The Emissary
THE SELANIAN CHRONICLES
VOLUME 1
PETER KRAUSCHE

The Selanian Chronicles

Volume One

The Emissary

Peter Krausche

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This is a work of fiction set in an alternate timeline. Many of the names, places, characters, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination. Where they are not, they are used fictitiously.

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Author's Note

I first met Philip Brannon in the summer of 1990 while visiting the Old Mill District in Bend, Oregon. The last of the lumber mills had shut down in the early 1980s, so the area was a bit run down, but I felt it was well worth exploring because of its historic value. It was an atypically warm day, so after a few hours, I stumbled into an obscure little bar to cool off.

Philip immediately impressed me by the casual manner in which he mixed with the other guests. He mainly just listened. Sometimes, he sympathized and encouraged. In one case, I even saw him stash a few dollars in someone's pocket. I had often been discouraged by the way members of religious groups canvassed the populace for new followers and was pleasantly surprised to find someone who actually cared about the people around him. We got to talking, and my impression deepened. By the time I returned to Switzerland in the spring of 1991, Philip and I had become fast friends.

Just before I left, Philip entrusted me with a manuscript titled *The Rose*. As it turned out, the document contained an intimate account of his experiences leading up to the formation of the Selanian Society. I was overwhelmed by the prospect of working on something of such a delicate nature, and since my personal situation at the time required my attention, I laid the manuscript aside. More than two decades went by before I found the courage to pick it up again.

I originally envisioned the story as a novel. But even a cursory review of the existing material made me realize the tale's length and complexity went far beyond the scope of a single volume. The structure of the series may seem unusual in that each volume contains two separate stories. Beginning with Philip's account of *The Rose,* the first story in each volume is set more or less in our time and to a great part here on Earth. The second story is set 4,500 years in the past on the planet Piral. At first, the two plots may seem unrelated, but the context will become clear as both timelines are continued in each consecutive volume of the *Selanian Chronicles*. All mysteries will be resolved by the final installment. In the meantime, I hope this tale will give my readers as much pleasure as it has given me in relating it.

Peter Krausche
February 2016

A major aspect of the historical sciences is the interpretation and classification of relevant data, a task which requires objectivity and strict attention to detail. Alas, the main difficulty in performing this task seems to lie in our own character, resulting in the exaggerated significance we often assign to our research. But no matter how important we believe our opinion to be, and regardless of the confidence we place in our methods, the travesties we compile—which we dare call historical chronicles—will always remain mere glimpses of the infinite moments that constitute our existence. Believe me, in the overall scheme of things, we can't even begin to imagine how crucial a gentle breeze on a bright spring morning may turn out to be.

—Covatal, *Excerpts on History*

Prologue

Nevacad quickened his pace and dashed toward the precipice. Piral's larger moon bathed the desolate landscape in its clear light, casting distinct shadows on his surroundings and bringing the parched earth, rocks, and dried shrubs into sharp contrast as he flashed by. Before him and to his left, the mountain path dropped into the barren plain, from where he heard the snarls of the beasts and the screams of the dying. Was he too late?

When he reached the overlook, he stared at the scene below. Two of his friends had already been slaughtered, their silent, noble forms smoldering on the desert floor, and several of the others were seriously wounded. He was out of breath and his blood was pounding in his ears, but he knew what he had to do.

Setting his jaw against the conflicting emotions rising up in him, he snatched his hunting bow from his back. Although he was barely in range, he wiped the sweat from his silvery brow, brushed his long, snowy hair aside, and took aim. The arrow made that dreaded yet satisfying swish as he released it, flying straight and true. Fortunately, his target was too far away, so he didn't hear the dull thump of impact. But he did have to watch as the young woman reeled and dropped to her knees, reaching up to the shaft sticking out of her side in shock before slumping to the ground.

Despite his heavy heart, he had to get closer. While scrambling down among the rocks to find a better vantage point, he saw two more young women in dark cloaks raise their hands and hurl dark magenta-colored spheres at one of the beasts. The blasts knocked the poor creature back, scorching off massive chunks of its glistening black skin. It lay writhing on the ground, bellowing in pain.

Nevacad sucked in his breath when another Demantar loomed up behind the unsuspecting women. One of them whirled around, sending a few loosened strands of her long, dark hair flying. But the beast slashed into her with its huge claws before she could conjure another sphere, pinning her lifeless body to the crusty earth. It swung to the right, and a stream of fire spouted from its fanged snout, engulfing the second woman as she tried to attack its flank. She collapsed where she stood, the searing flames devouring the flesh from her bones. He knew the Demantar had no choice, but the women's death grieved him more than he could say.

In grim determination, Nevacad raised his bow, letting one arrow after the other fly from its string. By the time the enemy realized where the assault was coming from, the battle was

practically over. His friends attempted to round up a few stragglers, but they wouldn't let themselves be taken alive and had to be slain.

Dismayed at the senseless carnage, he hurried down the path. The night was chilly, and he could see his breath as he wrapped his black cloak tighter around himself. Contrary to the dark robes of the women he had seen killed, the robes he wore beneath his cloak were the color of cream. And instead of an amethyst pendant around his neck, he wore a platinum brooch near his heart, designating him an elder of the Selanian Order.

But sometimes, like tonight, he found it difficult to maintain a sense of pride in his heritage or his title. While his brothers and sisters of the Order were enjoying a midnight matinee in Travis, the "City of Light," or squabbling in the Advisory Council over such vital issues as the color of the High Priestess's ceremonial sash, the real battle between light and darkness was being fought in the wilderness hundreds of leagues from their cozy homes. The saddest part was they probably wouldn't even believe him if he told them what he knew. Not that he ever would.

He sighed as he followed a bend in the path around to the left. Ahead of him, to the west, he saw the waning sickle of the smaller moon, Vilatanas, setting behind the Covasins, whose snow-capped peaks were faintly visible in the clear night air. Behind him, the jagged summits of Malentisa glowed ominously in the cold, pale moonlight, harboring the silent ruins of a long-forgotten splendor in their depths. When he rounded the last boulders and the site of the conflict opened up before him, he could hear his friends whispering in his mind, "It's the prophet." Although many of them were tending to their wounded, they all bowed in respect as he passed.

Nevacad reached into his robe and took out a bit of the *venora* he had stashed away. He crushed the wood flower blossoms between his fingers and raised them to his face, taking a deep breath. The thick, sweet scent made his eyes water. If any of his brethren had seen him, they would have thought he was attempting some strange form of self-punishment. But his friends' voices had been getting weaker, and the flowers were the only way he knew to communicate with them.

Sutanay, the eldest of his friends, approached him and bowed. "Welcome, Nevacad. Once again, you come to our rescue. Since when were you following them?"

With a fresh dose of *venora* coursing through his veins, his friend's words boomed in the prophet's head, making him wince. "I came upon them four days ago in the Covasins and have been tracking them ever since. But I didn't realize until yesterday where they were headed. I'm relieved to see my warning reached you in time."

“Yes, a squad of our western guard was close by, so we were able to ambush them here. But we were nevertheless grateful for your assistance. We’re not accustomed to such acts of aggression. If you hadn’t arrived so soon, even more of us would have perished.” He directed a pained glance at the bodies of his two friends lying there so still.

“Who is it?”

“Lonara and Tecar.”

Nevacad remembered Lonara. She was such a gentle soul, always so helpful and inquisitive. And now she was gone forever, like so many of their race. He shook his head. “I’m so sorry, but I have no idea how they knew where to find you.” He glanced around and grimaced at the many bodies of their enemies strewn throughout the area. “I’m grateful your people didn’t just rip them apart.”

“We’re not savages. But who are they?”

Nevacad regarded him with a probing glance. “Feigned ignorance doesn’t become you, my friend.” He gestured toward some of the bodies lying nearby. “Observe their black cloaks and dresses and the darker complexion of their hands and faces. These women must be from the Northern Covasins. And if that wasn’t indication enough, I’m certain the power they extorted from the amethysts they wore around their necks must have brought back fond memories of past encounters.”

“Enchantresses,” Sutanay hissed.

Nevacad nodded as he let his gaze sweep over the beings around him. Although he had known them for decades, it was still bizarre seeing amphibious creatures so far from their natural environment. And they were large. Sutanay was sitting right in front of him, but Nevacad’s head barely reached his friend’s shoulders. He admired the crimson appendages which framed their heads like manes and adorned their sleek bodies and long, muscular tails like elegant fins. The moon’s light emphasized the lovely patterns running along their sides and backs, setting them in stunning contrast to the shimmering blackness of the creatures’ smooth skin.

“I didn’t realize any Enchantresses remained,” Sutanay said. “I thought the Prophet Cades wiped them all out centuries ago.”

“So did I. But a coven high up in the Covasins must have survived somehow, and with it the knowledge of their dark arts.” He sighed. “I’m so sorry, my friend. I wish I could do more for you.”

“No, you’ve done more than enough. You’ve protected the secret of our existence and intervened on our behalf more times than I can remember. You’ve proven yourself to be a true friend of the Demantar, and that many times over.”

“I was glad to be of service. But it still grieves me that you have such a long way to go before the Emissary arrives and you’re delivered from this desolate state of affairs.”

“Don’t worry, my friend, you’ve given us hope, and that is what we needed most. We finally have something to look forward to, and we’ll gladly await the Emissary and his female companion, the Golden Messenger you told us would release us from our prisons. For a Demantar, five hundred years don’t seem as long as they do for your people.”

“I’m glad you can see it that way, Sutanay. But there are more important issues at hand. I don’t believe this attack was random. Do you remember what I told you last month?”

“Your prophecy, the archer’s bow Anae wishes you to forge. How could I forget?”

“I believe a dark force is at work here, a force that will stop at nothing to prevent us from building it.”

“Who or what would have the power to do such a thing?”

“I know of only one.” Nevacad hesitated, eyeing his friend with caution. “Nevilan.”

The creature snarled, and smoke billowed from its nostrils. “We’ve asked you never to speak his name in our presence.”

“But you’ll have to confront your past at some point.”

“There will be time enough for that when we’ve been set free. You know there’s nothing we can do for your people until then.”

Nevacad shuddered. “They have absolutely no concept of what they’re dealing with. I see such misery and suffering ahead for them.”

The creature seemed to relent of its harsh words and placed its huge, webbed paw on the prophet’s shoulder, but it immediately withdrew it when it saw him wince. “I understand, my friend, and I’m sorry. You’ve shared in our pain, and we wish to share in yours.”

The Dragon’s words produced a sad smile on the prophet’s lips. “You’re most kind, Sutanay. I understand your reluctance to recall the terrible sins of our parents. We shall speak of them no more.”

The Dragon bowed its head in agreement.

“Have you thought about my request?” the prophet asked. “Will you help me, despite the apparent dangers involved?”

“Yes, we can design the bow that will lead the Emissary to us, but we lack the agility to build it.”

“Good, then you’ll lend me your wisdom and guide my hands, just as Anae instructed.”

“And my brethren and I will ensure the Emissary’s safe passage through the wastelands when his time comes to seek us out.”

“So be it, my friend. Now let us begin the sacred task with which we have been entrusted.” Nevacad turned toward the mountains behind him, and the solemn group followed him into the ruins of what had once been the creatures’ home.

The Rose

1.

The rose strives upward toward the light of the sky in the garden behind the cabin, its shades of cream and roseate in solemn contrast to the plain headstone behind it. I think she got the cane from my father. She planted it in late fall, a bare stem with thorns, hardly something you would notice on passing by. But perceiving latent beauty seemed to be in her nature, and she cared enough to coax wilting flowers into full bloom. So many small miracles I never really appreciated.

I remember how much she loved candles. She was always lighting them: at the dinner table, on the little shelf above our bed before we drifted off to sleep, or in the reading room on cold winter evenings with a fire crackling in the fireplace. I kept teasing her about that. No, it wasn't just teasing. There was always that trace of sarcasm, just enough bite to cause her pain.

All I have now is the rose. Sometimes, when I can't sleep, I see the blossom silhouetted in the moon's light. A pale, delicate flower, as pale and delicate as she appeared to me when I first saw her four years ago.

2.

Twilight was settling over the high desert plateau east of the Cascades on that clear and warm midsummer evening in 1982. I had just completed a demanding geological survey in the Deschutes National Forest and thought I'd let off some steam in my new Jeep before starting in on the long drive back to Medford. The radio was airing yet another tiresome retrospect on President Ronald Reagan's assassination a year ago. I didn't want to hear more whining about how the gunman's obsession with that one actress had driven him to kill the President and the White House Press Secretary, so I switched the station. Toto's new hit song *Rosanna* blasted from the speakers, and when I lowered the windows, the fragrance of juniper, alder, and manzanita filled the cab.

The bend in the road was approaching a bit too fast. I rammed the shift back into second and gradually released the clutch. Gravel scattered in all directions, but my Cherokee clung firmly to the dusty surface. I kicked down the gas midway into the curve and shot out from among the trees.

There was just enough light left to see the woman dash out into the road.

I slammed on the brakes. It seemed to take forever before my SUV skidded to a halt. The dull pounding of my heart in my throat drowned out the song coming from the stereo. I switched off the engine and listened. Except for the crickets in the grass, everything was still.

With shaky knees, I got out and looked around, but I couldn't see her anywhere. Oh, god, was she trapped under the car? I dropped to the ground and looked underneath. Nothing. My brow creased, and I scratched my head as I walked around to the back. The dust had cleared, and I saw a small, lifeless form lying in the road. A squirrel, maybe, but certainly not a grown woman.

Standing there in confusion, I felt a slight tingle at the base of my neck. Irritated by the sensation, I turned to the forest. What I saw made my heart leap.

She stood at the edge of the woods just a few feet away, regarding the squirrel, her eyes glistening. "Oh, no," she whispered. I estimated her to be in her mid-twenties. She was wearing a cream-colored gown that moved with the evening breeze, and she had a jute bag slung over her shoulder. At first glance, her thick, dark hair looked like a waterfall suffused with starlight as it fell about her shoulders and down to her waist.

I shook my head to clear my senses. When the hell had I become romantic? "Oh, my god, are you okay?"

She cast a quick glance in my direction as she approached the squirrel. "Do you always drive with your lights off after sunset?" Despite the angry undertone, her voice was pleasant, and she spoke with an unfamiliar accent.

"I'm really sorry. Did I hurt you? Are you injured?"

"Am I injured?" She stared at me with her mouth open. "If your driving had reflected even a fraction of that sentiment, my friend here might still be alive."

"Well, what were you doing in the middle of the road?"

She scoffed. "Really? You're going to make this about me?" She sighed and stroked the squirrel's brownish-gray fur. Then she untied a scarf from around her shoulders and enfolded the animal. "We should bury her." She turned and walked back toward the forest.

The last bit of daylight was waning swiftly, but I felt the least I could do after almost running her over was accompany her on her little errand. I still couldn't believe my luck. The image of her suddenly dashing right in front of my moving vehicle was still fresh in my mind and gave me the jitters. It seemed like a miracle that I had been able to stop in time.

With a shrug, I got back in my Jeep. She had already disappeared among the trees, so I pulled my car over to the side of the road before hurrying after her. Fortunately, she was moving at an easy pace, and I immediately caught sight of her just ahead.

I had almost reached her when I stopped dead in my tracks and blinked. I wasn't quite sure what I was seeing. Was there a soft shimmer surrounding her? I rubbed my eyes, but the radiance had already dissipated. I shrugged. It could have been a trick of the light. Or was it just flashes caused by vitreous gel tugging at my retina?

No, I thought to myself, shaking my head. Even if there was a rational explanation for the anomaly I had witnessed, it warranted at least a bit more consideration. I knew what I had seen. Why would I try to explain it away? I had only just met the girl and wasn't even sure I liked her that much. Granted, she was beautiful, perhaps even breathtaking, but I didn't usually turn off my brain because of a pretty face.

Feeling flustered, I finally caught up with her as she entered a clearing bordered by pine and hemlock. The girl produced a gardening trowel from her bag and used it to dig a shallow grave at the base of a tree. After we had laid the squirrel to rest in the red forest soil, she surprised me by kneeling beside the grave and spreading her arms. She must have been reciting a short prayer because she had her eyes closed, and I saw her lips moving, but her voice was a mere whisper. When she was done, she placed her palms on the grave and said, "Sleep well, dear little friend." She extended her hand to me—it seemed so soft and delicate—and I helped her up.

"I'm really sorry about your, uh…friend. Is there anything I can do?"

"No, she's at peace now," the girl said, brushing some dust off her gown. "But please be more careful."

I shrugged and stuck my hands in my pockets, staring at a pebble on the ground.

"May I invite you for a cup of tea? I only live a short distance from here." She sounded sincere yet cautious.

"Thank you, but you really don't need to go to so much trouble."

"Oh, it's no trouble, and I would welcome the company."

"I'm Philip, by the way."

"My name is Silana." She pronounced it "See-*lah*-nah," with emphasis on the second syllable. Then she linked arms with me as if it was the most natural thing in the world and guided me out of the clearing.

As we were strolling along, I asked, “Was that a prayer you were saying earlier?”

“Yes, it’s an ancient invocation our priests and priestesses recite when someone passes away.”

“Interesting. I think we also have prayers like that.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Silana. “Most cultures have some form of funeral rites. When performed in the proper mindset, they can facilitate the grieving process.”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never been very religious.”

“Religion has nothing to do with it. We all need to grieve after we’ve suffered a loss.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

“So am I.”

We soon saw the warm glow of lights before us. I didn’t recall her cabin afterward, but I could imagine how it must have been on that first evening. Just one cozy little room filled with plants and herbs, drawings on the walls, and a fire in the hearth. All I remembered at the time was the fair complexion of her oval face, her long, dark hair, and her gorgeous figure as she glided about the room, filling a kettle with water, crushing herbs in a mortar, or filing jars away in cabinets. She was small, barely rising to my chin, but she emanated a quiet authority that belied her seeming fragility. We sat at the table for a while, talking. I still see her before me as if it were today, sipping her tea and probing me with those large, dark brown eyes of hers.

At one point, Silana closed her eyes as if from exhaustion and sighed. “You’re not well.”

“I feel fine.”

“No, in here.” She placed her hand over her heart.

Her words made me uneasy, and I didn’t want her to elaborate. But I realized it was getting late, and I needed to leave soon, so I said, “May I come visit you again?”

She gazed at me, searching my face. Finally, she managed a smile. “All right, yes, I think I’d like that.”

Silana walked me back to the car, the stars shining down on her hair. The sky was filled with their silent brilliance, and she raised her head to consider them—a sad, yearning expression—before turning to face me. “Good-bye, Philip. I look forward to seeing you again.”

I hardly knew what to answer, so I climbed into my Jeep and closed the door. The odious noise of a revving V8 engine intruded upon the peaceful sounds of the night. I eased my vehicle back onto the road and watched her in the rearview mirror until she was lost from sight: a pale, delicate figure gazing up into the night sky with her arms around herself against the evening chill.

3.

As a freelance civil engineering consultant, I had flexible work hours, so I was able to see Silana every weekend and often stopped by on weekdays when my schedule allowed. She always seemed genuinely pleased to see me when I was able to visit, and since the weather in Central Oregon was usually marvelous, we were able to explore her world every time I called on her.

One afternoon a few weeks after I had met her, we were walking near a stream. The path hardly deserved the name, but somehow Silana always found these trails, navigating the forest with the greatest ease. She was wearing a pretty, dark green gown with burgundy insets. Silana had made it from wispy fabrics that flowed with her as she moved. I couldn't understand how she managed to get through all the growth without even the slightest scratch while wearing something so delicate. Contrary to her, the underbrush tore at my skin and clothes, and I was relieved the trees weren't quite so dense in this area.

The trail was narrow and, as always, I let her go ahead. But my heart was pounding, and it wasn't just from the exercise. How could her movements be so graceful and yet so riveting? When Silana slowed, I couldn't resist and raised my hand, wanting to reach out and touch her, or hug her close and lose myself in her dark eyes and the scent of her hair.

I sighed and let my hand drop to my side, shaking my head. What the hell was wrong with me? Had she been any other girl, I probably would have at least tried. What was the worst that could happen? It wouldn't have been the first time a girl had slapped me for overstepping my boundaries.

Silana stopped and turned around. I couldn't quite interpret her expression, but she seemed distressed. "Oh, Philip, I would never slap you."

I gawked at her. Could she read my mind? No, that was impossible. Or was it?

"No, don't worry, I wouldn't read your mind."

"But…you just did."

She smiled. "I didn't need to. It was fairly obvious from your expression what you were thinking. But images and emotions that you throw at me like that, they're fair game."

"What!"

She rewarded me with an impish glance and took hold of my arm. "Come, there's something ahead I'd like to show you."

We soon came to a clearing with soft grass. There were a few evergreens growing here and there, and I could hear the stream rushing by just a few steps to our left beyond a thicket. Silana

stopped and regarded a cluster of little, white flowers growing in the shade of a boulder. “I thought as much,” she said. “But this really won’t do.” She walked over to the stream.

While she was busy, I looked at the flowers but couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary, except perhaps that they seemed to be sagging a bit. In the meantime, Silana scooped up a handful of water and returned. She kneeled and sprinkled the water over the blossoms. Then she cupped her hands as if protecting the flowers and closed her eyes.

I gaped. There seemed to be a faint shimmer coming from her hands. How was that even possible? When she got up, I paused and stared. The flowers looked as fresh as if they had just bloomed after a spring shower. “How did you do that?” I asked in astonishment.

“Do you know why flowers wilt?”

“Uh, well, to tell you the truth, I’ve never been very good at biology.”

“You said you were trained in the sciences. Make an educated guess.”

I shrugged. “Because they don’t have enough water?”

She pointed to the nearby stream. “There’s plenty of water here.”

“The heat?” I said, glancing at the sun in the west.

“Philip, be reasonable. It’s barely eighty degrees Fahrenheit.”

“Then I really don’t know.”

“So you admit the context is more complex than it might appear at first glance.”

“Of course, but I never claimed I knew enough about plants in the first place.”

“And you wouldn’t want to be responsible for them if you didn’t know enough about them, would you?”

“Absolutely not! The poor things would probably wither and die if someone left them in my care.”

“I’m so grateful you realize that, and I beg you not to forget it.” Her voice had an urgency to it I had never heard in her before.

“What are you getting at?”

Silana sighed. “Philip, I don’t mind if you touch me. It would be unfair of me if I did since I’m constantly grabbing hold of you and pulling you around. The question is always, what are our intentions? What is in our hearts? Our emotions are too fragile and too complex to be trifled with.”

I stared at her. After a moment, I finally realized I had my mouth open. “How…why…?”

She took my hand in both of hers. “I enjoy our walks together more than I can say, and I really want us to remain good friends, if that’s all right with you.”

“Yes, of course. I…”

She squeezed my hand before letting go. “I’m so relieved.”

I shoved my hands into the pockets of my jeans and shuffled my feet. “You, uh…still haven’t answered my question.”

“You mean, how I helped my little friends here?” she said with a smile, gesturing at the blossoms at her feet. She crouched down and stroked one of the flower’s petals. “First, you need to understand what was wrong with them. Like us, all plants have certain requirements in regard to food, water, air, and sunlight. The ecosystem is delicate, and even the slightest imbalance may have disastrous results.”

“I understand that.” The words came out with more force than I had intended.

Silana regarded me with a penetrating glance. “Good, I’m glad you understand.” She stood and let her gaze sweep the clearing, watching the sun caress the treetops and a breeze play with the blades of grass around us. “It saddens me greatly, but this forest’s health has been in decline for decades. Most people wouldn’t even notice, but it’s there if you know what to look for. For instance, the rain here is slightly sour. It’s not enough to cause much damage in a short time, but it is enough to cause a slight shift in the nutrients of the forest’s soil. Do you know how flowers keep water and nutrients flowing through their system?”

“Osmosis?”

“Correct. Plant cells are usually filled with water, which keeps the plant firm and rigid so it can support its own weight. The plant extracts water and nutrients from the soil through its roots and draws them upward through the stem by osmosis. But if the cells don’t receive the proper nutrients, osmosis is inhibited, and the cells lose water. The flower wilts. That’s what happened here.”

“But they look fine now.”

“Yes, I used a simple induction process in conjunction with water from the stream to stimulate the plant’s cells. Perhaps you could compare it to jump-starting an engine.”

“That’s pretty amazing. I’ve never seen anyone do that before.”

“That may be, but I’m afraid it’s only a temporary solution. These flowers are doomed if they remain here. I’ll need to return tomorrow and transplant them to a location that’s more compatible with their needs.” Under her breath, she muttered, “If only I could do the same for myself.”

"What are you talking about?"

"Never mind." She looked up at me and flashed me an elfin smile. "It wasn't light, you know."

"What wasn't light?"

"What you saw emanating from my hands during the Induction. The brain doesn't know how else to interpret it, so it interprets it as light. But come, I've bored you long enough with my chatter." She took my hand and pulled me to the other side of the clearing, where we resumed the trail.

Silana seemed to be leading us deeper into the woods because I struggled more often with the undergrowth. I couldn't help but notice again how intuitive her movements were. Her gown never once caught on a branch, twig, or shrub. As I admired the way she navigated this botanical labyrinth with such confidence, my glance caught on her hair, and I couldn't help myself when it started to glide down her dress.

Silana slowed and hung her head. When she turned to me, her smile seemed saddened. "Philip, would you be a good friend and take the lead?" I didn't miss the way she stressed the word *friend*.

How did she do it? Was it possible she really was reading my mind?

I couldn't quite meet her gaze, so I wasn't watching my step when I passed her. My hand brushed her thigh. It felt as if someone had poured lava into me. The heat radiated up through my breast and sent a thrill down my spine. What was happening to me? I tried to keep my head straight as I walked ahead.

Without Silana guiding us, our progress was much slower. My plaid shirt kept getting caught on the twigs of the shrubs we passed, and if I hadn't been wearing my heavy jeans, I'm sure my legs would have been all scratched up. I finally found a broader path, which made the going easier. A short while later, I stumbled out into the open.

At first, I thought we had reached another clearing. It took me a moment to realize this whole section of forest had been destroyed by fire. Burned ponderosa lay scattered everywhere, and the ground was scorched black. But it was strange because the scene looked more like the damage path of a tornado: a long, broad trail of destruction.

Silana came up beside me and stood in silence. It seemed as if she were struggling with herself, and I was astonished to see she was biting her lip as she regarded the devastation before us. I had never seen her do that before. But she must have come to a decision because she grabbed my arm and pulled me away, walking as quickly as she could without breaking into a run. Only after we

had put a considerable distance between ourselves and the disturbing scene did she relax and finally loosen her grip.

We walked for another half hour, but neither of us said anything. Silana seemed lost in thought and, to be honest, her words and actions that day had made a strong impression on me, even if I wasn't yet prepared to admit it. When we reached her cabin, we parted without many words.

4.

As the summer dragged toward fall, I knew I had to do something. It was getting more and more difficult for me to concentrate, and my work was suffering. If this continued, I would soon begin to lose clients. One solution I thought of was to stay away. Maybe her mysterious behavior had simply overwhelmed me, and if I gave myself some time, my feelings would subside.

The attempt lasted about a week. The next time I visited her, she seemed as happy as always to see me, and I was glad to let my reservations fester as long as I could be near her.

I spent the following Sunday with my parents. After lunch, we relocated to the living room, where my father grabbed the newspaper and his pipe, and my mother took out her knitting basket. I just sat there, stirring my coffee.

"All right, Philip, what's her name?"

I looked at my mother in surprise. "What are you talking about?"

"You push your food around on your plate without getting a bite down, you hardly get a word out when someone talks to you, and I'll have to get a new carpet if you keep staring holes in it."

"It's nothing, Ma. Don't worry about it."

"So, you're telling me you've been stirring your coffee for the past half hour because it's still too hot?"

I set my cup on the table, trying not to frown. "Pa, some help here?"

My father took out his pipe and grinned at me. "No, sir. I've been married to your mother for almost thirty years, and I know a hopeless case when I see it." He vanished behind his paper.

"Thanks a lot," I said, with a sour glance in his direction. "Look, Ma, there really isn't anything going on. Why are you riding me just because I'm a bit pensive today?"

"I wouldn't say a word if it was just today, but you've been like this for weeks. I've never seen you like this before, so this girl must be very important to you. And if that's the case, I'd at least like to know her name."

I sighed. “It’s Silana.”

My father put down his paper. “Silana? Is she from around here?”

“I doubt it.”

“Well, where’s she from?”

“You know, I never thought to ask her that.”

My mother stared at me. “I think I’d like to meet this girl.”

“I…don’t know if she’d come. As a matter of fact, I don’t even know how to ask her. We don’t really have that kind of relationship.”

“You mean, she doesn’t reciprocate your feelings?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

My father put his pipe on the pipe holder. “For god’s sake, Son, you’re almost twenty-eight. Man up and tell her how you feel. That way, you’ll at least know how things stand between you.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I muttered to myself.

I didn’t stay much longer, but the conversation with my parents had been an eye-opener and made me realize how essential Silana had become to my life. I wanted to tell her how I felt about her, but what if she turned me down and wouldn’t allow me to see her anymore? I didn’t know if I could live with that. She had made it very clear she only wanted to be friends, so what chance did I have if I told her the truth? On the other hand, I knew things couldn’t go on like this. I struggled with myself for a few more days but finally surrendered to the inevitable and waited for the right moment to reveal my feelings to her.

The opportunity came one Sunday afternoon in early fall. We were taking a long walk and had reached the edge of a field not far from her cabin. I saw a low shrub with black berries on it, plucked a few off, and held them up in my palm so I could examine them in the sunlight. “I think these might make a good aphrodisiac.”

Silana hardly glanced at them, but she seemed amused.

“Well?”

“Maybe, but they’re poisonous.”

“How can you tell?”

“Just look at them.”

“They look fine to me.”

“Then you’re not seeing them as you should. Open your heart and your mind. Sense their aura and their essence. Can’t you hear what they’re screaming with every fiber of their existence?”

“So, it’s not an aphrodisiac?”

In playful exasperation, Silana flung up her arms and marched into the field. “That’s not what I said, Philip.”

I tried to keep up with her. “What then? You don’t like the color?”

She spun around and snatched the berries from my palm. Then she brushed them out of her hand and into the grass, evidently enjoying the astonished expression on my face.

“Wow! How did you do that?”

She gave me that look, the one where she raised her eyebrow. “Philip, it was black nightshade.”

I gaped at her. “You knew that the whole time?”

“I did. But even if I hadn’t known their name, I would have recognized their nature, known them for what they are.”

“How?”

“I look. I listen. And so should you. You’ve got it in you, but you’re keeping it bottled up, and now it’s growing dark.”

“I don’t understand. It’s still broad daylight. Or was that supposed to be a metaphor?”

She sighed and sat down in the grass. “I see this is going to take a long time, more than I probably have left.”

I sat down beside her. “Why? We’ve got all day.”

“Yes, we do have this day, don’t we?” She closed her eyes and let the sun warm her face.

In that moment she looked so beautiful, surrounded by tall, yellow grass, the aspen golden in the warm sunlight, and everything so peaceful. Silana filled her lungs with the clear, mountain air and let her breath out in a long, contented sigh. Then she smiled at me, her face radiant from the exercise and her eyes shining.

I felt it was now or never, leaned in, and kissed her. She didn’t resist, but when I opened my eyes, I realized she was staring at me. I pulled away and saw the shocked expression on her face. She reached up and touched her lips. “Oh, Philip.”

I took her hand in mine, kissed it, and pressed it against my heart. “Silana, I hardly have the words to express how I feel about you, and I know this may sound crazy, but will you marry me?”

Her lips were still parted from shock, and she slowly sucked in her breath. “Marry you? Oh, no, Philip, what are you saying?” There was a pained look in her eyes. “You really mean it, don’t you?”

“Yes, Silana, I’ve never been more serious about anything in my life.”

She glanced out across the field, and her eyes followed a flock of geese flying in formation above the trees, their silhouettes black against the blue late-afternoon sky. She eased her hand away from mine, shaking her head. “I truly don’t wish to hurt you, but I don’t think it would be wise if you married me.”

I felt as if an ocean of darkness had come crashing down on me, and for a moment, I just struggled to catch my breath.

Silana stared at me, and her eyes filled with tears. “*Tevas’an,* Philip, I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize—” She recoiled and shook her head, tossing her long locks. “*A’mada,* now I’m just deceiving myself.” She beat the heels of her hands against her head. “I’ve been so stupid. Oh, how could I have been so selfish?”

“Silana, please, I love you, and I…I just don’t know if I could live without you.”

She tried to smile through her tears at my confession but failed. Instead, she reached for my hand and pressed it against her wet cheek. “My dearest Philip, you don’t understand.”

“What’s wrong, Silana? Please, just tell me what’s going on.”

She gazed out across the field but remained silent. After a while she looked back at me, her eyes filled with pain. “Please, be patient with me. I…need time to think.”

“I’ll give you all the time you need.”

Silana brushed a tear away. “I’ve been so lonely this past year. I didn’t even realize how much until you came along. But I thought it was only my heart I had put at risk. I suppose I wouldn’t allow myself to recognize how important our time together had become to you.”

I gaped at her. Had she just given me the tiniest ray of hope? “You…put your heart at risk?”

“I did.”

“Does that mean…you have feelings for me?”

“I do.”

I shook my head. “But then I don’t understand why this is so difficult.”

“I know.”

“Silana, please, say something. Don’t be so monosyllabic.”

"Disyllabic."

"What?"

Silana sighed. "Never mind."

"I was an idiot for believing you would ever want to marry me."

"Oh, Philip, please don't say that."

"Why, it's true, isn't it?"

"It's not that simple. And you're certainly not an idiot."

"But you would never want to marry me."

Despite the tear running down her cheek, she attempted another smile. "That's not what I said."

I felt my heart leap and stared at her. "Will you at least allow me to see you again?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I'm too confused right now."

I hardly dared to look at her. "I don't know if I could survive not seeing you anymore."

She looked into my eyes, probing. "Please believe me, I would never want to hurt you like that. But I just don't know what to do."

"Can I come back next weekend?"

After a moment, she finally nodded. "All right, next weekend." She sat up on her knees and caressed my cheek. "I promise, I've taken your proposal to heart. But I need time to think, and I'll give you my answer then. But please excuse me now. I really have to go, or I won't be responsible for my actions." She hesitated, but then she leaned forward and kissed me before rushing off and disappearing into the forest.

I sat there, stunned, and touched my lips where I had just felt hers. After a while, I somehow managed to pick myself up and haul myself back to the car.

The following week dragged by. I could hardly eat, and since I couldn't concentrate, the projects I was working on were delayed. All I could think about was Silana.

When the weekend arrived, the drive from Medford up Highway 97 seemed to take forever. Every curve, sign, and bump in the road was engraved in my memory. After a few hours, I turned toward the dark, snow-capped cone of Mt. Bachelor. Snaking through the less traveled lanes off Century Drive, I finally came down the little service road where I had that fateful encounter only three months earlier. I parked my car at the trailhead and walked down the path to her cabin. The warm autumn sun was shining on my face, but I could hardly enjoy it, I was so nervous.

Silana was sitting on the veranda knitting a shawl. When she saw me, she took a deep breath. Then she deliberately placed her work on the table and stood to meet me. I stepped onto the porch and took her hands in mine, searching her eyes for an answer. “Silana, please, I—”

“Yes.”

At first I just stared at her. But when the meaning of that single word finally registered, overwhelming joy flooded my thoughts, shattering all the anxiety of the past week like ice cracking on a river in the spring warmth. I took her in my arms and held her tight, her fragrance, like summer blossoms, heightening my senses. “Oh, Silana, you can’t believe what this means to me. I love you so much.”

She looked up at me, and I saw she was worried. “Yes, that’s my hope, and…”

“But I really—”

She put her finger on my lips. “…and I love you, too, Philip, with all my heart. But I have one condition. There’s so much you don’t know about me, so many questions you probably want to ask. I beg you to please trust me and let me tell you in my own time.”

I held her close. “Of course, Silana, I’ll do anything you want. Don’t worry, everything will be fine.”

I was wrong.

5.

My parents lived in a place near Medford, Oregon, called Rogues Mill, the small town where I had been born and raised. Unfortunately, the inhabitants of this town clung to a rather conservative way of thinking. It therefore came as no surprise that Silana’s obscure past triggered mixed feelings, and not just in the Brannon family. “Who is this girl?” they wanted to know. “Where does she come from? Who are her parents?” Didn’t they realize the only important thing in the world was our happiness?

But in her own gentle way, she won their hearts. It was mainly her natural and almost naive wonder at the beauty she saw in everything around her. She could spend hours marveling over the figurines in my mother’s showcase or take an afternoon to revel in the beauty of my father’s roses. Her sincere and sympathetic nature soon dispelled any doubts regarding her character or integrity.

What tended to be frustrating was her ignorance of Christianity. I had a hard time understanding what she did believe, although she was very patient and tried to explain everything carefully. I

concluded I just didn't have the necessary background since I had never been very religious. My parents suggested we meet with the minister of the church we belonged to. Silana agreed and even seemed to be looking forward to the meeting.

When the day arrived, the Reverend Dr. Gregg Bailey, who was known to all as Pastor Gregg, invited us into his office. We sat around a pine coffee table, relaxing in cushioned chairs with the sunlight streaming in through large windows that looked out upon a clear, autumn day.

"Now," said the pastor, "there seem to be a few discrepancies in your documents. For instance," he chuckled, "your birth certificate here says your birth year is 1934, but I suppose it's more like 1954 or even later, right? So, if you don't mind, I'll just take this down right quick for the record. Your name is Silana Tolares. T-o-l-a-r-e-s. Is that correct?" He looked at her over his glasses as he scribbled on his notepad.

"Yes."

"And your age is…?"

"Forty-eight."

The pastor gaped at her. "Excuse me?"

She bit her lip. "I'm very sorry. I thought you might be startled. I…suppose it has a lot to do with the way I've lived up to now."

"Good Lord, you don't look a day over twenty-five."

She blushed. "Yes, but thank you for the compliment."

The pastor turned to me. "Philip, were you aware of this?"

I swallowed. "No, I thought the birth year was a mistake, too."

Pastor Gregg studied me intently. "Will it have a bearing on your decision?"

Silana stared at me with a forlorn expression on her face. "I'm so sorry, Philip. I didn't realize how important it was to you, or I would have talked to you about it sooner."

I looked into her lovely, dark eyes and my heart skipped a beat. How could I live without her? I'd be an imbecile to even consider such a thing. On the other hand, maybe I was under some kind of spell. But did it matter? I'd gladly put up with any spell that could make me this happy. I shook my head. "No, Silana, I would always want only you, even if you were a thousand years old."

The smile that lighted her eyes was worth the perplexity of the last few moments. "Oh, darling, what a wonderful thing to say."

"Yes, well, would you, uh…rather talk about this some more and come back some other time?" Pastor Gregg asked.

"No, that's fine," I said. "My mind's made up."

"Okay, I'm glad that's settled." I didn't think I had ever seen him change the subject quite so quickly. He turned to Silana. "I've talked with Philip's parents, and I believe it would make them very happy if you were married in our church."

"Yes, they probably would be very pleased," Silana said, with a cautious tone in her voice.

"Uh…well, would you be pleased?"

"I don't know. Would a church wedding require the ceremony to take place indoors?"

"No, not necessarily. If the weather remains as fair as it has been, we could hold it outside somewhere."

"In that case, I suppose it might be all right."

"Good. Now, the next item is very important. Silana, this has nothing to do with you personally; you seem to be a good kind of girl…uh, woman. But I need you to understand that, as an ordained minister, I can only marry you if I've established that your beliefs don't contradict the basic principles of our faith."

"No, that's fine. Please believe me, I do understand."

"Okay, then let me ask you a few questions. Do you already belong to any established Christian denomination?"

She shook her head in confusion. "I'm sorry, denomination?"

"Okay, let's leave that and take a step back. Would you describe yourself as a Christian?"

Silana took a deep breath and swallowed. "I'm afraid I don't know what being a Christian implies."

"Okay, let's take another step back. Do you believe in God?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, that's a good place to start. Now, could you tell me in simple words who God is for you?"

She stared into space, her eyes unfocused and contemplative. "One of our prophets says, '*Sirae cena sirae,* He is who He is. There is no other. It is He who has brought everything into existence. *Anavae i Ulanavae,* the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, from eternity to eternity.'"

"Well, that does agree quite accurately with what the Bible says. Now, do you believe in Christ?"

She shook her head. “I’m sorry. I’ve heard the name, but I don’t know much more about your deity than that.”

“In that case, we can skip the Hypostatic Union, the Resurrection, and Salvation by Grace. That implies you’ve never read the Bible.”

“The Bible?”

The pastor and I looked at each other. I shrugged.

“I see this isn’t going to be quite as easy as I expected.” He let his fingers glide though his graying hair. Then he reached over to his desk and picked up a black, leather-bound volume. “We call this book the Bible. We believe it’s the inspired Word of God, similar to the holy writings of other religions.”

Silana pursed her lips and inclined her head. “A collection of sacred writings is certainly valuable.”

The pastor regarded her with a sidelong glance. “I seem to hear a ‘but’ in there somewhere.”

“If it’s not too presumptuous, I’d very much like to know on which personal experiences you base your faith.”

“Personal experiences? I’m not sure I understand. I don’t base my faith on personal experiences, but on what the Bible says.”

“Yes, but much of our development—our character, our personality, the level of our maturity even—depends on the emotional impact of our experiences and the lessons we derive from them.”

“Emotional impact? The Bible actually teaches us not to trust our feelings, but only the Word of God.”

“Oh, really. That’s very…um, interesting.”

“Listen, I think it might be best if I just gave you this copy of the Bible and you try to read in it. It’ll probably be easiest if you start with the Gospel of John in the New Testament, and we’ll schedule another appointment for next week. Does that sound fair?”

Silana accepted the volume and held on to it with the reverence she might have shown for a valuable relic, but she seemed troubled.

I visited her several times that week. Whenever I saw her, she was absorbed in the book’s pages, sometimes even in tears, or wandering in her garden in deep reflection with the book clutched to her heart. By the time we returned for our scheduled appointment a week later, she had read it from cover to cover, a feat I’d never accomplished, let alone in such a short time.

The light of another beautiful autumn day shone into the pastor's warm and cozy office. "So, how far did you get? Were you able to read the Gospel of John?" he asked.

"Excuse me, Pastor Gregg," I said, "but I think she read the whole thing from front to back."

The pastor gaped at her. "What? Is that true?"

She acknowledged my statement with a shy nod.

"That's amazing. Did you take a course in speed reading?"

"No, I just read very quickly. It really wasn't so difficult."

"Okay, so what did you think?"

"I was deeply moved. And a lot of what I picked up in those religious programs on the radio and on television is finally making sense. I was intrigued by the many similarities between your Bible and the *Selani s'Ulavan*. Although, if I think about it, that's not really so surprising."

"Excuse me—*the celery should have won*?"

"The *Selani s'Ulavan*."

"Are those your holy scriptures?"

She nodded.

"I've studied the Quran, the Vedas, and the Tripitaka. But I'm afraid I've never heard of your scriptures before."

"That's fine. I'm just so sorry I didn't get to know the extent and beauty of what Anae has done elsewhere sooner. I could have learned so much. I really wish I'd studied the Covatal's *Excerpts* in more detail while I was still at home. I would have been so much better prepared, but it just didn't seem important to me at the time."

"The Covatal?"

"Yes, the *Covatal*, or Traveler. He's an important religious emissary in our society."

"Okay, I understand. But if you actually read the whole Bible, you also read the account of the Prophet Jonah who was swallowed by a whale."

Silana's eyebrows contracted in confusion. "Yes, but it doesn't say *whale*, it says *great fish*. From what I've heard, a whale's throat would be too small to actually swallow a whole person."

"Yes, sorry, that was a trick question. My, but you are an observant reader."

"Thank you for saying so, but the only reason I remember that particular story in such detail is because it reminded me of an acquaintance of mine."

"An acquaintance?"

“His name is Talas. I have a feeling that, like the Prophet Jonah, he, too, is running from his destiny. I can only hope he won’t be consumed by events beyond his control.”

I didn’t like the way she said that name. “Talas? Who’s this Talas?” My glance darted back and forth between Silana and Pastor Gregg.

Silana’s eyes implored me. “Philip, please don’t. I’m sorry I brought it up. It’s really not that important.”

“All right,” the pastor said, “to get back on track, do you know now who Christ is?”

“Yes,” she whispered, “I never would have believed Anae would do something so wonderful.”

“Anae?”

“Yes, Anae, the One, the Almighty.”

“Why do you call Him that?”

“For the same reason you call your deity ‘Yahweh.’ Just as He revealed Himself to your Prophet Moses in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush, She revealed Herself to our Prophet Cades in a brilliant light that blazed from within a cold stone. Since then my people have called Her ‘Anae.’”

“Her?”

“Him, Her, does it really matter?”

“It matters to me, since the Bible uses the masculine pronoun.”

“In regard to the One, we use gender interchangeably. But even the Bible sometimes describes God using female imagery. Isn’t it possible Yahweh was just being considerate, since the Israelites, being a patriarchal society, would have found it difficult to accept the feminine aspects of God’s personality?”

“Yes, well, humph. All right, could you at least tell us who your people are and where you come from?”

“We call ourselves the Selani, and I’m from Travista, the capital of Chyoradan.”

“That is what your documents say. But at the risk of seeming ignorant, I’m afraid I must admit I’ve never heard of that particular city before.”

“I can imagine. It’s very far away.”

“Hmm...Chyoradan. Is that in Central Asia?”

“No, I wouldn’t quite put it in Central Asia. Although, globally seen, it would probably be in that general direction, at least at this time of day.”

He gave her an odd glance. “Okay. Personally, I’m…well, more or less satisfied with our interview. I guess I am a bit liberal. As a matter of fact, some people in our community even consider me to be sacrilegious. But I think you’re mature enough to decide for yourself if your beliefs contradict any of the essential doctrines of our faith. Since I don’t want to…uh, take up too much of your time, I’ll just skip to the main question. Do you think you’d consent to a Christian wedding?”

“Yes, gladly.”

“Well, I suppose that’s all we need to know. Now, why don’t we discuss the details of the ceremony?”

I felt relieved. Religious topics worked like a sedative on me. “Great, because I have a few ideas about—”

“Um…excuse me, but I have a few more questions,” Silana said.

Pastor Gregg pressed his hands together at the fingertips and leaned back in his chair. “Okay.”

“You mentioned the other day your faith isn’t based on feelings.”

“Yes?”

“But doesn’t the Bible teach that a person is an inseparable whole consisting of body, soul, and spirit; of a heart, a mind, and a will? I think it would be dangerous to divide these elements into isolated entities by stressing some and ignoring others.”

The pastor smiled down at her. “I’m sure in time you’ll come to understand the intricacies of biblical teaching. You see, the Word of God says all evil things proceed from the heart, and that it’s deceitful and wicked above all things.”

“Yes, but your Scriptures also say we should trust the Lord with all our heart, and not to lean upon our own understanding. If this really is a fallen world, as the Bible says, then isn’t every aspect of it fallen? Or do you believe your mind is less fallen than your heart?”

“Well, perhaps,” said the pastor, “but trusting your emotions can lead to some very dark forms of mysticism.”

“And trusting your intellect can lead to some very narrow forms of legalism. There will always be risks, no matter how a person feels led. Shouldn’t we allow others the freedom to decide for themselves?”

“I see. So I guess you’re a follower of one of those effusive visionary cults, in which everyone seems to be moved by some divine spirit.”

"No, I actually prefer a balanced holistic approach. How can we expect to learn anything about the One if we insist on ignoring the diverse ways in which the Goddess speaks to us? For instance, am I correct in assuming that's a cross you're holding?"

During the conversation, Pastor Gregg had been toying with a large, wooden cross. It was the one he often waved around during his sermons to underline his meaning. He placed it back on the table. "Yes, this is a cross. Why do you ask?"

I tried to intervene. "Uh, Silana, maybe we should—"

She merely held up her hand while keeping her eyes fixed on the pastor, but the gesture emanated such authority that I was immediately silenced. "How do you use it?" she asked him.

"Oh, I wouldn't say it's a question of use," the pastor replied, with an amused glance in my direction which seemed to say, *Good luck with her*. "It's just a symbol, a kind of…reminder."

"A symbol?"

"Well, yes, I believe symbols are important. They help us focus on the essential values of our faith."

"Nothing more?"

"No." He hesitated, and then added with a smug grin, "But I suppose you disagree."

She studied him for a moment. "I just think there's more to it than that."

"How so?"

"I believe every symbol possesses its own unique ethereal pattern, which is something even you would be able to sense if you only opened your heart enough to let such things in."

"Ethereal pattern?"

"I'm sorry. You could probably compare it to the object's aura, which in a sense is true because the aura is mainly an effect of the pattern's ethereal projection. But in its purest form, a symbol's ethereal pattern should express inherent values inseparable from the reality and substance associated with the symbol itself."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Then let me put it this way: I don't believe love is just an abstract, rational idea, bare of all emotion. For that reason, I believe the symbol of the cross, which you use to represent God's love and sacrifice, should also contain the essence of that love in all its wonderful diversity."

"You believe a symbol should contain the essence of that which it represents? Isn't that animatism?"

“Mysticism, animatism! Do you really want to discuss belief systems, or are you just hiding behind the terminology?”

The pastor gaped at her. “You know more about theology than you were letting on the other day, don’t you?”

“That’s not the point.”

“All right, what is the point?”

“Tell me honestly,” Silana said, “of what real value would a symbol be if it only embodied some unfathomable concept?”

“What are you getting at?”

“I’d like so much for you to understand how necessary it is for us to experience the things we believe in, even if it’s only through something as simple as a cross. But you’ve stripped the cross of its potential for sensuous or inductive expression. You’ve severed it from the quality and essence that should permeate its very being and degraded it to a mere intellectual exercise.”

He sniffed. “I’m sorry my dusty academic views don’t meet with your approval.”

“No, I’m sorry. I was truly looking forward to getting to know you, Pastor Gregg. Despite the differences in our beliefs, I was hoping to find a friend, a man with the open and compassionate heart of a true servant of God. Instead, I find a man who has no idea what he’s talking about. But maybe this will help.” She reached out and grasped the cross at its stem.

Suddenly, the cross began to glow with a pure, white light. It spread and filled the room until the sunshine outside appeared like twilight in comparison. Its warmth and brilliance entered my soul, and I sensed for the first time that wonderful and formidable presence I could never quite recall afterward: that all-embracing fire before which the darkness of my innermost being was completely exposed. I felt as if I were being torn apart, yearning to stay there throughout eternity, floating in that protecting warmth, but also longing to crawl into some deep, dark hole to hide my sordid being from that pure, revealing radiance.

Silana let go and the light collapsed, returning us to the cold reality of the pastor’s sunlit study. The pastor and I stared at the cross, shaken and embarrassed at our emotional distress. I remembered enough to shut my mouth. Pastor Gregg just kept gaping. “How...How did you do that?” he finally choked out.

“Isn’t it your duty as a minister of God to always be one with your Creator and Her creation?” She kept her eyes leveled at him, and he averted his gaze.

Somehow, we were able to finish our conversation and coordinate the important details of the wedding, but the pastor kept shooting uneasy glances in Silana's direction. In the end we decided to hold the ceremony in the open if the weather allowed. Knowing Silana, I couldn't have imagined it otherwise.

Silana and I didn't talk until we were in the car, and even then I couldn't find the right words. It was Silana who broke the silence. "Philip, did I do something wrong? You've been so quiet."

"Well, no, not necessarily wrong. Although that was quite a stunt you pulled off back there."

"Yes, I'm sorry. I admit, I was showing off a bit. But he was so patronizing. I hope it did him some good."

"What I don't understand is how you did it. If I didn't know any better, I'd say it was sorcery."

She gaped at me. "Sorcery? What are you saying?"

"Oh, is that a bad thing? Sorry. It's just that it was a very extraordinary experience. You certainly shocked Pastor Gregg." I sniffed. "Not to mention me."

Her expression became pensive. "Philip, there was no sorcery involved in what I did. But sometimes things we don't understand may appear as such. If you want, I'll gladly explain our principles of Sensation and Induction to you. But please believe me, it wasn't my intention to upset you, and I'm very sorry if I did." She lowered her eyes.

"Hey, that's okay. It's just that, for a moment there, I thought I might be marrying a witch." I looked at her with a conciliatory grin.

"Well, maybe not quite a witch," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

6.

The wedding day dawned clear and warm, one of the last sunny days of that beautiful Indian summer. My mother found that none of the traditional white wedding gowns agreed with the bride's complexion, so Silana wore a lovely cream-colored gown with pale rose inset gores. She didn't seem to be very interested in what she would be wearing and amiably let my mother make all the necessary arrangements. But when it came to the surroundings, Silana was uncompromising. We spent days driving around the Medford area until we found just the right spot.

Pastor Gregg was calm and radiant during the ceremony. He appeared somehow more composed and at peace with himself than I remembered him from our meeting, as if he had

exchanged his former ego with this unfamiliar being now standing before us. I wondered if the incident in his office had anything to do with his transformation.

Silana and I said our vows under a giant weeping willow. When I finally held her in my arms and kissed her, the scent of her hair was like the perfume of flowers in an open meadow, and for a moment, the world around me seemed to disappear.

I hardly noticed the golden leaves raining down upon us, but when Silana saw them, her eyes opened wide and she gazed up at the willow in awe. “Oh, no, Anaterya is bidding us farewell. I hope she finally finds some peace where she’s going.” There was a strange sadness in her voice. “Good-bye, fair friend, and fear not. We shall soon meet again in a gentler world than this.” Her words sent a chill down my spine. But then she smiled at me, her eyes shining, and I let it go.

After our family and friends had congratulated us, Silana took my hand and led me away from the crowd and into the woods. We strolled along for a while until we came to the edge of a deep and narrow stream, where she took my hands and pressed them against her heart. Her eyes were like dark pools, deep and inscrutable as she looked into mine. “*Siran esara;* I am yours.” She got down on one knee and dipped her hands in the water. Then she turned and kneeled directly before me, almost touching me.

I stared at her and felt my eyebrows draw together. “Silana, what are you doing?”

She looked up at me, a plea in her eyes. “Please, Philip, this is important to me.”

I nodded, and she continued the ritual by spreading her arms wide. In her kneeling position, her gown framed her graceful figure like the petals of a rose, and I felt she had never looked lovelier. I was so absorbed by my amorous contemplation I almost missed the two sweeping half-circles she drew in the air around us while letting the water sift through her fingers.

Still kneeling, she placed a chip of wood in my left hand and brought my right palm up to her parted lips, filling it with her warm breath. She gently squeezed my fingers so I would close my hands. Then she drew up a few drops of water in her left hand and enclosed a pinch of the dark soil from the stream’s bank in her right. At last she rose and faced me with the palms of her hands held just below mine.

I opened my hands to mirror hers—and gaped. The piece of wood in my left hand was glowing with an intense, inner fire, and my right hand contained a small orb of golden light. There was no heat, but only a faint tingling sensation on my skin. I shifted my gaze and saw the contents of

Silana's hands shimmering green and blue respectively, but her tender glance drew my eyes back to hers before I could examine the phenomenon more closely.

"*Siran osal esar;* I am your water. *Sires selan anar;* you are my wind. *Siran piral esar;* I am your earth. *Sires pilan anar;* you are my fire. May this cup be filled; I am with you. May it be drained; I am at your side. The stream, the water, is our witness. The air, the wind, is our witness. We make this vow today with earth and with fire. *Siran esara;* I am yours."

Silana took my hands and grasped them tightly. The materials' glow merged into a golden radiance that swelled until it engulfed our clasped hands, then gradually diminished. When the light had dissipated, Silana stretched out her arms to the side without letting go and took a step toward me. She was now standing so close I could feel the warmth radiating from her body. "We are one with Anae; now let us be one with each other."

I don't know how she did it, but she reached back and her gown came off, gliding to the ground on a cushion of air as she slipped into the cool stream. I just stood there with my mouth open and stared.

My reaction seemed to embarrass her, and she splashed some water in my direction. "Philip, I swear, if you leave me alone in here…"

I don't think it was her words that finally decided me, but the sight of her ivory figure highlighted beneath the water's dark surface. I pulled off my clothes—not nearly as effortlessly as she—and stumbled into the water after her. She met me midstream and melted into my arms, setting my soul aflame. Just as I thought my heart would burst, she let herself glide back into the lazily flowing waves. Together we went down, and my world exploded in bright light and ecstasy.

Later, when we were lying in the grass near the stream, Silana stroked my hair and studied the lines of my face.

I groped around for my clothes. "My god, what time is it?"

She traced the curve of my nose with her finger. "Hush, dearest. It's not that late."

"But we need to get back. What are the guests going to think?"

"Is that so important? Today's our day." She gently pushed me back into the grass.

I gave up my resistance and we lay together, enjoying each other's presence. Staring up into the leaves of the trees, I must have dozed off.

When I woke up, the texture of the light had clearly changed. It was late afternoon. I looked around and saw Silana down at the stream. She had her gown on and was wading in the shallow

near the bank, lifting her skirts to keep them dry and humming an unfamiliar, melancholic tune. When she heard me stirring, she looked up. Her eyes were deep and sad, but she smiled. “It’s time to go back.”

7.

The first few weeks passed quickly. Silana declined a honeymoon and chose rather to stay with me in her cabin for a week before moving into our comfortably sized, ranch-style house. I had bought an acreage on the outskirts of my hometown, giving her enough room to work with her plants come spring. The trees lost their colorful foliage, and the world turned cold and gray as the Rogue Valley’s notorious fog rolled in. I caught up on my work, and Silana kept busy discovering and organizing the new household.

Was it then that the shadow crept into our lives? At night, I often dreamed something was chasing me. In the vision, I came upon a large mirror. But instead of my own reflection, I saw Silana holding out her arms and silently calling to me. A feeling of dread constricted my chest and tightened itself around my throat. My eyes opened wide in horror as a ghastly figure, vaguely familiar, crept up on my beloved. I turned to face it and woke up drenched in sweat with Silana sleeping soundly beside me.

A month after the wedding, I invited Bill Marten and his wife to dinner. Silana was busy in the kitchen all afternoon, while I prepared several papers to go over with Bill, who was a colleague and important client of mine. The doorbell rang just after seven. Silana and I met our guests at the door. I introduced Silana, and Bill introduced his wife Carol, an inconspicuous and shy woman of roughly Silana’s height with shoulder-length, dark blonde hair, pale blue eyes, and an insecure smile. Bill was tall and athletic, with short, dark blond hair, gray eyes, and a nicely trimmed goatee.

Silana stared at Carol’s sweater in hushed amazement. “Oh, how beautiful! What a lovely and intense blue. It reminds me of Devil’s Lake in the evening. No, not the one in Lincoln County. I mean the one near Mt. Bachelor on Century Drive. The water is so clear you can see the rocks at the bottom. Did you crochet the sweater yourself?” She linked arms with an overwhelmed Carol and led her away.

Bill, seemingly amused at having his wife swept off like that, followed me into the parlor, where the ladies were already sitting comfortably on the sofa and chatting. Soon thereafter, dinner was served. The meal was excellent and Silana the perfect hostess.

During dessert, Carol touched Silana's arm. "I just don't know how you do it. I have such a hard time getting a dinner organized. Could you give me a few tips?"

"Yes, of course. Why don't you come into the kitchen with me after I clear the table? We'll need to leave our husbands to their business anyway."

Bill and I really did have an immense amount of red tape to go through. After about an hour of paper warfare, we decided we needed a break, and I went to the kitchen to get refreshments.

Carol and Silana were sitting at the kitchen table. As I came through the door, Carol turned to the window to appraise the darkness outside, but not before I had seen that her eyes were red and puffy. She was clutching a tissue in one hand, and Silana was holding her other hand in both of hers. I looked at Silana with a questioning glance, but she shook her head. I got a couple of beers from the refrigerator and left as quickly as possible.

It took Bill and me another hour or so to wrap things up. When the ladies joined us in the parlor a while later, we both gaped. For an instant, I couldn't recognize the woman who came in with Silana. It was Carol, but what a contrast to the shy and inconspicuous woman I had met just several hours earlier. She had her hair styled differently and was wearing a dark blue skirt that blended perfectly with her sweater, instead of the gray and unassuming slacks she had worn when she arrived.

But the main difference was her casual attitude. She seemed so much more relaxed. Her smile was open and natural, and she joined our conversation in a manner completely devoid of the reserve she displayed at dinner. Bill could hardly take his eyes off her.

After they left, sauntering to their car with their arms slung tightly around each other, I turned to Silana. "What was that all about?"

Silana let her fingers glide through my hair. "I'm sorry, dearest, but it would be an indiscretion for me to talk about it. Please trust me." She put her arms around me and hugged me tight. "Such pain," she whispered. "How could anyone bear it?"

Several days later, Bill called me on the phone. After a few pleasantries, he said, "Philip, what on earth did your wife do to Carol?"

"Why? Is something wrong?"

"No, on the contrary. It's like she was a new woman. Our relationship's never been this good."

"Well, I'm really glad to hear that, Bill," I replied carefully.

"Oh, and by the way, I've got some clients who might appreciate your services. That is, if you're interested."

"Hey, that's, um…terrific. You bet I'm interested," I said, attempting to sound more enthusiastic than I felt.

"Great! Why don't you come over for dinner tomorrow evening, and we'll discuss the details? And bring your wife."

"All right, does seven-thirty sound okay?"

"That sounds fine. See you then. Bye, Philip."

"Good-bye, Bill."

I hung up and just sat there, lost in thought. I should have felt excited about the new business opportunity. Instead, I felt confused. I had a beautiful wife who loved me and did whatever she could to make me happy and show interest in my endeavors. Why didn't I appreciate the extraordinary effect she had on everyone she met?

The next day, we went over to Bill's place. Carol and Silana embraced like old friends. Silana asked if she could help, and they scooted off to the kitchen together. Bill and I took a look at the clients' project profiles so we could get started on our proposals. We were still thrashing out some of the subtler details when dinner was served, so we continued our discussion at the table. There was one item in particular we weren't coming to terms with.

"Excuse me," said Silana, "I couldn't help overhearing, but in this situation, wouldn't it be more constructive if you allowed the concerned party to participate in working toward a solution rather than trying to eliminate the problem yourselves?"

Everyone looked at her in surprise.

"What exactly do you mean?" Bill asked.

"Well, during my involvement in diplomatic mediations and dispute resolutions, the goal was usually to assist the concerned parties in reaching an agreement, and not to present the solution ourselves. I see a certain analogy in this case. Given the circumstances, wouldn't it be preferable to get your client involved in the process? You could present various alternatives you had worked out in advance and let him decide for himself. Or better yet, assist him in coming up with a solution of his own. You wouldn't be taking too much of his time since you came well prepared. And if I were the client, I think I'd appreciate your honesty more than your efforts to produce a solution that might not even meet my needs."

Bill gaped at her. “Well I’ll be…Now, why didn’t I think of that?” He grinned at me. “Diplomatic mediation, huh? Philip, what aren’t you telling us?”

Silana bit her lip. It seemed she had revealed too much, but she was obviously pleased she had been able to help, and her eyes shone. But that was only until she saw me glaring at her. She remained quiet and thoughtful for the rest of the evening.

8.

Late that fall, she planted the rose. It was a gray morning, a cool wind blowing from the north but no frost on the ground. She dipped the roots in a pasty loam and enclosed them with burlap to protect them from the cold. Then she planted the cane, binding it to a wooden pole for support. Every day she would tend to it and cut away dead growth, caring for it as if it were a frail child.

The tension at home grew. I criticized everything she did and made sarcastic comments about her customs and habits. It is possible to find fault with perfection if you look hard enough. I even took offence at the fact that she was left-handed.

But Silana never complained. She endured my outbursts in silence, waiting patiently until the mood passed. I figured I was hurting myself more than her because my friends and neighbors shot indignant glances at me whenever I dropped another cynical remark, which only increased my annoyance.

In the late afternoons or early evenings, we often went for a walk in the pine woods at the end of the street or just around the block. Silana linked arms with me, and her calm gaze never missed an iota of our environment.

Every so often, that otherworldly radiance surrounded her. It was the same shimmer I thought I had seen the evening I first met her, but it had become a recurrent phenomenon, so I knew I wasn’t seeing things. Whenever I confronted her about it, she just looked at me as if she was speechless, and her eyes were so sad I didn’t have the heart to force the issue. What was she hiding?

Our walk on this particular evening remained vivid in my memory because of the two things that happened afterward. We had just returned from the woods and were on our way to the local convenience store when we came across a little four-year-old girl sitting on the lawn near the sidewalk, dissolved in tears. A doll lay next to her with its arm torn off. The girl was the daughter of a neighbor Silana had met while shopping about a week earlier. I remembered because she had

been more excited about this new acquaintance than usual and, what was more, seemed oddly concerned.

Silana stopped and looked down at the wretched bundle of misery. I tried to pull her away, not being in a very charitable mood, but she stood her ground. She stooped down on one knee and stroked the girl's blonde locks. "Hello, Theresa. You're not very happy today. What's the matter?"

"Dana's hurt," the girl sobbed, raising the doll's arm.

"Oh, the poor thing. Would you like me to make her well again?"

Theresa's head bobbed up and down while a few lingering tears slid down her face. Silana picked up the doll and maneuvered the arm back into its shoulder. Then she unfastened a small ivory brooch carved in the shape of a rose blossom from her sweater and pinned it to the doll's dress. Theresa stared at her toy in awe. She flung her arms around Silana's neck and planted a soggy kiss on her cheek.

Silana waved to the child's mother who had just come to the door to see what was going on. The woman waved back, smiling, and hurried toward us. Theresa met her halfway, eager to show her mother the doll's new adornment.

I took the opportunity to hiss, "Do you have any idea how much a brooch like that costs?"

Silana regarded me with her large eyes and shook her head. "Oh, dearest, what's all the money in the world compared to the delight of a little child?"

I pressed my lips together in seething anger.

But as Theresa's mother approached, I forgot to be annoyed. My mouth fell open. It certainly wasn't difficult to guess from whom Theresa had inherited her golden locks. The young woman's long, wavy mane was stunning. If Silana's hair was suffused with starlight, Theresa's mother must have caught the sunset and woven it into hers. She rushed to Silana and bowed her head. "Your Eminence."

"No, Juliana, please," said Silana, giving her a hug. "How often do I have to tell you I need your friendship so much more than your reverence?"

The woman seemed breathless as she eased herself out of Silana's arms. "Yes, of course. I'm so sorry, Silana, but I just don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come, and Theresa still needs me so much. *A'mada*, it's difficult enough getting used to the idea you're even here."

"You know I don't believe in coincidences. I was led here for a reason." She looked at me, her eyes shining. "Actually, more than one."

I felt my brow cloud over. “What’s going on?”

Silana drew the woman closer to me. “Philip, this is Julie. Julie, this is my husband, Philip.”

I offered my hand. “Pleased to meet you.”

Julie took my hand in a surprisingly firm grip and gazed into my face with her deep blue eyes. “And I’m very pleased to meet you, Philip.” Turning to Silana, she said, “He doesn’t know?”

Silana shook her head.

I tried to swallow my anger. “What don’t I know?”

Julie studied me, as if probing my heart to see if I was worthy. Finally, she sighed and attempted a smile. “Silana is the High Priestess of our people.” She fixed Silana with a sidelong glance. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell him.”

Silana’s smile was strained. “It’s complicated.”

Theresa tugged at her mother’s skirt. “Mommy, is Lana staying for dinner?”

The two women exchanged a quick glance. Julie took her daughter’s hand. “No, my little princess, I think they have other plans for tonight. But I’m sure they’ll be coming over some time soon.”

Silana and Julie touched cheeks, left, right, left. “I’ll stop by tomorrow,” Silana said. “Give my love to Don.”

“I will. Good-bye, Philip. It was nice meeting you.” She walked back to the house with Theresa, and we continued down the street.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on,” I asked, “or is that privileged information you only divulge to your so-called friends?”

She glanced at me, concern in her eyes. “All right, what would you like to know?”

“Well, for instance, I knew you were really religious and all that, but what’s this about you being a high priestess?”

“It’s *the* High Priestess. There’s only one.”

My lips tightened. “I should have known.”

Silana sighed. “Why is it so difficult for you to accept who I am?”

I took a deep breath. “I didn’t realize you were that important.”

“Important? Maybe, but I never had much time to think about it. To be honest, it’s almost a relief, not having to shoulder the burden anymore. On the other hand, I left almost three years ago, and they need to choose someone to take my place. But I never sensed…”

“Never sensed what?”

“I don’t know. It’s strange. They couldn’t have waited this long. But even Julie said… Oh, well.” She shrugged it off.

“You can sense things like that?”

“Yes, as priestesses, we’re trained in the Art of Sensation. But I was always particularly sensitive, even as a child.”

“Sensitive to what?”

“To the ethereal currents all around us. They’re always interacting with each other, creating subtle patterns of harmony and dissonance that we can distinguish.”

“Can you give me an example?”

“All right, how about something simple, like the rose I planted in our garden? Even if it doesn’t look like much right now, I can still sense its potential for beauty. And if I close my eyes, I can even see it blossoming in lovely pastels of cream and roseate.”

“I can’t. All I see is an ugly stem with thorns.” I kicked a rock on the sidewalk and sent it spinning into the street. A passing car honked at me. I was tempted to acquaint the driver with a certain digit of my right hand but glared at him instead.

Silana rolled her eyes and sighed. “It takes training, and you need to be open to it. But there can also be turbulences in the ether that almost anyone can sense. For instance, when I was four, there was an unprecedented temporal disturbance close to where I lived. Everyone who was even in the slightest sensitive could feel it.”

“A temporal disturbance?”

“Yes, there were massive distortion waves, as if something had punched right through the fabric of the universe. You know, like the waves a boulder creates when you drop it in a lake. They never found out what caused it.”

“That sounds an awful lot like science-fiction.”

Silana chuckled. “It does, doesn’t it?” She hesitated, and her brow furrowed.

“What is it?”

“It’s strange. I sense it here, too, just on a much smaller scale.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ever since I arrived here in Oregon, I sensed something was off with this timeline.” She looked at me. “For instance, who’s President?”

"Of the United States?"

"Yes."

"George Bush."

She shook her head in irritation. "See, that's what I mean. Somehow, that's just not right."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Is George Bush really supposed to be President?"

"Uh…well, actually, no. Ronald Reagan is supposed to be President. But he was assassinated almost two years ago, and the Vice President took over."

Silana stopped and stared at me. "Oh, no," she whispered. "That might be my fault."

"Oh, come on, now. You don't really believe you're responsible for President Reagan's death, do you?"

"No, of course not. Well, at least not directly. But my arrival here may have produced minute ripples; just enough to cause some subtle changes. We call it *corel selatanas*, or 'gentle breeze effect.' It's from the Covatal's *Excerpts on History*, where he says that we can't even begin to imagine how crucial a gentle breeze on a bright spring morning may turn out to be. I believe your term for it is 'butterfly effect.' It's one of the many reasons I isolated myself before I met you. I was afraid something like this might happen, although I never believed my presence would have such dire consequences."

I scoffed and pulled her forward with me. "You had nothing to do with it. For me, it was that deranged gunman's decision to pull the trigger, so it's his responsibility, and you'll never convince me otherwise." I shot her a sidelong glance. "I always figured you had some kind of higher education. I just never imagined it was in metaphysics."

Silana's gaze probed me. "I wish you would take this seriously."

"All right, what did you study?"

"Theology, philosophy, psychology, music, art, science, you name it. But then, our training takes a bit longer than your average four-year degree."

"Oh, really? How long?"

"It normally takes eleven years to qualify for a commission as priestess."

"Eleven years! And how long for High Priestess?"

"Another eleven years, at least that's the recommendation."

"You can't be serious. Twenty-two years? When did you start training?"

“I entered the Selanian Order when I was nineteen, which is early for an initiate. We usually start training at twenty-two.”

“So you were what when you became High Priestess? Forty-one?”

“No, I was actually thirty-seven. The Elders claimed I was somehow…uniquely qualified, despite my young age. Of course, I didn’t take their word for it. I knew they were up to something.”

“That’s a lot to take in.”

“I understand. Take your time.”

I stared at the sidewalk, counting cracks and trying to digest this information. After a while, I took a deep breath. “So, what’s Julie’s story? It seemed to me she owes you.”

Silana fixed me with another probing glance. “Yes, but please keep this to yourself. I trust you, Philip, and I’m telling you this in confidence.”

“All right.”

“Julie suffered from a dysthymic disorder, with severe intermittent episodes of major depression. When I met her a week ago, she was going through a very difficult phase.”

“How difficult?”

“It’s quite possible she wouldn’t have survived. She had become suicidal.”

“That’s pretty hard to believe. She seemed fine to me.”

“Well, yes, she is now. I was able to help her.”

I dragged her to a stop. “What? How is that possible? Treatment of a depression takes months, or even years.”

A corner of Silana’s mouth went up. “That’s what Selanian priestesses do. Mental disorders are often caused by an imbalance of the soul or spirit, or sometimes of the body. If we can help them restore their balance, they’re usually cured. It’s actually a bit more complicated, but that’s about the gist of it.”

After what I had seen of her abilities in the past, Silana’s explanation seemed plausible, so we continued our walk. But something didn’t feel right. I shook my head. “There’s more to this situation than you’re telling me.”

Silana raised her eyebrows. “Hey, you’re opening up! That’s a good sign.”

“So what’s going on?”

She became very quiet. “Philip, believe me, the situation is extremely dangerous, more than you could possibly imagine. You mustn’t breathe a word of what I tell you to anyone, or the results will be disastrous.”

“Sounds ominous.”

“It is. The thing is that Julie and Don are fugitives. No, they didn’t do anything wrong, nor are they running from the law, that’s all I’ll say. They moved here from Europe when Julie became pregnant and changed their name to Ferris. Their real name is… Well, it’s better you don’t know. But even after they came here, they had to keep moving, which is why Julie became dysthymic. The strain of their turbulent lifestyle and the constant fear of being discovered was too much for her.”

“It can’t be all that bad.”

“It’s worse than your most horrible nightmare. My current situation is a picnic compared to theirs. It’s a miracle they’ve managed to stay alive for as long as they have, and I doubt they’ve got much time left. But I’m glad they were able to keep Theresa under the radar. If all goes well, she at least might stand a chance of surviving this ordeal.”

“Aw, come on! You have got to be kidding!”

I grimaced when she grabbed my arm and squeezed. “Philip, this is no joke.”

I stared at her, and what I saw in her eyes made my stomach lurch. “I’m sorry, but I don’t understand any of this.”

“I know, but you will. Believe me, I’ll make sure you never forget a single word. And remember this: if anything happens to Julie, Theresa will be your only hope. Cost what it may, you must protect her.” She let go of my arm but kept her eyes on mine.

I finally nodded, and we crossed the street to the store. I felt numb and couldn’t get a word out, so I brooded until we got inside. Little did I realize how quickly the following experience would jolt me out of my lethargy.

We didn’t talk much. Silana greeted the McPhersons, the elderly couple who had operated the business since forever, with a friendly wave. They had liked her from the start and returned her greeting with a cheery smile. I got the drinks, and Silana picked up some vegetables and butter. But she hung back as we approached the checkout, and she seemed wary.

Suddenly, a short, stocky man in grimy jeans and a patched, scruffy jacket pushed his way to the front and shoved a silver Remington 1911 semi-automatic in Mr. McPherson's face. "Open the cash register. And hurry up, you jerk, 'cause I don't have all night."

The customers were shocked into silence, but one young woman, who was desperately trying to protect her little daughter, shrieked.

The man pointed the gun at her and said in a dangerously quiet tone, "Shut up, or I'll blow your goddamn brains out."

As Mr. McPherson tried to get the cash register open—a difficult undertaking with his hands shaking the way they did—Silana calmly walked toward the man with the gun. I tried to hold her back, but the man had already seen her. "Back off, you dumb-ass twit," he growled.

I couldn't believe my eyes because Silana shrugged off my hold, stepped right up to the man, and regarded him with a vague smile. Nodding at the gun, she said, "I'm sorry, but I can't allow you to keep that."

"All right, you stupid bitch. I warned you." He aimed the weapon's muzzle at her heart.

The gun smashed into the back wall and clattered harmlessly to the ground while the man went flying backward into a pyramid of Campbell soups. I wasn't even sure of what I had seen because her movements were so swift they seemed like a blur. But it was difficult to deny it had happened since he was out cold on the floor with dozens of cans rolling around his head.

I caught my breath when the man's accomplice, who must have been on lookout near the exit, came out of nowhere and tried to take Silana in a headlock from behind. Without looking back, she marginally shifted position. He got the full force of her elbow in the gut while she caught his arm on her shoulder and yanked down. I winced when I heard something crack. The man's scream sounded like the squeal of a stuck pig. He cried out again as Silana twisted his arm and forced him to the ground, where he remained groaning in pain.

The whole incident only took a few seconds. The customers stood there staring at Silana as if they had been frozen. The McPhersons broke the ice by coming around the counter to thank their savior, but Silana suddenly swayed dangerously. Everyone reached out, but I was closest and grabbed her.

Leaning on me for support, she pressed her hand against her head. "Whoa! That took more out of me than I thought. Could I please sit down for a moment?"

Mrs. McPherson nodded and showed us to a chair in her office. “There you go, honey. You take it easy, now. You’ve done more than your share.”

Silana smiled up at the old lady as she sat down. “Thank you.”

“Goodness, no, thank you, honey. It was certainly providential that you stopped by when you did. Kicked those guys’ asses something fearful. I’ve never seen anything like it, but it felt good just watching. Be sure to come in again as often as you like, and don’t you mind what it costs.”

“Oh, Mrs. McPherson, that’s so sweet. But I could never do that to you. I know you have to struggle just to scrape by in a small town like this. Don’t worry about me. I was glad I could help.”

Silana was on her feet again in ten minutes, but we didn’t get to leave the store until the police had arrested the perpetrators and taken down our testimonies, which took over an hour. It turned out the two men had come up the interstate from L.A., holding up convenience stores whenever they ran out of cash.

When we finally got home, neither of us was in the mood for dinner. Silana was exhausted and went to bed. I stayed up late, staring into the fire and knocking back one glass of brandy after the other. Although I was startled and perhaps even amazed by what I had seen and heard that evening, I realized it hadn’t much helped to defuse our volatile domestic situation. Somewhere deep inside, I felt my anger and resentment simmering like a hotpot waiting to boil over.

9.

One day, I came home after visiting with a client and found Silana on her knees in the den, performing some kind of ritual. Candles were lit on the floor around her. She had her skirt tucked in under her knees and her arms spread wide. Her eyes were closed, her face was raised to unseen celestial spheres, and she seemed to be glowing with a soft inner light. Her countenance was calm and radiant, as if it had been washed clean by a warm spring rain, and her lips moved as they formed silent words. The scene projected a peace and beauty I had seldom seen in such intensity.

I slammed my briefcase down on the table.

Silana drew her hands to her heart and bowed her head. “Hello, dearest,” she said in a low voice. She blew out the candles and regarded me evenly. “You’ve had a hard day. Would you like some tea, or coffee maybe?”

“That would be great, if you can spare the time.” Again that biting sarcasm. Why was I so angry? Was I jealous of her composure?

She came over and put her hand on my arm. “Philip, what’s wrong? You know you’re a part of me now, just as I’m a part of you. Do we really need to quarrel?”

One look into her deep, dark eyes, and my anger subsided. In its place, I felt my conscience gnawing at me. “Yes, I know. I’m sorry.” I followed her into the kitchen.

Silana put on her apron. “Would you like coffee, or tea?”

“Coffee’ll do fine.” I didn’t want to feel guilty. What right did she have to make me feel guilty? I felt the anger coming back like some big, black freight train looming in the distance. I sat down at the kitchen table and opened the newspaper, not really reading, and sensed the deep rumble of the freight train rolling closer.

Julie had taught Silana how to make Italian-style coffee using a moka pot, and she had become quite adept at it so it didn’t take long. When she finished, she set the cup in front of me with a pleasant smile and returned to the counter to clean up.

I sipped the coffee, and the freight train thundered through the crossing. “Silana, damn it, how many times have I told you to make the coffee stronger?” I shoved the cup away in angry indignation. “This is nothing but hot water! Can’t you do anything I say?”

She turned to face me. “Philip, I’m sorry about the coffee, but this is all so new for me. I know I haven’t had enough time to adapt to this whole…oh, this whole housewife thing, but I want us to be happy, and I’m really trying. You could at least give me some credit for that.” She was on the verge of tears.

“Well, maybe you’re just not trying hard enough. Instead of helping those so-called friends of yours or talking to your plants all day, you might try listening to me for a change. Try using your head instead of that worthless feminine intuition of yours and think!”

The tears came. As she stared at me, I saw the confusion in her eyes at her reeling emotions. Then she yanked off her apron, flung it on the counter, and marched out of the kitchen.

As the stunning realization of what just happened hit me, I felt triumph and guilt battling inside of me, but also a peculiar satisfaction at finally having accomplished the impossible. With such a victory to show for it, what did it matter that the coffee Silana had made was actually perfect? But in the end, guilt won the upper hand, and I left the kitchen to look for her.

I found her sitting on the bed in our bedroom with her arms around herself and her head down. She looked up when I came in, a handkerchief in one hand and tears running down her face.

I was shocked when I saw her. She had given up all semblance of composure, her face was paler than usual, and she looked exhausted. “Why, Philip?”

“I…I don’t know. It won’t happen again.”

She didn’t answer. Instead, she traced the lines of her palm with her finger and then wiped her eyes with her handkerchief.

My heart broke seeing her like that, somehow so beautiful but also so fragile, and all the anger washed out of me. I went over and sat down beside her. “Silana, I’m so sorry. Can you forgive me?”

“Yes, of course I forgive you.”

“Is everything okay?”

She shook her head. “Philip, have you ever asked yourself why you have such a desire to hurt the people who love you?”

“Whoa, hold on a minute! Why is this suddenly just about me?”

She probed my face. “All right, let’s make it about me. I don’t want us to argue, Philip. It just hurts too much. So please tell me what I’m doing wrong.”

I lifted my hands and let them drop back into my lap. “I don’t know. You’re not really doing anything wrong. To be honest, you’re amazing. You’re great at everything you do, and when confronted with something new, you quickly become an expert at that, too. So I really don’t know what to tell you. I guess you’re just plain perfect.”

“I don’t understand. If I’m so perfect, why do you—?” She caught her breath. “Oh, I see.” She buried her head in her hands and shook her head. “I can’t believe this. How could I have been so stupid?”

I gaped. “Silana, what just happened?”

“Philip, look at me. I’m not perfect, I’m a mess.” She wiped away the tears streaming down her face.

“Aw, come on. You’re not a mess.”

“Really? Well, if I’m so perfect, why am I crying?” She put her hand on her heart. “Why do I hurt so much in here? Despite everything I might seem to be, I’m still just a woman, and I need you. You can’t believe how much.” More tears filled her eyes.

I put my arm around her and drew her close so she could put her head on my shoulder. “You really need me? I guess I never realized that. I just knew I needed you.”

"I know, and that's my fault. I think it's mostly the training. The life of a priestess is harsh. We're led to be extremely self-sufficient and to excel at everything we do. And I did so much want to be a good wife for you."

"You are. You're wonderful."

"Maybe a little too wonderful?"

"Maybe. But I don't think I'd want to give you back."

"I'm glad." She plucked a thread from my shirt. "You know, I think I just learned a valuable lesson."

"What kind of lesson?"

"People don't always need you to be strong, they need to feel needed. But I've always been the strong one in the family. Maybe that's where I went wrong with Nisa."

"All right, who's this Nisa?"

"Well, Tamenisa, actually. We tend to shorten our names. But Tamenisa's my best friend and my protégée. And she's next in line to be High Priestess, the poor girl. She has no idea of the horrors that await her." I felt her shiver, and she pressed up close against me. "Oh, Goddess, it's so hard thinking about her. I'm so homesick."

I squeezed her tightly and stroked her hair. "It's okay, Lana, it's okay."

She looked up at me through her tears. "Hey, you called me Lana."

I shrugged. "Yeah, sorry. You said you shorten your names, so I thought I'd give it a try."

Silana put her head on my shoulder. "That's so sweet. It's what little Theresa calls me." She drew a deep, shuddering breath. "I miss my people, Philip. And I miss…I miss my sister. I just miss her so much." A tear spilled down, and she wiped it away.

I froze. "You have a sister?"

She nodded.

"Wow! That's, uh, some revelation."

She grimaced. "Sorry. But I am a person, you know. I do have a family."

"Yeah, but a sister! I just never thought of you that way, with siblings and all." I puffed up my cheeks and let the air rush out through my mouth. "All right, why don't you visit her?"

She sighed. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't go back."

“I don’t understand.”

She had a bitter smile on her lips. “It’s my own fault. Maybe I should have stayed and faced my fear instead of running off like that, despite what the Elinar told me. But then, all they ever do is speak in riddles.”

I stared at her. “You ran away?”

She nodded. “I told you, I’m a mess.”

“And what’s an Elinar?”

“No, sorry, I can’t get into that just yet. It still hurts too much. But if you want, I’ll try to tell you as much as I can.”

“I’m listening.”

She looked up at me and pleaded with her eyes. “Please hold me. I wouldn’t know how to get through it otherwise.” She cuddled closer, like a child seeking protection. “I really don’t know where to begin. No, that’s not true. I know exactly where to begin.” She shuddered, then suddenly cowered down and convulsed into violent sobs. “I’m sorry, Philip, I can’t do it, it’s just too horrible. Poor Nisa! Poor Juliana!”

A chill went through me. Silana was right. She was strong, stronger than anyone I had ever met, and I had never known her to be frightened of anything. What could possibly be so terrifying as to unnerve her like this?

I put both arms around her and let her sob into my shirt. It seemed as if her whole heart was pouring out in a frenzied stream of tears. Perhaps it was the first time she had ever allowed herself to let go and was trying to make up for lost opportunities.

After a while, she quieted down. “I’m sorry, I didn’t want you to see me like this.”

“You mean so vulnerable?” I stroked her cheek.

She attempted a smile. “Yes, I suppose. I guess I’m not used to it.”

“Yeah, well…”

“Maybe we can start with something that’s less difficult for me. But I’m afraid you won’t like it.”

I felt my stomach knot up. “Okay.”

She took a moment to collect her thoughts. “There was a man where I lived who fell in love with me.”

I groaned.

“Please don’t,” she said. “It’s difficult enough for me as it is.”

“Sorry. Go on.”

She sighed. “I realized how much he needed me, and it scared me because I sensed how unbalanced he was. I just didn’t know if I had the strength to see him through his crisis. I felt as if I couldn’t breathe anymore, and I was afraid I’d be trapped forever.”

I felt a red flag go up. “That situation sounds familiar.”

“Yes. I suppose running away is never a solution. The problem always catches up with you.”

“So, I guess to you I’m just a problem that needs to be solved, huh?”

She gaped at me. “What? But I didn’t mean—” She clicked her tongue. “Oh, Philip, please don’t do that.”

I studied the wall. “Silana, am I really unbalanced?”

She paused, and when she spoke, her words seemed guarded. “Do you remember the evening we met? I sensed it then, and I told you that you weren’t well, in here,” she put her hand on her heart. “It had me worried, because I knew even then how difficult it would make our relationship.”

“You were already thinking about a relationship back then?”

“Oh, yes,” she said with a smile, “although I hardly let myself hope. You wouldn’t believe how quickly I lost my heart to you. But where light shines brightest, darkness will always attempt to rise up and smother it.”

“What are you saying?”

She took my hand. “I’m saying that I love you, Philip, and I’m here for you if you need me. But I want to be your wife, not your priestess. I have faith in you, and I’m sure you’ll figure out how to banish the shadow on your soul, even without my help.”

She was right about the shadow, of course. But even if I was beginning to realize how destructive that side of my nature could be, I couldn’t quite bring myself to acknowledge it to anyone else. I took a deep breath. “All right, how does the story go on?”

She sighed. “Yes, poor Talas. That’s his name, by the way.”

“Yeah, I figured as much.”

“Darling, there’s really no need to be jealous.”

“Sorry.”

She stared at me in awe. “From the outside, you may only see an ugly stem with thorns, as you once put it. But I wish you could see the wonders you’ve buried so deeply under that prickly

surface of yours. Then you might understand why I lost my heart and fell in love with you so soon after we met, or why I love you so much now. Sometimes, I'm afraid it's the only thing that keeps me going." I swallowed as she caressed my cheek. "But the story gets even messier because it's my sister, Melina, who actually loves Talas, not me."

"You're kidding."

"I'm afraid not. Melina is such a dear and has a heart of gold. She never would have obtruded upon Talas's intentions toward me. But his heart was focused in the wrong direction. He never looked at her, hardly realized she existed, let alone perceived how much she loved him. I feel so sorry for her. Oh, Philip, I miss her so much." Tears filled her eyes.

I held her tight and rocked her back and forth. When she had calmed down, I stroked her hair. "What happened then?"

"There's really not much more to tell. I left. *Fled* might be a better word for it. I guess I wanted some time to think and find a way out of this mess. Instead, I probably wound up hurting everyone I love. I hope my rash actions weren't too painful for them. But who knows? With me gone, maybe Talas finally woke up to the truth. I'd be so happy for Melina if he did."

"So, you left because of this Talas?"

"No, he was just a convenient pretext."

"And why can't you go back?"

She looked into my eyes. "I'm so sorry. I want to tell you, but I'm not ready yet."

"Why? Don't you trust me?"

"Please believe me, it has nothing to do with you. And for what it's worth, I do trust you, that is, as far as you trust yourself."

"What do you mean? I trust myself."

"Really? Do you trust yourself to open your heart and let me love you? Do you trust yourself not to let your anger or your sarcasm control you?"

I swallowed and remained silent.

"Darling, what is it you really want?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I really don't know."

10.

Spring comes early in Southern Oregon, and by the time the first snowdrops and crocuses bloomed, Silana had grown pale and lost several pounds. She usually felt cold and always wore her knitted shawl wrapped around her shoulders. I asked her to see a doctor, but she just shook her head.

But spring itself seemed to be cure enough, at least for a while. She had already planted bulbs in the fall and now got busy sowing seeds and making room for her plants and flowers. But she took particular care of her rose, making sure it had enough water, taking out wild sprouts, and breaking off buds below the main stem to strengthen the single blossom she was raising.

Although our heart-to-heart talks were helping me to better understand her, I couldn't always control my anger and sarcasm. I found it difficult to break the tenacious habit rooted so deeply in my character, but I seriously tried not to let it get out of hand. Even so, it seemed to drain her, depleting her strength and exhausting the very essence of her being.

On the first Sunday in May, we had my parents over for lunch. We were sitting around the table, enjoying the meal and talking about my father's newest addition to his rose garden. Silana stood to get the dessert but suddenly slumped over and slid to the ground.

We all jumped up in surprise and shock. My mother, who had been sitting next to her, reached her first. "My goodness! Silana, are you all right?"

Silana tried to prop herself up on one arm while holding her head with her free hand. She was white as a sheet and had a dazed expression on her face. My mother kneeled down and supported her. A thought seemed to occur to her, and she smiled conspiringly. "You're not pregnant by any chance, are you?"

Silana shook her head. "Not possible, just need to rest. Philip, could you…could you help me to the bedroom, please?"

With my mother's assistance we eased her up off the floor. When I had gotten her into bed I sat down beside her, holding her hand and stroking her hair.

She turned her head to look at me. Her face was void of color and her expression one of utter exhaustion. "Oh, Philip, I'm so sorry." Just saying the words seemed an immense strain.

"Hey, that's okay. Why don't you get some rest? I'll take care of Ma and Pa."

I tried to get up, but she held on to me. “Dearest, my heart aches so. What your mother said…I wish so much that we…that we could have had a child together. I’m so sorry it wasn’t possible.” A single tear slipped down her cheek.

“Honey, that’s not important right now. Please, just get better.”

She shook her head, straining at the effort. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

My heart felt as if it was being squeezed by a huge fist. “Silana, what’s wrong with you? Why are you suffering like this?”

“Doesn’t hurt, just tired. My physiology…it can’t cope…talk later…need to rest.” She tried to squeeze my hand, then turned her head and closed her eyes. Inside of minutes, her breathing took on the steady cadence of deep sleep. I caressed her cheek and looked down at her pale and peaceful face.

When I returned to the dining room, my mother said, “Philip, you just have to get that girl to a doctor. She hasn’t seemed well for months.”

I shrugged. I knew Silana didn’t want to see a doctor, but I was becoming more and more anxious myself.

A few days later, Silana asked me if we could visit her cabin. I was surprised but agreed, hoping it would benefit her health. On the following weekend, we made the long drive up to the Deschutes National Forest. It was a beautiful, clear day, and we reached the cabin in the late morning. It was amazing to see the change that came over her as we strolled through the forest she knew so well. She was silent for the most part and just enjoyed the warm sun filtering through the branches. It was like seeing her again for the first time: her natural radiance, her composure, and the way she seemed to feel in tune with everything around her.

We spent the night in the cabin. The fresh air must have done me good because I slept soundly all night and didn’t wake up until late the next morning.

Silana wasn’t there.

Anxious, I dressed quickly. When I stepped outside, she was just coming around the corner of the cabin. Silana seemed tired but smiled. Without a word, she took my arm and dragged me forward, so we just kept walking.

After a while, we came to a large, old oak. Silana reached out and put her hand on the tree’s furrowed bark. “Thank you, Linaya, oldest and wisest of friends, for your silence and understanding. I have to say good-bye now, it’s time for me to go, but our hearts remain as one.

Greet my friend, Anaterya, and tell her I'll be seeing her soon, as I'll be seeing you again someday in that most wonderful of places."

She went up to the massive trunk and kissed it. The oak seemed to sigh while a gentle breeze swayed its gnarled branches. When Silana turned to me, I thought I saw her eyes glistening. She walked away without looking back.

I followed her, confusion and alarm growing in my heart. When I caught up with her, I turned her around to face me. "Honey, I know I promised not to badger you, but I just can't stand it anymore. Please, tell me what's going on."

She gazed into my eyes. Then she raised her hand and touched my cheek. "Oh, my darling, you already know so much. So for now, I'll just say that I was Silana, a princess of the House of Tolares and the High Priestess of my people, Guardian of the Rites of Malentisa and Protectress of the Woods. You might not understand what that means yet, but I hope you will, someday. But that part of my life is gone and past. Now, all I really want is to be your wife, with all my heart, but I'm afraid even that time is waning swiftly."

I felt a lump rise in my throat. "Silana, please don't—"

She suddenly collapsed into my arms, and I had to grab her to keep her from falling. I put my arm around her and supported her back to the cabin. We left soon after, and she slept most of the way back home.

That night, I woke up and realized she wasn't asleep. "What's wrong, honey?" I murmured.

She stroked my hair, and her words were a mere whisper. "Don't forget me, Philip. Remember."

"What do you mean? I don't understand." I was still half asleep.

"Don't worry, you will. Go back to sleep." She let her fingers glide through my hair, and I soon drifted off again.

Although I was worried about her, I had to get up early the next morning and stayed away on important business until fairly late. When I got home, I couldn't find Silana anywhere. I called to her around the house, but everything was so dreadfully quiet I got anxious. I stepped out into the garden, but when I called her name, all I heard was silence.

I finally found her in the growing dusk, lying next to the rose. Her head was resting on one arm, her hair partly covering her face, and her eyes were closed as if she were taking a nap. Filled with dread, I bent down and touched her. Her arm was warm, but she didn't respond. "Silana," I cried, shaking her. "Silana, wake up. Please, wake up."

There was no answer, not even the soft sound of her breathing to comfort my growing despair. I sat there, insensitive to my surroundings, letting realization sink in, letting the pain trickle into my soul like burning poison. I took her lifeless form in my arms and cradled her, rocking her back and forth, unaware of the passing of time.

When I came to myself, it was already fully dark. The following hours were a nightmare, and I only remember them as if through a misty veil. The paramedics, the police, my parents, the coroner; it all seemed to swirl before my eyes in an unreal mosaic until my deranged spirit finally fled to the oblivion of dreamless sleep.

11.

Despite their own intense grief, my parents attended to all the arrangements of the funeral. Although it was unusual in a case like this, they firmly resisted an autopsy, using their influence in town to attain their objective. Everybody who had known Silana recognized instinctively that she would never have wished it. The violation of her remains would have seemed like an act of desecration.

In the days and weeks after the burial, I found myself wandering aimlessly from place to place, not capable of coming to terms with reality. I let my work slip, not caring, not eating, living off my savings. All I felt was pain, guilt, and emptiness while endless questions kept spinning in my mind.

At some point, I visited the spot where we had been married. It wasn't a conscious act. Somehow, in my disoriented wanderings, the location drew me like a bizarre magnet.

Shock set in immediately. The beautiful park had been demolished. What remained looked like a bludgeoned battlefield. Where there had once been a lush meadow, vibrant with colorful autumn leaves and soft, green grass, there was only a dusty, torn-up construction site. Instead of sweeping the sky in golden splendor, the charred stump of Silana's friend, the willow, was condemned to crouch near the ground. Like an image frozen in perpetual despair, the cold, severed limb pointed upward in a mute shriek to the heavens, devastated by the horror it had been forced to conceal for so long. A large sign announcing some new building complex stood over it, watchful, patient, knowing the dreadful secret slumbering beneath the willow's roots could never truly be silenced.

My eyes opened wide, and a chill crept through me. I had never had a vision before. No, not a vision. It had been more like an awful, ghastly impression. Was Silana trying to tell me something? I couldn't believe she would speak to me in such a morbid fashion.

Shivering despite the mildness of the day, I turned away from the creepy stump and looked over at the conifer woods behind the site, where the true marriage ceremony had been performed. The elegant laburnum, magnolia, and rhododendron bushes that had adorned the line of stately trees had been replaced by black, gaping holes filled with refuse, and the red earth under the trees was trampled and littered with trash. The forest looked dreary and forlorn on this summer day, one of the rare overcast days of the season.

I dragged myself through the dirt and entered the woods. Roaming along, I discovered the stream where Silana and I had shared a moment of blissful harmony on that afternoon so long ago. I stared into the water and tried desperately to recall that precious instant. Was that a shape outlined in the water next to mine, an ivory figure with long, dark hair? But when I turned, there were only leaves and branches waving in the wind.

That night, I dreamed she came to me. She sat down beside me on the bed and stroked my hair. *Remember, Philip, remember*.

I woke up and tried to hold her, but my arms closed on thin air. I got out of bed and moved over to the window, like someone walking in his sleep. Gazing outside, my memory of her seemed like a veil before the moon, its beams reflecting the pale color of the rose. But when I rubbed my eyes, I realized it was only tears.

The next day I moved to the cabin that had played such an important role in her life, to the place where her spirit surrounded me day and night. I took the rose with me and carefully planted it in her garden behind the cabin. The rest of the time I just rambled about in the fields and the woods, searching for peace and seeking answers to the questions that ravaged my soul.

One day, I came upon the clearing that had been destroyed by a fire. It was the spot that had triggered such an intense struggle in Silana: a huge scar desecrating the beauty of the surrounding forest. Following the black, narrow wound, I found a knoll where the damage path ended. A gut instinct told me the mound wasn't just part of the scenery. Something was buried there, but I couldn't distinguish its form. Whatever it was must have plowed into the earth at impact, and the wind and leaves had completed the task through several changing seasons, forming an elevation

in the landscape. I could imagine how it must have been as it descended, raking the trees like the talons of a large, wounded bird, intruding abruptly into the peaceful quiet of the forest.

Remember, a soft voice called inside me. *Remember*.

I walked around the right side of the knoll, my heart pounding. Near the front, I encountered a steep, earthen stairway leading underground. I couldn't see inside because of the bright sunlight, but I stepped down, drawn by some inner force and not fully aware of my actions.

The passage was approximately three times my width and high enough for me to comfortably stand upright. It ended after several feet, and my senses told me I was facing a dirt wall. I closed my eyes.

Remember. A distant echo in my soul.

Using my left hand, as Silana might have done, I reached out and touched the wall. I was surprised when it yielded like smooth rubber, and my hand bounced back.

An instant later, I recoiled. Like a specter materializing in the fog, a silvery, metallic surface appeared where the dirt wall had been. At first, I just stared. But my need to know, my longing to find an answer was greater than any fear I might have felt.

I reached out. The object wasn't cold, didn't quite feel like metal. But my touch must have triggered something. I couldn't quite make it out, but it seemed as if some kind of subliminal vibration had started in the depths of the object.

The outline of a rectangular door with rounded corners appeared on the surface. The door slid aside without a sound, leaving an opening slightly smaller than the passage I was standing in. Beyond the entrance, soft light illuminated a corridor, inviting me in.

I stepped inside. The floor was soft, like a carpet, my footsteps soundless. The walls were blank and moderately luminescent. After a few yards, the corridor turned right and led to a dead end where another door slid open. As if in a trance I entered a large chamber.

"Hello, Philip." A soft, familiar voice. Silana stood at the far end of the room, a majestic figure wearing a cream-colored robe which draped to the floor, while her shining, dark hair spilled down her back.

12.

"What you're seeing is just a holographic message. I'd much rather be here myself, but I'm afraid that's not possible, for obvious reasons. But I do hope I can answer some of the questions that must have been tormenting you after I was forced to depart.

"Please forgive the induced memory I planted in your mind before I left. I hope it didn't cause you too much pain or confusion. Under normal circumstances, I would never resort to such methods. But if it's led you here, as I intended, then it's fulfilled its purpose, and the effects should wear off immediately.

"I'm sure you've already deduced that I'm not from your world. If you haven't—well, Philip, I'd be very disappointed in you, to say the least, and I'd advise you to take a closer look at the vehicle you're standing in. Could you come to any other conclusion? The *Sinaven Tyenares* is my private yacht. She's a good vessel, as far as ships go, and I hope you'll take good care of what's left of her.

"But that's just the problem, isn't it? What's left of her. *A'mada*, I don't even know where to begin! I had this speech all worked out, and now I find I'm tongue-tied.

"All right, I'll start with my departure from Chyoradan. When I left my home planet, I fled to the only place where I believed no one would follow. That was your world, dearest, which we call *Halena Yazoral*, the Forbidden Planet. But I didn't know a fanatic splinter group had established a comprehensive surveillance network around your solar system. I suppose they must think of themselves as some kind of divine enforcers of the ban on your planet. They attacked me and caused extensive damage to my ship, forcing me into an emergency landing.

"Okay, go ahead, laugh. I know I crashed. I'm sure Tal would have done a much better job. No, not of crashing, of landing. He's one of the best pilots the Alliance Military has. And you don't need to get jealous just because I admire his flying skills.

"Oh, Philip, I'm so sorry for teasing you. When you hear this for the first time, I'm sure you won't be in a laughing mood and might even find my humor morbid. But when the pain fades, you may find it more amusing than a solemn message left by a grave person you couldn't tell from a corpse.

"Oops! Maybe that wasn't quite the right thing to say, either.

"Anyway, I'm sure our technicians on Chyoradan could repair any damage the *Sinaven* has sustained. But I think it'll be difficult to find someone on Earth with an advanced degree in

Selanian technology. If you'd like to try some repairs yourself, you'll discover that a large section of the ship's right rear hull was fused.

"Sorry, I should have said *starboard hull aft*, but I'm not very good with technical terminology. The good news is that there should be enough of the external matrix left to power the internal facilities indefinitely. I've set the console in front of you so it'll display the ship's information facilities in English when you activate it. They're very easy to use, and I'm sure you won't have any problems with them.

"The bad news is crashing on Earth amounted to a death sentence, but then you've already had to find that out the hard way. I didn't realize it at first, but my physiology is under terrible stress on this illicit world of yours. I've known for some time I wouldn't be able to hold up under the strain much longer. It was just becoming too difficult, constantly attempting to restore the languishing ethereal pattern of my physiology, a pattern that simply wasn't compatible with your world. I know you found the seemingly mystical glow that sometimes surrounded me fascinating, but it was just my feeble attempt at realigning my pattern to restore my energy levels. But the effect was temporary, and I was doomed from the moment I set foot on your world.

"I hope you understand now why I tried to keep you at a distance when we first met. Although I had quickly lost my heart and fallen in love with you, I also knew we wouldn't have much time together, and I was so afraid of putting us through everything such a relationship would entail. But then I saw how much you were suffering, as was I. All I could do was hope and pray the love we shared would be worth any pain we might cause each other. Maybe I was just being selfish by taking this decision into my own hands and not telling you what you were getting yourself into. But to be honest, I don't regret a single moment of it, and I hope with all my heart you feel the same.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't bring myself to tell you the whole truth, but I hope you'll understand. A lot of what's happened to me in the past years is still too painful. But I kept a personal log which should tell you anything you'd wish to know, and probably a lot you wouldn't.

"Philip, I'm sure you're aware of how dangerous the knowledge aboard this ship could be. The consequences would be devastating if it fell into the wrong hands. The *Sinaven Tyenares* is yours now, and therefore your responsibility, so please keep her safe, keep her hidden, and only reveal her existence to those people whose hearts you're certain of. As a small example of what the *Sinaven* can do, I confess I used the facilities on board the ship to forge the documents I needed to

get married. I know, it was morally ambiguous, but telling the truth about my origin was out of the question, and the only other alternative was not to marry you, so—

"Whoa! Well, now, I'm sorry I got so dizzy, but the effect of the tonic seems to be wearing off, so I guess my time is almost up. Please give me a moment.

"You know, sometimes I feel as if I've failed utterly at everything I set out to do. I wanted so much to be there for my people, to show them my love by working toward a lasting peace in the Galaxy. Contrary to those who elevated me to the office of High Priestess, my people believed in me and trusted me. I wish I could have done more for them, but it wasn't possible, and I have to let it go.

"I'd like to tell you that the history of my people is one long tale of love, peace, and prosperity, but it's not. On Chyoradan, we seem to live in peace: one small, sheltered island in an ocean of conflict, at least that's what some people would like us to believe. But on so many other worlds, there really is only fear, grief, and misery.

"I won't bore you with the particulars, but if you're interested, you should read the Covatal's *Excerpts on History*. They contain an accurate account of how our mother planet, Piral, was destroyed two thousand years ago; how my people were scattered among the stars in the Galactic Diaspora; and how the Advisory Council wrought a semblance of peace through the Alliance of Chyoradan.

"My incumbency as High Priestess is over. I know I've done all I can, although I'll never feel it was enough. But Anae had other plans for my life. It was my destiny to meet you, dearest Philip, to love you and become your wife. I sense that what I was will continue in some form through you. That's why I wanted you to see me this one last time in my robes of office, as a servant of the life that was once so dear and holy to me. Please remember that I will always love you. *Siran esara.* Good-bye, my love."

13.

During the following months, I spent most of my time on the ship. Learning her language was my top priority, but I also took time to delve into the history, culture, and technology of her people. I was grateful I could share in the wisdom they had accumulated through the ages, and my studies kept me busy and helped keep my mind off the constant anguish that sometimes threatened to overwhelm me.

Then I began to listen. I deliberately opened my heart and listened to the wind whispering in the trees, the breeze rustling through the fields, or the stream babbling among the rocks. Often, I wandered to the old oak and spent hours at its base just listening and learning. Gradually, the change I felt in my heart took root in my wounded soul, and I discovered I could live among the plants and herbs of the fields and the forests, eliciting their secrets.

At last, I understood how she must have felt in that week before she gave me her answer, conversing with the oak, struggling with herself, knowing I couldn't understand. But ultimately overcoming her fears and doubts by love, a love so deep I still couldn't comprehend it. I looked up at the stars as she must have done, aware of her pain and sorrow, her longing for a world she would never see again.

Word spread of my seclusion and the change in my life. In these uncertain times in which so many people were searching for truth and meaning, my experience must have drawn them like bees to a honeypot. Bill and Carol Marten were the first to call on me. A few days later, Don and Julie Ferris showed up with their little girl. They only planned to stay for a short visit, but the days turned into weeks and the weeks into months.

Others followed. They came gradually, first in little trickles, then in tiny streams. Today I can better understand the need that brought all those people to this lonely part of the country, their craving for peace, for healing, for understanding. Most left again, a newfound calling in their hearts. But some stayed, sensing somehow that they had finally come home.

My parents also visited me for several months but were led to return to their hometown. They did insist, though, that Silana's remains be moved to the place where so much was growing as a fruit of her life and passing. As with the funeral, they attended to whatever was necessary, quietly coordinating the release, exhumation, and transfer so there would be no stir, aware of the delicacy of the situation and the need for secrecy.

The second burial was sincere and peaceful, a small ceremony held according to Selanian customs and attended by a few good friends. My father personally transplanted the rose so it would stand as a sentinel above the seed that had surrendered its existence and fallen into the ground, allowing new life to emerge from that which had passed.

But sometimes, I still feel the loss severely. Although Silana assured me of her love, it seems so difficult to let go of the pain and the guilt. Should it be easier, knowing there was nothing anyone could have done and that I must somehow come to terms with my fate?

But then, not long ago, there came a bright spring morning when I heard a horned lark calling to its mate. I was working in front of the cabin, looking out across the fields, when the song reached my ears. In that instant, I knew life was possible, that it didn't just have to be a deliberate attempt at somehow getting through the day. I knew it because, for the first time, I felt joy again, a simple joy untarnished by any pain or thought of loss. And despite my aching heart, I have found the strength to look upon that fragile blossom in the garden behind the cabin, which guards a simple, warm inscription upon a cold, hard stone:

In Loving Memory
Silana Tolares Brannon
1934 – 1983

END OF THE ROSE

Note: The storyline of *The Rose* will be continued in *The Alley* in the second volume of the Selanian Chronicles, *The High Priestess*. Although the story above seems unrelated to the one following below, the relationship between the two will become clear by the end of the series, as promised in the Author's Note.

The Emissary

Contrary to what some scholars seem to believe, historians are obliged to take the hermeneutic principles of their discipline seriously. To this effect, Piral, the mother planet, must always constitute the basis of any research when confronting the issue of the Great Houses. At the time in which we will therefore commence our investigation, the end of an era had dawned: an era in which the Elinar had long since fallen victim to their own crisis and disappeared into the void of myth and legend, while the Demantar were but a tale told to children on cold winter nights when families sat together about their warm and cozy hearths.

In the spring of 1524 TC, two and a half millennia before the Galactic Diaspora, an incident in the little town of Nadil triggered a chain of events that finally led the Advisory Council to contemplate the magnitude and impact this first significant struggle between the Great Houses might have on the future of the entire planet.

—Covatal, *Excerpts on History*

1. Arrival

The stranger emerged from the woods near a broad, stone-paved road. It was still early, but the sun was up, and the mild temperature and cloudless blue sky promised a beautiful late spring day. The breeze carried with it a hint of resin and wood flowers, so he filled his lungs with fresh air as he studied his environment.

The road must have constituted a major thoroughfare because it was already well traveled for this time of day. He knew Piralian society of this era could best be described as Neo-Victorian, so he wasn't surprised by the many chyeves-drawn carriages and wagons.

What did surprise him was the body.

The stranger moved closer and shook his head. The corpse had been dragged behind a hedge of low-growing shrubs—probably to ensure it wasn't visible from the road—and covered with a layer of pine needles and a few conifer branches. Whoever had disposed of the body must have been in a hurry and done a sloppy job. If it had been the stranger's task, he would have buried the body

deep in the woods where animals would have quickly destroyed most of the evidence and the remains would have decomposed long before they could be discovered.

"Damn it, I don't have time for this crap," he muttered.

Actually, time was pretty much all he had. And because of the scope of the incident he had been involved in during the night, he knew he wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. What he really wanted was to not get involved. The Temporal Displacement Directive issued by the Alliance was mandatory reading for all citizens in the stellar age, so he was aware of the behavior required of him while he was here. In broad terms, he was to interact with as few people as possible and stay out of the way of major historic events. Of course, the directive didn't account for *corel selatanas*, the 'gentle breeze effect,' nor did it tell you what to do if you stumbled upon a corpse your first few hours in.

He sniffed. "Just my luck." Obviously, he couldn't just ignore what had happened here. Someone had probably committed a crime, and it went against his nature to cover it up.

As he was considering his options, he saw an elderly gentleman plodding toward him on a chyeves. The man seemed to be some kind of officer and was wearing a dark forest green uniform with burgundy and gold embellishments.

The animal made him grin. Chyevi looked like a cross between a horse, a sheep, and a lama with their short rounded muzzles, large floppy ears, dark, inquisitive eyes, and soft and often curly pelts. Dependent on the breeding, chyevi could have long, thick manes and tails. This old mare was only mediocre and had a rather thin mane and tail. But it did have light brown fur with nice, tufted whorls.

As the stranger flagged the man down, he hoped his Selanian was up to the task. He hadn't used the language on a regular basis in years. "Excuse me, my friend, are you with law enforcement?"

The man looked him up and down but especially scrutinized the stranger's uniform. "Yes, my friend, I'm Constable Pirtas Venural."

"Could you spare a moment? I believe there's something here that requires your attention."

"Does it have to do with the strange lights last night? I've already had numerous reports about the sightings."

"Strange lights?"

"Yes, witnesses reported seeing a mysterious blue light descend on the forest northeast of town. And later, there were reports of odd lights in this area of the road. I was just coming by for another quick look. It was too dark to see anything here last night."

The stranger felt his face grow hot and stared at the ground, hoping the constable wouldn't notice. "No, I'm sorry, but I don't know anything about any lights." He hated lying outright, especially since he had never been very good at it. He was better at misdirection. But he really didn't know anything about the lights here on the road.

"Alright, I'll come take a look, as long as it doesn't take too long. My shift is already over, and I'd like to get back to the office." The constable directed his mount to the side of the road and got off. "Please, lead the way," he said, after he had hobbled the chyeves.

As soon as they were near the shrubs, the stranger said, "I didn't want to attract any attention. I assume you'll want to keep this quiet while you investigate."

"Investigate?"

The stranger showed him to the spot where the body was hidden and pointed to the mound.

The man's brow creased. "What is this?"

"I didn't touch anything, so the crime scene hasn't been contaminated."

"What are you talking about?"

"You might want to lift up one of the branches, but carefully," said the stranger.

The man gave him a quizzical glance but did as the stranger suggested. His face went pale, and he dropped the branch. "*Te'linos!* What in Anae's name happened here?"

The stranger lifted his hands in a defensive gesture. "I have no idea. I just arrived and found the body like this."

The constable reached for the branch again.

The stranger held him back. "Wouldn't it be better to wait for a crime scene unit?"

"A what?"

"Uh…you know, a team of forensic experts who examine the area and collect evidence."

"I don't know what you mean. We have no such experts."

"Really! Then how do you usually investigate a death?"

"We've never had to, at least not here in Nadil. People in this province usually die of old age, or in rare cases there might be an accident. In some of the larger cities we've had a few isolated incidents over the years, and of course there was that horrible affair near Lake Satural twenty years

ago. But if it's murder and mayhem you want, I'll have to direct you to the western provinces. With everything that's going on over there, it's very possible they have some of these experts you're talking about."

The constable turned back to the mound and lifted the branches from the body. Using a handkerchief, he tried to brush away some of the pine needles from the victim's head. The face of a young lad in his early to mid-twenties appeared, at least what the stranger felt someone in their early to mid-twenties would look like on Piral. He knew life expectancy on this planet was higher than on other worlds he had visited

The constable cringed. "*Tev'anar!* The poor boy." His voice sounded hoarse.

"Do you know him?"

"Yes, his name is Normas Tunilen. He's just a simple stable boy from a poor family here in town. Sometimes, he runs messages to the neighboring cities to earn extra coin. I remember him saying he was going to Vetena yesterday evening."

"How far away is that?"

"It's almost a hundred leagues to the east, so it would have taken him at least two days to get there and back."

Leagues! Of course. He would have to get used to Selanian units of measure again. He knew a Selanian league was a bit less than a mile or about one and a half kilometers. A league consisted of five thousand *viteli*, which could be translated as "cubits" or "armlengths," and a *vitel* was a bit less than a foot. Linear units of measure were easy. Synchronizing his timepiece would be more difficult. "Well, by the looks of it, I don't think the boy got very far," said the stranger.

The boy's eyes were opened wide, as if he had been surprised, and his dark hair was clotted with blood on one side. There were also a few bloodstains on the boy's clothing, which was worn and shabby, at least as far as the stranger could tell. The boy himself seemed strong and was well built. It looked as if he had been hit on the left side of the head with a blunt object but, although the wound had bled profoundly, the stranger didn't think it was cause of death. A layer of conifer needles was still covering large portions of the rest of the body, so it was difficult to make a more detailed assessment.

"Would you like me to help you turn him over?" said the stranger. "That might dislodge the pine needles and allow us to take a closer look at him."

The constable stared at him but didn't answer. He was white as a sheet.

“Constable?”

The man finally nodded and grabbed the boy’s shoulder. The stranger grabbed his hip, and together, they rolled him over. After looking at the boy’s back for a moment, the men gazed at each other, and the constable shrugged. Since there didn’t seem to be anything worth further scrutiny, they turned him face up again.

The constable recoiled. Wide eyed and with one hand over his mouth, he stumbled down to the first tree he could find.

While the constable gagged and coughed, the stranger examined the gaping black hole that had been revealed in the boy’s chest. “I guess we found cause of death,” he muttered with a humorless grin.

The wound was the size of a grapefruit and had penetrated through most of the chest cavity. What was odd was that the edges of the injury and the cavity itself were charred and completely fused. There was no trace of blood whatsoever in or around the wound. His first thought was of a plasma projectile. But that was impossible. This society hadn’t yet invented that kind of technology. Did this have something to do with the odd lights people had reported here on the road?

When the stranger pulled up the boy’s sleeves, he couldn’t find any evidence of defensive wounds on his arms. He examined the boy’s hands. There was a slight chance the boy had scratched his attacker during the struggle, but he had no way to verify if there was really blood and skin under the boy’s fingernails. There were several nasty burn marks on the boy’s face and neck: miniature replicas of the gaping hole in his chest.

He took out a clean handkerchief and extended it to the constable as the man returned. The constable took it with a grateful glance in the stranger’s direction and wiped his mouth. As he stood over the boy, the constable said, “What in Anae’s name could have done this?”

“You don’t know?”

The constable shook his head. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Neither have I,” lied the stranger. “What are you going to do?”

“This is well beyond our capabilities. But a Lady of a Great House lives just down the road. Her entourage has specialized training, and we’ve liaised with them in the past. Maybe her chief of security will know what to do.”

“Would you like me to come with you?”

"If you would be so kind, would you please wait here? Someone needs to, uh…guard the body. I promise someone will arrive soon and relieve you from this grim task."

The stranger nodded. "Alright."

The constable strode to his chyeves and removed the hobble. The stranger watched him swing himself up and turn the animal back to the road, urging it on until it was charging toward the town at breakneck speed.

2. Chosen

Dark shapes converged on the girl against a backdrop of crackling flames. On the ground, thick smoke crept forward and curled around her legs, rising in stinging wisps that confounded her senses. From somewhere far away, she heard a faint melody. But in the cold echo of such a song, there could be no comfort. Trembling, she looked around, hoping for a place to hide. Finding no shelter against the malevolent powers threatening to engulf her, she fled into herself.

In the sudden calm that occupied her innermost being, she opened the eyes of her heart and saw eternity stretching out before her. Dark conifer forests spread out across the Suviltan Plateau and far north into the vast expanses of the Navaren. Despite the thick cover, her spirit sensed the glowing, translucent horns of her friends concealed in the emerald dusk beneath the trees. Their familiar presence had a soothing effect on the shaken girl.

You have been chosen, Golden Keeper, they sighed.

Her heart skipped a beat, and she shrieked, "No, don't do this to me!"

You must be strong and hold them together, for the time is near.

"I thought you were my friends."

There was no answer.

"Please, don't leave me alone."

Silence.

"I'm so scared."

The scene faded, and she felt herself being dragged back into the darkness, her arms and legs flailing in the swirling currents. An eddy caught her and pulled her down, dropping her with a gut-wrenching thud.

Her eyes opened wide. The black army was closing in on her, and there was nothing she could do. The smoke stung her eyes, making them water and blinding her. All she could see was the flames glittering on the blades of countless swords. The melody she had heard before ascended into a song that filled the air with its vibrant force, pounding her mind until she could hardly breathe.

Paralyzed with fear, she cringed from a shadow rising up behind her tormentors. The black shapes whirled around, and their masked faces reflected hopeless terror. The apparition bore down on them, and darkness opened its jaws to release a crimson torrent of violence that swept everything away in its path. Then the shadow engulfed her, and she jolted upright in bed, a scream stifled on her lips.

Her eldest sister, Catyana, spun around. "Sinara, honey, what's wrong?"

Breathing heavily, the girl's glance darted around the room. The sun was up, and the darkness had passed, but she couldn't shake the dreadful images from her mind. "Oh, Caty, please hold me."

Catyana instantly rose from her seat at the dressing table, where she had been brushing her long, golden hair, and rushed over to the girl's bed. She took the helpless bundle in her arms and hugged her tightly. "Why, my *porodesa*, you're trembling all over." She stroked Sinara's golden locks out of the girl's face and kissed her on the forehead. "Was it the nightmare again?"

The girl nodded. A tear rolled down her cheek.

"Can you tell me about it?"

Sinara shook her head. "I can't see it clearly. I smell smoke, and all I see is darkness and fire. I hear the siren's song, and there's blood everywhere. Oh Caty, don't wake her up. Please, please, don't let him wake her up."

"Wake who up, dearest?"

Sinara closed her eyes and huddled closer to her sister's comforting warmth. A shudder went through her as she parted her lips, whispering the three words she dreaded above all others:

"Tevasala se Nemata."

The Goddess of Death.

3. Sound Arguments

The stranger paced back and forth. Every now and then, he glanced down the road, hoping for a sign of someone approaching. Finally, he sniffed. No way was he giving in to watched-kettle syndrome. At least the area was pleasant and could perhaps fill in as a distraction. Behind him, conifers spread their emerald foliage as far north as the eye could see. To his left, where the sun had risen, he could discern tall mountains with jagged, snow-capped peaks. To his right, the trees dropped away and revealed meadows dotted with flowers. The carriages traveling in that direction were heading toward a quaint little town just down the road. A large, friendly, pastel-colored sign was planted in the earth a few yards away, announcing they were entering "Nadil; where good friends meet, and strangers are always welcome."

The inscription made him chuckle. In Selanian, it actually said *Nadil; coni vilamadani vanaratae i tavasini celuvan pirhyelaratae*. The Selani always were very generous with their language when creating new phrases, as long as the result pleased their sense of aesthetics. For instance, "good friends" in Selanian should have been "*vilasenimi mada*," but they had written *vilamadani*, which was shorter and more elegant.

Despite his unusual activities on the side of the road with Constable Pirtas earlier, it didn't seem anyone had taken particular interest in them, which was fine with him. He wanted to lay low and blend in as much as possible. Since he was dark-haired, clean-shaven, and of moderate build, he didn't believe his goal was so far-fetched. On the other hand, his light gray uniform was a bit conspicuous when compared to the darker and more somber clothing of the other travelers.

As he studied the cavalcade, he saw the passengers of a carriage shoot furtive glances in his direction. The same thing happened when the next one rumbled by. So these people were curious, they just weren't being very upfront about it. Of course, this indirect approach could be a form of courtesy in this society.

Since no one had yet come to "relieve" him, he decided to follow the drag marks in the grass. Just a bit farther up the road toward the edge of the forest, he found a short, heavy branch with blood on it, and more blood on the ground. He was sure he had found the scene of the crime. After examining the area around the crime scene carefully, he decided he had learned everything he could reasonably deduce from the evidence at hand.

As he strolled back to where the body was, he saw two young women approaching. They were both wearing black cloaks and long, cream-colored dresses. As far as he could determine, the material was of excellent quality, as was befitting the entourage of a Lady. But the robes and cloaks puzzled him. They reminded him of the Selanian Order, but he couldn't understand why a Lady of a Great House would use that specific color combination.

The two women themselves were very pretty, with long, dark, open hair and dark eyes. The one on the right seemed especially cheerful, and when she was close enough, she said, "*Setavelan mada, vil'anar;* Good morning, my friend. I hope we haven't kept you waiting for too long?"

"*Setavelan mada.* Thank you for asking. The wait was pleasant, but its resolution even more so," said the stranger with a grin.

The girls looked at each other, their eyes bright, and they both seemed to be suppressing a giggle. The previous speaker said with a smile, "Thank you for the compliment. It's a delightful change of pace, but it seems our reason for being here is anything but. What can you tell us about this grim task?"

The stranger stepped aside, allowing the two young women an unrestricted view of the body. The girl on the left gasped, and her hands shot up to her mouth. The smile of the one on the right melted away, and the stranger saw the blood drain from her cheeks. She turned to her companion. "Tanola, you don't have to do this. After everything you've been through, it's no disgrace if you would rather stay back."

"No, I appreciate your concern, Tilya, but it's alright. I have a dim feeling we're all going to have to get used to such things soon enough."

"Perhaps, but it's still my job to protect you."

With a quick glance at the stranger, Tanola said, "I'm just the Lady's deputy chief of staff."

Tilya followed her glance and nodded. "Of course. Sorry."

Tanola gestured to the boy with a weak grin. "Besides, I doubt he's in a position to do us much harm."

"At least not physically," Tilya muttered. Her expression was grim as she walked over to the corpse. Her friend followed more cautiously.

"What are you going to do?" asked the stranger.

“There isn’t really much we can do,” said Tilya. “We’ll probably fetch a canvas and wrap the poor boy up before transporting him into town. I’m sure his family will want to bury him as soon as possible.”

“Don’t you want to find out how he died?”

“And how do you propose we do that? We’re not clairvoyant.”

“You could at least gather as much information as possible.”

“Such as?”

“Well, first of all, it’s clear he wasn’t killed here.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because his head wound bled profoundly, but there’s no blood on the ground in this area. If we backtrack along the drag marks leading to this dump site, I’m sure we could find the actual scene of the crime.”

The two women exchanged a glance.

“Nova would like you,” said Tanola, managing a vague smile.

“Who’s Nova?” asked the stranger.

“She’s the Lady Utalya Revan’s personal handmaiden and her chief of staff.”

“In other words, your boss?”

Tanola probed him with a sidelong glance. “She’s…our superior, yes.”

Tilya put her hand on Tanola’s arm. “Perhaps we should do as our friend here suggests and follow the tracks. May we know your name, by the way?” she said, turning to the stranger.

The stranger hesitated. “Well, uh…” Should he tell them his name? What about the Directive? He glanced over at the sign with the town’s name and had an idea. “My name is Vilam Tavasin.”

Tilya looked in the direction of his glance. “Really!” she said, turning back to him with a playful smile. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Alright, as you wish. I’m Natilya Revan, and my friend here is Tanola Penates. Would you please lead the way?”

The stranger wandered toward the crime scene, showing them the bent grass and the drag marks in the dirt as they moved forward.

“The perpetrator must have been quite strong to drag the boy so far,” said Tanola, but her voice seemed guarded.

"Actually, no," said the stranger.

"Why do you say that?" asked Natilya.

"Because of the tracks. It's evident the person was quite light, probably a woman. And look," he said as they arrived at the crime scene. "This is the branch with which the boy was hit in the head. You can see the blood on the branch here, and here on the ground after he fell. And just a bit farther along is where the drag marks begin, so he was probably killed in that area. But the dump site is the closest spot where the perpetrator could hide the body from travelers on the road. It's closer than the edge of the forest. I believe this person only dragged the body as far as they had to because they weren't so strong. Besides, if this person had been stronger and heavier, the tracks would have been deeper."

"That all sounds very reasonable," said Natilya. "*Tinataran esa;* thank you, Vilam."

"*Tezatal;* you're welcome. But there's more. Look at the tracks here. What were they doing?"

Natilya shot him a curious glance and stooped down to examine the grass. "It looks like they were lying down."

"Correct. I don't believe the perpetrator wanted to kill the boy initially. But at some point there was a scuffle, and the perpetrator took the branch and hit the boy. But even then, I don't think she was trying to kill him."

"She?"

"Yes, look here." He stooped down and picked up a strand of long, dark, wavy hair. "There are more of them in this area."

"Alright," said Natilya, "that seems to verify your suspicion. Anything else?"

"Well, um, the tracks here where they were lying on the ground are very, uh…unique. The impressions they left in the grass and earth are more prominent here than anywhere else, which means they weren't always lying side-by-side, and it seems there was some, uh…rhythmic activity, so, uh…"

Tanola's eyes suddenly grew round and her mouth popped open. "Oh."

Natilya looked at her friend with her brows drawn together. "What? Why—?" She gasped. "Oh!"

The girls gazed at each other, trying desperately not to snicker. Natilya finally said, "Yes, um, I…think we get the picture."

"Besides," said Tanola with a more or less straight face, "this is serious."

"Yes, absolutely," said Natilya with a perfectly somber expression, but her eyes were sparkling.

"Uh, anyway," said the stranger, "it seems hitting the boy in the head wasn't enough. It looks like he came after her, and I assume she felt she had to kill him."

"But how?" said Tanola.

"I have no idea," said the stranger, lying once again. "Why don't we take another look at the boy?"

The women exchanged a sidelong glance. Did they somehow know he wasn't being truthful? If they were in the Selanian Order, as he suspected, it was certainly possible.

They strolled back to the dump site, and Vilam squatted down to check the boy's pockets. Looking up at the women, he said, "They're empty. Where would a messenger or courier keep the documents they're carrying?"

"Usually in a pouch, which they either strap around their waist or hang over their shoulder," said Tanola.

"Well, the boy has nothing like that on his person. The girl must have taken it with her."

"Maybe we should attempt to piece the events together," said Natilya. "It might make things clearer."

"Alright," said Vilam, "The boy met the girl shortly after he left Nadil for Vetena. At that location over there," he pointed to the spot, "they left the road and moved down closer to the forest, where they did their, uh…thing…and then they began to struggle with each other."

"Where's the boy's chyeves?" said Tanola.

"I don't know," said Vilam. "I haven't seen it."

"Maybe the girl deliberately chased it away, or it might have returned to its stable in Nadil," said Natilya. "If the latter, we'll find it when we get back to town. If the former, there's probably nothing we can do until it turns up."

"Why were they fighting?" asked Tanola.

"Maybe the boy took something of hers," said Natilya.

"I doubt it," said Vilam. "It seems he had already obtained everything from her that most boys his age would have wanted, although it's not quite clear if it was consensual. Isn't it more likely the girl took something of his? If she was only trying to defend herself, why would she have emptied the boy's pockets?"

"That's a sound argument," said Natilya, "although we won't know for sure unless we find her."

“So the boy got up and tried to return to his chyeves,” said Vilam, “but the girl didn’t want him to leave and hit him in the head with the branch.”

“But she didn’t hit him hard enough to keep him down, maybe because she didn’t really want to hurt him,” said Natilya. “He got up again and came after her. And then she…killed him…somehow. At that point, it might even have been self-defense.”

“That sounds about right,” said Vilam. “I think that’s all we can glean from this area. Is there anything else I can do?”

“No, you’ve been a great help,” said Natilya. “But we might have more questions for you later. You’re probably hungry and thirsty. There’s a tavern on this side of town that I can recommend. Just follow this road into town, and you’ll soon see it on your right. If you reach the market, you’ve already passed it. The proprietor’s name is Folan and is a good friend of ours. Would you be so kind and wait there? Someone will be along in a while to talk to you.”

“Alright, that sounds like a good idea.”

“Oh, and please don’t tell anyone about this. We don’t want to cause a panic.”

“I understand. Farewell, my friends.”

“No, Vilam, not farewell,” said Natilya with a smile. “We hope to see you again later.”

With a wave, Vilam left the two young women at the dump site and started down the road. He realized he needed more accurate information about where, or better, when he was, and a tavern was as good a place as any to get it.

It didn’t take him long to reach the outskirts of the town. It was still fairly early, and there weren’t many people on the streets. He felt disoriented, which was no surprise after the various ordeals of the past few days. The unaccustomed environment seemed surreal, and he gaped as he strolled among the picturesque buildings.

When he saw the marketplace a few blocks ahead, he knew he was closing in on his destination. He stopped to get his bearings and examined the buildings around him. Ahead and to his right, he saw tables and chairs through the tall windows of a large structure. This had to be the tavern Natilya was talking about. Both wings of the massive and artfully designed wooden door stood wide open, inviting him in, so he stepped inside.

4. The Contact

Bejad recognized the indistinct shape of a vagabond ahead who had managed to curl up among the debris littering the passageway. He adjusted his direction to avoid tripping over him. The sun had risen more than an hour ago, but the alley was so narrow it remained in shadow for the better part of the day. He was already late, so he quickened his pace and reached into the pocket of his trousers for the instructions he had picked up at the dead drop yesterday.

They weren't there.

A cold wave of panic swept through him as he anxiously searched his pockets. He found nothing. Could he have misplaced the information again? What the hell had he done with it? Fortunately, he had a good memory, and the meeting place wasn't far. Angry with himself, he kicked a *gedashol* that scampered across his path.

The effort shifted his attention back to his surroundings, and he shook his head. Divestelan had once been called the "Jewel of the Covasins." When he glanced up at the buildings around him, he could imagine the impression the city must once have made on astonished visitors. Situated near the eastern foothills of the Covasin Mountains, the city was built from stones hauled there from Mt. Toradeh, the highest peak of the "Impassables." When seen from a distance, the capital of the western Suviltan provinces shimmered white against the imposing backdrop of the towering summits in the west, and even seemed to glow when the sun struck the polished stones' surfaces.

But the vision of grandeur faded as soon as the unsuspecting pilgrims came within range of the city's dreadful stench. Any remaining illusions vanished when they entered the city's gates and saw the filth that choked its streets.

When Her Eminence, the High Priestess, had engaged Bejad's services five years ago, she had attempted to explain the situation to him, but he was hardly capable of believing what he heard. How could anyone expect him to comprehend such terror and misery while sitting in the comfortable offices of the Capitol Building in Travis? It wasn't until he arrived in Divestelan that the undeniable facts hit him square in the face.

Conditions in the city had been deteriorating for more than thirty years. The metropolis was hopelessly overpopulated, now harboring more than three hundred thousand inhabitants. Most of them were refugees who had fled from the surrounding areas, hoping to find shelter from the unpredictable and shocking acts of violence that ravaged the countryside.

Bejad shook his head as he turned into another passage lined with the foulness of utter poverty. When confronted with the reality surrounding him, it was difficult to understand why the Advisory Council had waited so long. But when rumors of the declining state of affairs in the western provinces reached Travis thirty years ago, Bejad had been just as much in denial as everyone else. He found it difficult to censure the elders for diligently ignoring what nobody wanted to hear. People were afraid, and any rumor that the Millennial Peace was coming to an end was instantly smothered in a shroud of silence.

Only after the darkness spilled over to the eastern provinces ten years later did the elders respond—with conferences. It had taken the late High Priestess Halita Penates's shocking death here in the city five years ago to bring them to their senses. They finally realized there might be other forces at work, forces requiring drastic measures if they wanted to expose them.

And so they had chosen Her Eminence as the new High Priestess, despite her young age. Bejad trusted her judgment implicitly. Before her elevation to the office, she had shown courage and competence by anticipating the circumstances of Halita's "accident." Unfortunately, no one had listened, nothing was done, and Halita had died. After the election, the new High Priestess had taken over Halita's meager intelligence network and gone into seclusion, spinning her webs, strengthening her contacts with the Resistance, and biding her time until she could reveal herself. In the past five years, she had accomplished more than any High Priestess in the centuries before her.

Bejad had been one of her first liaison officers and had volunteered for the position in Divestelan. Although he had been here for almost five years now, he still couldn't get used to the reek and filth. He missed the warm luminance, the green gardens, and the fresh mountain air of Travis, the "City of Light," located five hundred leagues away on the other side of the Suviltan Plateau.

He made one last turn but had to press up against the wall to let a patrol pass. With the menace of the Black Guard always imminent, the guards in the dark brown, black, and golden attire of the Western Alliance patrolled the numerous streets and passages at all hours. Not that it did anyone any good. None of the patrols had ever survived an encounter with their adversaries.

This passage was a bit broader than the back streets he had been taking. He stopped in front of a grubby little tavern huddled up between two rundown craftsmen's shops and glanced left and

right. Then he stepped inside and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. The proprietor was leaning against the counter, talking with another customer, and eyed him suspiciously.

Bejad nodded casually in his direction. “I need a strong mug of deventas.”

The proprietor grunted and disappeared in the back.

In a gloomy corner, Bejad located his contact, who had a mug resting between his hands. Bejad steered toward his colleague and slipped into a chair beside him. “This had better be good, Sheletas. What were you thinking, calling me to such a godawful part of town at this ungodly hour?”

“I was thinking we have weightier problems than losing a little sleep,” the man answered, and pushed a crumpled piece of paper in Bejad’s direction.

Bejad stared at the note. He felt the blood rise to his cheeks and averted his gaze.

Sheletas shook his head. “Bejad, what on earth could have induced you to throw away the contents of a dead drop just twenty steps from where you picked them up? No, don’t answer that. Knowing you, I’m sure she was attractive.”

Bejad grinned shamefacedly.

“In addition to the insignificant detail of your negligent behavior which, in case you haven’t noticed, endangers us all, I hope you realize the dead-letter box has become useless.”

Bejad grit his teeth. “Sorry.” He let the note disappear in a pocket.

The proprietor shambled over and slammed down a mug in front of Bejad containing a dark, smelly broth. He immediately shuffled off again.

Since they were bound to silence until the proprietor was out of earshot, Bejad took the opportunity to study Sheletas’s face. He was a tall, muscular man with well-groomed but graying hair and a closely trimmed, full beard. His dark complexion indicated he was an inhabitant of the Northern Covasins, and his face was marked by the solid track record of an experienced agent of the Resistance. His high brow gave him an intellectual appearance, and his grim demeanor suggested he wasn’t the kind of man who put up with nonsense. Bejad often felt his own mediocrity in the man’s formidable presence.

In comparison, Bejad possessed only a moderate stature. But the hard work on his parent’s farm had produced a strong and sturdy physique, and his often rough life had spawned the dubious virtue of being able to drink most of his friends under the table. Bejad had made several attempts to emulate the trend and grow a beard or moustache. But the fashion didn’t become him, so he

propped a meticulously shaven chin in his left hand and swept his untamable black hair out of his face with his right as he warily observed his companion.

Sheletas glanced back to make sure the proprietor had gone. “Alright, let’s get down to business.”

“I’m listening.” Bejad took a sip of the hot liquid, grimaced, and forced himself to swallow.

“Did you know His Excellency’s family will be leaving for Tolares in the early afternoon?”

“Yes, but they’re cutting it pretty close. The conference begins in four days, and it’s more than two hundred leagues. But what does that have to do with me?”

“Someone close to the family has asked for a meeting.” Sheletas leaned closer. “Bejad, listen carefully, whoever it is asked for you by name.” The two men exchanged a significant glance. “My contact says it’s extremely urgent. You must meet with them at noon.”

“It could be a trap.”

“That’s a risk you’ll have to take.”

“And where is this meeting to take place?”

“On the west side of His Excellency’s stables.”

“His Excellency’s stables! Are you out of your mind? They’re already suspicious enough as it is. If I get caught within a league of the estate, they’ll execute me on the spot.”

“Then don’t get caught.”

“Very funny. Can’t we arrange this meeting someplace else?”

Sheletas shook his head. “Sorry, but there’s not enough time. Look, Bejad, you’re the one who’s always been pushing for an opportunity like this. Besides, things are getting tight for you. From what my contact told me, this person must be someone very important. Your instructions are to get any information back to Her Eminence in Tolares directly after the rendezvous. Take whatever you need with you and arrive at the meeting place ready to depart. From what I’ve heard, you’ll be transferred back to Travis after that, so this is good-bye.”

“But, Sheletas, I can’t just leave you and the others here with the pressure building up like it is.”

“That’s a kind thought, Bejad, but this is *our* home. The Resistance wants to see those who are destroying the western provinces driven out and Divestelan returned to its former glory, even if that’s not your highest priority.” Sheletas regarded Bejad with a sidelong glance. “And don’t think you’re irreplaceable, my friend. The High Priestess will find someone to take over your

responsibilities. We're indebted to her for everything she's done, so when you see her, please let her know she can always count on us."

Bejad sighed. "She'll be very happy to hear that."

"Alright, noon on the west side of the stables. Ask for Yanita. I'll inform my contact that the meeting has been arranged. Don't let me down this time, Bejad."

"I'll do my best. Ask for Yanita," he echoed wearily.

Sheletas placed a coin on the table and rose. As he passed, he put his hand on Bejad's shoulder and squeezed firmly, then departed without another word.

Bejad remained seated and stared into his mug, pondering his professedly last operation after five years as liaison between the High Priestess and the Resistance in this city. Had he ever been of any help to these people? He wanted to believe it. He would think of a way to get onto the estate.

He threw a coin on the table and left.

5. Folan's Guest

Since it was still early in the day, Folan wasn't expecting any customers. He therefore looked up from his task of polishing the tables in surprise when the stranger stumbled in. "*Setavelan mada, vil'anar;* good morning, my friend. What can I do for you?"

"*Setavelan mada,* my friend. Are you the proprietor of this charming establishment?"

"Yes, I'm Folan."

"There's been an incident out on the road to Vetena. Two young women in Lady Revan's entourage are investigating. I suppose they need me out of the way, so one of them asked me to stay in your tavern for a while. Her name is Natilya."

"Natilya sent you?" said Folan with a smile. "Wonderful! I always appreciate a patron's recommendation. But what incident are you referring to?"

"I'm not sure, but I believe it has to do with the reports of strange lights on the road last night."

"Really!"

"You've heard about it?"

"Who hasn't heard about it? What have they discovered?"

"They're not saying, and they've asked me not to discuss it."

"Yes, of course," said Folan with a wink. "But I'm being rude. Please, be seated!"

“Thank you, my friend, I believe I will.”

“If you will excuse me, I will get you some refreshments.” Folan bustled off.

In the adjoining room, his little, round wife Semanta caught him by the sleeve. “Who is he?” she asked in a whisper.

He snatched his arm away, appraising her with an ill-tempered gaze. “How should I know?” Feeling remorse over his outburst, he added, “Natilya sent him.”

“Natilya Revan, your cousin’s niece?”

“Yes, but he must be someone important. His language is too formal for a commoner, and the strange uniform speaks for itself.”

Semanta’s eyes became round as saucers. “Goodness, what does he want?”

Folan shrugged. “What everyone wants: a goblet of wine and the latest news.” To himself, he muttered, “But, for this one, I don’t think I can dish up the regular fare.”

He rushed off to the cellar, mulling over the exchange with his wife. Semanta had been acting so strangely of late. She seemed so nervous and uncoordinated. And instead of coming out and greeting their guests as she used to, his wife often preferred to remain at her listening post in one of the back rooms. What was wrong with her? He hoped for both their sakes she would get her act together. They had a tavern to run, for god’s sake! Without her help, he would have to hire additional personnel, which would cut into their profits and therefore into their retirement fund. Didn’t she realize what she was costing them with her outlandish behavior?

His shoulders sagged as he climbed down the stairs. He did love Semanta dearly, and her behavior worried him. For the past few months, she had often seemed so exhausted. But what could he do for her? She wouldn’t see a doctor, and he couldn’t force her to go.

He sighed. It had always been difficult for him to speak with his wife if the conversation resulted in any kind of conflict. And he knew he wasn’t like the priests and priestesses of the Selanian Order who had been trained in perception and could handle matters of a more spiritual or emotional nature. Why wouldn’t she at least allow one of them to speak with her? His cousin, the former High Priestess Lady Utalya Revan, had moved to Nadil four years ago and taken up residence just down the road. Why wouldn’t Semanta go to her? Although he knew it wasn’t the right way to go about it, the situation made him feel so helpless, and his helplessness in turn made him angry.

Folan switched on the light. The sight of the wine racks before him produced a content smile on his lips, and he took a deep breath to shake off his troubled thoughts. His wine cellar was

renowned for its excellence up and down the Suviltan Plateau. It had taken him years to achieve the high standard he was striving for, and even Lord Tolares himself had praised his superb collection.

He let his gaze drift up and down the countless rows of bottles. There was one in particular he was looking for; not too expensive, but good enough to earn an informed guest's admiration. "Aha! There it is." He grabbed the bottle from the rack and rushed up the stairs.

When he returned to the guest hall a minute later, he noticed the stranger had chosen a seat in a secluded corner from where he could easily observe the entire hall. The proprietor made a mental note of the fact, another detail confirming his suspicion that this newcomer was no ordinary citizen. He set down a goblet in front of the stranger and began pouring the wine.

"Oh, dear friend," said the stranger, raising a hand in apology, "I'm certain your wine is excellent. But could I just have a glass of water? Please forgive me for making so much trouble."

Folan stared at his guest in surprise, but he also felt a twinge of disappointment. "Oh, it's no trouble, I assure you." He whisked the goblet and carafe away. "The customer is always right," he mumbled. He would now have to sell the opened wine at a fraction of its worth.

In the next room, he and his wife exchanged a quick glance, but he shook his head and shrugged as he rushed by. He didn't need to explain, since Semanta would be listening in on every word anyway. He soon returned with a pitcher, from which he poured fresh, cold water into a glass. Leaving the pitcher and the glass in the customer's reach, he said, "Now, my friend, what else can I do for you?"

The stranger lifted his right index finger, gesturing for Folan to wait, while he emptied the glass of water with his left.

Folan gaped at him. "You really are thirsty," he said as he poured him another glass.

"Yes, I really am. But if I may be so bold, I'd very much appreciate some of your time. It's been a while since I've had a good conversation." He took another sip of water.

"Ah, then your journey has been a far and lonely one." Folan took a deliberate glance at the visitor's unaccustomed attire as he maneuvered his short but stout frame into a chair at his guest's table.

The proprietor's words produced a faint smile on the stranger's lips. "Yes, you may safely assume as much. But would you be so kind as to tell me today's date?"

“You really have been on a long journey! Today is Velanetav, the thirty-seventh day of the month Ulanaseta.”

“Ah, I see. Only four more days to the summer solstice. And the year?”

Folan’s jaw dropped. “Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry, but I believe my reckoning may be off. I’m not even sure my calendar is the same as yours.”

“Why, I’ve always been led to believe the standardized calendar has been in common use for ages.”

“That may well be, but please humor me.”

“Alright, this is the year 1524.”

“Ah, thank you. I really appreciate your putting up with my exasperating questions. But I’m afraid I’m not quite done yet. Could you please tell me if there are still thirty-two hours in a day, and forty days in a month?”

“*A’mada,* certainly! I must admit, we don’t get questions like these very often. But you’re the guest, and we attempt to serve.”

“Which you do very well. I’m grateful to have stumbled upon someone so accommodating.”

Folan beamed. “Well, as for that, please understand I do have a tavern to run. You wouldn’t believe the variety of people who turn in here, and most of my customers expect me to supply them with any and all kinds of information.” He lowered his voice and winked at the stranger. “To be honest, most of my intelligence comes from listening to gossip.”

“Then it seems I’ve come to the right place. But tell me, my friend, does the Advisory Council in Travis still regulate the units of measure?”

“Units of measure?” Folan chuckled in embarrassment, feeling both amused and perplexed. Even if he was an important official, this man was one odd fish. “Yes, Travis is where the temporal synchronization of the calendar takes place and, as you said, units of measure are regulated. Why do you ask?”

His customer took a strange device out of his pocket. “I need to synchronize my timepiece. I think they use that famous sundial in Travis to regulate hours, don’t they?”

“Yes, they do. It’s the sundial in the Capitol Plaza. But you needn’t travel quite so far. We have an accurate replica of the sundial in the town square.”

Folan realized his guest's attention had shifted to the guest hall, and he followed the man's gaze. The place was spacious, sunny, and comfortably furnished. His tavern was popular, and he expected many of the townspeople in the evenings and on the weekends when they had time to socialize.

A proud smile curled up the proprietor's lips. No patron would ever be left in doubt of his excellent taste. The windows were tall, rising from above the floor to just under the ceiling. Each windowpane measured nine square armlengths and was set in a delicate wooden frame, with four panes to a row and four rows to a window. The frames were glazed white and had been carved by artists. There were four such windows facing the road, with enough wall space between them to allow for subtle decorations and drapery. The entrance was set precisely midway between the four windows. Since the tavern was on the north side of a road traveling east to west, the room was filled with the light of a perfect spring morning.

Numerous works of art adorned the guest hall, and the floor was tiled in an artistic mosaic. In the rounded corners of the room stood elegant stone sculptures that had been polished until their surfaces were as smooth as the skin of a newborn child. The walls were decorated with a variety of paintings depicting abstract compositions of light and color. One side of the hall was elevated as a stage and contained chairs, note stands, and a few musical instruments. Designed and furnished by some of the greatest talents of the time, the hall expressed an astonishing harmony: a celebration of the joy and essence of life.

But the proprietor had added a personal touch. He had placed several weapons in prominent positions throughout the hall. It may have seemed strange, displaying instruments of death alongside so many portrayals of life, but each one was in itself a magnificent work of art. The swords, for instance, were all solid two-handers with unique hilts. The edges of their broad, double-edged blades asserted the weapons' deadliness by a soft metallic sheen, whereas the flats had been polished to mirror-like perfection and glistened brightly in the sunlight streaming through the windows.

A weapon hanging on the wall behind the stranger seemed to have caught the man's attention. It was a compact and powerfully designed archer's bow that shone like silver in the sunlight. The bowstring was redirected by an exotic mechanism mounted at the end of each limb. The handsomely molded quiver hanging beneath it contained roughly two dozen arrows, their shafts shorter and thicker than normal recurve or longbow arrows. The nocks protruding from the quiver

were carved from ivory, but the fletching vanes were made of a material unfamiliar even to the proprietor.

"I see the Prophet's Bow has awakened your curiosity," said Folan.

"Yes, it's fascinating!"

"Legend has it only the Prophet Nevacad himself was able to wield this particular weapon. Nobody else could draw its weight. It's more than five hundred years old."

The stranger gaped at the proprietor. "Five hundred years? What's it made of?"

"I'm no expert, but supposedly some amorphous alloy. I've heard it's virtually indestructible."

"Amazing! How do you come by such priceless wonders?"

Folan's answer consisted of a modest smile. From the corner of his eye, he saw a shadow in the doorframe to the adjoining room. He shot Semanta an angry glance, and her head immediately disappeared again.

"There is one more question I need to ask, my friend," the stranger said. "What kind of payment will you accept for your services?"

"For a glass of water and the pleasant company of a new patron? Don't be ridiculous! Do you wish to insult me?"

"No, my friend, but I do hope this isn't the last time I visit your establishment," the stranger said with a meaningful smile.

"Well, if that's how the matter stands." Folan gave the stranger a wink. "From the townspeople or the inhabitants of the surrounding farms I'll take most anything. Some pay me with corn or meat. Others bring what they can, and when they can. But I hope you understand I cannot give credit to foreigners who may never return."

"Yes, I understand perfectly. But I still don't know how to compensate you. I don't mean to offend you, but will you take gold?"

The proprietor gaped. "Gold? Why yes, of course!"

The stranger breathed a sigh of relief. "Anae be thanked for that."

"But, sir, what kind of services do you require if you wish to pay in gold?"

"Oh, please, don't call me 'sir.' And I'm sorry I don't have anything else to offer. After my long journey, I just don't have any other way to reimburse you. Believe me, my needs aren't particular, just the simple ones of a lonesome and weary traveler."

At these words, the two men heard a loud gasp from the adjoining room, followed immediately by the sound of earthenware shattering on the tiled floor.

Folan stared at the stranger and swallowed. He could hardly contain the emotions, the hopes and expectations, that welled up inside him at the stranger's simple remark. "A *Traveler*…" he whispered.

6. Echoes

After taking care of several urgent administrative tasks, Nova joined her friends who she had sent ahead to the scene of the crime east of town. The situation there affected her more than she was willing to admit. She stared at the boy's body, her face grim. "What happened to the stranger?"

"I sent him to Folan's tavern," said Natilya.

Nova sighed. "I suppose that's as good a place as any. And he didn't realize you were assessing his abilities?"

"I don't know. He was sometimes difficult to read."

"What did you say he called himself?"

"Vilam Tavasin."

"Really!" Nova laughed and glanced at the sign with their town's name. "At least he has a sense of humor. He must have known we'd see right through that."

"Maybe, but it didn't seem to worry him too much."

"Vilam, hmmm…Well, I certainly hope he lives up to the name he's chosen for himself. We could use a 'good friend' right about now."

Nova glanced at the wagon standing by the side of the road. The conference in Tolares was only four days away, and with all the traffic heading in that direction, they would have to be careful loading the body. Times were difficult, and if people heard there had been a murder on the outskirts of town, it might cause panic.

She had brought Hyelisa with them to help with their cover. The girl had an almost preternatural talent when it came to flora and would create a diversion by pretending to transplant shrubs from the roadside to the Lady's manor. She was already hard at work, digging around the shrubs so they could pull them out without causing irreparable damage to the roots. Her friends had offered to

help, but Hyelisa had shooed them away, declaring she didn't want them unintentionally injuring her plants with their tools.

Hyelisa thrust the shovel into the earth and wiped the sweat from her forehead. "Nova, will the Lady Utalya inform the boy's parents of his death?"

"No, honey, I think it's best I do it. They already know me, and the Lady Utalya's presence might make them feel uncomfortable. They aren't accustomed to receiving a former High Priestess and Lady of a Great House."

"But the Lady doesn't care about such formalities."

"Of course not, but they don't know that."

"Oh, right. So, you've spoken with them before?"

"Yes, I sometimes meet the boy's mother when we're at market, and I've talked to his father a few times when one of our chyevi threw a shoe." Nova turned to the girl standing beside her. "Tanola, dearest, how are you holding up?"

"I'm actually doing better than I thought I would," said Tanola. "But thanks for asking."

"I'm glad. The conference is only a few days away, and we all know what that means."

Tanola regarded her with a knowing smile. "You couldn't possibly be referring to the debut of the High Priestess, could you?"

Nova emulated the smile. "What I mean is I really don't want to put too much of a strain on you right now. We're going to have enough of that in the days and weeks ahead."

"Hey, I'm not that fragile!"

"I didn't say you were. But I know how distressing such memories can be when they resurface." More to herself, Nova said, "All those horrible echoes of the past."

"Oh, yes, of course," said Tanola, looking a bit shocked. "Sorry, Nova, I didn't mean to be so defensive."

"Do you mind talking about what happened to your sister?" said Nova, eyeing her with concern.

"Not as much as I used to."

"But I understand your reluctance."

"Yes, I was sitting right next to her when they killed her. I still sometimes see her that way." Tanola shuddered. "I have no idea how I survived."

But Nova did. She remembered the incident vividly since she had been in the carriage directly behind the High Priestess. It had been the fourth day of the conference in Divestelan, and they had

been on their way to the afternoon session. Halita had the top of her carriage down so she could wave to the people who had lined the streets to see her. Although they had used a different itinerary every time, and the routes had all been thoroughly vetted, they hadn't realized one of the higher buildings on their projected path had a fake front on the top floor.

The trap must have been meticulously planned and implemented months in advance, and all the assassins had to do was bide their time until the procession chose the right street. When the High Priestess's carriage reached the spot, the fake front swung away. Halita must have sensed their peril at the last moment, because Nova saw her use a flash of inductive power to throw her sister clear. An instant later, the carriage was obliterated by several tons of rock.

Because there had been so many spectators, the number of casualties had been overwhelming, and it had been difficult to get through. If Nova and two other priestesses hadn't been on the scene, they would never have reached Tanola in time. Nova had rebuked herself time and again since then because, instead of getting Tanola to safety after treating her most acute injuries, they had left her there to recover. With the help of dozens of bystanders, they had proceeded to remove enough of the rock to get to the High Priestess, hoping against all expectation they might still be able to save her. Tanola had regained consciousness just as they had uncovered Halita's remains.

Nova put her hand on Tanola's arm. "Let's not remember her that way. Halita was one of the kindest and gentlest women I've ever known, and she was a wonderful High Priestess."

"She was a wonderful sister. We had so much fun together during her tenure, and when we went home to visit, we sometimes cuddled up in bed and talked well into the night. I can't remember ever having a single quarrel with her. I miss her more than I can say."

Nova hugged her. "Oh, honey, of course you do. I'm so sorry I brought it up."

Tanola wiped a few tears away with her handkerchief. "No, it's alright. I want to think about her. It's better than bottling it all up. You remember what happened when I tried that."

"Yes, you almost left the Order, and where would we be then? But, to be honest, I really don't know what I'd do without you."

"Alright, sisters, snap out of it," said Natilya, clapping a few times for effect. "I think standing around this corpse is making us all morbid. Nova, didn't you come here to examine the scene?"

"Yes, Tilya, thank you." Nova took a deep breath. Natilya wasn't wrong. They really needed to change the subject. "Alright, quiet, please." She closed her eyes and raised her hands over the body, letting her senses flow into the environment. Scanning the boy brought no new insights. The

blow to his head had burst a network of capillaries but was otherwise inconsequential. His chest wound was the actual cause of death and—

"Oh, my Goddess!" Her eyes popped open and she bent over, clutching her heart and breathing heavily.

Natilya held her by the shoulders for support. "Nova, what happened?"

"So much power," she gasped. "How is that possible?" She saw Tanola and Natilya exchange a glance. "You sensed it, too, didn't you?"

Tanola nodded. "We did a superficial scan when we were here with Vilam. What we felt was more than enough, but I think you got the brunt of it. I'm so sorry. We should have warned you."

"What did the reports say about the lights here on the road last night?"

"Witnesses reported seeing a red glow, like ball lightning. But they were all too far away to report anything definite."

"Red? Not purple?"

"So you're thinking the same thing we are," said Natilya.

"An enchantress, yes," said Nova. "We would be remiss in our investigation if we ignored the possibility."

"You really believe they've returned?" said Tanola.

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"Would it be possible for an enchantress to use a ruby instead of an amethyst to focus her powers?" asked Natilya.

Hyelisa leaned on her shovel. "A ruby probably would be more powerful. An amethyst is really just a quartz and therefore has a rhombohedral lattice system, whereas a ruby is a corundum and has a hexagonal lattice system, which I assume would allow for a more bundled focus."

"Since when do you know so much about gemstones?" said Tanola.

"Just because I like plants doesn't mean I'm not interested in anything else. Besides, I want to make priestess, too, one day."

"I have no doubt you will, Hyelisa," said Nova. "But, girls, we shouldn't assume too much. We really don't know very much at all about enchantresses. On the other hand, with everything that's going on in the western provinces, they could already be among us. Let's just keep an open mind, alright?"

"What exactly did you sense, Nova?" asked Natilya.

“It was only supposed to be an echo, but it was massive. I’ve never felt anything like it. But I need more information. I’m going back in.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Be quiet. I need to concentrate.” Nova raised her hands again. This time, she was more cautious. As she reached out for the boy, she brushed the ugly hole in his chest. The power was immense, yet she sensed whoever had done this had actually been holding back. She shuddered.

“Nova, are you alright?” said Natilya.

“Yes, quiet!” As she delved deeper into the wound, she tried to backtrack along the echo of the plasma’s field lines, but there was so much resistance it made her tremble.

“Nova!”

“Tilya, shut up!” She tried again, but the field seemed to be pushing back, as if there were some kind of protective… “Shield,” she said as she opened her eyes and let her breath escape through her mouth. “It was an enchantress.”

“How do you know?”

“She’s shielding herself against us. I…um, read somewhere they were able to do that.” She ignored Tanola and Natilya’s sidelong glances. Of course, they sensed she wasn’t being upfront, but that couldn’t be helped. “When the Prophet Cades was persecuting them, they had to find a way to protect themselves against members of the Selanian Order. If they hadn’t been able to shield themselves, I do believe the Prophet would have summarily wiped them out.” She shook her head. “I’ll never be able to understand such hatred.”

“He lost several family members to them,” said Tanola. “But I’m not sure it was hatred, or revenge even. Perhaps he truly believed he was protecting the world against evil.”

“It’s true, Nova. From what I’ve read, the enchantresses have always aligned themselves with darkness,” said Natilya. “No exceptions.”

“I can’t believe that,” said Nova. “If I did, I might as well just give up. And by the way, the girl only killed the boy because she was terribly afraid.”

“Afraid of what?” asked Tanola.

“That’s what’s interesting. I could sense she feared for her life, but she was also afraid for someone else, as if that person’s life depended on what she was doing. Let’s see what the actual crime scene tells us. Where’s the branch with the blood?”

Tanola and Natilya led her to the crime scene. She raised her hands again, but this time she only had her eyes closed for a moment. “Interesting.”

“What is it, Nova? What do you sense?” said Natilya.

“I sense anger, but as before, I also sense she was terribly afraid of something. Where’s the spot where they were lying together? No, don’t bother. There’s so much emotional residue, I can sense it from here.” Nova walked over to the location and stooped down on one knee, letting the palm of her hand brush over the grass. She shook her head. “Poor girl. I sense loathing, but mainly for herself. Why would she degrade herself like that?” Her lips curled up in a humorless smile. “It seems the boy tried to force himself on her, but she was able to fend him off. Good for her!”

“Vilam thought they might have actually been intimate,” said Natilya, “and that it might have been consensual.”

Nova shook her head. “It didn’t come to that.” She closed her eyes again. “On her part, I sense fear, anger, and self-loathing, but she also felt betrayed. Why did she feel betrayed?” Nova took a deep breath. “I do sense she was leading him on. That’s from where her self-loathing originates. She desperately wanted something from him, and she was prepared to do almost anything to get it, but she hated herself for it.”

Nova sucked in her breath. “Of course! She must have promised him her favor in trade for something of his. At some point, she realized he wasn’t going to keep his end of the bargain. That’s when she felt betrayed. And when he realized she wouldn’t give him what he wanted, he tried to take it.” She opened her eyes and let the air out of her lungs in a slow stream. Then she stood up and looked around. “I think we’re done here. I doubt we’ll be able to get much more out of this location.”

“Any suggestions on what to do next?” said Tanola.

“I’m not sure yet. But at least we know she can’t shield her emotions.”

“Is she evil?” said Natilya.

“No. A truly evil person would either wallow in someone else’s pain and misery or be cold and indifferent, as long as they got what they wanted. This girl never meant to harm the boy, nor did she want him to suffer. On the contrary, I believe it pained her to hurt him. She only used violence as a last resort. Does that sound like an evil person to you? If only we knew what she was after.” Nova took a closer look at the ground. “There is one thing I want before we leave.” Her hands

combed the grass, and she collected several long strands of hair. “These might come in handy at some point.”

“Do you think you can use them to sense her identity?” said Tanola.

“No, like I said, she’s shielded herself. But that doesn’t eliminate the scientific method.”

“What are you going to do?”

“There are many things we can do. Just look at these strands. They’re wavy. How many of us have wavy hair?”

“Are you trying to make us jealous?” said Tanola with a grin.

“Catyana has wavy hair,” said Natilya.

“That’s true, she does,” Nova laughed. “But in her case, I don’t think it’s her wavy hair that makes us jealous.”

Tanola stared at her. “You’re jealous of Catyana?”

“Of course I am. Who wouldn’t want such beautiful golden locks? But that’s another thing we can do with these strands. Everyone’s hair is different. Even the shades are different. We could build a lamp that only reacts to a certain shade of black. This shade,” she said, holding up one of the strands. “Why don’t you hang on to these for me?” She wrapped the strands in a handkerchief and handed them to Natilya, who put them in a pocket of her dress.

“I have another thought,” said Tanola. “Enchantresses are rumored to be inhabitants of the Northern Covasins. If that’s the case, her complexion will probably be darker than ours.”

“Dark complexion and wavy hair,” said Natilya. “That would make it much easier to identify her.”

“We don’t know anything at this point,” said Nova. “If the enchantresses have been around for this long, they could have mingled with the population of the plateau. Like I said earlier, we’ll need to keep an open mind. But look, I think Hyelisa’s ready for our help.”

As they strolled back to the dump site, Nova asked, “Natilya, how would you assess the stranger’s…um, Vilam’s abilities?”

“I was actually quite amazed. He was able to read the tracks on the ground like a book, and his deductive reasoning was quite astute.”

“You led him on by allowing him to believe you couldn’t read or deduce anything from the environment on your own, right?”

Natilya’s brow creased, and her words seemed guarded. “Correct. He did all the work for us.”

“What is it, dearest?” said Nova.

“I’m not sure we should have led him on. There were reports of other lights last night, besides the ones on the road. Witnesses saw a mysterious blue light descend on the forest.”

“I know.”

“The Covatal will descend in a heavenly light, and death will herald his arrival,” said Tanola. “Isn’t that what the Prophet says?”

“It is,” said Nova. “Although I never thought to take it quite so literally.”

“So, what are you going to do about Vilam?” said Natilya.

“I think we should keep this Vilam close, but all we can do for now is observe. The enemy has sent so many frauds posing as the Emissary. We need to be wary.”

“There have never been any heavenly lights,” said Tanola. “Do you think they could falsify something like that?”

“I don’t know, but it’s one reason why I’m even considering him as a possibility. And then, of course, there’s this,” said Nova, gesturing to the body.

“Death will herald his arrival,” said Tanola.

“Yes,” said Nova. “But we all know what the ultimate test will be.”

“Gold of the Heavens?” said Natilya.

Tanola laughed. “No, silly. The Bow!”

“Oh, right, the Prophet’s Bow.”

“Although the prophecy regarding the Covatal giving Gold of the Heavens for water is quite prominent,” said Nova. “Don’t belittle it, Tanola.”

“See,” said Natilya, nudging Tanola.

Tanola elbowed her and the two friends giggled.

Nova shook her head and smiled. “I didn’t realize two established sisters of the faith could so easily revert to tittering schoolgirls.”

Tanola took a deep breath. “I believe we should grasp any opportunity to lighten the mood. I’m just afraid such opportunities are becoming much too rare.”

“You’re right, of course, and I appreciate your reproof.”

“Nova, when are you going to talk to Vilam?” said Natilya.

"I'll get around to it eventually. If he's in Folan's tavern, then he's in good hands for now. I'll have to go to the market later anyway, so I'll fetch him on my way back home. Now let's get to work on these plants."

After they had helped Hyelisa pull up the shrubs, Nova and Tanola wrapped the boy's body in the tarp with as much delicacy as possible and laid him on a broad stretcher. Then they shoveled a thin layer of earth on the wrapped tarp and decorated it with a few plants. It took all four of them to carry the stretcher and put it in the wagon. Everyone pitched in and placed the shrubs Hyelisa had dug up around the body, hiding it from view.

When they were done, Nova and Tanola climbed in the back with the body, while Natilya joined Hyelisa on the driver's seat up front. The manor was just outside of town, and they reached it without incident.

7. Quid Pro Quo

Vilam gaped at the proprietor. Simple courtesy required he close his mouth, but he could hardly suppress his amazement at the man's reaction. "I don't understand. Did I say something wrong? I assume many travelers stop at your tavern."

"Yes, my friend, but none such as you," said Folan. "Please forgive me, but times aren't as simple as they once were, what with the squabbling between the Houses and all. But you said Natilya sent you. Did she say when she would come for you?"

"No, she just said someone would come by to talk to me. But I'm sure they have more important things to do and have already forgotten about me."

"I doubt that. If Natilya said someone would come by, then you can count on it. But Nova, the Lady's personal handmaiden, usually comes into town about midmorning. If we haven't heard anything by then, I'll try to intercept her. In the meantime, please have some breakfast."

Vilam scratched his head. A lot had happened in the past days, and when he was agitated, he usually couldn't eat. But he needed to stay hydrated. "That's very kind of you, Folan, but I'm not very hungry. Could I just have some more water?"

"Yes, certainly," said Folan, shooting him an odd glance. But he bustled away and had soon brought another pitcher of cold water. He then asked to be excused to deal with various matters that required his attention, leaving Vilam to mull over his own thoughts.

Vilam set his jaw. Why did he have to end up here? He doubted he would be able to imitate the elaborate etiquette and exaggerated courtesy predominant in this culture. If only his fate had led him to some simpler world or time, where he could say what he felt and didn't need to be so sensible of his words and actions. He didn't even know what he had done to provoke such an effect in the proprietor and his wife. It made him feel like a bull in a china shop.

Natilya and Tanola's behavior at the crime scene this morning also puzzled him. The two girls were undoubtedly with the Selanian Order, and their own examination using ethereal arts probably told them more than he could ever garner from the scene. So why had they let him ramble on? Were they vetting him? And he was sure they had arrived at a similar conclusion regarding cause of death. Although there weren't any weapons in this time capable of inflicting such an injury, there was a dark art that allowed its proponents to create plasma projectiles. But if Natilya and Tanola felt they had reason to be cagey, so did he.

With such thoughts on his mind, the hours crept by. At the time of the traditional midmorning break, customers swarmed the establishment. Judging by Folan's reaction, there seemed to be more people than usual. But the proprietor and his spouse waded through the crowd amiably enough, and an hour later, the throng began to thin out.

Many of the remaining guests cast inquiring glances in his direction, but a couple of girls sitting at a table close by seemed to be particularly interested. The girl on the left had delicate features contrasted by dark eyebrows, full lips, and prominent cheekbones. She kept smiling at him, while the other seemed embarrassed by her friend's behavior. Both girls had dark, wavy hair and were wearing the simple black skirts and white blouses and aprons customary for domestic servants. Their dark cloaks were hanging behind them on their chairs.

There was one keen difference between the girls that aroused Vilam's interest. The quiet girl on the right had fair and creamy skin, whereas her friend's complexion was dark, a trait Vilam knew to be associated with inhabitants of the Northern Covasins.

He signaled Folan, who immediately scuttled over. "Yes, my friend, what can I do for you?"

"Do you know those two girls at that table there?" said Vilam.

Folan aimed a quick glance at them. "Oh, yes, certainly. That's Soshia Rotasen and Maralena Cemasena. They work for Menirel Sitenan, our Mayor. They're both sweet girls, really, although you might want to keep an eye on Soshia."

"Which one is that? The one on the left?"

“Yes, the one with the bright eyes and the playful smile.”

“Why, what’s wrong with her?”

“Oh, there’s nothing wrong with her, I assure you. She’s quite charming, actually, but she’s also very lively. Maybe too lively for some. And I’ve heard rumors she can be a bit of a heartbreaker.”

“Would it be considered inappropriate if I invited them over for a cup of deventas?”

“Oh, no, they’re just maids! No formal introduction is necessary, and I’m sure they would feel honored. But if it’s decorum you’re concerned with, as long as you remain in a public place and don’t appear to favor one, you should be safe.”

“You’re very kind, Folan. Thank you.”

“Glad to be of service. Is there anything else?”

“Yes, I think I’d be interested in meeting them.”

“Say no more, my friend,” said Folan with a smile and a wink. He scurried over to the girls’ table, where he exchanged a few whispered words with them. Soshia’s face lit up. She grabbed her cloak and strolled over. Her friend followed more slowly. The hum of conversation in the guest hall diminished as many of the patrons followed the girls’ activity.

“Don’t mind them,” said Soshia when she reached Vilam’s table. She gestured toward the other guests. “They’re just jealous.”

Vilam smiled as he stood to greet them. “Thank you for accepting my invitation.”

“Oh, no, the honor is all ours. May we sit?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you, you’re very kind.” Soshia took a chair at a right angle to Vilam and draped her cloak over the chair’s back. “I’m Soshia, and my friend here is Maralena. But we all call her Mara.”

“You can call me Vilam.”

In the meantime, Mara had taken the seat next to Soshia. She smiled and nodded in Vilam’s direction. The girl had softer features than her friend. Where Soshia’s dark eyes seemed bright and intelligent, Mara’s seemed more kind and pensive. She had her thick hair tucked under in a loose braid, while Soshia had her long locks bound together in a massive chignon and held together by a simple clasp.

Folan brought the women two more cups of deventas, winked at them, and vanished. Vilam stuck with his water but grinned at the little man’s proficiency.

“So, Vilam, what brings you to Nadil?” said Soshia.

“I’m just passing through.”

“On your way to the conference?”

“Conference? Is that why there are so many people on the road?”

“Yes, the Conference of Tolares begins on the summer solstice. That’s in four days, so the unusual amount of traffic is to be expected.”

“The Conference of Tolares? Oh.”

So that’s where he was! He couldn’t believe he was in proximity to such an historic event. If he remembered correctly, the ill-fated Conference of Tolares was one of only two Selanian Conferences ever to be held outside of Travis. The other one had been the Conference of Divestelan, which had also fallen victim to sabotage. But his studies at the Galactic Academy of the Sciences lay far in the past—or was it the future?—and that was all he could remember. If only he had paid more attention during the lectures on history. He wished he could recall names, dates, and places, but all he drew was one huge blank.

Soshia put her hand on his forearm. “You weren’t aware of it?”

Vilam blinked to regain his focus. “No, but now that you mention it, I should have remembered.”

“A man who forgets the most anticipated event in years. How intriguing.” There was a mischievous light in her eyes. “What do you think, Mara? Does he merit a good grilling?”

Mara probed Vilam’s face. “We value our privacy. Don’t you think he deserves his?”

“What would be the fun in that?”

“I’m up for it,” said Vilam with a grin. “But only quid pro quo.”

Soshia fixed him with a puzzled glance. “What pro what?”

“Oh, sorry. It’s an archaic expression and means ‘tit for tat.’”

Mara studied him with a cautious look on her face.

“Oh, a game! How fun,” said Soshia, immediately lighting up again. “But I get to go first.”

“I insist,” said Vilam.

“My, what a gentleman. But friends of ours said you came in early this morning from the east. Is that where you’re from? Maybe Vetena, or even Travis?”

“Friends of yours said that?”

Mara found it difficult to suppress a smile and exchanged a glance with her friend.

Soshia touched Vilam's arm. "This is a small town, Vilam. People here have nothing better to do than gossip about each other all day long, unless of course there's something or someone new to talk about. So, guess who's the talk of the town today?"

"Really?"

"Of course. Now, unless you're deliberately trying to distract me, please answer the question."

"No, I'm not from the east," said Vilam "I'm actually from a bit northeast of here." His answer wasn't completely untruthful. He had landed northeast of town.

"Oh, from Penates?"

"You could say that." Again, not necessarily a lie. "But now it's my turn. Where are you from?"

"I was born in Marusen," said Soshia, "but I grew up in Novesta and Cemasena. When things got difficult in the western provinces, I moved east, first to Tolares, and then to Nadil."

"So, you're originally from the Northern Covasins?"

Soshia grinned. "Isn't it obvious?" She pulled up her sleeve and put her arm next to Vilam's, ensuring her hand overlapped his. Her hand was pleasantly soft and warm, and the contrast between their skin tones was evident. She squeezed his hand before pulling down her sleeve again. "My turn. What kind of uniform are you wearing? I'm not familiar with it."

"I command a ship." Completely true statement.

Soshia stared at him with an open mouth. "A ship! Oh, then you must be from the Sea of Ventara. No wonder I didn't recognize your uniform. That's all the way across the Covasins. I don't know anyone who's ever been so far west. I can't imagine how adventurous it must be."

"Yes, navigating the currents from day to day certainly comes with its own set of challenges." True again, but he realized Mara was regarding him with an odd look. "Where are you from, Mara?"

She studied him for a moment before responding. "I was born in Novesta, but I spent a lot of time in Cemasena. When Soshia said she was going east, I decided to join her, so here I am."

Soshia grabbed his arm. "Oh, Vilam, have you ever seen a Mermaid?"

He grinned. "I have."

"What? Really?" said Soshia, but even Mara was gaping at him.

"Yes, really."

"What are they like?" said Soshia. "Are they as beautiful as everyone says?"

"They are, but they can also be dangerous."

"Yes, I've heard the fishermen on the Sea of Ventara call them Sirens because their song can lure men to their deaths. This is exciting, and I'm so glad we met you, Vilam. Don't you agree, Mara?"

Mara awarded him with another odd glance. "I'm not sure."

Soshia turned and stared at her friend. "Not sure? Why not?"

"Soshia, everything Vilam has told you has been misdirection. He's been leading you on so he can get at the information he really wants."

Soshia slowly drew her hands back, and her expression darkened. "Is that true?"

"What I said about seeing Mermaids was sincere," said Vilam.

"Yes," said Mara, "for some strange reason, that was the only complete truth you've told us, as wondrous as that may seem."

"Are you in the Selanian Order?" said Vilam.

"I am not," said Mara.

"Mara has always been good at sensing things," said Soshia. "So you've been lying to us this whole time? I'm very disappointed in you, Vilam."

"No, Soshia, he wasn't exactly lying. He fed you incomplete bits of information that were in themselves true or partly true but could be interpreted in different ways. All he had to do was wait for you to complete the information with your own assumptions."

"That's awfully rude."

"But very effective," said Vilam.

"Well, I'm hurt," said Soshia. "I was really beginning to like you." She did look quite distressed.

"What is it you really want to know, Vilam?" said Mara.

"I'd like to find out what you know about enchantresses."

Suddenly, Soshia's eyes seemed to burn with an inner fire. "Enchantresses? I'm from the Northern Covasins, Vilam. We *never* talk about enchantresses."

"Why not?"

"Because we've never been able to live them down! For centuries, anyone from the Northern Covasins was viewed with suspicion, if not with outright hatred. Even today, we're often regarded with a certain unease. And now, with everything that's going on in the western provinces, it's gotten so much worse. I've had to work extra hard to get people to trust me, and it's still not easy."

"Is that why you've been flirting with me?"

Soshia's expression wilted, and her shoulders sagged. "I'm so sorry. You must think I'm nothing but a harlot."

Vilam took Soshia's hand in his. "On the contrary, I think you're extraordinary." He leaned forward and raised her hand to his lips.

Her gaze became soft, and her eyes glistened. She covered his hands with hers. "Thank you, Vilam. You don't know what that means to me."

Mara smiled. "Was that the only reason you invited us to your table? Because Soshia is from the Northern Covasins?"

"To be honest, I'm new here, and since you were showing interest, I thought it would be an easy way to meet someone local. On the other hand, have you two looked in a mirror lately? How could I not want to be seen in the company of two such lovely creatures? But Soshia's complexion was certainly a motivating factor."

Soshia flashed him a playful smile and squeezed his hands. "Who's flirting now? But it was a good save. You're forgiven."

"*Tinataran esa;* thank you," said Vilam

"Tezatal."

"I'll make a deal with you, Vilam," said Mara.

"Yes?"

"I'll tell you anything you want to know about enchantresses, but only if you answer Soshia's previous questions truthfully."

Vilam raised his head just a fingerbreadth. "I…think I'll pass."

Mara honored him with an elfin smile. "That's what I thought."

"I was getting bored anyway," said Soshia. "What do you do in your free time, Vilam?"

"I like art and music, among other things."

"Well, then you've certainly come to the right place. Folan's tavern is loaded with works of art."

"I've actually been wondering about that. For instance, could you tell me what that silhouette on the wall is, near the Prophet's Bow? It looks a bit like a cross, but the long and broad tapered stem makes it seem more likely to represent a sword."

Soshia gaped at him. "Really? You don't know what that is?" She shared a look with Mara.

"Is that a problem?"

Mara said, “The Sword is an artifact that every child here grows up with. How is it possible for you not to know it?”

He shrugged. “I’d still be interested in knowing what it is. Would you be willing to tell me?”

“It’s a representation of the Sword of Selanae. The Sword was lost to us a thousand years ago. But the Prophet Nevacad, who designed the bow behind you, foretold it would be returned when the Covatal arrives. It signifies loss, but also hope, and reminds us of the consequences of complacency. We usually depict it as a silhouette, like here, or sometimes as an outline. Farmers sometimes fix wood or metal adaptions of the Sword to posts in their barns.”

“Now that you mention it, I’ve actually heard of the Sword, but I’m sorry to say I don’t recall the particulars of the tale. I’ve heard it’s most intriguing.”

“It is,” said Soshia. “But it’s usually retold in the form of a ballad or tragedy, which can take an entire evening if you do it properly.”

“I do enjoy music.”

“Well, be careful whom you say that to,” said Soshia with an impish smile. “Most people would jump at the opportunity to tell it, and then you’re stuck for hours. But if you like art so much, Folan has something on display here that you might be interested in.”

She beckoned to Folan, who hurried over. “Yes, my friends, how may I be of service?”

“I think Vilam would enjoy seeing your light sculpture,” said Soshia.

Folan’s face lit up. “Ah, yes! Gladly! It’s one of my most prized possessions. You might not believe it, but it was a gift from Elder Yonatan himself.”

Folan walked over to an elegant wooden pedestal that stood a bit lower than the tables around it. The pedestal displayed half of a crystalline sphere protruding from a short, solid, conical base. If Vilam hadn’t known better, he would have compared it to a crystal ball, the kind used by fortune tellers on Earth. Folan deftly tapped the base.

Vilam gaped. He hadn’t expected cascading fountains of colored light to erupt from the sphere. They floated as high as the ceiling and melted away again in a random, continuous pattern. The effect was startling and the sculpture’s movements slow and well-balanced. It was a lovely work of art, and he couldn’t understand why seeing it here, in this time and place, made it seem unsettling.

Folan smiled. “Here, listen to this.” His finger reached into an emerging blossom, filling the room with deep, gong-like tones. His hand stroked a delicate shower of light, and the nuance of the harmony changed ever so slightly.

“It’s beautiful,” said Vilam. “I’ve never seen anything quite like it.” Actually, he had. The Galactic Museum of Visual Arts on Chyoradan contained many beautiful light sculptures even more stunning than this one. But none of them had ever made him feel uneasy.

“It is most inspiring, isn’t it?” Folan tapped the base of the sculpture. The fountains collapsed and disappeared back into the sphere. “But you mustn’t forget, it was made by Elder Yonatan,” he added, as if the name was explanation enough.

“Thank you, Folan,” said Soshia. “It was kind of you to show it to us.”

“I was glad to be of service.” Folan came back to the table. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Vilam sighed. “My friend, don’t you think it’s time I cleared my debt?”

Folan seemed embarrassed. Judging from his reaction, Vilam assumed his host had deliberately delayed the moment when it became necessary for him to settle his account. “Alright, my friend, how do you wish to pay?”

Vilam reached across the table and handed him a skillfully worked piece of gold.

Folan took it warily, almost with reverence, weighing it in his hand. “My friend, this is far too much. How could I accept it?”

“Please, my friend, don’t embarrass me. I don’t have anything else to give you.”

Folan hesitated. “Well, if it must be. But at least accept my hospitality for the remainder of your stay. We have very comfortable quarters in the back. They face the courtyard and gardens, so you won’t be disturbed there.”

Vilam smiled. “Yes, gladly.” He reached over and shook the proprietor’s hand with a firm grip to complete the transaction.

“I’ll have your quarters ready for you in the evening. But I must attend to some urgent business, so please excuse me.” Folan rushed to the adjoining room, from where Vilam heard a muffled gasp.

“What’s with them?” said Vilam to the women. But then he realized they were staring at him. “What’s wrong? What did I do?”

“Vilam,” said Mara, “what exactly did you have here this morning?”

“Just water.”

"So you gave Folan gold for water?"

"Well, I invited you, so I paid for your deventas. But I suppose in regard to myself I did only pay for water. Is that a problem?"

The women looked at each other with an incredulous expression on their faces. "Is he being sincere?" asked Soshia.

"Yes," said Mara, "I can't sense any duplicity in him. He really has no idea what's going on."

"What is going on?" asked Vilam.

"I don't think we're the right people to talk to," said Mara. "Did I hear Folan mention earlier that Natilya Revan will be back for you?"

"I don't know. Either her or someone else."

"Then I think it's best if they explain it to you. Soshia, we really must leave. Culisa will need us at home soon, and I still have to go to the market. It's been very, um…interesting meeting you, Vilam. I do hope we see each other again soon."

Soshia reached for Vilam's hands and squeezed them. "I'm so sorry we have to leave you like this. Please don't count it against us. I would really like to see you again. Good-bye." She rose, kissed him on the cheek, and quickly left the tavern with Mara.

Vilam went to the window to watch them leave. Almost as soon as they were out the door, people swarmed around them. But it seemed the girls weren't giving them what they wanted, and the crowd soon dissipated. Vilam was glad to know the girls weren't gossips. Shaking his head, he returned to his seat. He wished he had even the slightest inkling of what was going on.

8. The Dispatch

Zetara had just finished packing the last of Gevinesa's chests for the Lady's journey to Tolares when her mistress rushed into the room, out of breath. Zetara felt an icy hand clutch her heart when she saw the pale and apprehensive expression on her face. "*Tevas'an,* Vinesa, what's wrong?"

Gevinesa stood silently with her eyes closed, catching her breath and desperately attempting to regain her composure. Zetara motioned for Midena and the two maids who had been helping her pack to leave the room. When the door was closed, Gevinesa opened her eyes and handed Zetara a piece of paper which she retrieved from a hidden pocket in the folds of her dress.

Zetara took the single sheet with trembling hands. She could feel the blood drain from her face as she browsed through its contents. "*A'mada,* Vinesa, where did you get this?"

"Yanita was playing in my brother's room while the servants were packing and found it on his desk." Her voice was now quite calm, but with a tinge of sarcasm, and Zetara could see the color return to her cheeks. A slight flush of anger replaced her friend's previous pale fright. "I'm astonished at Yanita's presence of mind for taking it, but not quite so astonished at Corsen's foolish pride for leaving it so openly where anyone could see it. It's fortunate for us he keeps a copy of such dispatches for his records."

Zetara took another glance at the document. It was a copy of an official dispatch to the captain of the Black Guard with instructions to terminate the designated members of the Resistance in Divestelan identified in the attached list. The operation was to begin precisely at noon. She felt herself growing faint and placed the paper on the Lady's desk before clutching at the furniture to steady herself.

Gevinesa reached over to support her. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine." Zetara grabbed her arm. "Were you able to acquire the list of targets?"

Gevinesa shook her head. "No, just the dispatch."

"Oh, Vinesa, what are we going to do?"

"There's only one thing to do. You have to get this information to your contact in the Resistance at once. It's already past midmorning, and there's no time to lose."

"I can try. My contact has a cover to maintain and might still be at the market."

"Good. Take my mare. She's much faster than yours."

"Will I see you again when I return?"

"No, Zetara, I forbid you to return here. It's just too dangerous. Besides, we'll either be gone by the time you get back, or my father and brother will detain me after I return from my rendezvous at the stables. I'm sure it'll arouse their suspicion, being at the same time their precious operation is to commence. As a matter of fact, I'll have to devise a way to slip out early, or they'll probably confine me before I can get away."

"Oh, Vinesa, I was hoping we'd have more time to say our good-byes."

Gevinesa looked at her and smiled. "Dearest Zetara, you've been such a comfort to me these past years. What would I have done without you?"

They fell into each other's arms, and Zetara felt Gevinesa's lips on her cheek. She tried to restrain her tears as they released each other from their parting embrace, but Gevinesa must have seen her eyes glistening. "Oh, Zetara, please don't cry. No tears for us, alright? I'm sure we'll soon see each other again in Travis."

Zetara nodded but couldn't find any words to get past the lump in her throat.

"Come on," her mistress said, "I have to return to Yanita's chambers to supervise the servants, and you really have to leave."

Zetara felt Gevinesa's hand at her elbow, guiding her out the door. In the hall, she turned to her friend. "I'll tell the servants to bring down your luggage."

"Alright, but hurry," Gevinesa whispered. "Good-bye, Zetara."

"Good-bye, Vinesa."

Gevinesa rushed off, and Zetara hurried to the guest chambers, where she found the three maids who had been assigned to attend to her Lady's belongings for the journey. After giving Midena some final instructions, she glided down the central staircase of the noble residence. She was crossing the main hall when Lord Divestelan approached her from the north wing with his son. "Ah, Zetara, I'm glad I've run into you. Have my daughter's things been prepared?"

She curtsied with her head bowed as the two men approached. "Yes, My Lord, the maids are completing the task as we speak. They will inform the servants shortly so the Lady Gevinesa's luggage may be brought down."

She raised her head and glanced at the men. Lord Divestelan was slender and of moderate stature. His shortly cropped, black hair had a slight tinge of gray, and his face was adorned by an elegant mustache and goatee. Corsen was taller and more athletic, but clean-shaven and with a somewhat longer and more liberal hairstyle. He looked even more dashing than his father in his house uniform, a fact that was underlined by a prominent scar on his right cheek running vertically down from his eye to his jaw.

"And what are Gevinesa's instructions for you at the moment?" the Lord asked.

"I…must supervise the servants who are returning some unneeded luggage to the basement for storage. Her Ladyship didn't want them standing unused in her private chambers while she was gone."

"Very well, you may proceed."

Corsen sneered. “Yes, and don’t dawdle, Zetara. We need you back here soon. We have a little, uh, surprise for you before we leave.”

Zetara paled at these words but kept her head bowed so the men wouldn’t see. She just barely caught Lord Divestelan’s annoyed glance in his son’s direction by looking up through her lashes. “As you wish, My Lord.” She curtsied and hastened to the entrance leading to the storage rooms.

It took her longer to escape the residence by the basement, but it also attracted less attention. She was relieved because she could hardly believe what she had just heard, and the insight made her feel weak and shaky. It was almost certain she was on Corsen’s death list. How had they found her out?

But she didn’t have time to engage in such thoughts. She hurried to the stables and saddled her mistress’s chyeves. When she left the grounds of the beautiful, park-like estate, she did so by inconspicuous trails she had often rehearsed with Gevinesa for just such occasions. She quickly gained the road from Catanin to Divestelan and spurred her mare to utmost speed. As she flew north, she saw the waters of Lake Divestelan glittering between sections of forest on her right.

It was little more than five leagues to the city, and she was convinced Gevinesa’s mare could handle the exertion of a quick but short ride. Indeed, she reached the gates of the city in just under half an hour and grimaced at the stench that engulfed her as she passed beneath the magnificent, towering archway. She allowed her chyeves to trot to the market, but decided to lead the animal by the reins when she approached the pulsating tumult of her destination. She almost fainted with relief when she saw her contact completing a transaction with a client.

Her contact caught sight of her and shot her an anxious glance. After a few kind words of thanks and parting to her customer, she turned immediately to Zetara. “*Setavelan mada, vil’anar*; good morning, my friend. What may I do for you?”

“*Setavelan mada*,” Zetara replied. “My Lady is leaving for Tolares in a few hours and has discovered she requires a new pearl barrette to match her earrings.”

As she spoke, Zetara made the sign for acute danger, and her contact paled, but adroitly disguised her shock with a shrug at the extravagance of such noble ladies. “I’m certain we’ll find something suitable for the princess. Why don’t you step into my pavilion?” When they were sure of concealment, the young woman whispered, “What is it, Zetara?” When Zetara had explained the situation, she said, “*Tevas’an!* I must relay your message immediately.”

She wanted to leave the tent, but Zetara held her arm. “No, Lady Denadya, please wait.”

The woman stared at her. “Lady Denadya? I didn’t realize you were aware of my identity.”

Zetara studied her, wanting to imprint her image on her memory. The young Lady Denadya Cemasena was of the same height as she was, but was more than twenty years younger, namely thirty-five. She was no particular beauty, but her appearance was pleasant. Instead of the fashionable hairstyle Zetara was obliged to wear as the personal handmaiden of the Lady Gevinesa, the young woman had her hair simply bound together using a stylish barrette as an advertisement of her products. Her skin was fair, and not the darker complexion that marked Zetara as an inhabitant of the Northern Covasins.

“I beg Your Ladyship to forgive me for taking such liberties as to call you by your first name,” Zetara finally answered, “but I’ve always known who you are. I saw you at the ball your father gave for you in Cemasena thirteen years ago to celebrate your Age of Confirmation and coming-out. If I remember correctly, you were celebrating with your friends, the Ladies Pirena Novesta and Cetila Marusen, because your birthdays were so close together. I was attending the Lady Gevinesa as a simple chambermaid at the time. I recognized you when we met four years ago.”

Denadya’s astonishment grew. “Never mind the breach of formality. And I detest being called Lady. It makes me feel so old. Besides, I consider us to be sisters in a mutual cause. Please, just call me Dena. How much do you know about me?”

“I know enough. Dena, we don’t know who’s been targeted. And if I was able to discover your identity, it stands to reason others might also. Besides, my task is complete so I’ll be heading east. Please, get yourself to safety.”

“You…you’re leaving?”

“Yes, I have to. I’m almost certain I’ve been targeted.”

“May I ask where you’re going?” said Dena.

“I’ll be going to Tolares first, to see my older brother, then on to Travis.”

“Oh, your brother, Eratis. Isn’t he the steward of Lord Tolares’s estate?”

“Yes, I’m very proud of him,” said Zetara. “He’s accomplished much at such a young age. Do you have somewhere to go?”

“Well, yes, I was planning on going after Tavita. We’ve received intelligence that she’s gone east, and if you no longer require me as a contact, this would be a good time to follow her.”

Zetara fixed her with a probing glance. “What? Tavita Marusen?”

“Yes.”

“Do you mean the captain of Lady Gevinesa’s Crimson Brigade and your friend Cetila’s sister?”

“Former captain. And stop calling Cetila my friend. That was years ago.”

“Dena, are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

The young woman raised her head, and her eyes flashed defiantly. “I know what she looks like and am therefore the obvious choice for the task.”

Zetara regarded her with compassion. Dena seemed to have her jaw set. Zetara kept her voice soft. “I’m so sorry for your loss, Dena.”

Dena’s eyes were glistening now. “I don’t…” She jammed her lips together and swallowed. “Come, we need to leave.”

“Yes. But if you’re going east, we might see each other again.”

“Possibly.”

“Farewell, Dena.”

“Farewell, Zetara.”

They touched cheeks on the left, on the right, and on the left again. Then they stepped outside and, to uphold the charade one last time, Dena bid her alleged customer farewell and expressed her regret that she had found nothing suitable for her mistress. Zetara watched her close shop and hurry away before she took hold of her chyeves. She was about to mount when a sudden recollection made her stomach turn to ice. “Oh, dear Goddess, no! The dispatch!”

How could she have been so careless? They had even scoffed at Corsen for leaving the document on his desk, and now she had done the same thing, leaving it in the Lady Gevinesa’s chambers. If the document were found in her mistress’s possession, it would certainly be the Lady’s death warrant.

She swung herself up on her mare and raced through the streets, completely disregarding the cursing pedestrians who jumped out of her way. When she finally exited the city, she spurred her chyeves forward without any consideration for the animal’s well-being. She could think only of her friend.

She reached the estate in twenty minutes; hid the wasted and frothing mare in a group of trees; and stole toward the residence, sneaking inside by the back entrance she used when she had left almost one and a half hours ago. The main hall was suspiciously quiet. The staircase in the south wing was the one least used, so she eased herself toward that side of the building and climbed the steps to the second floor. When she was almost at the top, she encountered Midena.

“Zetara!” the maid cried, seemingly shocked at her superior’s sudden appearance.

“Midena, have you seen the Lady Gevinesa?”

“Yes, she…she left for the stables just a short while ago.”

“Good. I need to inspect her chambers one more time before she departs to see if we’ve missed anything.”

The maid awarded her an odd glance, bowed, and hurried past her down the stairs.

Zetara didn’t have time to consider the maid’s strange behavior and rushed forward. With a pounding heart, she entered Gevinesa’s chambers. To her utter relief, the treacherous document was still on the desk. It was the work of a moment to catch it up, light a match, and watch it go up in flames. She performed the task with methodical thoroughness, ensuring that nothing but ashes were left, which she then disposed of in the dustbin.

She had just finished cleaning everything away when she heard heavy steps in the corridor. She turned, but an abrupt surge of terror froze her movements.

Two Black Guards were standing in the doorway with Midena cowering behind them. The men were wearing black uniforms, gloves, and capes, with black masks covering their eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Zetara,” the maid whined, “but we were ordered to report you if we saw you, and—”

“Shut up!” one of the guards snarled.

Midena cringed, whimpered, and fell silent.

The guard grinned at Zetara from beneath his mask. He leisurely unsheathed his sword and walked toward her with slow, menacing steps.

Zetara couldn’t think. She stared at the approaching demon with her eyes wide open in shock. She wanted to tell Midena that it was alright, that everything would be fine and not to worry, but when she opened her mouth to speak, her breath was forced from her in a silent gasp.

Despite the searing pain in her stomach, she couldn’t tear her eyes from the grotesque, grinning mask before her. Her hand reached down, and she cut her finger on the cold steel protruding from her belly. Dazed, she raised her hand and stared at the trickle of blood running down into her palm. Then her legs gave out beneath her, and she collapsed to the floor. The last thing she heard was Midena’s hysteric shrieks echoing through the building.

9. Running Errands

Nova's morning had been filled with cheerless tasks. When she discussed the incident on the road with the Lady Utalya and informed her of their findings, the Lady was distressed when she heard an enchantress might be involved, but she agreed with their assessment. She also approved of their plan to report the boy's death as an accident. Their story would be that something must have startled the chyeves, and the boy had fallen and hit his head on a rock.

Later, she went to the workshop, where she helped the other acolytes wash the body, and prepare and clothe him so no one would see the inexplicable wound in his chest. The workshop was a large structure with a vaulted glass ceiling situated on one side of the garden behind the stables and carriage house. They usually used the building as a greenhouse or for larger art and science projects that might disrupt life in the manse. The sunny interior seemed to provide a much-needed contrast to their solemn task.

When Nova was finally able to get away and run her errands, her first stop was the constabulary building to speak with Constable Pirtas. Liaising with law enforcement was usually Natilya's job, but this was a delicate matter, so she had discussed it with Natilya, and they had agreed that Nova would take care of it. The offices were on the south end of town, and she reached them in fifteen minutes. When she entered, the duty officer greeted her. "*Setavelan mada,* Nova. So nice to see you. What can I do for you?"

"*Setavelan mada,* my friend. Is Constable Pirtas in? He was doing his rounds on the east road early this morning."

"No, I'm sorry, but Pirtas clocked out a few hours ago. He was on the night shift and probably went home to sleep."

"Was he able to file his report yet?"

"No, he said he would do it this evening."

"Did anything, um…unusual happen during his shift?"

"Oh, you're probably referring to the lights in the sky and on the road last night. He said he went out to investigate but couldn't find anything out of the ordinary. He did seem a bit pale and fatigued, though. I hope he's not coming down with anything."

"There's something urgent I need to discuss with him. Could you give me his address?"

"Of course." The officer wrote the address down and handed it to her.

Nova thanked him and left. She felt relieved. When the constable had arrived at the mansion this morning, Nova had urged him not to tell anyone what he had seen. He had been glad to comply, and it seemed he had been true to his word. She arrived at his house five minutes later, and his wife opened.

"Good morning, Nova. What a pleasant surprise!"

"Good morning, Cavara. Has your husband gone to bed yet?"

"Yes, he was exhausted. Is something wrong?"

"Yes, I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid there's an urgent matter I need to discuss with him. Could you please wake him?"

"Of course, if you say it's that urgent. Please, come in." She led Nova to the living area and asked her to wait while she fetched her husband. The house wasn't large, but it was quaint, and Cavara kept it nice and tidy. The living area was comfortable and homey, and while Nova waited, she admired some of the decorations Cavara had placed on the shelves and furnishings.

The constable entered after about five minutes. "Nova, I'm sorry I'm in a bit of a state, but I'm still not quite awake yet. What can I do for you?"

"I'm so sorry for waking you, Constable Pirtas, but I need to know if you told anyone at all about what happened on the road this morning."

"No, of course not."

"Not even Cavara?"

"She knows there are sometimes confidential matters I can't discuss with her. She's used to it."

"Good, I'm very thankful. Listen, Constable, I'm very sorry about this, but I need to rely on your discretion once more. Our investigation has turned up some very disturbing facts. I'm afraid I can't share them with you, but we need to keep the circumstances of the boy's death confidential. Except for you, the stranger who found the boy, and the Lady Utalya's entourage, nobody must know, or the consequences may be dire."

"You can rely on me, Sister."

"Thank you. The story we'll circulate for now is that the boy had an accident. His chyeves was startled, and the boy fell and hit his head on a rock. Do you think you can do that?"

"Of course. I'll put that in my report."

She squeezed his hands. "Thank you, Constable. You can't believe how grateful I am. I owe you for this."

Her final stop was the most heartbreaking. She had to inform the boy's parents of his demise. When his mother opened the door, she already knew by Nova's expression that something was wrong. Nova waited until they were all inside to break the news to them. They heard it with more composure than Nova could have hoped for. She sat on the sofa with them for half an hour, holding the mother's hand. Then she explained that the acolytes had already prepared Normas for them and asked whether they wished to retrieve the boy themselves, or if the sisters should deliver him to the funeral home. They decided to meet their son at the funeral parlor.

When Nova was outside again, she sighed. It felt horrible, having to lie to the boy's parents. They deserved to know the truth, and Nova vowed she would tell them as soon as circumstances allowed. By the time she arrived at home, it was already well past mid-morning.

Her next task was to go to the market, which was much more pleasant, especially since her best friend Catyana would be joining her today. Catyana was never late, so she waited in the garden for her. She soon saw her friend's golden mane in the distance and waved. Catyana always came in the back way since their home was northeast of town.

After they had hugged and started on the road toward town, Catyana said, "You look exhausted."

"I've had a rough morning, is all."

"Anything you care to talk about?"

"Dearest, you know I don't like to keep things from you, but this is very sad."

"Oh, no! What happened?" said Catyana.

"A stable boy died. His name was Normas."

"Normas? Oh, I'm so sorry."

"Did you know him?"

"A little. I knew some of his friends better. I, uh, feel so bad for…his parents?"

Nova targeted her with a sidelong glance. "But you don't feel bad for him?"

"Well, um…I do."

"But?"

Catyana flung up her arms. "I don't want to talk badly about him. He didn't deserve to die."

Nova dragged her to a stop. "Catyana, this might be important. The circumstances of his death were unusual. Anything you can tell me might help."

"Unusual? Whatever do you mean?"

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you yet. The investigation is still underway. But if you know something about the boy, I would be grateful.”

Catyana continued toward town. “Alright. He and his friends were insufferable flirts. They were always toying with different girls’ feelings and broke several hearts along the way. Until Soshia put a stop to it, that is.”

“Really! How did she do that?”

“I have no idea, but I think she gave them a taste of their own medicine. Whenever she’s around, the boys in that gang either glare at her or seem downright frightened. I think she has something on them, because they’ve behaved more or less since then.” She hesitated. “Huh!”

“What is it?”

“Well, now that I think about it, I actually believe they admire her for showing them up.”

Nova smiled. “Maybe I should get to know her better.”

“Oh, she’s a horrible flirt herself, but she’s funny. She’s always been nice to me, but I still like her friend Mara better.”

“Why is that?”

“Mara is a kind and quiet person. It’s as if I can feel her warm heart. Oh, look, there she is right now. Hello, Mara.”

Mara had just come out of a side street and looked shocked when she saw them. “Catyana! What are you doing here?”

Catyana’s brow furrowed. “Well, alright then. Nice seeing you, too.”

Mara attempted a smile, although there was still a look of concern on her face. “I’m so sorry, Catyana. Of course I’m glad to see you.” She hugged her tight. “Hello, Nova. It’s good to see you, too. Are you going to the market?”

“We are,” said Nova. “Would you care to join us?”

“Yes, very much.” She linked arms with Catyana. “I’m really sorry about before. I wasn’t expecting you in town this morning. What happened?”

“Father has to prepare a special load of timber and can’t come into town today, and Mother needs a few provisions from the market.”

“I see. Well, all the better for me then.” She squeezed Catyana’s arm.

“Catyana, you are still coming this afternoon, right?” said Nova.

"Yes, of course. But I'll need to help Mother clean up after our meal, and I also have a few chores I need to take care of, so it might not be until mid-afternoon or later."

"*Nolavelates* is just fine, dearest. I'm really looking forward to it."

"So am I," said Catyana, flashing Nova an excited grin.

"You're coming back into town this afternoon?" said Mara with a startled look on her face. "Is that wise?"

Catyana cast a sidelong glance at her. "I don't understand. Why should that be a problem?"

Mara sighed and shrugged. "I don't know. I suppose I just worry since you have to walk such a long distance all by yourself. It's an hour each way."

"I appreciate your concern, Mara, but to be honest, I would walk even farther to be with Nova." Nova and Catyana smiled at each other.

"Of course you would," muttered Mara.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Nova, please take good care of her."

Nova studied the young woman for a moment. "Mara, why are you so concerned?"

"We're living in difficult times, and I don't think they're going to become easier anytime soon. I just wouldn't want anything to happen to Catyana."

Catyana looked at her in surprise. "Oh, Mara, that's so sweet."

"I really appreciate the sentiment, Mara. I promise I'll take good care of her. But since Catyana's welfare is so important to you, why don't you join us this afternoon?"

"Really?"

"Oh, yes, Mara, please," said Catyana. "It would be such fun."

"Well, I can probably arrange it. But we promised Culisa we would collect some fresh herbs for her, so I might have to bring Soshia along."

"The more, the merrier," said Nova. "We'll probably just be taking a long walk, so if you bring your herb bags, you can collect the herbs along the way."

"That's very kind of you, Nova. Thank you."

"*Tezatal.* By the way, I heard you and Soshia were in the tavern this morning."

"Yes, who hasn't?" said Mara with a bitter smile.

"I haven't," said Catyana. "What's going on?"

"There was a stranger in the tavern this morning," said Nova. "He calls himself Vilam."

“Nova, I’m actually glad I ran into you,” said Mara. “I think you really need to talk to Vilam. I’m worried about him.”

“Why is that?”

“Because he has no idea what he’s gotten himself into. If you don’t prepare him, he’s going to be overwhelmed.”

“Please explain.”

“I think the important thing to know is that Vilam only drank water all morning, and then he paid for it with gold.”

Catyana came to a stop and stared at Mara with wide eyes. “He gave gold for water?”

“I heard something like that being whispered around town,” said Nova.

“Well, if you did, it wasn’t from Soshia or me,” said Mara. “I know Soshia craves attention, which can be frustrating at times, but she would never betray anyone’s confidence.”

“Mara, this is important,” said Nova. “Did you see this yourself?”

“I did. Soshia and I went to Folan’s for *setavelates*. Soshia of course couldn’t help herself and started flirting with Vilam from afar, so he invited us to his table. We saw him drinking water, and we saw him pay with gold.”

“What did the gold look like?” said Nova.

“I didn’t get a very good look at it, but it seemed like quite a massive chunk. It was a rounded cube of about two fingerbreadths in size and had engravings on each side. But, Nova…”

“Yes?”

“He has no idea what he’s done.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes, I’m very good at reading people. He didn’t even know what the Sword silhouette was, or that there was going to be a conference in four days.”

“Thank you, Mara, that’s valuable information. I will need to verify it for myself, though.”

“Of course. Please do that. But here’s the tavern. Are you going inside?”

“No, I’ll wait until I’m done shopping,” said Nova, and pulled her friends forward.

10. View from a Window

Vilam didn't like waiting and felt bored. He was accustomed to prolonged stakeouts, but then he at least had a clear objective to work toward. In this case, he had nothing to do but monitor the monotonous activities of the people passing by on the road outside. There were simple peasants in overalls and craftsmen in long shirts and trousers going about their business. Maids in long, serviceable gowns and adorned only with unassuming aprons went by on their way to the market. Things didn't get interesting until Folan rushed out the front door.

Since Vilam was alone in the hall, he walked over to one of the windows to get a better view of the events unfolding on the road. Three young women had passed the tavern on their way to the market just before his host had scuttled outside. The women were carrying empty baskets and were chatting. The one on the very right was Mara, whom he had met earlier that morning. The one on the very left must have been Nova, the Lady's handmaiden, because she was wearing the same cream-colored robe and black velvet cloak he had seen on Natilya and Tanola. Because of the pleasant warmth of the day, the hood of the cloak was hanging idly on Nova's back. She had thick, black, unbound hair, most of which disappeared under her mantle.

The third young woman in the middle was clothed far more simply in a somewhat worn dress which reached to the ground, as did all the women's attire he had seen so far. A patched but clean apron was tied about her waist. What came as a surprise was her long, golden hair, a true rarity in this black-haired population.

When the three women became aware of the chubby little proprietor shouting and running toward them, they stopped and turned in his direction, smiling and calling some friendly greeting. As soon as he reached them, he grabbed the handmaiden's arm and assailed her ear with urgent whispers. Her unaffected smile faded and was replaced by a more solemn expression. She glanced in the direction of the tavern, then back at the proprietor.

After several more animated whispers between them, the handmaiden turned to her golden-haired companion and spoke a few words. The latter nodded with a smile and answered something that seemed to be reassuring while touching the handmaiden's arm. Nova waved to Mara with a smile, after which Mara and her companion continued in the direction of the market, while the handmaiden turned toward the tavern with Folan.

Vilam hurried back and sat down just as the two entered. The proprietor pointed the handmaiden to his table but didn't join her. He preferred to remain in the background, looking busy. She nodded and thanked him, then approached, obliging Vilam to rise again.

He had already assessed Nova as being very beautiful when he saw her from the window, but reality almost overwhelmed him. Her eyes were dark, like the hair that framed her oval face. Her skin was fair, smooth, and perfect. Her features were gentle and friendly, but also composed and thoughtful. There was nothing unnatural or cunning about this young woman; she seemed completely at ease with herself and her environment. In his experience, it usually took years of intense and specialized training to attain such a state of equanimity, so she must have been with the Selanian Order for decades. But what startled him was her resemblance to his late wife's sister. She could have been her twin.

The young woman must have noticed his perplexed gaze but didn't react to it. Instead, she considered him and smiled. "*Velan mada*; good day." Her voice was pleasant, allowing him to feel at ease. "I'm sorry we kept you waiting for so long. My mistress, the Lady Utalya Revan, would very much like to meet you, if that complies with your wishes. May we invite you to our residence for the midday meal?"

"*Velan mada,* My Lady. I thank you for your kind offer and would be delighted to make your mistress's acquaintance."

His words appeared to disturb her. "Please, don't call me 'Lady.' We are naught but simple servants here."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I just thought—"

"No, I understand," she replied with a smile. "My mistress has her whims, and one of them is to dress up her servants like royalty." She made a sweeping gesture at her clothes. "But believe me, beneath the pretentious splendor, I'm no different from my golden-haired friend you saw me with when you were watching from the window."

He almost didn't catch the virtually insignificant change in the tone of her voice and the luster of her eyes. It took a moment for her words to register, but when they did, Vilam cast a quick glance at the proprietor behind the bar, a bit of color rising to his face. Fortunately, the man hadn't heard but still seemed busy polishing the silverware. Vilam opened his mouth to reply, then thought better of it and closed his mouth again.

"We are in agreement then?" she asked, without pushing the fact of his impropriety.

He nodded, slowly regaining his composure after his embarrassment.

"I need to purchase some items at the market for our meal. Would you like to accompany me?"

Vilam immediately accepted Nova's offer. He had been cooped up in the tavern all morning and felt some fresh air would do him good, so he rose and followed the handmaiden to the door.

11. Dark Premonitions

Catyana and Mara had almost reached the market when Catyana saw Lutrisya Cemasena barreling toward them. The woman had waddled by just moments ago, attempting to pass close enough to snatch up a few morsels of Nova and Folan's whispered conversation. What did she want now? Catyana grabbed Mara's arm and whispered, "Look who's back."

"It's alright," said Mara. "Just be pleasant."

"I can't. I hate her," said Catyana.

"She is your senior," said Mara, "so at least try to be civil. Please, for me?" She squeezed her arm.

Catyana nodded.

Lutrisya was still a few armlengths away when she called, "*Vela'mada*, Catyana. What a pleasant surprise seeing you here. Are you going to the market for your mother?" She gazed at Mara just long enough to sniff down at her before turning back to Catyana.

Catyana had to swallow so she wouldn't gape. Horrible woman! But she had given Mara her word. With a bit of effort, she managed to fix something akin to a smile on her face. "*Vela'mada*, Lutrisya. Yes, Mother needs a few provisions to get us through the weekend, and Father won't be able to make it into town with the wagon until next Velanav."

"I've just returned from the market myself. Are you and your family doing well?"

Catyana saw Mara glance at Lutrisya's basket, which contained a three day's old loaf of bread. Mara hid a smile behind a cough. Lutrisya probably dumped the loaf in the basket to lend her pretext some validity before rushing away from her spying post at the kitchen window to go fishing for the newest gossip.

"Thank you for your concern, Lutrisya. We're all doing well," said Catyana.

"And your friend Nova? That was her I saw you with just before, wasn't it?"

Aha! Getting right down to business, wasn't she? "Yes, your eyes didn't deceive you. And from what Nova told me, I did receive the impression she's also in good health."

"I understand, dear. You didn't have much time to chat, did you?"

"That's true. It's only a short distance from the Lady Utalya's manse to Folan's tavern."

"Such a shame. I know how fond you two are of each other. But I suppose she had her reasons for leaving you so suddenly."

"I suppose so. But I'm afraid she didn't get around to informing me of them."

"That's surprising. I thought you always told each other everything." Lutrisya sounded irritated.

"Well, not quite everything. Besides, we'll be seeing each other later this afternoon, and I'm sure we'll have enough time to chat some more then."

Lutrisya's voice dropped to a whisper. "So you haven't heard anything about the stranger who's been in Folan's tavern since early this morning?"

Catyana leaned closer and whispered, "No, I'm afraid I can't tell you anything about that."

"Hrmph." Lutrisya finally turned to Mara. Looking down at the girl, she said with a sniff, "Oh, right, Mara. I heard you and Soshia were in the tavern this morning for *setavelates*. I suppose domestic servants do such things. Did you by chance see the stranger give Folan a piece of gold?"

"I…couldn't really tell you," said Mara. "You know how men are about their financial transactions. But if you do actually make a trip to the market to get some bread, I'm sure you could somehow arrange to run into Nova and ask her about it."

Lutrisya stared at the girl with her mouth wide open. "Well, I never!" She lifted her skirts and swept away, holding her head high.

Catyana gaped at her friend. "Mara, you didn't!" She had to put her hand in front of her mouth to suppress a laugh.

"The old gossip had it coming."

"What was that you said earlier about being civil?"

Mara stared at her in mock surprise. "I wasn't civil?"

"Well, yes, you were. But still. Oh, do you mind if we stop at this booth for a moment? I'd like to get something for Sinara."

"Of course."

They had just arrived at the marketplace. The booth Catyana steered toward carried craftily molded brushes and barrettes, and Catyana perused the products to see if she could find something suitable for her sister.

"How is Sinara?"

Catyana sighed and shook her head. "I have no idea what's happening to her. She's my little sister, Mara, and I hate feeling so helpless."

"What are her symptoms?"

"She's having these dismal visions. They're happening ever more frequently, and they're very disturbing. I'm really worried about her."

Mara smiled at her. "But you're hoping a little present might cheer her up. That's really sweet of you."

"Yes, how did you know?"

"Because I know you."

Catyana's brow furrowed. "That's true. You do know me, don't you?"

"I do." Mara gazed at her, and Catyana thought she saw pain in her eyes. "But maybe you should mention Sinara's nightmares to Nova when you see her this afternoon. She's being trained for such things, isn't she?"

"You're right. Nova helped her once before, and it seemed Sinara got better for a while. Maybe it will help again."

"I hope so. But I'm worried about you, Catyana. You haven't been yourself for weeks. It's as if something were hanging over you. I hate seeing you like this." Mara looked into her eyes and stroked a golden lock out of Catyana's face, her fingertips gliding through her hair like a caress. Her eyes were so deep and dark and full of warmth. As Mara moved closer, Catyana felt her heart skip a beat, and her breath came faster. She gave herself up to the moment, closing her eyes and leaning toward her. But Mara only placed a kiss on her cheek and took her hand, giving it a quick squeeze.

Catyana felt the color rise to her cheeks and dropped her gaze. When Mara let go of her hand, Catyana took a step back and cleared her throat. What had just happened? And why was she feeling embarrassed? Mara was her friend. They hadn't done anything wrong…had they?

Breathing slowly and deeply to calm her whirling emotions, she deliberately turned back to the booth. But talking about her sister's nightmares combined with Mara's heartfelt words brought

back images of the dark premonitions Catyana had been having for weeks. Like Mara had said, they had been hanging over her like a black cloud. Was that what Mara had sensed? But Catyana had always felt that other people's needs were more important than her own trivial problems. And then, of course, there was Nova. How would her friend react if she told her about her fears? Better not mention it. Not now, when her dream of joining the Selanian Order was so close to being fulfilled. Better to just not think about the whole thing.

Shoving all the disturbing thoughts and feelings back down into her subconscious, she chose a wooden barrette that would match nicely with Sinara's golden locks and exchanged a few friendly words while paying the vendor. Before she turned away from the booth, she glanced back. Lutrisya was whispering with the smith's wife and throwing poisonous glances in their direction.

"I think we're going to regret snubbing Lutrisya like that," said Catyana.

Mara followed Catyana's gaze and smiled. "I wouldn't worry too much. As soon as she catches the scent of her next prey, we'll be forgotten."

Catyana grinned but wasn't convinced. Lutrisya's husband, who was head of the potter's guild, was a very important official in the town parliament. Although Mayor Menirel was Lord Tolares's formal representative in Nadil, most business was discussed in parliament meetings in the town hall before any definite decision was reached, and Lutrisya's husband was known to be a very influential man. Mother wouldn't be very happy when she told her about the incident.

Linking arms with Mara, she turned toward the center of the market and threw back her thick, golden hair.

Mara sucked her breath in through her teeth. "Oh, Catyana," she whispered, "you shouldn't have done that."

Catyana knew what Mara meant and immediately regretted the motion. Nadil was currently filled with foreigners passing through on their way to Tolares for the upcoming conference. She and Mara both scanned the area.

It was as she feared. The townspeople were accustomed to the sight of the Faeren girls with their unique golden tresses. There was a mutual understanding between them based on simple courtesy that they would never openly stare at Catyana or her three sisters.

But with foreigners, it was a different matter. Catyana observed several men who just stopped in the middle of the street and gawked at her, their mouths agape. Her cheeks grew hot and she averted her gaze.

“Men!” said Mara. “Is that all they ever think about?” She sighed. “Tell you what, why don’t we visit the dairy before we continue on to the vegetables?”

Catyana readily agreed, and Mara put her arm around her, directing her into a side street and away from any unwelcome scrutiny.

12. Gold of the Heavens

Semanta had been eavesdropping from her listening post in the antechamber. She peeked around the corner in time to see Nova approach her husband with the stranger. “Folan, I’ll be abducting your guest for a while, if you don’t mind,” Nova said.

Folan dropped the pretense of polishing his silverware and joined his two guests. “No, of course not. But please, my friends, you must both come again this evening.”

“Don’t worry. Where else would we go? I’ll return your guest before nightfall.”

Semanta felt this was a good opportunity to draw Nova’s attention, so she cautiously stuck her head through the doorway.

The handmaiden noticed her immediately. “Oh, hello, Semanta.” Semanta felt no need to suppress her agitation and beckoned for Nova to approach. The handmaiden stepped around the counter to join her in the other room, leaving the stranger with Folan in the hall. “What’s the matter, Semanta? You’re not usually this shy.”

“Oh, Nova, I’m so sorry to bother you, but it’s the stranger. I just don’t know what to think. Look,” she whispered, “Gold of the Heavens.” She held up the piece of gold the stranger had given her husband. It was a cube measuring approximately two fingers to an edge, but with rounded edges and corners. Embossed on the sides of the massive nugget were emblems of suns, moons, and stars with the triphyllon, the three-leafed symbol for eternity, engraved in the background. “Please, we’re in such dire need of hope. Do you think it could be him?”

Nova regarded her with concern. “There’s always hope.” She took the older woman’s hands and squeezed them. “Semanta, please promise me not to discuss what happened here today with anyone.” Semanta let her head droop, and Nova relented. “Alright, at least not with anyone you don’t completely trust.”

Semanta smiled up at her. “I promise.”

They embraced, and Semanta followed the handmaiden into the hall. When her husband saw Nova return, he took the stranger's hands and shook them heartily, entreating him once more to return soon, then released the pair to the bright spring day.

Semanta bit her lip as she watched them leave. Should she have told Nova everything? Should she, for that matter, tell her husband? She felt frightened and confused. If this stranger really was the divine Emissary, then all the things she had done behind her husband's back these past years had been a farce, even if she had believed it to be for the best.

She would have to talk to the mayor's wife again soon. Culisa was such a kind and wise friend and could maybe bring some order into the chaos of her emotions. But she had a bad feeling about all this. She had wanted to help set things in motion, just a fresh breeze to bring new life into the land. Instead, she might have helped to release a tempest.

Semanta bit down harder and tasted blood.

13. The Mayor

Menirel Sitenan, the Mayor of Nadil, took a long draw on his pipe, savoring the sweet flavor of the weed on his tongue. He gazed at his guest while leisurely blowing out the smoke.

Talenon Novesta hadn't changed much since he had last seen him, except perhaps that he had become even more condescending. He had extravagant and sometimes obnoxious tastes, and obviously enjoyed wielding the power that came with his position as head of western intelligence. Menirel didn't much care for him, but he was cautious enough not to show it. He knew exactly how much influence Talenon had, a fact that disturbed him and often made him wonder what he'd gotten himself into. "We have a problem," he finally said.

"So it seems," his guest replied.

"Then you've already heard about it?"

"News travels quickly in a small town like this."

They were sitting in comfortable chairs in the mayor's office, which faced the gardens behind the town hall. Menirel studied his guest while the man's attention was momentarily distracted by some insects buzzing around the bright flowers outside the window. The man might have been called handsome, apart from his unvarying conceited expression and the flaming crimson birthmark that blemished his right cheek, a typical characteristic of the male members of the

Novesta family. He was dressed in the plain gray robe worn by members of the Videsian Order. The burgundy sash tied around his waist revealed that he held the office of a priest. With just a bit less incentive for restraint, Menirel would have scoffed at the hypocrisy. Instead, he said, "My wife brought me up to date half an hour ago. This person, whoever he is, is still in Folan's tavern."

"Yes, I've seen him. He makes for an interesting character study. But where do the proprietor's loyalties lie?"

"He's devoted to the Selanian Order, but his wife seems to be alright. Truth be told, I have little taste for the man. I sometimes wish I could run him out of town."

A corner of Talenon's mouth twisted up. "Maybe you'll get your wish sooner than even you could imagine."

"That would be most gratifying. But what do we do about the current situation?"

"Be patient, my friend. Let's see how things develop. If you can exert your influence in any way, then try to keep the stranger away from the Prophet's Bow."

"I'm sorry, but I don't really have much authority over that."

"I understand. Maybe you could have a chat with the proprietor and express your concern?"

"I could try, but Folan can be pretty stubborn."

"I see. In that case we'll just have to fall back on firmer methods of persuasion. I'll call in a squad of western guards to run interference."

"I'd be very grateful if you did."

"Well, Mayor Sitenan, it was a pleasure seeing you again. I must continue on to Tolares and hope to stop by on my way back to Vetena."

The men rose, and Menirel gripped Talenon's outstretched hand. "Always a pleasure. You know how much we appreciate your, uh…expertise." The mayor showed his guest out and quietly closed the door of the office behind him.

14. A History Lesson

Vilam enjoyed the short walk to the market. It was good to feel the warm sun on his face, while a gentle breeze propelled wispy cirrus clouds across the deep blue sky. The scenery was lovely, since the town was situated amid gently rolling hills, dark conifer forests, green meadows, gurgling streams, and the snow-capped peaks of the Tyenar Mountains glistening in the east.

The buildings had been built far enough apart to allow for trees, fountains, and gardens, with a park thrown in here or there for good measure. The paving stones under his feet were evenly formed, not quite smooth enough to be slippery when it rained, but smooth enough to make the road pleasant to use for pedestrians, animals, and vehicles.

The buildings were amazing architectural structures that blended well into the environment. Most of them were plastered and whitewashed, in many cases with brick or wooden embellishments. The roofs were rounded or tapered and usually decorated with wood, brick, or tiling. The town expressed such creative harmony he was convinced it had been designed by artists rather than craftsmen.

Every now and then, Nova would stop to greet an acquaintance, exchanging a few friendly words or the squeeze of a hand. Although the townspeople greeted Vilam politely, they were reserved, and he noticed their restrained but inquisitive glances in his direction when they thought he wasn't looking. It reminded him of the furtive glances he had received on the road that morning. Maybe it really was their way of showing courtesy.

As they approached the market, his senses tingled, and he slowed down. What was going on? The place was lively and colorful enough. Merchants offered their products, artists displayed their work, and the kinds of things you would see going on at most any market in the galaxy were…well, going on. But something felt a bit off. He let his gaze wander from booth to booth, trying to discover the problem with the picture before him.

Nova looked at him askew. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm not sure. It's as if—"

Then it hit him. Not the picture was wrong, but the soundtrack! He closed his eyes and listened. That was it! There was no shouting or fussing, and he didn't hear any of the colorful negotiations he was used to. Everyone seemed to know exactly where they were going and what they were doing, but not in the noisy, unorganized way he recognized as being market-like.

He drew his eyebrows together. This was certainly different. "I'm sorry I startled you, but is the market usually this quiet?"

"We try to keep it that way, yes. Is there a problem?"

"No, it's just that I'm not accustomed to a market being so, um, orderly."

"Then maybe you should try the one in Divestelan. Now, that's a place where you could indulge in chaos to your heart's content." It sounded as if she was teasing, but from the look on her face,

she appeared worried or perhaps even angry. He didn't think he knew her well enough to inquire, so he shrugged it off.

From where they were standing, Vilam had a good view of the town square. An intriguing fountain adorned its center, but what caught his eye was the sundial situated near what he supposed was the town hall. It was undoubtedly the sundial Folan had mentioned earlier. He suppressed an urge to walk over and examine it. There were too many eyes following his every movement.

Just as he was about to turn away, a man in a gray robe and a burgundy sash tied around his waist stepped out of the town hall. When the man saw Vilam and his companion, he hesitated. Their eyes met.

Something cold and cruel rose up in him, a feeling he knew only too well. No, this time the sensation wasn't his, but only a reflection of what he sensed in the man across from him. It seemed one predator always knew another, no matter which world he was on or how different the race or color.

Vilam noted the aversion in the man's face and returned his scrutiny with a cold, even gaze. The man pursed his lips as if considering the situation. Then he turned his back on Vilam and hurried across the town square and down the road leading to the western end of town.

Vilam touched his companion's arm. "Do you see that man in the gray robe over there, walking away from us?"

The handmaiden inhaled sharply. "What's he doing here?"

"Why? Who is he?"

"His name is Talenon Novesta, a priest of the Videsian Order. I'm surprised we weren't informed of his arrival."

"The Videsian Order?"

"Yes, it's a religious organization that emphasizes holiness. Actually quite a noble matter, if they weren't so extreme."

"If that man is a priest, then I'm a pussycat."

Nova gave him a strange look. "A what?"

"Uh, well, a pussycat. You know, something like a *carulen*, or a—Oh, never mind."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm just saying that you need to be very careful around that man. I'm telling you, he's no priest, but a cold-blooded killer who wouldn't hesitate to slit every throat in this town if it was in his best interest."

Nova stared at him with wide eyes. "How could you know that?"

"Believe me, I just do." He felt it was better not to elaborate, and the handmaiden fortunately didn't press the matter.

When Nova had completed her purchases, they returned the way they had come, first passing the tavern, then leaving the town. She stopped a few minutes later at a comfortably sized manse on the left side of the road. He remembered passing the pretty little mansion on his way into town that morning. His companion opened one side of the solid wooden, double-winged door and beckoned for him to enter.

The corridor inside was spacious and ran most of the front length of the manse, with a door at each end. The opposing wall contained several closed doors, and facing the entrance, a broad but elegant wooden staircase led up to the second floor.

Two maidservants met them as they entered. Their long, black hair fell unbound down their backs, and they wore cream-colored robes similar to the handmaiden's. "Nova, I'm glad you're back," the shorter one said with a cheerful smile. "May I take your cloak?"

"*Vela'mada,* Hyelisa." Nova embraced her while handing over her cloak. She gave the second maidservant a quick hug. "*Vela'mada,* Fatasa. Would you mind taking these things to Redina and Sitenayla in the kitchen? They're waiting for them." She handed her the items she had purchased at the market.

Hyelisa and Fatasa bowed their heads and disappeared down the hall to the left. Nova showed Vilam to a large, comfortable parlor on the right, shutting the door behind them after they had entered.

"Ah, there you are, Nova." A tall, stately woman, presumably the Lady Utalya, rose from a desk near the window where she had been writing. Her dark hair was still thick but graying and fell elegantly around her shoulders and down her back. Her robe was similar to Nova's, only that she wore an attractive golden brooch above and to the left of her heart. The Lady came forward and hugged Nova. The two women whispered for a moment, after which the Lady turned to Vilam. "I see you've brought a guest. Welcome, my friend."

"Thank you for your hospitality. I very much appreciate it," he said, bowing his head.

“Please, don’t mention it. The meal won’t be ready for a while yet. Shall we sit and chat until we’re called?” The Lady showed Vilam to a comfortable sofa and seated herself on a chair facing him.

“I hope you don’t mind if I sit on the carpet,” said Nova, lowering herself onto the floor near the Lady’s footstool. “It’s really soft and I feel more comfortable.”

The Lady leaned forward and let her fingers glide through Nova’s hair, for which Nova rewarded her with a smile before turning back to Vilam.

“So, you’re the stranger from the tavern who’s caused such a stir,” said the Lady.

“I really don’t understand what all the fuss is about,” said Vilam in distress.

“You mustn’t be too harsh in your judgment. These are simple people living in difficult times. They’re afraid and cling to any hope that comes their way.”

“But what exactly have I done?”

“Were you able to test him?” the Lady asked Nova.

The handmaiden nodded. “He’s sensitive, but not trained.”

Vilam’s eyes wandered from the one to the other. “May I ask what you’re talking about?”

“I’m sorry I had to embarrass you in the tavern,” Nova said, “but it was necessary.”

Vilam’s eyes lit up. “Ah, the window.”

“Yes. It wasn’t such an impropriety as I led you to believe, but I had to test your perception. You sensed my meaning, namely that it was improper for you to have watched us, and your reaction was one of embarrassment. A sensitive person with little or no training in the ethereal arts reacts to such an allegation with a slight delay, as you did. Someone with training would have sensed my meaning immediately. Folan, on the other hand, would probably have sensed nothing and therefore wouldn’t have reacted at all.”

Vilam nodded and gestured toward the Lady’s brooch. “I haven’t seen one of those in a long time. You’re in the Selanian Order, aren’t you?”

“I am,” said the Lady.

“And I assume the golden brooch signifies you hold the office of a priestess.”

The Lady smiled. “It does. I was High Priestess a while back and wore a platinum brooch with a golden border, but I resigned the position when I married.”

“Ah, I see. So the girls here are probably acolytes studying to become deaconesses or priestesses.”

“Correct again.”

“Thank you for setting that straight. But I’m still puzzled. Why did the people in town act so strangely? What have I done, and what do they want from me?”

“I’ll be glad to explain,” said the Lady, “but I’ll need to elaborate. How much do you know about our history?”

“Let’s assume I know very little.”

“Alright. For the past one thousand years we’ve had peace, with a few inconsequential squabbles in between, which is why we call this era in which we live the Millennial Peace. But thirty years ago, a shadow emerged in the western provinces. We heard rumors of such shocking acts of violence we could hardly believe them. I’m sorry to say we didn’t take the rumors very seriously. I suppose we were all hoping the problem would just disappear if we ignored it.”

“I’ve heard several references today about the dismal conditions in the western provinces. What exactly is going on over there?”

“That’s what we’ve been trying to figure out ever since the violence started. For years, we could only theorize with the little information we had to go on. But in the past five years, many of those theories have been verified.”

“Can you just give me a quick rundown of the actual facts?”

“Yes, of course. About thirty years ago, a sinister organization appeared in the western provinces, which we called the Black Guard, because the members of this organization all wore black uniforms with black masks and capes. Small groups of these Black Guard would savagely attack farms at random, raping girls and women and then slaughtering them together with any men they found.”

Vilam saw that Nova wouldn’t raise her eyes during this account, but stared at the ground while swallowing on occasion.

“That’s horrible!” he said. “It sounds like they were building some kind of terror organization.”

“And for the past thirty years, terror is exactly what they have been spreading,” said the Lady.

“For the past thirty years? Why don’t you do anything about it?”

“That’s a very good question. I think the main problem is that, after a thousand years of peace, we no longer have the knowledge or the resources to oppose a group like that. The western houses always wanted to take action, but there were constant squabbles with the eastern houses in regard

to the methods, and nothing ever got done. Then, about twenty years ago, the terror spilled over into the eastern provinces."

At the Lady's last words, Nova seemed to flinch. The episode only took a fraction of a second and was hardly perceptible, but the stranger detected it. Nova shot him a self-conscious glance and averted her gaze. Vilam regarded her with compassion. Something terrible must have happened twenty years ago if it could still affect her today.

The Lady sighed. "The western houses never were very happy with the way the Advisory Council handled the situation. I can't really say I blame them. A few years ago, several of the more influential western houses decided they would no longer sit back and watch. They recruited eligible men to strengthen the guard and introduced various taxes, tributes, and duties to finance them. But of course, some of the eastern houses protested, and tensions developed. About six months ago, the cauldron boiled over, resulting in skirmishes along the border. Fortunately, nothing more came of it, but I hope you understand. Since the shadow appeared, the people of this town have become more and more apprehensive, and the events of the past months have terrified them."

"I do understand," Vilam replied, "and I'm truly sorry. But I still don't understand what this has to do with me."

"Yes, I apologize, I digress." The Lady drew a deep breath. "As you may know, our culture has spawned countless prophets and prophetesses. Over the years, many of their revelations were added to our holy scriptures, the *Selani s'Ulavan*. These writings predict a great turmoil in our time, which will end after the arrival of an emissary these texts refer to as the *Covatal*, the Traveler. His coming marks the end of an old and the beginning of a new era. So if someone were to appear who matched the accounts in the prophecies, the people would have reason to hope."

Vilam nodded. "Interesting. But why would they believe I had anything to do with this person, this…emissary?"

Nova fixed him with her dark eyes. "It seems this morning alone you've already fulfilled several of the prophecies."

He felt his jaw drop. "What?"

The two women studied him and exchanged a quick glance. The Lady nodded to her handmaiden. Nova sat up straight and focused her full attention on Vilam. "Before we continue, I need to inform you of our responsibilities. As spiritual leaders of our people—or, should I say, prospective leaders," she awarded her mistress a smile, who seemed amused, "we're responsible

for the people's spiritual well-being. You wouldn't believe how many charlatans we have to deal with every year."

"You'd be surprised," said Vilam with a grim smile.

"Oh, well, good. Then you appreciate our dilemma. Because it's our duty to assess anyone who claims divine authority, whether they do so deliberately or not. If you really did fulfill any of the prophecies regarding the Emissary, you would be claiming such authority. Do you understand?"

Vilam nodded. "I think so. So what do you need from me?"

"At the moment, all we will do is monitor the situation. We don't want you to feel uncomfortable."

"Can you at least tell me something about the prophecies I supposedly fulfilled?"

"Well, many of the prophecies describe characteristics of the Covatal. One of them is natural perception, which is why I tested you when I met you in the tavern. I believe we've verified that detail to our mutual satisfaction."

"Ah, I see."

"Other characteristics involve the Emissary's knowledge of the arts, his tendency to speak with the voice and heart of a priest, or his sense of dissociation from his environment. For instance, is it true you didn't know anything about the upcoming conference in Tolares or the silhouette of the Sword?"

"Yes, it's true."

"And you asked Folan what the date and the year was?"

"Yes, I did, actually."

"Why?"

He regarded them with his lips pressed into a straight line. Finally, he said, "I'm sorry, but I can't tell you. But aren't those things general characteristics that could describe almost anyone?"

"Perhaps, but there are a few prophecies that describe specific events, and those are difficult to refute."

"Such as?"

"The little town of Nadil will be the first to harbor the Emissary, offer him its hospitality, and quench his thirst."

"Huh. That…does seem…rather specific, as details go."

"I agree. Another prophecy says the Emissary will describe himself as a lonesome and weary *Traveler*."

"Ah. Um, I…did say something along those lines, didn't I? But I honestly didn't know those words would cause such a stir. Are they really in your holy scriptures?"

"They are. Here's another one: The Emissary will descend in a heavenly light, and death will herald his arrival."

Vilam pursed his lips. "Oh!"

"And one last passage: The Covatal will offer Gold of the Heavens for water."

Vilam sat there in a daze. He shook his head in an attempt to clear the fog of confusion from his mind. This just couldn't be happening.

"Are you alright, my friend?" the Lady asked.

"Yes, sorry, I just need a moment. This is all so…strange. I really don't know what to say."

Nova moved closer and touched his knee. "I'm sorry we've made you uncomfortable."

"That's an understatement. The concept of being some kind of religious icon whose life others foresaw hundreds of years ago…" He shook his head. Was there no way out of this predicament?

The Lady and the handmaiden exchanged a meaningful glance.

"I doubt the One who inspired the prophecies would want someone to claim a title only She may bestow," said the Lady. "If you're not the Emissary, it will be revealed soon enough. But maybe you can help. For instance, if you tell us where you're from, it might help to lift the veil of mystery."

He considered her words but shook his head. It was better not to give them too much information. He didn't want to be accused of violating the Directive.

The Lady nodded. "Alright, we certainly don't want to force you to tell us anything. We believe everyone has the freedom to decide for themselves what to do, and we respect that right most highly. But you would make things easier for all of us if you told us more about yourself."

"I'm very sorry, but I can't do that right now."

She sighed. "We'll accept that for the time being." She exchanged a quick glance with Nova. "We sense you're being sincere, although the mystery has deepened. But I do believe the time has come to shed our formality. I'm the Lady Utalya of the House of Revan, but you may call me Utalya."

"And I'm Novantina of the House Satural. But my friends call me Nova."

Vilam could only muster a weak smile. He hoped they couldn't detect how much he felt the irony of the situation, but there was no way he was going to give them his real name after everything he had just heard. "You may call me Vilam."

Nova regarded him with a playful smile. "So you're going to stick with that one, are you?"

"I am."

"Vilam Tavasin," she chuckled, "a 'good friend' from a House of Strangers."

"Is there anything wrong with it?"

"No," said the Lady Utalya with a vague smile, "that's acceptable, for now."

At that moment, Hyelisa came to the door and announced the meal. Vilam turned to his hostess. "Would it be presumptuous if I skipped the meal and asked to lie down for a while instead? It's been a long night and an even longer morning, and I'm very tired."

"No, I understand," the Lady replied. "We have a guest room you may use. Nova will show you the way." They rose and exited the parlor, but in the hall the Lady turned and bowed her head in his direction. "I wish you a refreshing respite."

"Thank you, My Lady."

The room to which Nova showed him was on the second floor. It faced the garden in the back, was quiet and filled with light, and seemed comfortable. Nova left him to himself, so he went over to the window and opened it, leaving it ajar, and drew the curtains to soften the light. The couch agreed with him, so he took off his shoes and soon drifted off into the deep and dreamless sleep of exhaustion.

15. Rendezvous at the Stables

Bejad followed the insignificant route south along the lake's shore, hoping nobody would be guarding the narrow trail. His strategy paid off. He approached the stables on a path leading up from the lake and peered through the shrubs. Several frantic stableboys were preparing the chyevi's harness for the royal family's departure but weren't getting on at all, and the equerry supervising the procedure was conveniently throwing a fit. In the general commotion, nobody took notice as Bejad moved along the stable yard, keeping close to the walls and hopefully well out of anyone's awareness.

Of course, his relaxed attitude was just a sham, and if it hadn't been for the current mayhem, he was sure everyone would have heard the furious pounding of his heart. He was dressed in the attire of a simple laborer and had the hood of an old worn cloak raised over his head. His few worldly possessions were tied up in the bag he had thrown over his shoulder.

The sun stood almost straight above and brightened the lovely environment around him. The city of Divestelan was located on the northern bank of the Suviltan River where it flowed into Lake Divestelan, but His Excellency's residence was situated several leagues south, facing east toward the lake. The family must have been grateful to live in such an out-of-the-way paradise, especially since it put some distance between them and the filth of the city. But every now and then, a faint odor was carried in when the wind shifted, a bothersome reminder of the actual state of affairs.

He advanced upon the west wing of the building, unnerved by any sound or movement. The location was well concealed from the main estate by a variety of trees and shrubs, which was probably why it had been chosen for the rendezvous.

He jumped when he heard a rhythmic swishing sound. Peering around the corner, he saw a maidservant sweeping the ground in front of the stable. Like him, she also had the hood of her simple cloak up against the gleam of the day.

Despite his raw nerves, he was conscious of his duty, so he took a deep breath and clenched his teeth. He strode over to her in what he hoped looked like an offhand manner and leaned back against the wall with a loud sigh. "*Vela'mada*, my friend. I'm looking for Yanita. Have you seen her, by any chance?"

The maid glared at him. Then she flung the broom into the stable and wiped her hands on her cloak in disgust. "It's about time. What took you so long?"

When Bejad glanced under the woman's hood, he froze and felt the blood drain from his face. He dropped down on his knee and bowed low. "Please forgive me, My Lady, I didn't recognize you."

Gevinesa grabbed his arm and wrenched him back to his feet. "You idiot!" she hissed. "Do you want to get us killed?" She glanced around to check if anyone had seen them, then fixed him with smoldering eyes. "I must admit I was expecting more from a supposedly experienced operative of Her Eminence's intelligence organization."

"I'm sorry, My Lady. I didn't anticipate seeing His Excellency's eldest daughter here."

“And I always thought spies were supposed to be prepared for anything.”

He stared at the ground, embarrassed.

“Come,” she said, seizing his arm and dragging him into the bushes. “This position is vulnerable, and I don’t want to be surprised by the next blundering idiot who stumbles this way.”

When the Lady Gevinesa was sure the underbrush gave them ample cover, she drew him down into a crouch and pulled back the hood of her cloak. Her thick, black hair was artfully pinned up on the sides and back of her head in the traditional style of House Divestelan. Her skin was darker than his, but he had grown accustomed to the distinctive complexion of the Northern Covasinians. He knew her treacherous beauty had been the downfall of numerous unwary suitors.

Under her cloak she wore a stunning two-piece dress in the house colors dark brown, black, and gold, highlighting her attractive, athletic figure. She noticed the direction of his gaze and eyed him coolly. “I trust my bodice meets with your approval?”

“Yes, of course. Sorry.”

They were interrupted by the crack of a whip from the yard. One of the stableboys cried out in pain. From the sound of things, Bejad thought the equerry was having a heart attack. “What’s going on over there?”

There was a mischievous smirk on the Lady’s lips. “Nothing particular. The man is a fool, so I took the liberty of informing him that he would either have the coach ready in half an hour, or henceforth earn his wages as a taster. Of course, I do believe I let slip the fact that the first and last thing he would ever taste would be my steel.” She hesitated. “Alright, to be honest, I thought you could use the diversion.”

Bejad grinned. Then he remembered why he was there and took a deep breath. “What can I do for you, My Lady?”

The amused look on her face melted away, and there seemed to be a glint of desperation in her eyes. “My cover has been compromised, and I wish to be extracted.”

“Extracted? I don’t understand.”

“I can see that, but I don’t have time to explain. All I can tell you is that I’ve been working for Her Eminence, the High Priestess, for years now.”

“That’s not how you’ve been described by my colleagues, My Lady. You couldn’t imagine the horrific accounts we’ve heard of your actions.”

She stared at the ground and swallowed. “Yes, I could. And I’m sorry, but I’m afraid many of them are probably true. All I can say in my defense is that everything changed five years ago. Please believe me.”

“How can I?”

She grabbed his arm. “Bejad, we don’t have time for lengthy clarifications.” She looked into his eyes and sighed. “Alright, I understand this is difficult for you, although I wouldn’t even know where to begin. I met Her Eminence five years ago at the conference. She wasn’t High Priestess then, but she made such an intense impression on me. I’ve never known anyone who could be so compassionate and yet so focused. She accepted me despite the terrible things she knew I’d done. A few weeks after she was elected, she got in touch with me through her channels in the Resistance. It was a dangerous move on her part, for both of us, but she had assessed my situation correctly. Half a year later, she came to Divestelan to visit me. Can you imagine that? She put her life in danger just to see me.”

Bejad nodded. “Alright, only someone close to her could have known she was here at that time. And it’s true, she’s always putting others before herself. If you’ve met her, then I can understand how she may have had that effect on you.”

Gevinesa sighed deeply. “I’ve grown so tired of these sinister games. I’ve become so hardened.” She balled her hand into a fist, then unclenched it and stared fearfully at her palm. “I sometimes feel there’s no trace of humanity left in me.”

“Believe me, I understand your apprehension.”

She shook her head and her eyes seemed to burn with suppressed anger. “You understand nothing. This isn’t about me. I’ve long since forfeited my life, and I’ve earned everything that befalls me. But I’m so afraid for my little sister, Yanita. Bejad, she’s only seven years old. I can’t allow my father and brother to do to her what they did to me. I have to get her to safety.”

“Is that why I’m here?”

“Yes, the whole situation has become too dangerous. My father and brother no longer trust me. As a little parting gift, they’ve given the order to eliminate all suspected operatives of the Resistance before we leave. At this very moment, they’re probably storming your place in Divestelan. If you hadn’t come, I’m sure you wouldn’t have survived the day.”

Bejad felt his limbs go numb. “I see.” His voice was hoarse. “But what about Sheletas and the other members of—?”

“Please, don’t give me any names. I can’t betray what I don’t know. I’m sorry, Bejad, but there’s nothing more I can do. I alerted the Resistance as soon as I discovered the plan. Our friends must fend for themselves now.”

“Alright, what do you want me to do?”

“The High Priestess gave me your name in case anything like this ever happened. You must go to her immediately. Please ask her to organize an incident when we arrive in Tolares, perhaps at the conference. She must get my sister and me away from my family. And tell her it’ll be difficult, because my brother won’t let me out of his sight.”

“Consider it done.”

“Here, take this.” She pressed a slip of paper into his hand. “It’s a plan describing the exact route you should take. If you follow the instructions, you’ll be able to change your chyevi every few hours. You’ll be taking one of our steeds from here to get you started. He’s in the second stall on the right, already prepared and saddled. When you reach Divestelan, stay north of the main roads. And for heaven’s sake, keep out of sight!”

“I’ll do my best.”

She grabbed his arm. “Listen, Bejad. This is probably the last time I’ll ever send out a courier, and the farms along the way are in dire need. Tell the owners of the way stations you come to that they may keep the chyevi I lent them. They’re excellent mounts, and the farmers will probably be able to sell them for a good price. It’s the least I can do after all they’ve done for me.”

Bejad stared at her in awe. “That’s very kind of you, My Lady.”

“Now, give me two minutes, and then go.” She turned to leave, but he held her. “What is it, Bejad?” she asked impatiently, glancing back at him.

“I just wanted to tell you it’s been an honor meeting you, Lady Gevinesa.”

She looked him in the eye. “When we meet again in Tolares and you address me in any other fashion than as Vinesa, I will slit your throat.”

He smiled. “I don’t think that will be necessary. Farewell, Vinesa.”

“Farewell, Bejad.” She slipped through the bushes and took off her cloak. He saw her toss it in a stall before disappearing around the corner. He waited two more minutes and left the shrubs in the direction of the stalls.

16. The Sinaven

The sound of laughing children penetrated Vilam's consciousness, and he blinked. It took him a moment to remember where he was. Ah, yes, in the Lady Utalya's manse. The room had darkened, and from the quality of the light, he concluded it was mid to late afternoon. He swung his legs over the couch and sat up.

The abrupt movement must have caused a sudden drop in blood pressure, making him dizzy. Sharp images of the past days' events came rushing back. A sense of surrealism overcame him. He massaged his forehead and temples, breathing regularly. When the sensation had passed, he went over to the window and drew open the curtains.

The view from the window was beautiful, and he realized how refreshed he felt. A path led from the garden to a pond at the edge of a small, conifer woods. The rays of the afternoon sun glittered like diamonds on the water's surface, and reeds beckoned in the mild spring breeze.

In the garden, he saw Natilya supervising a group of small children. She was teaching them a game and evidently enjoying herself as much as the boys and girls giggling and frolicking around her. The scene seemed so perfect and radiated such joy and peace, a peace he had been told was now threatened.

He shook his head in exasperation and felt anger rising inside him. Why were people so stupid? From what he had seen, they had an amazingly sophisticated society here, but one still mostly innocent of the terror and violence he had experienced on so many other worlds. Why did they want to go and throw it all away?

He closed the window and went to the door. Opening it carefully, he saw two acolytes standing in the hallway, talking quietly. One of them was Tanola. Despite his caution, they noticed him and bowed their heads. The other acolyte hurried down the stairs while Tanola approached with a cheerful smile. "*Nolavelan mada*; good afternoon, Vilam. Redina didn't mean to be impolite. She's just going to inform Nova that you're awake. In the meantime, is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, Tanola, thank you. I'd like to freshen up, please."

"The room next to yours is a restroom. You're most welcome to use it."

"Thank you very much."

She bowed her head. "Glad to be of service."

As he entered the restroom, he saw a basin with a faucet on his left. He turned the handle and was rewarded with a stream of clear, fresh water. After splashing his face, he stuck his head under the water and let it run through his hair. The cool, prickling sensation felt good on his skin. Then he used his fingers in an attempt to tidy his unruly, black hair but didn't have much luck.

When he opened the door, Nova was waiting for him in the hallway. She suppressed a smile when she saw him. "I'm sorry. We should have realized you didn't have any personal effects with you." She went over to his room, where Tanola was changing the quilts. "Tanola, would you please bring our guest a hairbrush from the sanitary supplies?"

Tanola nodded. As she brushed past, Nova smiled and gave her arm a quick squeeze. Then she turned back to her guest. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, very much so, thank you."

"I hope the children didn't disturb you?"

"Oh, no, not at all. On the contrary, I love children." His gaze turned inward as a sad memory assailed him.

Nova must have seen it. She had a sympathetic look in her eyes as she touched his arm to get his attention. "A very dear friend of mine, the companion you saw me with in town this morning, will be coming by shortly. We were planning on going for a walk, and two friends of yours will be joining us."

"Friends of mine?"

"Yes, the two young women you met in Folan's tavern this morning, Mara and Soshia."

"Oh, really! I would enjoy seeing them again."

"Would you care to join us?"

"Yes, gladly. Some fresh air and exercise would do me good."

Tanola came back and handed Vilam a brush with a smile and a bow of her head. He thanked her and returned to the restroom, where he used the brush to better effect on his hair. When he finished, Nova was waiting for him.

"What would you like me to do with the brush?" he asked. "And the towel I used, for that matter."

"Just leave them. Tanola will take care of it later."

"Alright. Would you like to go out front and wait for your friend? I think I'd enjoy a bit of sunshine."

“Yes, of course, but maybe not out front. I’m afraid with you here there are too many inquisitive eyes. Why don’t we join Natilya in the garden?” She led him down the stairs and around and under the staircase. A double-winged glass door opened out to the garden, where Nova ushered him to the acolyte who was supervising the children. “Vilam, you already know Natilya. She’s the Lady Utalya’s niece.”

Natilya bowed her head. “It’s good to see you again, Vilam.”

“And how are the children doing?” Nova asked.

“Oh, they’re wonderful. I could play with them all day.”

“I know,” Nova answered with a faint smile, “but I was referring to the test on social competence.”

“Oh, right. I think they had a lot of fun with it. Two of them need a little polishing, but they’ll do fine.”

Vilam raised an eyebrow. “Social competence?”

“Why, yes,” Natilya said. “You see, the people in town and from the surrounding farms send us their children for preliminary training. Of course, the children believe they’re just playing, but there’s so much we can do while they’re having fun. We evaluate and train them in fundamental aspects of perception. Their sensitivity for arts and sciences is heightened, their skills are sharpened, and we can even determine if some of them will be eligible for advanced training.”

“Ah, I see. So what we see here are the future leaders of your society.”

Nova restrained a smile. “Well, in a sense you may be right. It does make it easier if we can begin their training at an early age. But many children don’t have that chance. Some of them live far out in the country, and their parents rely on their help. Take my golden-haired friend here, for instance.” Nova embraced her companion, who had just entered the garden from the direction of the pond he had seen from his window. “Vilam, this is Catyana of the House Faeren.”

Catyana kept her head down, even after she had bowed. Vilam thought she was probably just shy.

“Sorry, Catyana, but I was just explaining to Vilam that a person’s calling shouldn’t depend on whether they can participate in the children’s preliminary training.” Nova turned back to Vilam. “You see, Catyana and her siblings live about an hour’s walk to the northeast, and their farm takes a lot of work. But she’s been thinking of joining the Order.” The two women exchanged a quick glance, and Vilam thought he detected a smile on Catyana’s lips.

Hyelisa came from inside the manse and ushered Mara and Soshia into the garden. The two girls were wearing more comfortable gowns than the formal servant's dresses they had on in the morning, and they waved as a greeting. Mara linked arms with Catyana, but when Soshia saw Vilam, she lit up like a firefly. She immediately took him in possession by wrapping her hands around his arm. Although he was surprised, Vilam realized he didn't mind Soshia's familiarity in the slightest. It had been years since anyone had allowed him to feel so close to them. He looked at her to gauge her mood and saw that her eyes were shining.

Soshia squeezed his arm and whispered, "Now that I have you, I'm not letting go, so don't even think about it. Resistance is futile."

"Uh-oh," he said, keeping his voice just as low. "Is the Borg queen trying to assimilate me into her collective?"

She searched his eyes. "Borg queen? You do sometimes say the strangest things. But I don't see you putting up a struggle. Let's see how the afternoon goes. I'm yours for the duration."

"I was hoping you'd say that," he replied with a grin.

She rewarded him with a smile of her own and put her head on his shoulder.

Nova regarded the couple with a curious glance but didn't seem inclined to comment on their familiarity. "Alright, let's go." Leaving Natilya with the children, Nova took Catyana's free arm and nudged her and Mara in the direction of the pond, while Soshia and Vilam ambled behind. "What do you think?" said Nova to Catyana. "Will your parents let you join the Order?"

"I don't know," said Catyana. "When it comes to that topic, they're always very reserved. But they've asked me to invite you to the midday meal tomorrow. Will you come?"

"Catyana, really, I'm at your place half the time as it is. Since when do I need an invitation?"

"They probably just wanted to make sure you'd be there, which is why I think they have something special planned." Catyana squeezed Nova's arm. Vilam saw that her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes sparkled as she peeked back at him. "Excuse me, Vilam. May I invite you, too? I'm sure my parents would be delighted to meet you." She gasped, and her hand shot up to her mouth.

Vilam grinned at her timidity but kept his eyes on the ground as he considered her offer. "Thank you, Catyana, I feel honored by your invitation. But so much is going on, and I might need some time to, uh…sort things out. Do you need a definite reply right this minute?"

Catyana plucked at her dress and smoothed her apron. Her attempt at a smile looked more like a self-conscious grin. “No, no, of course not, it would be fine if you just showed up for the meal since we’re a large family and my mother is accustomed to throwing something together if unexpected guests turn up so…”

Nova fixed her with a sidelong glance. “Um, Catyana…”

“…believe me you would be more than welcome and my parents and siblings love visitors because we don’t get them very often and can’t always be leaving the farm since there’s so much to do so we’re glad when people bring the outside world—” She flinched when Nova jabbed her with her elbow. “And I’ll stop babbling now.”

“*A’mada*, Catyana,” Nova said. “You really do seem tense lately.”

“No…I mean yes, I mean…O-o-oh.” She balled her fists and exhaled in frustration. “Sorry. It’s…nothing.”

“No need to be nervous, dearest. I’m sure Vilam didn’t find your invitation presumptuous. But I hope your parents have come to a decision, one way or the other. We’ll be leaving for Tolares early the day after tomorrow and won’t be able to wait any longer. By the way, Tanola and Natilya said they would like to join us tomorrow at your home. Would that be alright?”

“Of course! Mother will be overjoyed.” Catyana became starry-eyed. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful, though, if they said I could join the Order? Then I could go to Travis with you.”

Nova smiled. “You know how much I’d like that.”

“I really hope it works out that way,” said Mara to Catyana. “I would be so happy for you. But you might want to mention to Nova what you told me this morning at the market. About your sister?”

“Oh, right! Thank you, Mara. Nova, I’m sorry to change the subject, but I’m worried about Sinara. Her nightmares are getting worse.”

“Oh? That’s not good. Is she having them more frequently?”

“Almost every night. She even had one this morning just before she woke up. And I believe they’re becoming more vivid, too.”

“Alright, I’ll talk to her when I come over tomorrow. Maybe we can—” Nova suddenly stopped and stared in awe. “Look, a sinaven!”

They had reached the pond, where Vilam saw a lovely, jet-black bird standing in the clear water near the bank. It raised its head on its long, slender neck to study them, but they didn’t seem to

pose a threat because it soon returned to its task of tending its feathers. The bird was quite large, and Vilam estimated its head reached to his waist. Its dark plumage was contrasted by discreet white markings along its wings and sides, with white crescents behind its eyes, and its bill and webbed feet flamed bright red.

"He's so breathtaking," Catyana whispered. "I wonder how many songs have been composed about the *sinaveni*."

"I couldn't say. So many artists have been inspired by these graceful creatures. But I still think Vodana's song *Sinavena* is incontestable," Nova said with a twinkle in her eyes.

Catyana shot her a quick glance. "Well, that goes without saying. No one can compete with her. Why did you even bring it—?"

Nova clutched Catyana's arm and drew her closer. "I wonder where the *sinaven's* mate is? It would be strange if he were alone at this time of year."

"Interesting," whispered Soshia to Vilam. "I wonder why Nova is deflecting. But Catyana seems to be wondering the same thing."

Vilam knew what Soshia meant, because Catyana was peering at Nova from the side as she eased her arm away from her friend. Then she concentrated on the pond.

"Who's this Vodana they're talking about?" whispered Vilam.

"Vodana Satural. She's a world-renowned singer," said Soshia. "I've seen her a few times. She really is quite brilliant."

Catyana's eyebrows shot up and she pointed. "There's the *sinaven's* mate, over by the reeds. Do you see her?"

"Yes, and look who she has with her," said Nova.

"Oh, aren't they just adorable? How many are there? Let me see now, six little hatchlings, two males and four females."

Nova turned to Vilam with a proud smile. "You see, my friend, how perceptive she is?"

"Yes," Vilam agreed in amazement. "She really is, for one who seems so young and without substantial training. I've never heard of distinguishing the gender of *sinaveni* just by looking at them." He glanced at Catyana and saw she was deliberately keeping her deep blue eyes on the *sinaven*, but her cheeks were glowing red.

Nova saw the direction of his gaze and gave Catyana a little nudge. "Oh, don't worry about her. She's just shy."

Catyana nudged back. “You know I don’t like being the center of attention.”

“You’re my best friend, and you’re special. Is that such a bad thing?”

“Does the whole world have to know?”

“I agree with Catyana,” said Mara. “You really must be more mindful of the company in which you say such things.”

Nova aimed a puzzled glance at Mara. “I appreciate your concern, but I don’t think Vilam will be a problem.”

“What about Soshia and me?” said Mara. “How do you know you can trust us?”

“Let’s just call it gut instinct,” said Nova. “From what I’ve seen so far, I believe you can both keep a secret. Besides, I know you’re just as worried about Catyana as I am, so I’m sure you’d want to keep her safe.”

“Keep me safe?” said Catyana. “Nova, what are you talking about?”

“I’ll fill you in later, dearest, when we’re alone.”

“How about you fill me in now?” said Catyana.

“No, this time I agree with Nova,” said Mara. “We’re too exposed here, and I think such a conversation requires more privacy.”

Catyana flung up her arms. “Ugh! You’re all against me!”

Mara put her hand on Catyana’s arm. Her eyes were glistening and she seemed sad. “Is that the impression I’ve given you? That I’m against you?”

“Oh, no, of course not, Mara. I’m so sorry. I really must stop saying whatever pops into my head.”

“I did want to talk about your unique abilities a little farther down the road, Catyana,” said Nova. “There’s something up ahead I want to show Vilam.”

Vilam glanced at her. “You’ve made me curious.”

Nova only smiled and drew Catyana and Mara away from the pond and back to the path.

“Alright,” Vilam said, “since you can’t be moved to explain yourself, there is something I’ve been meaning to ask. Is there really just one language on Piral?”

Soshia gave him a curious look. “I could tell you that, although the question does seem a bit odd, doesn’t it, Nova?”

“I agree,” said Nova, “but be my guest.”

“Yes, there’s only one language on Piral,” said Soshia. “Why would you think otherwise?”

"Hmmm…Have any of you ever heard of that curse, the confusion of tongues?" said Vilam.

"I'm sure we all have," said Soshia. "But that's a question best answered by an expert." She looked over at Nova.

Nova swallowed and stared at the ground. "Yes, but it's quite a grim topic."

"I'm up for it," said Vilam.

"Morbid much?" said Soshia, squeezing his arm.

"Our scriptures contain several passages regarding the curse," said Nova, "but those are ancient prophecies and belong to the foundations of our faith."

"Would you care to elaborate?" said Vilam.

"Well, the *Selani s'Ulavan* say when Anae created Piral and the Three Races, She—"

"The Three Races?"

"Yes. The Selani—being us—the Demantar, and the Elinar."

"Ah, I see." Vilam couldn't help but grin to himself. So in this time, the Selani had not yet learned the truth about the delicate balance on which their lives depended. "*Vot'ana;* please, excuse the interruption."

Nova and Soshia both shot him an inquisitive glance. "*Tezatal;* that's alright," said Nova. "As I was saying, when Anae created Piral and the Three Races, She also established a covenant with us that clearly stated the terms of our relationship, meaning the promises attached to our obedience, and the consequences if we failed to comply. The terms were simple: to love Her and each other with all our hearts. But the consequences of unrepentant iniquity were terrible." There was a bitter smile on her lips. "How soon we fell from our trust. Do you know the account of the Cataclysm?"

"I've heard of it, but that was long ago, and I can't remember the details."

"We were punished for allowing ourselves to be tempted by evil and for opening our hearts to the lure of darkness. Anae's judgment was severe: The life expectancy of the Selani was greatly reduced, and the Demantar and the Elinar vanished completely. But She reprimanded us through her prophets, stating that, should we fail again, the results would be even more terrible: the desolation of Piral and the confusion of tongues. But why do you ask about this curse?"

"I was just thinking. Can you imagine what the consequences of such a curse would be?"

Catyana seemed to flinch.

"I would rather not imagine," Nova replied.

“It would definitely mean the end of your culture as you know it. Communication would become problematic, if not even impossible. It would become arduous to promote cultural exchange, such as arts and sciences. Think of the setback for any kind of technological advance. You would be thrown back to your darkest beginnings.”

Catyana shuddered.

“Uh, Vilam…” said Soshia, trying to gain his attention by plucking at his shoulder.

He put his hand over Soshia’s to get her to stop. “But then, imagine what the destruction of an entire world would imply: the annihilation of so many lives, your entire culture completely obliterated. It would be—”

“Vilam, you really have to stop,” said Soshia, stepping in front of him and grabbing his shoulders. “Personally, I don’t mind much. I can probably handle anything you throw at me. But others here might not be as resilient.” She motioned at the group behind her.

Vilam finally looked at his other three companions, who had turned around to face him and were standing stock still. Nova and Mara were both supporting Catyana, who was trembling and had her face buried in her hands.

17. Vicious Revenge

Keeping the hood of her dark brown cloak pulled low over her face, Dena elbowed her way through the crowd, sick with the foreboding of what she would see. Divestelan was overcrowded as it was, but the populace had panicked after the attacks started at noon, making it almost impossible for her to get through. Just as she jostled her way to the edge of the scene, a short, stout grandmother in a simple frock tried to hold her back. “No, young miss, you don’t want to see that.”

But even if Dena hadn’t been determined to ignore the warning, it would have been too late. She already had a good view of the thing lying in the street and stared at it with her teeth clenched, as she had in the past two instances. But this time it was too much, and her body revolted. She turned and doubled over, gagging. But only air would pass, and she coughed as tears gushed into her eyes.

The elderly woman stayed with her. “Are you alright?”

Dena nodded and held on to the woman’s arm, clutching her aching stomach. “Thank you.” She took a few deep breaths and then deliberately turned back and took another look.

As with the other two cases, this was undoubtedly no ordinary termination. The gory mess the Black Guard had left behind was a premeditated display of vicious revenge, calculated to cause prolonged agony in the victim and meant as an object lesson for the Resistance. With an expert gaze, she scanned the crowd and buildings on all sides but detected nothing suspicious. It didn't seem as if the Black Guard had posted a counteragent to keep watch for an enemy operative such as herself. She only observed the regular guards in their dark brown, black, and golden uniforms who were keeping the crowd at bay, and the lamenting relatives and friends surrounding the corpse.

Sick, weak, and trembling, she turned away from the dreadful scene and began moving through the packed multitude, but the elderly lady held on to her and whispered in her ear, "You're with the Resistance, aren't you?"

Dena just stared at her.

"You don't have to answer. I can see it in your eyes. He was a good man and he died bravely. Tell your friends that."

Dena kept her voice low. "Did you see it happen?"

The woman nodded, her eyes bright but glistening with tears. "They came out of nowhere, broke down the door of the building, and threw him into the street from a third floor window. He was hardly alive as it was, but then they—" A suppressed sob escaped her.

"It's alright. Did you see them leave?"

The woman nodded and pointed into a narrow alley. "It all happened so quickly. They were gone in an instant."

"I understand."

"Where are the constables? And why hasn't the coroner come? He's been lying there like that for hours. The guards won't even let the relatives move the body."

"There have been attacks all over the city. It's difficult to get through, and the authorities are understaffed. I'm sure a team will arrive soon."

"It's just horrible."

"Yes. Do you know who might have betrayed him?"

"It was common knowledge in the neighborhood that he was working for the Resistance, but I couldn't imagine why anyone would give him away. We're all hoping the Emissary will arrive soon to put an end to this dreadful state of affairs."

Dena squeezed her arm. “There is always hope. But please excuse me, ma’am. I really must leave.”

“Yes, of course. But never forget that we’re praying for you. And you’re so young, and such a pretty little thing, too. I marvel at your courage.”

Dena bent down and gave the old woman a kiss on the cheek. “Anae bless you.”

She lost herself in the crowd and headed for the northern part of the city. She would have to hurry to get to the rendezvous on time, but her task was done, and she could move more freely now, so she stuck to little used alleys and passages, which sped her progress. After half an hour, she entered a run-down building and rushed through a corridor that reeked of decay. When she stepped out into the garden on the other side, she looked up, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath, enjoying the sun on her face and the gentle breeze that caressed her hair.

The public gardens of Divestelan were located just outside the north wall and had once been counted among the city’s main attractions. They had been donated by some of the more noble families, who had meticulously kept up their maintenance for many generations. In the past decades, the gardens had been allowed to deteriorate beyond recognition, but the extensive grounds still retained a unique and untamed loveliness, harboring small islands of melancholic tranquility.

In one of these alcoves, Dena sat down at the edge of what had once been a large, bubbling fountain and pulled her hood over her head. The statue in the center of the fountain had crumbled, the walls were overgrown with weeds, and the water now remained silent and stagnant. The alcove was surrounded by trees and the ground covered by layers of wilted leaves left there as the spoilage of many unfeeling winters. To her left, a plot of struggling *novantan* had somehow managed to raise their snowy heads above the leafy carpet, and clusters of colorful *venora* decorated the scene in all directions.

Dena was grateful for the momentary silence. She still felt herself quaking with the terror of the past hours and hoped she could compose herself before her contact arrived. Everywhere around her, in the thickets among the trees, she heard the whispering or muted sobs of people who had managed to flee the panic-stricken city and seek refuge beyond its walls. Would the terror never end? They had worked so hard these past years, but instead of getting better, things were only getting worse.

Her thoughts turned to her meeting with Zetara in the market that morning. It had been brave of the young Lady Divestelan’s handmaiden to notify her of the impending attack, even if the

warning had come almost too late. She wondered where Zetara was now. The handmaiden said she was going to see her brother, so if she had made it out of the city, she was probably well on her way to Tolares.

Dena knew she might never see Zetara again, and she wished she had been nicer to her. Zetara's words regarding Tavita had been meant kindly, but Dena could hardly contain the rage she always felt when she thought about what that bitch Tavita had done to Varan. Although it had happened two years ago, the image of holding her love in her arms as his life seeped out of him still made her shudder, and she clenched her teeth to suppress the emotion.

She sat up straight when she saw a woman enter the clearing and look around. The woman saw Dena and walked toward her. She was wrapped in a simple dark brown cloak and, like Dena, had the hood pulled far down into her face, leaving her countenance in deep shadow. She stopped when she was still several armlengths away. "The prosperity of summer at last fulfills the anticipation of spring," said the woman in a low voice.

"And winter's wisdom the perseverance of fall," Dena answered with a trembling voice. The woman approached, but Dena didn't look up when she sat down beside her. "Mirayla?"

"Yes, it's me," the woman whispered.

"I wasn't sure whom I would be meeting," said Dena, trying desperately to remain calm. But the horror of the past hours suddenly overwhelmed her, and she burst into tears and threw herself into the woman's arms. "Oh, Mirayla!"

The woman stiffened at the sudden imposed familiarity, but Dena didn't care. She felt so safe and secure as the woman mechanically rocked her back and forth, and Dena allowed herself to release the pent-up tears that had constricted her chest all afternoon.

After a while, Mirayla said, "There, there now, child. Why don't you take all the time in the world to get your act together? It's not as if our operatives had just been slaughtered and we had a lot of work to do."

Dena sat up with as much dignity as she could muster and stared at Mirayla, sniffing back a few straggling tears.

"Get a grip, Dena. Was it that bad?"

"It was horrible! I saw the carnage of our operatives at every one of my assigned locations. It reminded me of…" Dena gagged and fell silent.

"Varan?" the woman coaxed, but her sympathetic smile seemed artificial, and her eyes remained cold.

Dena nodded. "The whole city has gone mad. I could hardly get through because of the panic. Mirayla, how many of us are left?"

"I don't know exactly, but quite a few were able to get to safety. Thank you for acting so promptly and relaying the alert."

"I only passed on what my informant told me. Is…is Tuval…?" Dena asked, fearful of the answer.

"Sorry, but I don't have any information regarding your brother." Dena thought she saw her eyes glittering dangerously. "The incompetence of it all. This whole situation is just…" Mirayla pressed her lips together.

"Mirayla, what's going on? You seem so—"

"Mind your own business!" Mirayla took a deep breath, and her face became a blank mask. "I gather from what you just told me that you weren't able to contact the three missing operatives assigned to you."

"No, I confirm that all three operatives have been terminated," she answered, attempting to emulate Mirayla's crisp, professional attitude. Dena explained the details.

"Alright, Sheletas wants you to meet another contact in Skull Alley tonight at 28:00 hours. Do you know where that is?"

"Yes, it's behind the Gilder's Lane. Tuval and I have often met there."

"Good. I'm sorry, child, but it's not safe for us to be seen together. Will you be alright?"

Dena nodded.

"Farewell, Dena," the woman said. She got up and left the clearing without looking back.

"Farewell, Mirayla," Dena whispered, following the woman's retreat with a troubled glance. Why had Mirayla been so cold and distant, even hostile? And just because she was now practically engaged to Sheletas didn't give her the right to be so patronizing. *Child*, indeed!

Dena suppressed a shudder. As procedure required, she waited a few minutes, but was hardly able to control her anxiety. Was her brother safe? Would she ever see him again? She rose and returned to the city by a different route.

18. The One Law

Vilam just stood there, feeling embarrassed. Well, that certainly wasn't anything new, now was it? Why did he have to keep getting into such awkward situations? Maybe it would help clear his senses if he knocked his head against one of the larger conifers lining the path. If it wasn't for the beautiful young woman standing in front of him and holding his hands, he might even have tried it. "I…I'm sorry. I got carried away," he said.

Nova gave Vilam a look that was difficult to interpret, but she turned back to Catyana. "It's alright, dearest," she whispered, moving her hand up and down the girl's back.

Catyana leaned into Nova's arms, still covering her face with her hands. "I feel as if I'm suffocating. I can't breathe," she sobbed.

"That's alright, just remember your training," said Nova.

Mara stood behind Catyana's right shoulder. She tried to give her support but appeared distressed. Catyana finally looked up and wiped a few tears from her cheeks, but she seemed surprised the sun was still out.

Nova gave her a handkerchief and looked at Vilam. "What is the matter with you, my friend, that you're preoccupied with such dismal thoughts?"

Vilam stared at the ground. "Catyana, I'm very sorry. I formally apologize to all of you. It won't happen again."

"I'd like to believe you," said Nova. "Please be more mindful of your words."

Catyana had calmed down but remained quiet, and Vilam gave her a quick glance as they continued their walk. Soshia linked arms with him again and nudged him forward.

He shook his head. Speaking quietly so only Soshia could hear, he said, "I don't understand. Why did my words trigger such an extreme reaction in Catyana?"

"Don't forget," whispered Soshia, "we're living in difficult times, and people everywhere are tense. I know I'm one to talk, but it might be wise to use a little restraint, especially in regard to the kinds of calamities you mentioned. You might trigger images and sentiments you weren't expecting."

"Maybe, but I don't believe it's just the difficult times that are making Catyana so tense. Her reaction to my remarks was much too strong for that. And Nova said she's really worried about her."

“Yes, so is Mara. Catyana hasn’t seemed like herself in weeks. It’s as if some dark cloud were hanging over her.”

“Mara seems very attached to Catyana.”

“Yes, she is.”

Vilam saw Soshia’s concerned expression. “You don’t seem very happy about that.”

“Oh, no, Catyana’s a sweetheart. Mara feels she’s very special, and I agree with her.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Soshia sighed. “Unrequited love. Sometimes, I think my cousin has a martyr complex.”

“Your cousin?”

“Oops!” Soshia held her hand over her lips and giggled.

“Mara is your cousin?”

“She is, although to be honest, she’s always been more like a mother to me. She practically raised me since I was little. And, of course, she’s my best friend. Vilam, stop. Please, look at me.” She stood in front of him and took his hands, her expression now serious. “I’ve never told anyone about this, ever. You’re the first. Do you know what that means?”

Vilam shook his head.

She moved closer and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “You’re smart. Figure it out.”

He hesitated, gazing into her eyes. Then he took her into his arms and kissed her. She immediately reciprocated by putting her arms around him and hugging him to herself. The scent of her hair and the sensation of her warm pressure against his body was exhilarating, and he couldn’t get himself to stop. It had been so long since he had kissed someone like this.

After a while, she pulled away to catch her breath and moved her lips close to his ear. “See, I told you you’re smart.” Taking his arm, she turned out of his embrace and drew him forward. The others had already moved ahead, and they needed to catch up.

“Do you think they saw us?” said Vilam.

“Well, at least there would have been something worth seeing,” Soshia said with a smile. “But no, I don’t think they did, or Nova and Catyana would be gawking at us, shocked to the core.”

“You may be right.”

“Of course I’m right. We’re in the eastern provinces. They have to be shocked.”

“So, why haven’t you told anyone you and Mara are cousins? Is it such a secret?”

“It is. No one can know who we are, or there’ll be hell to pay.”

"Well, then, who are you?"

She looked up at him. "Vilam, I will tell you, I promise. I don't want us to have any secrets. But please, let me talk to Mara first. It's her secret, too, and I don't want to betray her trust."

"That's very admirable."

"Just because I'm a shameless flirt doesn't mean I can't have a bit of integrity."

"I don't believe you're a shameless flirt."

"You don't know me very well yet, Vilam, although I am looking forward to us getting to know each other. But if you ask around, I'm sure you'll find I know how to use my wiles to get what I want."

"They definitely worked on me."

"They did, didn't they?" she said, flashing him a playful smile. "Only this time, I'm afraid I lost something in the process."

"Oh? And what was that?"

"Really? It should be obvious by now. Here." She took his free hand and guided it to her heart. "Oh, my, do you feel how fast it's beating?" she whispered. "As if it wanted to jump right into your hands so you can keep it safe."

He kissed her a few more times, but they had to restrain themselves since they were closing in on their companions.

"Can you at least tell me how old you are?" Vilam asked her.

"You want to know how old I am? Is that so important?"

"What was that, Soshia?" said Nova, turning her head to look back at them.

"Vilam wants to know how old I am."

"I'm really sorry," said Vilam. "I hope that's not inappropriate. I know in some cultures it is."

"No, of course not," Nova said. "But while we're at it, I'm forty-three, and Catyana is twenty-six."

Vilam's jaw dropped. Granted, Selanian life expectancy still caught him by surprise when compared to the average life expectancy on Earth. But what truly stumped him was how someone with Nova's abilities could still be an acolyte at forty-three.

Nova aimed a curious glance at him, but turned her gaze to Soshia. "Your turn."

"How old do you think I am?"

"I…would estimate you're right around your Age of Maturity," said Nova.

Soshia chuckled. “No, I’m a bit older than thirty-three. I’m forty-six.”

Now it was Nova and Catyana’s turn to look astonished. “I never would have guessed,” said Nova.

“Nova was being generous,” said Catyana. “I would have guessed you were about my age.”

Soshia shrugged.

“Mara, how old are you?” said Catyana.

“I’m sixty-eight.”

“No!” said Catyana, her eyes wide. “You look about Nova’s age, but never sixty-eight.”

“What’s your secret?” said Nova.

“We’ve been working with plants and herbs all our lives,” said Mara. “If you choose a lifestyle that prioritizes health, you’ll be astonished at what you can do. I’d be glad to show you.”

“That would be lovely, although I think Hyelisa would appreciate it more. She’s our botanist. But it’s your turn, Vilam. How old are you?”

Vilam scratched his temple and furrowed his brow. “I’m not quite sure. There are periods in my life that are a bit vague, and some are missing completely. But I would estimate I’m between a hundred and twenty and a hundred and forty.”

They all stared at him, and Nova said, “You have us all beat. I wouldn’t have put you over sixty. Soshia, are you sure you can handle him?” she said with a playful smile.

“I think the better question is, do you think he can handle me?”

“I couldn’t even handle you,” said Nova with a chuckle.

“And don’t you ever forget it,” laughed Soshia. She touched Vilam’s arm. “I’m going to talk to Mara, alright?”

Vilam nodded. Soshia squeezed his hand before catching up with her cousin and taking her aside. They dropped behind, talking in whispers, while Vilam caught up with Nova and Catyana.

“You seemed surprised earlier,” said Nova, “when you heard my age.”

“Well, I always thought female acolytes were able to apply for the office of priestess or deaconess at thirty-three.”

Nova pursed her lips and her tone became cautious. “Not always. Yes, a female acolyte may accept a commission as priestess or deaconess when she reaches the Age of Maturity, if she meets the necessary requirements. That’s our recommendation. But I take care to point out that it is a

recommendation and not a fixed rule. There can be many exceptions." She sighed before adding quietly, "And sometimes things don't turn out the way we might have wished."

Nova's clarification made Vilam pensive. If Nova was forty-three, she could have been a member of the Selanian Order for more than twenty years, which would explain the extraordinary level of her equanimity. The extent of self-control he sensed in her could only be the result of intense and long-term training. And judging from her last, hushed words, she might have attempted to earn a commission as priestess and failed, although he couldn't understand how that could have happened. Compared to other priests and priestesses he had known in the past, Nova seemed easily capable of holding her own. But he didn't want to embarrass her and decided not to pursue the matter.

"Maybe I should become a deaconess," Catyana said dreamily.

"Why do you say that, dearest?" Nova asked.

"Because a deaconess can become Protectress of the Woods or Guardian of a certain rite. That sounds so romantic."

"A priestess can also specialize in forestry or ritual studies and earn those titles, although it's less common since their domain is more spiritual than physical. Even so, it's mainly a lot of hard work, one way or the other, even if you do find a trace of romance somewhere. I'm surprised, Catyana. I've always been candid with you about what to expect."

"Yes, I know, and I'm very grateful to you for being so honest with me. But I've been hearing Mother's bedtime stories much longer than your sober descriptions of reality. All those wonderful tales of how the High Priestesses and High Priests were chosen and all the adventures they had. Please, don't take all the romance away from me just yet. If my parents do allow me to join the Order, I'm sure everyday life will soon overtake my childish fantasies."

Nova squeezed Catyana's arm. "I understand. Although it might make things more difficult for you, when you're torn out of your fantasy world so suddenly."

"Nova, why can women commission so much earlier than men?" said Vilam. "I've never understood that."

"Why?" said Nova. "I think it makes sense for a person to wait until they've come of age to earn a commission. Granted, for women the Age of Maturity is thirty-three instead of forty-four. But I don't think that's so much earlier. It's only eleven years. And I feel those eleven years are justified."

“Really! Why is that?”

“Well, during puberty, female hormones allow girls to stay more in touch with their feelings than boys, and well-trained perceptive abilities are an absolute prerequisite for the priesthood.”

“So you think men and women should be treated differently?” Vilam asked.

“They are different. But that doesn’t mean the one is better than the other. I like to compare the affinity between men and women to the relationship between mind and heart. The mind represents logic and reason and makes decisions, but the heart represents intuition and creativity and is the one that cares and feels. So, as an analogy, you could perhaps think of men as the mind and women as the heart. And for any organism to function properly, mind and heart must form a unity; they must become one. I suppose that’s why the Selanian Order takes such pains to maintain a healthy balance between male and female, as a reflection of Anae’s masculine and feminine characteristics.”

“Such as women in the Order using feminine pronouns like ‘She’ and ‘Her’ when referring to Anae, while men prefer masculine pronouns?” said Vilam.

“Exactly! Although, even in this instance, I wouldn’t want to impose strict rules but allow my brethren the freedom to decide for themselves which aspects of Anae they feel drawn to.”

In the meantime, Soshia had caught up with the group and took hold of Vilam’s arm again. She rolled her eyes. “Oh, great. Theology. My favorite subject. Although I must admit, Nova, what you said before about men being the mind and women being the heart was actually quite beautiful. But I would posit that our minds are at least as good as men’s are.” She rewarded Vilam with a mischievous grin.

“I did say it was an analogy,” said Nova, smiling.

“You keep emphasizing that you don’t want to impose strict rules, or that everything is a recommendation or a guideline,” said Vilam. “Are you always so, uh…generous regarding the interpretation of the laws of your Order?”

“I try to be,” said Nova, regarding him with a concerned gaze.

“And why is that?”

“Because I don’t wish to impinge upon Anae’s sovereignty.”

“I don’t understand.”

Nova sighed. “I believe Anae is infinite and eternal, be that in regard to Her love or Her thoughts. But contrary to Her, our minds and hearts are extremely limited. And yet we so often

dare to presume our views are the only possible way of seeing things. Because I'm aware of this constant danger, I'm careful not to stamp a mark of exclusivity upon my interpretations of spiritual matters. The only exception is, of course, the One Law, which our Goddess has shown us to be indisputable and must always constitute the basis for any legislation."

"Which One Law are you referring to?"

She stared at him. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have presumed, but I thought it would be clear. I'm referring to love, of course."

Vilam felt the suppressed anger and bitterness of years rising up in him. He attempted to squash the emotions back down and smiled coldly. "I'm afraid it's not always so clear to everyone."

Nova swallowed and remained silent. "I see what you mean," she finally said.

"Yeah, right."

Nova shot him a worried glance. "Vilam, did I say something to offend you?"

"You seem to think all your problems can be solved with something as simple as love. Aren't you making it a little easy on yourself?"

Nova shook her head. "Love is anything but simple. And yes, I do believe all our problems could be solved if everyone adhered to the One Law. The problem is they don't."

"I don't understand. How can you say that love is anything but simple?"

"Well, think about it."

"You seem to know so much. Why don't you explain it to me?"

"Whoa, down boy!" said Soshia, giving him a light slap on the arm. "Nova doesn't deserve that."

Vilam paused and took a deep breath. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"I may not agree with everything she says," said Soshia, "but her heart is in the right place, and she certainly wasn't trying to rile you. Why are you jumping all over her?"

"I…don't know. I just felt so angry all of a sudden."

"Well, tone it down a notch, will you? You're kind of ruining the mood here." She moved closer to his ear and whispered, "We'll talk about it later, alright?" When Vilam nodded, she rewarded him with a quick kiss and said, "You have my attention, Nova. What else do you have to say about love?"

Nova regarded them with a probing gaze before continuing. "Well, personally, I believe love encompasses everything, so there are many different aspects to it."

"Such as?"

"The attraction between men and women, for starters. Our sensuality can be filled with warmth and tenderness. It replenishes our energy levels and can inspire us in ways we never dreamed of. But love means so much more, such as truth, or friendship, or the willingness to sacrifice ourselves for others, or maybe even something as simple as being considerate of one another."

"Of course, I'm all for sensuality," said Soshia with an expressive glance at Vilam. "But consideration, sacrifice, friendship, truth, *and* sensuality. That's an interesting and very compelling combination. I never thought of it that way."

"Yes, but we've hardly scratched the surface. If we really want to love someone, we must get to know them as completely as possible, in spirit, soul, and body; their heart, their mind, and their will. Marriage can be an excellent metaphor for the way our Goddess loves us; a perfect union of mind and heart."

"Thank you, Nova. That's exactly how I imagine a relationship with the person who wins my heart." She fixed Vilam with a reproachful glance.

"I really am sorry," said Vilam. "I sometimes don't know what comes over me. But I want to learn."

"Alright, just a little more groveling and I think we're good," said Soshia with an impish smile.

Catyana regarded the couple with a curious glance but seemed amused. "Isn't one of the High Priestess's titles 'Guardian of the Heart'?"

"Yes, it is," said Nova. "One of her responsibilities is to ensure every issue brought before the Advisory Council is considered from the perspective of the One Law. That's also why she has the right to veto any decision the Council makes if she feels they've been negligent in their duties."

"Do you by any chance know the current High Priestess?" said Catyana.

"Well, a new High Priestess's identity usually remains classified until she's officially introduced at the first Selanian conference after her election which, in this case, would be the one coming up in Tolares," Nova said carefully. "But I might know her."

"I heard a very young High Priestess was elected after that terrible accident in Divestelan, in which the late High Priestess Halita Penates was killed five years ago. Why do you think the elders waited so long to call a conference?"

"They'll have had their reasons," Nova said softly. She kept her eyes on the path in front of them, but Vilam noticed the concerned look on her face.

19. Confused

Natilya cautioned the children to be quiet and beckoned to her friend, who was tending the herbs in the garden. “Hyelisa, would you please join me over here?”

“Sure, I’ll be right there,” Hyelisa called back. Natilya watched her as she set down her hoe, shed her gloves and apron, and hurried over. “Yes, Natilya, what can I do for you?”

Natilya drew her aside and, with a smile, put her hands on Hyelisa’s shoulders. “I’m glad you enjoy working in the garden so much. You’re such a big help.”

The young woman returned the smile, but it seemed more like an attempt. “Thank you. I know you mean it, otherwise I’d believe you were just trying to keep up morale when you say such kind things.”

Natilya let her hands drop and stared at her friend. “Why? What’s wrong with that?”

“Well, I’m concerned your praise might sound hollow if you allow it to become a mere habit.”

“Oh?”

Hyelisa’s smile faltered, and Natilya detected fear in her eyes. “Please, I don’t mean to seem impertinent, but my brother is in the west, and...” Hyelisa swallowed.

“You mean Bejad?” Natilya coaxed.

Hyelisa nodded, her eyes cast down. She took a deep breath. “You know what they’re saying about us in the west. They make us out to be hypocrites. They say our manners, our social graces and etiquette, are all just sham and pretense. And sometimes,” she added, glancing up at Natilya, “I’m afraid they’re right.”

Natilya just stared at her.

“Oh, Natilya, I’m so afraid of what’s coming. I feel a storm brewing. Our enemies in the west want to change everything. They claim the world will be a better place. But what will it all lead to? And I’m so afraid for Bejad. If we of the Selanian Order, with our constant affectations and duplicitous protestations, can’t be sincere, how can we expect those who look to us for spiritual and moral guidance pretend to be? I’d like to believe that, in some small way, we’re doing something to help my brother, even if it’s only to be sincere in the things we do and say.”

“You’d like to believe it?”

“Yes.”

“But…?”

“Sometimes, I don’t know if I can.”

Natilya threw the children a concerned glance, but they were too absorbed in their game to notice. She shuddered. It seemed as if a cloud had passed before the sun and the air had turned cold, sending a chill down her spine.

But when she looked up, Velana was still shining down upon her from a blue sky, as she had been all day, and Natilya relaxed when she felt the sun’s pleasant warmth on her face. She turned back to Hyelisa, regarding her with compassion, and said with a soft voice, “I didn’t realize how much the incident on the road this morning affected you.”

Hyelisa returned Natilya’s gaze, but it seemed she couldn’t bring herself to answer. “I…I’m sorry if I’ve been too blunt in the way I’ve expressed my opinions,” she finally replied.

“No, Hyelisa, I’m sorry. I should have been more sensitive to what was happening in that precious heart of yours. I promise we’ll talk later. But I really appreciate what you’ve told me. Thank you for trusting me with your concerns.”

“Glad to be of service.”

“Listen, dearest, I have an appointment with Auntie Utalya. Would you take over the children for me?”

“I would, gladly, but I still have so much to do in the garden. Couldn’t you get Nova to reassign someone else for you?”

“She went for a walk with Catyana and Vilam. Mara and Soshia went with them too, and I’m not expecting them back for at least another hour. With Vilam and Catyana and several of the children staying for the meal, I’m afraid we can’t spare any of the other girls. All you need to do is finish up with the children here, make sure the ones who aren’t staying go home, and keep an eye on the ones who are staying until I get back. Do you think you’ll manage?”

“Yes, of course. I’m not as good with the children as you are, but I’ll be alright.”

“Thank you. It shouldn’t take that long.”

“Alright, I hope your meeting with the Lady goes well,” Hyelisa answered, but Natilya thought she detected a trace of sadness in her friend’s voice.

Natilya gave her a warm hug and a peck on the cheek and hastened away. Hyelisa’s heartfelt revelations troubled her, but she had more immediate things to worry about, so she deliberately pushed the conversation from her mind. When she reached her aunt’s parlor, she took a deep breath, hesitating an instant before she knocked.

"Come right on in," a voice called from inside.

She opened the door. "Hi, Auntie."

"Hi, dear. Why don't you have a seat? I just need to finish this up, and I'll be right with you."

The Lady Utalya continued writing at her desk, so Natilya tried to make herself comfortable on the sofa but felt as if she were on pins and needles.

After a moment, her aunt put her quill away. When she came over, she gave her niece a kiss on the cheek and sat down in the armchair across from her. "Did Nova instruct you on tomorrow's schedule?"

"Yes, she asked Tanola and me to go into town for her in the morning. In the afternoon, the girls will be expanding on herbology. I was thinking of putting Hyelisa in charge of that. She knows more about plants than all of us put together. Tanola suggested they combine the lesson with medical training. I believe that would—"

"Um, excuse me, honey, I'm certain Nova has an excellent program worked out for the day, but I sincerely doubt that's the reason you wanted to see me."

Natilya bit her lip, feeling the color rise to her face. She folded her hands on her lap and studied the carpet. Had it been such a good idea to schedule this meeting and attempt to talk to her aunt about her dilemma? She had tried so often in the past, but always with poor results, and the last attempt had bordered on catastrophic. Natilya loved her Aunt Utalya, but she also knew how overprotective her aunt could be, and she could do without another humiliating experience right now. But who else could she turn to? Nova? Yes, Nova would probably understand, but her supervisor had enough problems of her own.

Natilya felt her aunt's eyes on her, so she took a deep breath. "Auntie, we're leaving for Tolares day after tomorrow, aren't we?"

"Yes." The Lady's tone was cautious.

"And we'll be staying at His Excellency's residence again."

"You know we are."

Natilya finally looked up, and she felt as if her eyes were pleading. "I don't know what to do. I just feel so confused about going."

The Lady regarded her niece, and Natilya saw pity in her eyes. "Natilya, why can't you get over it?"

Natilya helplessly lifted her hands and, with a shrug, let them drop back in her lap. Get over it? *A'mada*, this was turning out worse than she had imagined. She really didn't want her aunt's pity, nor did she want to "get over it." She just didn't want to be so confused. In her soul and in her spirit, she had such clarity, but her heart kept whispering those subtle questions.

"What do you want?"

Natilya shook her head, not capable of answering, and tried to blink away the rain shower looming behind her eyes.

The Lady sat down beside her, took her hands in hers, and sighed. "Natilya, you mustn't forget it's been more than ten years since Lord Tolares lost his wife. A man can feel very lonely under such circumstances. Maybe he was just seeking a bit of companionship. You must admit your presence can be most diverting, and your natural cheerfulness is extremely contagious. It helps people take their minds off things. Just because he stood up with you for every dance four years ago doesn't necessarily mean anything."

Natilya finally found her voice. "Auntie, please, you don't understand."

"Alright, I'm listening."

Natilya stared into space, attempting to find the right words to express her feelings. "Every fiber of my being knows I belong to him. But in here," she put her hand on her heart, "there's so much fear, so many questions, and so much confusion."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, child, we've been over this so many times. Although I'd like to keep an open mind, I can't help but feel all those cosmic soulmate notions are pure romantic nonsense and will only get you hurt. Do you realize how old he is?"

"That didn't stop you when you met your first husband." Natilya didn't mean for the words to sound so harsh, but for the Goddess's sake, *child?* It was beside the point that she felt that "romantic nonsense" was true, or that Lord Tolares's age was an actual concern of hers, although neither for the reasons her aunt believed.

"Touché, my dear. I wasn't quite as young as you are, and he wasn't quite as old as Lord Tolares, but the age difference was still significant. But look at it this way, Natilya: you're thirty-five. You could accept a commission as priestess anytime you wish. Do you really want to throw that away?"

"You didn't begin your career in the Order until your first husband died. You became an acolyte when you were 83, made priestess at 102, and were chosen as High Priestess when you were 133.

Then you met Lord Revan and gave up the office at 148. That was fifteen years ago. I'm sorry he passed away so soon, but those are the facts."

"Now you just sound as if you're trying to justify yourself. Dearest, I'm worried. I know it's been difficult for you, not having a father figure in your life. But you've always been like a daughter to me, and I've never once regretted making you a member of my entourage."

Natilya gaped at her aunt and felt the color rising to her cheeks. Father figure? Is that what her aunt believed? This was even worse than the last time! Sensing Natilya's bewilderment would be easy for a former High Priestess, but why did Auntie's interpretation of the reasons for her confusion fall so short of what was actually happening in her heart? Natilya felt humiliated and couldn't bring herself to respond.

Her aunt sighed. "Natilya, be honest. Let's assume Lord Tolares did care about you. Would you really want to marry him if he asked you?"

Without realizing it, her aunt had stumbled upon another one of her concerns, but again for reasons other than what her aunt believed. "Oh, Auntie, I just don't know."

"Well then, come to Tolares and find out."

Natilya shook her head. "I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"I'm afraid he will ask me. But I'm also afraid he won't."

"Oh, I see." The Lady hesitated. "You know, things would be so much easier if you could just fall in love with someone else. What about the young Lord Tolares?"

"Chyardal? Oh, Auntie, all he's interested in is science. Besides, Nova's in love with him."

"What? Nova? I never noticed anything like that, and I know her better than any of you."

Natilya managed a weak grin. "Well, I'm glad to see you don't notice everything. Besides, you were both very busy when we were there four years ago. And I'm certain the young Lord wasn't aware of Nova's feelings for him. He was too busy with his science projects." She shook her head. "Believe me, I've tried falling in love with someone else. I just can't."

"Alright, listen. I'd like to make things easier for you, but the situation being what it is, I'm going to have to lay down some strict ground rules for your stay in Tolares. You know I can't let you go off on your own while we're there."

"Auntie!" Natilya could feel her cheeks glowing. "I'm not a child anymore."

“But you are chief of security and therefore have responsibilities, both as a protectress and as a role model for your peers,” the Lady said with careful deliberation. “I really need you to be aware of the proper etiquette while we’re in Tolares.”

Natilya felt the words were only slightly less overbearing and cast a sullen glance at her aunt.

“Look, Lord Tolares is an honorable man, and I’m sure he would never do anything to intentionally hurt you. But under these circumstances, I don’t want you—” Utalya caught herself, barely. “I promise I’ll keep my eyes open. If things get difficult for you, I’ll talk to him. Does that sound fair?”

Natilya couldn’t bring herself to look at her aunt. “How kind of you,” she said quietly, but there was no warmth in the words.

Utalya fixed her with a stern glance. “I need you to give me your word that you’ll follow the required protocol, and especially that you won’t do anything foolish.”

Natilya stared at her in disbelief but couldn’t bring herself to answer. She felt frustrated, humiliated, and confused, but mainly she just felt worn out.

“Natilya, I need to hear you say it.”

“Yes, I’m well aware of my responsibilities.” Her words were more like a hoarse whisper. “You needn’t worry. I’ll observe the proper etiquette.” As if that had ever been in question.

The Lady sighed with relief. She pulled Natilya close and gave her a warm hug. “Come on, get out of here. Let Hyelisa get back to her garden, or you’ll never hear the end of it.”

Natilya attempted a smile, then got up and slouched out of the room. After she had relieved Hyelisa, she cast a furtive glance in the direction of the window behind which her aunt was working. She saw her Aunt Utalya sitting behind her desk, staring out the window and watching her playing with the children, a worried expression on her face.

Natilya bit her lip. Despite her aunt’s obviously heartfelt concern for her reputation, Natilya knew protocol wasn’t the answer to the questions that were troubling her. On the contrary, she didn’t believe any amount of etiquette would diminish her confusion, and with the way things were developing, she hoped she wasn’t heading for a disaster.

20. The Artifact

When Nova came around the bend at the edge of the woods with her group, a meadow opened up before them. Nova was prepared and kept her eyes on Vilam, curious to witness his reaction. He slowed his pace and stared at the artifact that dominated the scene with its enigmatic presence. Nova held Catyana and Mara back and motioned for them to be silent. Catyana nodded as Vilam moved toward the object with Soshia by his side.

"I've always hated this horrible contraption," said Soshia.

Vilam grinned at her. "It's not that bad."

"Yes, it is, and you know it."

He stared back at the artifact. "You're right, there is something off about it."

"Something? Everything!" said Soshia.

The object looked like a short but broad, tapered cylinder that had been sliced off diagonally, like an oversized cone that had landed in the grass and been beheaded near its base. The artifact had a diameter of about fifteen armlengths, and the walls were approximately one armlength thick. The object had four vertical incisions at regular intervals. Guarding each incision was a rectangular post. The entire artifact shimmered darkly in the late afternoon air.

Vilam moved closer to it, dragging a reluctant Soshia along. He stretched out his free hand and let it glide along the object's surface. This action prompted a smile. "Ah, there we go. It's made of metal. It should have been made of stone."

"You're right," said Soshia. "Now that I think about it, it would look a lot nicer if it were made of stone. Pink granite, to be exact."

Nova grinned and moved toward the couple. "I agree with Soshia in regard to the pink granite. But it's also more proof of how naturally perceptive you are in regard to art, Vilam. Folan told me about your reaction to Elder Yonatan's light sculpture this morning. I suspect you're familiar with the concept of Sensation and Induction?"

"Oh, boy, here we go," muttered Soshia.

Vilam gave Soshia a wry smile. "Well, yes," he said to Nova, "I've studied the concept, but only sketchily. As you said this morning, I'm not trained. What I sense, I sense intuitively."

"There's nothing wrong with that," said Nova. "Intuition is always valuable. But that's exactly what I'm getting at. So, just to make it clear, could you tell us again how you deduced that the artifact should be made of stone, and not metal?"

"From what I've heard," said Vilam, "every object has a distinct ethereal pattern that is initiated at the subquantum level. I believe the current subquantum kinetic theory states that the patterns are produced by the reaction processes of virtual particles in the ethereal substrate, that is, the quantum foam which composes the basis for all matter and energy in the uni—"

Soshia jabbed him with her elbow. "Enough already. That's not what Nova meant."

"She's right, Vilam," said Nova. "I wasn't really asking for a precise, scientific definition. And I have no idea what you mean by 'subquantum' or 'virtual particles.' All I wanted to know is why you believe the artifact should be made of stone, and not metal."

"Uh…well, I don't really know. I guess I just sensed it."

"Exactly! You sensed it. Even though you're not trained in the Art of Sensation, your perception is well developed. Of course, in this case, it's quite easy because the artifact's ethereal pattern isn't in tune with its environment."

"If an object's form deviates from the ethereal pattern's disposition," Catyana mumbled to herself, "the dissonant component becomes dominant, and we sense that the object is no longer in tune with its environment." Her eyes were unfocused, and she seemed to be deep in thought.

Vilam's brow contracted as he looked at her. "What was that?"

Catyana blinked in surprise. "Oh, sorry. I was just repeating something Nova once taught me about ethereal patterns."

"Interesting. Can you memorize everything someone says word for word?"

Nova beamed. "Yes, she's been an exemplary student these past four years."

Catyana's cheeks turned pink. "You're exaggerating."

Nova shot her a playful glance. "You know I never exaggerate."

Catyana sighed, but she still seemed pensive.

Vilam put his hand on the artifact. "So, is this the thing you wanted to show me, what you mentioned back at the pond regarding Catyana's abilities?" he asked Nova.

"Yes. As you've seen, Catyana's perception is astonishingly well developed, which is why she could sense the gender of the six little *sinaveni* back at the pond with such ease."

"Ah, I see. Is that why you want to initiate her into the Order?"

Nova shook her head. “Contrary to others, I wouldn’t normally initiate anyone because of their abilities. I’m much more interested in the bearing of a person’s heart.”

Catyana cast a grateful glance at her and turned back to the artifact with a puzzled look in her eyes.

Nova sighed. She crouched down on one knee to pick up a chip of wood lying at her feet. She stared at it, unseeing, and let it glow a bright, intense red in her palm. If she only knew what was wrong with Catyana. The girl had become so distracted and withdrawn these past weeks, and she was worried about her. But Catyana wouldn’t talk about it, and Nova didn’t want to pressure her. And now she had to deal with this Vilam, who might or might not be the Emissary. Would things ever get easier? She had given everything these past five years, and she sometimes felt so tired.

She realized Vilam was watching her. “Isn’t that a form of Induction used in wedding ceremonies?” he asked, staring at the glowing piece of wood in her palm.

Nova looked at him, and the glow dissipated. “Yes, sorry. It’s one of the first things we learn when we start training, so I guess it comes without thinking.”

“It kind of makes me wonder what you were thinking.”

“Yes, I’m sure it does,” she said, brushing the piece of wood into the grass and getting up. He was about to reply, but the look she gave him probably made him think better of it.

“Serves you right, darling,” said Soshia. “That was a bit rude.”

“I suppose it was,” said Vilam. “I guess I’m just curious.”

“No, I’m curious,” said Soshia with a playful smile. “You’re nosy, is what you are. And you need to be careful that you don’t become intrusive.”

He gave her a kiss on the forehead. “Right, and I’m glad I have you to teach me propriety.”

Soshia put her head on his shoulder, her eyes bright.

Nova studied the couple for a moment. She was surprised at how close they had become in such a short time and was a bit concerned their familiarity might be progressing too far, too fast. On the other hand, Soshia seemed more than capable of handling Vilam while also having quite a positive influence on the man. Nova regretted not having gotten to know her better before today. Granted, Soshia seemed to be exceptionally bright and spirited to the point of being fearless. But Nova hadn’t seen any truly objectionable behavior from her, except perhaps by being too familiar with a man the girl had only known since this morning. She was optimistic that Soshia’s heart was in

the right place, especially since the girl had already surprised her several times today, and in a good way.

Nova shifted her attention to Catyana, who had been studying the artifact all this time but seemed to have reached a conclusion. “Nova, wouldn’t it be possible to induce the artifact to be more in tune with its environment?”

Nova looked at her in surprise. “Catyana, really! You know that’s impossible. Although there is some variance in any given ethereal pattern, our inductive influence always remains inside of the parameters of the object.”

“Yes, yes, I know, the ethereal substrate’s inherent resistance. But what if the change to the artifact’s pattern is to accommodate its form? Wouldn’t that help?”

“I don’t know. What exactly are you getting at?”

“I’m not sure. I think what I’m trying to say is that the artifact’s form already deviates from the ethereal pattern’s disposition, which is why it’s producing the amount of dissonance we’re sensing. Wouldn’t that facilitate a transformation of the artifact’s pattern to a less dissonant state?”

“Oh, I see. So what you want to do is change the artifact’s pattern to match its form instead of its texture, thereby attempting to circumvent the ethereal substrate’s inherent resistance.”

“Right. Do you mind if I try?”

“I don’t think you have much chance of success, but it is intriguing. Go ahead.”

Catyana turned back to the artifact, and Nova could tell she was trying to find a suitable entry point into the object’s essence. She decided on one of the higher posts guarding the object. Her palms moved up and down both sides of the metal post but not quite touching it, as if feeling for something. She seemed to have found what she was looking for and stood still, closing her eyes. A faint glow radiated from where she held her hands over the object. The light gradually expanded to include the entire artifact and herself.

Nova held her breath when she detected a kind of oscillation in the light with which Catyana had surrounded the object, almost like a throb. She was even more astonished when the artifact changed. It lost its dark hue and shone brightly in the sun.

Nova was so fascinated by what Catyana was doing she realized too late that Soshia had sunk into the grass and was having difficulties breathing. Vilam and Mara were supporting her, but it seemed she was on the verge of passing out. Nova immediately turned to them to see if she could help, but there wasn’t much she could do.

Catyana dropped her hands, opened her eyes, and let the air stream from her mouth. “I’m sorry, but that’s the best I can do. The essence of the metal’s lattices was too resistant, so I changed the pattern to—Oh, Soshia, what happened?” She ran to the group around the girl.

Soshia shook her head. “I really don’t know what came over me.”

“How do you feel?” said Nova.

Soshia gazed up at her, a worried look in her eyes. “To be honest, it felt as if my life was being drained from me.” Vilam was still behind her, supporting her, and she reached up and stroked his cheek. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Mara gave her an odd glance but didn’t say anything. She seemed very pale.

“Are you alright?” asked Vilam.

“Yes, I think I’m feeling better,” said Soshia. “Would you please help me up?” Vilam took her hand and helped her to rise. She still looked a bit pale, but she put her arm around his waist and cuddled up against him.

“Maybe it’s better if you sit down on that bench,” said Nova.

There was a wooden bench under a large tree nearby, and Vilam led Soshia to it. Everyone else followed a bit slower. When they were both seated, Soshia took Vilam’s arm and put her head on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry. I don’t mean to be a burden.”

“Don’t worry, you’re not,” he said. “I just want you to feel better.”

She flashed him a weak smile and turned to Catyana. “The artifact looks wonderful. What type of metal did you turn it into?”

“I turned it into platinum,” said Catyana, but she looked upset.

Soshia reached out and took the girl’s hand. “Hey, don’t worry. I’m alright.” She smiled. “And I like the artifact much better already.”

“That was pretty amazing, Catyana,” said Nova. Fortunately, her friend had no idea exactly how amazing, and Nova wanted to keep it that way for the time being.

Now that Soshia was doing better, Vilam stared at the artifact, but he didn’t seem astonished at what Catyana had done. His lips were pursed, his eyes narrowed into slits, and his gaze had a cold, analytical quality to it. “Catyana, do you think you could enhance the resonance process you were using?”

Catyana looked at him in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“I noticed a kind of oscillation in your inductive influence. I assume you were exploiting the force produced by bouncing back from the pattern’s natural resistance and using that against the artifact. Try it again, but concentrate more on that bounce effect. See if you can attain some kind of resonance from the artifact to create an inductive pulse.”

“I can try. Is there anything else I need to know?”

“Well, you probably shouldn’t concentrate so much on the essence of the artifact as you should try to get a feel for its heartbeat. Look at it as if you were taking someone’s pulse. When you’ve induced the pulse, it creates a field, just like you did before. Now, don’t try to directly manipulate the artifact’s pattern. Instead, use your inductive powers to manipulate the field you’ve created, and let the field manipulate the pattern.”

Catyana nodded “Thank you, Vilam. I think I can do that.” She turned and walked back to the artifact.

Mara touched Nova’s arm. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?” she said, gesturing to Catyana.

“Why? What are you concerned about?”

Mara shrugged. “I don’t know. I just have a bad feeling about this.”

“I wouldn’t be too worried. When it comes to induction, Catyana knows what she’s doing. Let’s see how this goes, and we can decide then, alright?”

Mara didn’t seem convinced, but she turned to watch. Catyana closed her eyes and raised her hands. The artifact began to glow.

As soon as it did, Soshia doubled over with her hand on her heart, struggling for breath. Vilam grabbed her shoulders and supported her. Mara was white as a sheet, but she dropped to one knee in front of her, took Soshia’s hand, and looked her in the eye, emphasizing deep breaths. Soshia nodded and imitated her, breathing deeply and slowly.

In the meantime, the glow around the artifact had become a throb, but it was apparent the frequency was somehow off. It quickly fell in upon itself and collapsed. Catyana dropped her hands and stared at the artifact. The look in her eyes made it appear as if she were trying to solve a puzzle. She was so engrossed in her thoughts that she seemed oblivious to her surroundings and never noticed what was happening on the bench.

Soshia’s breath was coming in gasps, and there were tears in her eyes. Nova put her hand on her shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Soshia. I should have listened to Mara.”

Soshia nodded, but she was awfully pale, even more so than Mara.

Mara got up and touched Nova's arm. "What's Catyana doing?"

They all looked toward the artifact. Catyana stood there, staring at it as if she were entranced. She let her palms glide over the shining metal's surface without actually touching it, like a slow caress, and closed her eyes. The same glow as before appeared around the artifact, but it immediately began to throb and expanded to enclose Catyana.

Soshia doubled over with her arms wrapped around herself, and it seemed as if she were emitting a silent scream. Nova wanted to rush over to Catyana to stop her, but Vilam grabbed her and yelled, "No, don't!"

Mara turned white as a sheet, but she dropped down on the bench beside Soshia and took her in her arms, whispering in her ear. Soshia nodded and began breathing deeply again. Vilam sat next to her, rubbing her back with one hand and looking helpless.

The luminous, pulsating shimmer around the artifact gradually changed. Suddenly, Catyana beamed, and she seemed to be influencing the pulse. When she had established a continuous oscillation, she quickened its pace, and the artifact appeared to shift out of phase with reality.

Nova looked down to the bench. Soshia was sobbing on Mara's shoulder, clutching her friend's dress, and tears were streaming down her face. The poor girl hardly made a sound, but Nova could hear her gasping, and sometimes a weak moan would escape her.

Catyana had taken control of the phase shift and steadily changed the texture of the artifact, like a skillful equestrian directing her mount with a gentle nudge here or slight pressure there. When the artifact's consistency had reached a subtle, roseate hue, she dropped the pulse. The glow around the artifact collapsed, and she stepped back.

But when Catyana turned and saw Soshia, her radiant smile evaporated into an expression of shock. Her hands shot to her mouth and she rushed over. "Oh, no! Oh, Soshia, I'm so sorry."

Soshia glared at Catyana, gasping for breath. "Get away from me," she hissed.

Catyana recoiled at the look on Soshia's face. Nova took Catyana's arm and led her back to the artifact. Catyana wiped a tear away. "Nova, I swear, I have no idea what happened. I never meant to hurt her."

"I know, dearest. It's alright." Nova looked over at the bench. Soshia seemed to be feeling a little better and turned to Vilam. They exchanged a few words, she gave him a kiss on the cheek, and Vilam got up and came toward them, leaving Soshia and Mara alone on the bench.

When he joined them, Nova said, "Why wouldn't you let me stop Catyana?"

“Because it was too late. Catyana had already induced the pulse field. I’m not exactly sure what would have happened if you had run into it, but I’d rather we didn’t find out without prior tests.”

“Worst case scenario?”

“My initial guess would be that your atoms would have been scattered all over the area, and I doubt there would have been much of you left.”

Nova swallowed and nodded. “In that case, I owe you my thanks.”

Catyana stared at Nova, her face pale. “I could have killed you?” When Vilam nodded, she said, “Oh, my Goddess! I’m never doing that again.”

“Don’t worry,” said Vilam. “You were standing inside the field’s radius and nothing happened to you, so you must have been doing something to protect yourself. I’m sure you’ll figure out how to do the same for everyone else.”

Catyana nodded but didn’t seem convinced.

“Do you know why this happened?” said Nova, gesturing toward Soshia.

“I’m not sure,” said Vilam.

“Any conjecture?”

“I’d rather not say, at least not at the moment.”

“Alright. What about the artifact?”

Vilam stepped up to it and let his hand glide over its surface. His forced smile informed Nova that he indeed felt the smooth, cool grain of solid rock. “Very good, Catyana. It’s perfect.”

Catyana gave him a weak smile.

Nova glanced at her. She saw in the pained innocence of Catyana’s gaze that she had no idea, probably couldn’t even imagine the magnitude of what she had done. The thought that had occupied her ever more often in the past months regarding her friend flashed once more through her mind.

Golden Messenger.

She reached out and put her arm around Catyana’s shoulder, pulling her closer. “It’ll be alright, don’t worry.”

“That’s not what it looks like,” said Catyana.

They could see Soshia and Mara in animated conversation on the bench. Soshia’s voice carried over, but not enough to understand the words. Mara seemed to be more quiet but resolute in her manner. Soshia flung up her hands and walked away in the direction of the road. Mara sighed and

went after her. When she reached her and tried to touch Soshia's arm, Soshia pulled it away and started gesticulating. They could hear her voice carrying over even from there, although they still couldn't make out the words.

"Why don't you wait here?" said Nova. "I'll see if I can find out what's going on."

As she got closer, she could hear Soshia saying, "No, that's not what I think, and you know it! … How should I know? … No, and stop patronizing me. … Damn it, Mara, that's just not true!" When she saw Nova coming toward them, she said, "We'll finish this later, but I need to fix something first." Then she turned her back on Mara and huffed past Nova in the direction of the artifact. Mara still seemed pale as she stared after her.

"Are you alright?" Nova said.

Mara sighed. "She's always been so spirited, and what happened to her just now scared the wits out of her. Don't worry, she has a good heart, and she's not the resentful type. She'll cool down soon enough."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No, but it's kind of you to ask."

"Mara, what did happen back there?" Nova said, gesturing toward the bench.

"I…suppose Soshia and I are sensitive to changes in the ethereal currents, although Soshia obviously more so than me. I've always suspected as much, but this confirms it." She took a deep breath before continuing. "Nova, please listen to me. What Catyana did was amazing, but if it had such an effect on Soshia, what kind of effect might it have had on others, especially those you wouldn't want knowing about Catyana and her abilities?"

"You really are worried about her, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm very worried. Did you know Catyana healed a little girl in a park yesterday?"

"I…heard about it. What exactly happened?"

"The girl was playing on the swing and lost her hold. She hurt herself quite badly. Catyana was walking by as it happened and of course couldn't help herself. Dozens of bystanders watched her heal the girl. Nova, that shouldn't have happened. But this," she gestured toward the artifact. "Please, Nova, she can't stay here, not after today. You have to get her away from here."

Mara walked toward the artifact, and Nova joined her, but Mara's words left a deep and disquieting impression on her.

As they got closer to the group, they saw Soshia holding Catyana's hands.

"I'm so sorry, Soshia. I really had no idea it would hurt you," said Catyana under tears.

"Oh, sweetie, of course you didn't. I was just being a total bitch, and I'm the one who's sorry. Forgive me?" The girls embraced and Soshia kissed Catyana on the forehead. Then she turned to Vilam and put her arms around him. "Thank you so much for being there for me." She put her head on his breast and hugged him tight.

"My friends, I hope it's alright if we don't tell anyone about this," said Nova to the group. "I'd like to discuss it with the Lady Utalya first."

"Our lips are sealed," said Soshia with a glance at Mara. She stayed close to Vilam and the group sauntered back to the road.

Nova was glad Soshia had made such a rapid recovery, but she was also worried. What did it all mean? It was evident Catyana's powers by far exceeded what Nova had initially believed. Mara was right. How could Nova protect her against the sinister forces rallying all around them? If they discovered her friend's talent, they would undoubtedly attempt to either use her abilities to their own advantage, or ensure she would never use them against her enemies. All Nova could do for the moment was pray that Catyana's parents would allow her to accompany Nova to Tolares. In the eye of the storm, they might find enough calm to prepare Catyana before its full force engulfed them.

21. A Pining Soul

Cetila took a deep breath, enjoying the fresh scents and tranquil sounds of the forest. Only the busy but ordered hum of the girls pitching camp nearby intruded upon her lazy thoughts as she rested against one of the countless majestic conifers separating her from the Brigade. Ever since they had left Navaresa and entered the seemingly endless expanse of the Northern Forests a week ago, Cetila had been in raptures. She couldn't explain it, but she had never felt so alive and at peace with herself and everything around her. If it hadn't been for the recurrent conflicts with her captain, this might have been one of the happiest times of her life.

She stepped forward and leaned over the calm surface of the pool at her feet. Yes, there was the same thin face that had always stared back at her from her reflection, although it now harbored an almost serene expression instead of the strained and apprehensive gaze she was accustomed to seeing in the mirror of late. Even so, her thick, dark eyebrows, full lips, and prominent cheekbones

made up for her otherwise too delicate features, and some even considered her pretty. Her outfit went well with her dark complexion and the massive chignon that indicated she was a princess of the Northern Covasins and the House Marusen. Of course, her hair was often veiled by the mask she wore during critical operations, but here in the Navaren, such precautions were unnecessary.

When she had first donned the black and crimson uniform twelve years ago, she had been so proud. The crisp, flowing dress, chic cape, and black gloves shrouded her in an aura of elegance and authority, although she had to admit her attire seemed strangely out of tune with her momentary surroundings. She wasn't as tall and stately as Captain Pira, but that didn't really matter. Tavita was even shorter than Cetila and had been promoted to Captain of the Crimson Brigade at the age of nineteen, when the Lady Gevinesa had stepped back five years ago.

Overwhelmed by helpless rage at the recollection of Tavita, Cetila yanked off her gloves and grasped at the pure, clear water pouring into the pool from a little stream. She stopped and stared at the water in her hands, then flung it to the ground. Why couldn't she ignore the pain and resentment that surfaced every time she thought of her sister? Would she ever be able to forgive her? Tavita didn't have any right to do what she had done to their brother, regardless of the allegations she had brought up against him, and her horrendous deed had left a permanent scar on Cetila's pining soul.

Cetila had been very close to Varan. She could still picture him with Dena Cemasena, who had almost become her sister-in-law. The two had been a perfect couple and had been so happy together. Poor Dena! The tragedy had naturally hit her harder than Cetila, and she had become pale and distant in the past two years, bottling up her pain inside herself. Although it was now almost certain she had become a member of the Resistance in Divestelan and was working for the enemy, Cetila couldn't find it in her heart to harbor any ill feelings toward the young Lady Cemasena. On the contrary, after the tragic event, Cetila had finally turned her analytical capabilities toward the ideology of her own indoctrination and had discovered many discrepancies between the words and actions of her superiors. She could now better understand some of the views of their enemies in the east.

She drew in her breath when she registered hushed steps in the soft moss behind her. Pulling on her gloves, she turned toward her approaching comrade with her left hand on the hilt of the sword strapped around her waist, prepared to draw the weapon in an instant.

Davina Novesta stood before her, eyeing her cautiously. The girl slapped her left fist to her breast and bowed in a brusque military salute. “Sorry to disturb you, Commander, but Pira has been asking for you. We’ve discovered some interesting tracks she’d like you to examine.”

Cetila sighed. “Alright, Lieutenant, lead the way.”

As they marched toward the camp, Cetila scrutinized the girl walking ahead of her. Pira’s sister wasn’t quite twenty-two, thirteen years younger than both Cetila and Pira. She was slightly shorter than Cetila and appeared much more delicate. She made up for her seeming fragility by a deviousness unrivalled in the Brigade—except of course by Tavita—which was why Davina had risen through the ranks so quickly in the past four years. It also made Cetila uneasy.

When Tavita had been promoted to major and left the Brigade indefinitely two weeks ago to take charge of a covert operation in the eastern provinces, Davina had been promoted to second lieutenant and taken Cetila’s place as commander of the second company. Cetila herself had been promoted to first lieutenant and was now the captain’s first officer and commander of the brigade. She still couldn’t understand Pira’s decision, unless it was a bit of sentimentality on their new captain’s part, for old time’s sake.

The thought brought back pleasant memories. In younger years, Denadya Cemasena, Pirena Novesta, and Cetila Marusen, who were born only days apart of each other, had been inseparable, spending as much time together as distance would allow. Later, Tavita, Cetila’s junior by ten years, had joined them and become an integral member of the small clique. The three girls had practically raised the child by themselves, and the group had often playfully been termed the Nursemaids by their friends.

Then, about twenty years ago, Gevinesa Divestelan secretly began recruiting eligible girls into the Crimson Brigade. Without knowing the cause, the friends registered that their acquaintances found less and less time for social engagements. After five years of observing this strange development, Pira had been the first to succumb to Gevinesa’s subtle inducement, and Cetila followed several years later. Tavita was appointed to the Brigade two years after Cetila and, at the age of fourteen, had been the youngest member ever to be admitted. Of course, Tavita was always amazingly adept, and her ascent was quick and steep. At the age of seventeen, she was promoted to first lieutenant and became Gevinesa’s right hand.

Dena never joined. Either she wasn’t approached or, as Cetila rather suspected, she declined to understand Gevinesa’s devious insinuations. Interestingly enough, Dena and Cetila remained

close, despite the apparent differences in their world views, but Cetila and Pira had grown apart. The harsh indoctrination to western ideology, the fierce training and incessant tactical operations had taken their toll on their relationship. Because of conflicting duty rosters, Pira and Cetila hardly saw each other, and she knew Pira and Dena had seen each other even less. A little more than two years ago, the three friends had met once more to celebrate their Coming of Age and Dena's quickly approaching nuptials. But the meeting had been awkward almost to the point of embarrassment, and several months later, Cetila's brother had found his demise, to put it gently.

When Cetila and Davina reached the camp, Cetila stopped to monitor the progress of her brigadiers. A satisfied smile touched her lips. They had only arrived half an hour ago, but everything seemed to be in place. The Crimson Brigade was a slick and efficient military machine and, in Cetila's opinion, the deadliest force the planet had ever seen. In earlier years, she had held the Black Guard in awe and wanted to emulate their seemingly lethal proficiency. The past five years had taught her otherwise, and today she felt nothing but contempt for Corsen Divestelan's supposed elite legions.

Davina studied her as if gauging her mood. "They're certainly efficient, aren't they?"

"I dare say they are, but I would expect nothing less."

"I believe we've proven beyond a doubt we don't need men in black uniforms or dispassionate Ladies to accomplish our goals."

Cetila regarded her with a sidelong gaze. "Dispassionate Ladies?"

"Would you rather I used the term more commonly employed in the Brigade?"

"No, I think I'm good."

Davina rewarded her with a playful smile. "That's what I thought."

"Although I do appreciate your use of tact."

"Glad to be of service. But we shouldn't keep Pira waiting."

While Davina urged her on, Cetila pondered their brief exchange. Speaking with the girl always astonished her. She had to be extremely perceptive to sense Cetila's contempt of the Black Guard and then call her out on it. And dispassionate Ladies? She could only mean Gevinesa's seeming loss of interest and withdrawal from the Brigade five years ago. But "the term more commonly employed" Davina had referred to was "traitorous bitch." Yes, she would definitely need to keep an eye on Davina.

As they navigated the camp's rows of tents, many of Cetila's sisters in arms flashed her respectful salutes. Davina led her back into the forest on the other side, where they continued for approximately five minutes. They arrived in a clearing where Cetila saw Pira with a squad of the second company, investigating the little stream flowing through it.

Pira looked up as they approached. "Ah, very good. Step back girls. I want Tavita's sister to examine the tracks," she said with a smug grin and a subtle trace of sarcasm. "Where would we be if we didn't always consult our beloved commander?"

The troop immediately obeyed their captain and made room for Cetila, who groaned inwardly. Pira was at it again. What had gotten into her these past two weeks? "Tavita's sister still has a name, you know," she whispered as she passed the captain.

Pira only honored her with a wry smile and pointed toward the stream. Cetila stooped down and glanced into the water.

Her heart skipped a beat.

This had to be what they had come here to find! All her instincts told her the prints belonged to the elusive creatures they were hunting. She could hardly contain her excitement and felt the skin of her cheeks flush.

With her breath quickened, she looked up. "The tracks are fresh, hardly an hour old. We must have disturbed the animals when we arrived as they were watering. They were very clever and tried to erase their tracks by moving into the stream, but the ground in this area is partly composed of clay. The water therefore didn't wash the tracks away as soon as they might have wished. I predict you'll find tracks leaving the water several hundred armlengths upstream. I assume you've contained the area and traced the prints?"

Pira favored her with a condescending smile. "Thank you, Commander. Your opinion and singular expertise are most welcome." Her voice was crisp and professional, but she targeted Cetila with a provocative glance, daring her to retaliate.

Cetila clenched her teeth and swallowed the anger boiling up inside her. She didn't want to make a scene in front of the girls. Breathing deeply to calm herself, she deliberately surveyed the young woman who had been her best friend in her youth.

Captain Pirena Novesta, Pira for short, had the tall, aristocratic bearing and slender figure of a true patrician beauty. Her thick, dark hair was pinned back in a tucked braid, as was Davina's, indicating the two sisters were princesses of the House of Novesta. She had wonderfully fair and

creamy skin, and decidedly marked yet somehow delicate features. Her countenance had once been supple but had grown harsh during her fifteen years of service in the Crimson Brigade. Her dark eyes flashed dangerously as she returned Cetila's gaze. "If First Lieutenant Marusen has finished her inspection of my person, perhaps we can resume the task at hand?" Her cold smile seemed to be chiseled onto her face.

She motioned for Davina to continue, who turned to Cetila. "Commander, a squad of the second company are following the tracks. They lead in a north-easterly direction. From the number of prints, we assume it's a herd consisting of approximately fifty animals."

"Very good, Lieutenant," Cetila said. "I want two squads from each company to remain behind to supervise the camp and maintain security. The rest will be dispatched to encircle the herd according to our prearranged strategy." She glanced at Pira, who nodded in agreement. Cetila turned back to Davina. "You have your orders, Lieutenant. Ensure your platoons maintain the required distance of at least half a league from the herd until all troops are in position."

Davina slapped her fist to her heart and bowed, then ordered the squad back to the camp, leaving two guards as protection for the captain. Cetila watched her leave and turned to Pira. "Captain, I…" Her eyes pleaded.

"Is there anything you wish to add, Lieutenant?" Pira replied coldly.

Cetila sighed. "No. I'll instruct the commanders of the other companies."

"Very good. It's going to be a long night. I have a lot of paperwork to complete, and I don't want to be disturbed. Dismissed!"

Cetila saluted and stalked back to the camp. She felt excited at the prospect of capturing one of the animals and was certain they were up to the task, even though they would be tracking the creatures in the dark. But she still couldn't understand why her mother had been so insistent when she had ordered the search for these mythical creatures. What was going on? And why was Pira playing such antagonistic games? She could only hope the next day would bring some answers. As Pira had said, it was going to be a long night.

22. Hide and Seek

The group around Nova reached the woods east of town and turned south, ambling along the edge of the forest. Catyana had linked arms with Nova and Mara, and Soshia had taken possession

of Vilam. Nobody talked much since they were still diverted by the events at the artifact, so Mara and Soshia used the opportunity to gather herbs for Culisa. After a while, Nova shaded her eyes and checked the sun's position. "It's getting late. We need to think about heading back." She glanced at Vilam. "May I ask you a personal question?"

"Of course."

"I noticed the way you looked at me when we first met in the tavern, and also how you've been glancing at me now and again during our walk."

"Yes, that's true. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be obtrusive, but you remind me of someone."

"I see. I thought that might be the reason. May I ask who it is I resemble?"

"Yes, you bear an uncanny resemblance to my wife's sister. It's almost as if you were twins."

Soshia dropped Vilam's arm like a burning coal and stepped back, gaping at him. "You're married?"

Vilam shook his head. "No, I apologize. I should have said 'late wife.' She passed away years ago. I can't believe it's been so long."

"Oh." Soshia took hold of his arm again. "I'm so sorry."

The corners of Vilam's mouth turned up in a bitter smile. "What's done is done." He looked across the meadow on their right. "Nova, what are those fascinating structures in the field over there? Are they sculptures like that artifact we just saw?"

Nova sighed. How she hated this silly game of hide and seek, always having to conceal so much behind trivial chatter. On the other hand, it probably was better than awkward silence, and she was now able to make sense of Vilam's previous antagonistic behavior. Under the surface, he probably still struggled with suppressed anger resulting from his loss. She could empathize. Although it had been more than two decades, she sometimes had to deal with the pain and horror of her own trauma whenever something triggered the memories.

Nova and Soshia both glanced in the direction of the structures Vilam was looking at and shielded their eyes against Velana's brilliance. Nova was just about to answer his question when she realized Soshia was staring at him with her brow in folds.

"Is there a problem?" said Vilam.

"No, no problem," said Soshia. "It's just a bit…different. How can you look toward the sun without some form of protection?"

“Oh, that.” He gazed directly at Velana and shrugged as he turned back to Soshia. “I don’t know. I guess it’s the pigmentation in my irises. More melanin than most people, or something like that. I’ve made a habit of shading my eyes because I don’t like to attract unnecessary attention, but sometimes I forget.”

“Oh, so you’re going with pigmentation, are you?” Soshia chuckled and shook her head. “And you really couldn’t come up with anything better on the spur of the moment?” She reached up and caressed the side of his face while letting her thumb glide over his brow. “Well, you don’t have to shade your eyes on my account. And please, my darling, stop making excuses. I know you have your secrets, as do I. It’ll be fun, trying to figure each other out.” She shot him a playful grin.

He drew her closer and kissed her on the forehead. Nova was astonished that Soshia had managed to turn Vilam’s previous grim expression into a smile.

“I’d still be interested in those sculptures, though,” he said to Nova.

“Yes, well, it’s not always easy to distinguish between a fine work of art and a good piece of technology,” said Nova. “We need to head in that direction anyway, so why don’t we go over and have a look?”

It didn’t take long to reach the first of the structures. There were quite a few of them spread around in various locations on the field. The base of the object extended about two heads above Nova and looked like a concave cone with a sphere set on top. She pressed against the base and a section of the object opened outward. The sphere on top was translucent, and inside they could see combustion modules spinning horizontally at immense speed. “These are solar generators. The energy created in the combustion modules is translated to a magnetic turbine underground.”

“For what purpose?” Vilam asked.

“For instance, for the hydraulic pumps needed to sustain the town’s water distribution pressure.”

“Ah, I see. Fascinating. Thank you for letting me see it.”

“*Tezatal*.” Nova closed the access to the generator, linked arms with Catyana, and led them west.

Vilam seemed impressed. “You have quite a well-developed water distribution system. As a matter of fact, Folan told me this morning that you have a virtually inexhaustible supply of fresh water in subterranean wells around the town.”

Catyana beamed. “Yes, isn’t it exciting?”

Vilam stared at her. “Exciting? That’s not quite the word I would use to describe subterranean wells.”

Soshia squeezed his arm and smiled. “Hush, dear. Don’t be mean to her. I know where this is going.”

Catyana awarded him an impish glance. “Soshia’s right. You see, they’re not just subterranean wells. Didn’t you know there’s a whole network of underground lakes and streams beneath us?”

Nova realized what her friend was trying to say. “Catyana, I don’t think Vilam is interested in our myths and legends.”

“How could he not be interested? It’s so romantic.”

Vilam scowled. “Romantic? What are you getting at?”

Soshia laughed. “Haven’t you figured it out yet?”

Catyana squeezed Nova’s arm and her gaze pleaded. Nova sighed and rolled her eyes. “Alright, go ahead.”

Catyana leaned across Nova and her voice dropped to a hush. “They say the Ventaren use the underground waterways to get almost anywhere on the planet without being seen.”

Vilam’s face brightened and he laughed. “Ah, yes, Mermaids. I should have realized what you were talking about.”

Catyana’s mouth popped open and her eyes became wide. “You’ve heard of them?”

“Yes.”

“And you believe they really exist?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“Vilam has even seen Mermaids,” said Soshia.

“What? Really?” said Catyana.

Mara smiled. “Yes, he told us about it this morning at Folan’s.”

Catyana sighed dreamily. “Aren’t they just wonderful?”

“They certainly are,” said Vilam.

Nova probed Vilam with an inquisitive glance. The faint smile on his lips was difficult to interpret. It seemed as if he knew something he wasn’t telling. But when she looked at Catyana, she realized it wasn’t important. Catyana seemed to be walking on air. Her face was radiant, and the evening sunlight made her hair glow like a river of gold.

Nova smiled and shook her head. In some things, Catyana was still so naive and innocent. But the world around them was quickly growing dark. She hoped her friend's childlike simplicity wouldn't be torn from her too soon.

"Nova, is the technology we've just seen used everywhere on Piral?" Vilam asked.

Nova pursed her lips. Why did the man have to ask such uncomfortable questions? But he was her responsibility now, and the truth was always the best recourse, at least as much as she could tell him of it. "I'm afraid not. The technology currently doesn't extend much farther west than Cemasena. We originally planned to make the technology available everywhere, but the hostilities that began in the western provinces thirty years ago brought all such plans to an abrupt stop. The elders wanted to see how things develop. That's one of the main allegations the western provinces have made against us, and it's led to quite a bit of tension on both sides."

"So the right to eastern technology has become a political issue?"

"Very much so, I'm afraid." She cast a quick glance in his direction. Did he realize how much she wasn't telling him? No, her answer must have satisfied his curiosity for the time being. Gentle pressure on her arm made her look at Catyana. Her friend's eyes had that expressive gleam Nova knew so well. But she couldn't tell Catyana anything more, either, so she sighed, and they continued on their path in silent contemplation.

They reached the Lady's manse a quarter of an hour later. Mara gave both Nova and Catyana a hug, but Soshia pulled Vilam aside. "Mara and I have a few things we need to take care of, but I'll come find you later."

"You don't know where I'll be," said Vilam.

She gave him a playful smile. "Of course I do. I was there when Folan arranged the room for you, remember? I know exactly where you'll be."

"You want to come to my room? I…don't know if that's appropriate."

"Vilam, I'm from the west. When we care for someone, then we do what our hearts tell us to do, not what others feel is appropriate. And I care for you, Vilam, more than you'll ever know. I'll come find you." She pulled him down to her and kissed him on the mouth. "Good-bye, my darling," she whispered.

Nova gaped, and she realized Catyana was staring, too.

"You can take the girl out of the west…" said Mara with a smile.

Soshia laughed and gave Catyana and Nova a hug. “I promise, Nova, I won’t break his heart. I really do care about him.”

“I know,” said Nova. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Soshia linked arms with Mara, waved, and sauntered away.

As they entered the garden, Nova put her hand on Vilam’s arm. “I won’t tell you what to do about Soshia, but please be careful. Our passions and desires can lead us to do things we might regret. I don’t want either of you getting hurt.”

“I know. I’ll be careful. I promise.”

When they entered the house, they realized the meal had already been served, so they quickly freshened up and joined the others at the dinner table. The table was large and could accommodate at least two dozen people, although only a little more than half of the seats were filled. The Lady Utalya officiated at the head of the table and had left two places empty on her left, which were taken by Nova and Catyana, and one on her right, to which she winked Vilam. In addition to the acolytes, a few children had also joined in the meal. As always, the ambiance at the table was one of relaxed cheerfulness. The acolytes were chatting quietly among themselves or with the children, and Nova, Catyana, and the Lady were quickly engaged in a conversation regarding the upcoming conference.

While talking with Utalya, Nova watched Vilam from the corner of her eye. He was a complete mystery to her. He seemed to know so much, and yet so little. For instance, she couldn’t help wondering where he had come by the knowledge to aid Catyana with her inductive abilities.

She saw Vilam’s gaze wandering about the room, which was spacious and light. Various works of art adorned the walls, but his eyes lingered on the wall opposite the Lady, which contained the mandatory silhouette of the Sword. Nova knew Vilam had seen the Sword’s counterpart in Folan’s tavern that morning, and from the pensive expression on his face, she thought he might be wondering at the lost artifact’s vital role in their society. Was he aware of the part the prophets assigned to him in that regard, if he truly was the Emissary?

As always, the food was strictly vegetarian, but Nova felt such a diet wouldn’t hurt their guest, and he certainly wasn’t complaining. Nova smiled when she noticed how often he helped himself to the sautéed mushrooms in sour-fried bread.

She turned back to the Lady. “I promised Folan I’d get Vilam back to him before nightfall, so we need to leave soon. Would you care to join us?”

“No, dear, I’m sorry. I’d love to, but I still have so much to prepare for the conference. Please excuse me and give my love to Folan and Semanta. I do believe Tanola and Natilya very much wanted to join you, though.”

After the meal, Nova had a private consultation with the Lady. The meeting didn’t take long, but she had to inform Utalya about the events at the artifact. The Lady, on the other hand, had been informed by their contacts of an interesting development regarding Folan’s wife, Semanta, and it seemed the High Priest Vordalin wanted to meet with Nova in the tavern before he left on urgent business in the west. But Nova was particularly excited about another person she was told would be at Folan’s, and she felt a thrill go through her as she hurried to lead the others into town.

23. The Games of the Noble

Gevinesa noticed her brother Corsen leering over at her as she read a large, illustrated storybook to her little sister, Yanita. Her father was sitting beside him looking outside, where the sun was going down and setting the forests around their coach ablaze in its fiery light. They had already traveled more than forty leagues in the past nine hours. If they continued at this pace, they would reach Tolares in two days.

“Sister, I have a little surprise for you,” said Corsen.

Gevinesa jammed her lips together at the condescending tone of his voice, but she swallowed her anger and looked up at him. “Oh, and pray, what might that be?”

“We cracked down on a few cells of the opposition today. I’m pleased to inform you we caught about twenty of the accursed rebels. They were all executed.”

“Well good for you, brother. They do become a bit tiresome after a while, don’t they?” She used a deliberately bored tone, returning his arrogant grin with an indifferent gaze.

“I also thought you might want to know your handmaiden was among them. What was her name again? Ah, yes, Zetara, wasn’t it?”

“Oh.” Gevinesa hesitated. She felt something in her face twitch but had herself under control again immediately.

Yanita squeezed her arm and Gevinesa saw the anguish in her face and the tears glistening in her eyes. But she was a good little girl and remained silent, just as Gevinesa had taught her.

“Well, that’s alright, brother dear,” Gevinesa said, certain the slight tremor in her voice could hardly be detected. “I was planning on getting rid of her myself, but I suppose you got around to it before I did. You always were so thoughtful. At least I know now why she was becoming such a nuisance. But next time, I’d be grateful if you’d let me in on the fun.”

Corsen glared at her, noticeably disappointed.

“Corsen, don’t you think you could have waited with that particular piece of information until we reached Tolares?” said Lord Divestelan. His voice was dangerously calm, and he gestured toward Yanita, who was sniffling and had tears running down her face. Gevinesa put her arm around her and gave her a handkerchief.

“Yes, sir, I’m sorry,” Corsen said. But Gevinesa sensed his respect was mere pretense, which became evident when he pulled a face at Yanita as soon as he thought his father wasn’t looking. At least Gevinesa would never be disappointed in regard to her brother’s level of maturity, or better, lack thereof.

Yanita looked away and cuddled closer to Gevinesa.

“Good girl,” Gevinesa whispered to her.

“You’re a gifted young man, Corsen,” said the Lord, “and what’s more, you’re my son. But you must learn to control your passion. Often, patience is more effective than immediate action. Of course, we all enjoy these little games, but the tools must be honed, and temperance is one of them. That seems to be a lesson your sister has learned quite well these past years.” He shot a meaningful glance in Gevinesa’s direction. “But the game isn’t over yet, and it remains to be seen who will emerge victorious.” His gaze appeared cold as it swept over her.

The coach slowed. Gevinesa looked out the window in surprise as the vehicle came to a full stop.

“Corsen, come with me.” Lord Divestelan opened the door and stepped outside with his son on his heels. “Guard, ensure nobody enters or leaves this coach.”

One of the guards flanking the coach on their *chyevi* snapped to attention. “Yes, My Lord.”

As soon as the men had gone, Yanita started sobbing. “Oh, Vinesa!”

“Oh, sweetie, please don’t cry, or I’ll start. And once I do, I won’t be able to stop anymore.” She gave the girl a kiss on her head and tried desperately to suppress her own tears.

Yanita looked up at her and nodded. She sniffed and swallowed a few times.

Gevinesa dabbed the girl's eyes and cheeks with another handkerchief. She knew she had to distract herself before she turned into a waterfall, and the best way to do that was to observe the events outside. With an iron discipline deriving from years of experience, she swallowed her grief and pulled back the curtain just enough so the men outside wouldn't notice her. Her father and brother were approaching a courier who was talking quietly with the coachman. Although the coach wasn't soundproof, situations like this made her glad she had learned to read lips.

"Do we have a problem, Martan?" the Lord asked the courier.

"I'm sorry for the interruption, My Lord, but I have an urgent message for you," the courier replied, handing him a sealed envelope.

The Lord accepted it and thanked the courier. He moved away, beckoning for Corsen to accompany him, and broke the seal. After studying the contents of the letter, he took a deep breath. "Just as we feared. Bejad Tsimerel has escaped." He seemed to take the news calmly enough.

Corsen didn't. "How could that happen?" he fumed, his face pale with anger.

"Patience, my son, patience. It seems one of our steeds is also missing, and who did we catch returning from the stables right around noon?" He cast a significant glance in the direction of the coach, forcing Gevinesa to flinch back. When she dared to peek out again, her father was striding toward the courier. "Are you aware of the contents of this message?"

"Yes, My Lord," the courier answered.

"Where do you think Bejad has disappeared to?"

"I assume he's gone to Tolares."

"Sharply observed, my friend. There is hope for you yet."

"Thank you, My Lord."

"Alright, Martan, I want you to ride ahead and alert our operatives in Tolares."

"But, My Lord, what shall we do with Bejad, when and if we find him?"

"Kill him." The Lord turned his back on the courier and marched back to the vehicle with Corsen right behind him.

As soon as she saw the men approaching, Gevinesa grabbed the book and resumed reading to Yanita. Although her face was hidden behind the book's large and colorful pages and she couldn't see Corsen as he got into the coach, she could almost feel the intensity of her brother's glare.

But that was nothing compared to the anguish threatening to burst Gevinesa's chest. Her heart ached for Zetara, the simple young woman who had been her handmaiden and dearest friend for

years, and who was now probably buried in a cold, anonymous grave on their estate near Divestelan. Neither of the men saw the tears streaming down Gevinesa's cheeks as she attempted to read on in a firm voice.

24. An Evening in the Tavern

As the group entered town, Vilam was surprised at the many townspeople on the streets heading in the same general direction. Nova was walking beside him, talking quietly with Catyana, and didn't seem surprised. He looked back to see Natilya and Tanola following close behind. They were in animated conversation and also didn't seem interested in the many pedestrians around them. He pointed the people out to Nova. "Is there some kind of special event going on?"

"Yes, I suppose they're all heading for Folan's tavern."

"Really? Why's that?"

A corner of Nova's mouth twitched upward. "I should be furious with Semanta, but she did keep the promise she made to the letter."

"Semanta? Isn't that Folan's wife?"

"Yes."

"And why is this her fault?"

"Well, you know how these things go. As promised, Semanta told only one very dear and trusted friend about the events in the tavern this morning. Too bad that friend just happened to be the mayor's wife. Of course, Culisa then told another dear friend what she heard from Semanta. By evening, the whole town probably knew every last detail of your stay."

"My stay! What does all this have to do with me?"

"Oh, come now, Vilam. This is a small town. What did you expect?"

"You're right. Soshia already said as much this morning. I knew the townspeople were curious. I suppose I just didn't realize how much."

"Well, I guess that's just plain old small-town shrewdness for you. The townspeople aren't blind, you know, nor are they dim. Although you maybe never knew it, you probably had at least several dozen eyes watching you go into the tavern shortly after sunrise. That you remained there for the rest of the morning certainly didn't help your situation and had to arouse their interest.

Didn't you notice the many guests during the midmorning break? What did you think they were doing there? Enjoying their deventas?"

"You have got to be kidding."

"I'm sure that old gossip-monger Lutrisya was just wallowing in it," Catyana said.

"Catyana! That's not a very nice thing to say." Nova aimed a stern glance at her.

"But it's true, Nova. She tried to hit on me for information after I left you this morning, and you wouldn't believe how condescending she was to Mara. Besides, the old hag hates me since she can't squeeze me for gossip. I'm sure she thinks of me as a lost cause."

"Catyana, believe me, there's more to Lutrisya Cemasena than meets the eye. Give her a chance, and she may surprise you some day."

Vilam pursed his lips. "Nova, how is it you know so much about what's going on in this town?"

"I'm in the Order. We need to stay informed, so we have a few sources."

"Yeah, right. Sounds more like the beginnings of a clandestine intelligence organization," Vilam mumbled. By the amused expression on Nova's face, he knew he wouldn't get anything more out of her, so he focused his attention on the surroundings.

He was astonished at the many lights. He hadn't noticed them before because they blended so well into the environment. Ground lamps, which could hardly be distinguished from normal paving stones during the day, were installed at seemingly random intervals near the edges of the lane, illuminating its boundaries. Set back from both sides of the road, waist-high lamps alternated with full-sized lanterns, creating a picturesque avenue of warm luminescence. Similar welcoming lights shimmered through the curtained windows and on the walls of the buildings. "Excuse me, Nova. I'm astonished to see that the entire town is illuminated. Do you have a network of electric power?"

"Electric? No, why should we use such a thing? Our culture is founded on light. We employ an optical pulse system. The pulse comes from the solar generators we saw this afternoon. They're not only used for our water distribution system, but also for the light pulse system we use for lighting and heating. It keeps things nice and modular."

Vilam became pensive. He wondered if these people understood the implications of the knowledge they had acquired. Were they conscious of the fact that they stood upon the threshold to a completely new form of technology, a technology with possibly terrifying repercussions?

His musing was interrupted by a disturbance ahead. Several guards in the uniforms of the Western Alliance were standing around a wagon that had stopped in the middle of the road, and

were laughing at the spectacle that presented itself. One of their comrades, a corporal, and by far the tallest and heaviest of them, was attempting to force the chyeves pulling the wagon to move on.

The chyeves wasn't a sleek pedigree like the ones ridden by nobility but a simple draft beast. It had powerful hindquarters and massive fetlocks, well suited to pulling carts. Despite its designation as a beast of burden, its mane was full and well-groomed and its thick, curly pelt of a soft creamy-brown texture.

But its floppy ears weren't twitching playfully. They were laid back flat against its head, and its gentle brown eyes, which should have been studying its surroundings in an intelligent and inquisitive manner, expressed agony. It lifted its head to give forth a pitiful bellow of pain from its short, rounded muzzle as the guard raised his arm and beat it with the flat of his sword. He wasn't being very gentle about it, either. It was plain he was putting his weight into each blow. "Get on now, ya stupid beast." *Whack!* "Come on, hurry it up." *Whack!* "I haven't got all night, ya damn brute." *Whack!* Laughter from his comrades followed each one of the beast's pained bawls.

"If you want to know what a man is really like, observe the way he treats his wife or his animals," Nova whispered to her companions. She let go of Catyana's arm and stepped up to the guard. "Excuse me, my friend, but the chyeves is in pain. I must ask you to stop beating him."

The comrades' laughter ceased abruptly and they stepped back, eyeing her robes with an apprehensive gaze.

The corporal himself, though, looked her brashly in the eye. "Eh, what? And who do you think you are, its nanny?" Laughter again poured forth from his comrades when they saw the corporal wasn't in the slightest intimidated by the handmaiden's resolute manner. "Get outta here. This is none of your *coritan hi'tev*!"

He raised his sword to strike the beast, but Nova intervened by stepping between him and the tormented creature. She placed a hand on the chyeves's back, but her eyes were ablaze with an inner fire. "I'm sorry, but I must insist. Please stop beating him at once."

"What the…? Will you get out o' my way?"

The corporal turned his sword and was going to shove her away with the hilt, but Vilam seized his arm from behind in a viselike grip and forced the corporal around to face him. "I suggest you do as the lady says," he said, his voice as cold as ice.

The corporal was almost a head taller than Vilam, but he cried out as Vilam casually applied more pressure, causing him to drop his sword. Vilam pulled him aside, giving Nova room to work, and released his arm.

Nova awarded him a grateful glance, then turned to the beast and fondled its neck. “There, there, now, I’m not going to hurt you.” The chyeves rubbed its muzzle gratefully against her open palm. She crouched and lifted the beast’s left front leg onto her lap, then examined its shank. “There we go, just as I thought.” She pulled a splinter from the chyeves’s limb, set its hoof back on the ground, and held the splinter to the light for all to see. “The poor animal must have hurt itself a couple of days ago, and I fear the wound has become infected.” She fixed her gaze on the guard. “If you don’t want the injury to cause permanent damage, you’ll have to tend to it immediately.”

The corporal was still holding his arm in pain and gave her an annoyed glance. He mumbled something into his beard and picked up his sword in slow deliberation. Then he gestured to his men, and they unhitched the chyeves from the cart.

Catyana had her eyes fixed on Nova in anticipation, but Nova shook her head, and Catyana dropped her gaze in disappointment. Vilam wondered what that was all about but remained silent.

When the guards had completed their task, Nova pointed them in the direction of the veterinary. One of them took hold of the animal while four of the others pulled the wagon, spurred on by the jeers of their comrades.

After Nova had ensured her instructions were being followed, the party continued on their route to the tavern. They reached it a minute later. When they entered, the hall was already quite full, but Folan saw them and bustled their way as quickly as the dense crowd allowed. “My friends, how wonderful! Welcome, welcome!” he cried over the din. “Look, my friend, I’ve reserved your preferred table.” He grinned at Vilam as he led them to the back of the hall where Vilam had been sitting that morning.

The noise subsided as they pressed toward their table. Vilam could hear whispers on all sides that were probably variations of *Covatal* or *Emissary*. He felt embarrassed but was glad their table was in a back corner.

Folan pulled him aside. “I’ve prepared your quarters for you. Would you like to see them?”

Vilam nodded, and Folan directed him through a door in the back of the hall near his table. A corridor led to the back of the building where they turned right. Folan opened the first door on the

left, switched on the light, and ushered Vilam inside. “This is it. I hope it suits your needs.” He walked over to the far side of the room and opened two sections of a triple-winged, windowed door leading out onto a veranda and the gardens, letting in some of the warm evening air.

Vilam was astonished at how spacious the room was. The ceiling and walls were tiled with white glazed wooden panels, and the furniture was made of some type of oiled coniferous wood. A large, comfortable-looking double bed adorned the left side of the room, and there was a living area on the right. The furniture was not only of excellent workmanship, but each piece was individually crafted and designed, every one of them a singular and organically structured work of art.

“The lavatory and bathrooms are right across the hall, as you will remember from your visit this morning,” Folan said.

“This is exquisite. Thank you very much, my friend.”

Folan beamed at his guest. “Glad to be of service.” He bowed himself out of the room and shut the door, leaving his guest to himself.

Vilam walked out onto the veranda, which was raised above the courtyard. Several wooden benches adorned the scene. The cobbled walkways leading away from the court all converged upon the gardens. A sculptured fountain decorated the center of the court. He turned from the peaceful scene and closed the doors.

Looking around the room one more time, Vilam gathered it was a suite reserved for distinguished guests. If that was true, he was sure Soshia would be able to find her way here, if that was what she really wanted. But he also realized he was looking forward to seeing her more than he cared to admit.

When he returned to the hall, Catyana and Natilya were already seated at the table. Catyana smiled up at him and motioned to one of two empty chairs facing the hall. The women had arranged themselves so everyone could see the stage from where they sat. He took the seat farther away from Catyana, leaving the empty chair next to her for Nova, whom he couldn’t spot anywhere.

He finally discovered her with Tanola on the far side of the hall near the stage, where several musicians were tuning their instruments. Nova was speaking to a man approximately twice her age. They held each other’s arms near the elbows and looked deeply into each other’s eyes. Whatever they were talking about, it certainly seemed important.

The man had dark hair and a well-trimmed, full beard. He was dressed in a robe similar to Nova's, but more fitted to the forms of the male physique, which didn't pronounce the waist quite as much as the female dress and left more room for the upper torso. The man's robes also didn't flow all the way to the ground, but only to a bit below the knee. Vilam felt it had a faint resemblance to an Indian sherwani, but it wasn't as long nor was it buttoned, but made of one piece. Under the robe, the man wore long, comfortable trousers, and a black cloak covered his attire. The cloak's material seemed to be of a coarser and more robust material than the cloaks of the Lady's acolytes. He had double sole moccasins similar to Nova's, but again of a more masculine form.

Vilam saw a platinum brooch with a golden border pinned to the man's breast. The brooch had the same shape as the solid gold ornament he had seen on the Lady Utalya: a circle, which represented the Selani, or the spirit, superimposed by the triphyllon, the rounded, three-leafed symbol for eternity. The brooch had three tiered layers. The top two layers were platinum, but the third and lowest layer was made of gold. Vilam was astonished, because the brooch's composition signified the man was the High Priest.

Standing next to the pair was an elderly man with gentle but wise features. The expression on his face was intent as he listened to their conversation. He had a robe and cloak similar to that of the younger man. His long hair and beard were completely white. Pinned to his breast was the solid platinum brooch of an elder.

Nova and the younger man completed their conversation and touched cheeks in a light embrace characterizing mutual respect. She turned to the older man who embraced her lovingly, like a daughter, and gave her a few whispered instructions. She nodded and planted a kiss on his cheek.

In the meantime, Tanola had put her hands on the younger man's shoulders, whispered a few words in his ear, and gave him a peck on the cheek. He laughed, put his hands on her waist and kissed her on the forehead. Then he let go, waved, and the two men quickly left the tavern. People made it a point to keep a respectful distance and bow to the pair as they passed.

As Nova and Tanola were on their way back to the table, Nova was stopped by an authoritative, middle-aged gentleman in elegant clothes. Nova listened to what he had to say, but it seemed he wasn't quite satisfied with her answer, and his eyes flashed dangerously. She left him with a frosty nod, and the two acolytes continued on their way to the back of the hall. When they arrived at the table, Tanola took a chair beside Natilya.

Nova unhooked her cloak and draped it over her seat, then sat down between Catyana and Vilam. “So, how did you like your quarters?” she asked, but she didn’t really seem to expect an answer and scanned the hall instead.

“They’re very luxurious. By the way, I noticed the two men you were talking to near the stage. Was my eyesight accurate? Did I actually see a platinum brooch with a golden border pinned to the younger man’s breast?”

“Yes, you observed correctly. He’s Vordalin, the High Priest. The man next to him was Elder Yonatan.”

“Ah, I see. I’m very sorry if I appear to be prying, but it seemed to me you knew them well.”

This finally seemed to catch Nova’s full attention. “Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. I’ve been with the Lady Utalya for many years, so it’s almost impossible for me not to know them. The Lady asked me to bring them a message since she wasn’t coming herself. Does that satisfy your curiosity?” she asked with a playful smile.

“Yes, of course. *Votalaran;* I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be so obtrusive.”

“*Tezatal;* that’s alright.”

“Tanola seemed to be very friendly with Vordalin.”

“Yes, she would be. He’s her brother.”

“Really!”

Nova’s eyes twinkled as she smiled at him.

“I really would be eager to get to know Elder Yonatan, if that were somehow possible,” said Vilam.

“That might actually be possible. He’ll be attending the conference, so if you decide to come, you might be able to make his acquaintance. He regretted he couldn’t stay for leisure tonight because he’ll be leaving for Tolares early tomorrow morning and has an important matter to settle this evening. The High Priest, however, has urgent business farther west and needs to depart immediately. Although, if all goes well, he might still be able to attend at least part of the conference.” Her last words were marked by quiet concern.

“May I ask who the other gentleman was who stopped you on your way back to the table?”

“My, you are an inquisitive one, aren’t you?” she teased. “But it’s no secret. It was Menirel Sitenan, the Mayor of Nadil. And to forestall your next question, he asked me whether the Order has come to any official conclusions yet regarding your person.”

“Oh, he did? What did you tell him?” Vilam couldn’t quite suppress the anxiety in his voice.

“I told him to mind his own business and to consult with his Videsian friends if he wanted further information.”

Vilam gaped at her. “You told him that?”

She returned his stare with a smile. “Of course not, Vilam.” Then she added mischievously, “At least, not in so many words. He might have received a different answer if he hadn’t threatened Folan.”

“He threatened Folan? In what way?”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s an old feud. Menirel has never particularly cherished Folan. Another good reason to distrust our dear mayor.”

“Well, what did you tell him, then?”

Nova didn’t reply but only smiled to herself. From his previous experience, he knew it would be impossible to coax further information from her.

Folan soon arrived at their table with refreshments: fresh water for Vilam, and sweet cider for the others. In the meantime, the hall had become quiet. Vilam leaned toward Nova. “It seems as if everyone is waiting for something.”

“Yes, evenings in a tavern of this class traditionally commence with a song or some unique piece of instrumental music, and everyone is wondering what Folan has come up with.”

They didn’t have to wait long. A few minutes later, Folan stepped onto the stage, and the silence became conspicuous. “My dear friends and patrons, it is with the utmost pleasure that I present a very special guest here tonight. The renowned vocalist and musician, Vodana, has graced us with her presence.” A surprised murmur went through the crowd. “Since her name is already introduction enough, I will say no more and leave the stage to her. My friends, I give you—Vodana.” He bowed to the applause and quickly left the stage.

As the lights in the hall were dimmed, a noble figure walked onto the stage and faced the audience. Catyana turned and squeezed Nova’s hands, her face flushed with excitement. Then she leaned over and whispered to Tanola and Natilya. The three young women were radiant with anticipation.

The artist seemed tall, but it was difficult to judge her age. Her face appeared young yet wizened with experience. Her attire gave her an air of nobility and consisted of a cream-colored dress with scarlet insets and a cream-colored vest with subtle yet intricate green and scarlet stitching. Part of

her thick, dark hair was pinned up in a lace crown braid while the rest was bound back in a braided waterfall cascade.

Everything was now perfectly still. The singer stood alone, highlighted on the stage, her eyes far away, contemplating. In the background, a flute took up a single, soft note, rising on a mellow crescendo. A harp subtly joined it, outlining the harmony and providing substance to the flute's tone. The other instruments delicately joined in, taking up the theme in different voices, luring the audience into the rising and falling harmonies.

Softly, the artist's voice joined the instruments, entering into the intertwined strains of melody almost unnoticeably. But soon, her clear voice rose above the polyphonic themes and subtly dominated the flowing musical structure.

Vilam was entranced. He had never heard anything so beautiful. He sat back in his chair, closed his eyes, and gave himself up to the song.

Alin
Peniranu
Camar nevilas lacemitarae madan?
Coni dineval lalovanirae vosal?
Cadan mitalen lavetenarae vilas?
Alin ten'alin
Selanae netarae lu tenari
Sutani saratae l'adanisai
Satulen tesira l'ambarena
Alin vor alin
Isanai tenarata
I'ulavan tenevarae
Imala t'ulavara
Alin cel alin
Pesatas corata se linosa
Porodi miratae se Velana
Piralai cosira se nimata
Alin set'alin

Cadan Demantar ataer pilavaratae?

Coni Elinar Adar sitavaratae?

Camar Selanae anur enavimarae?

Peniranu

Alin

Again

We ask

How could darkness slay goodness?

Where could evil obscure love?

When could hate consume light?

Time after time

The wind blows through the reeds

Doves sail through the heavens

Emptiness was filled

By and by

All joy went away

And eternity held its breath

Kindness ceased

Here and there

Little things become important

Golden squirrels rejoice in the sun

All the earth sings of life

To and fro

When will their Dragons breathe fire?

Where will Her Angels take wing?

How will our Spirit be revived?

We ask

Again

Even after the final notes had long diminished into silence, the hall remained completely still, as if the audience had been enchanted. Vodana stepped to the very front of the stage and bowed, breaking the spell. The audience erupted in violent applause. Vodana bowed once more, then turned and moved off to the back of the hall.

Order gradually returned to the tavern. The musicians played some simpler pieces of background music, and the crowd resumed their activities. Vilam noticed that Nova was watching two groups of guards near the stage with concern. One of them was the same group of western guards they had encountered earlier that evening. The other was dressed in the forest green attire of the eastern provinces. Listening intently, Vilam caught snatches of the taunting remarks they were throwing at each other over the din.

"…better things you can do with an Angel," one of the western guards sneered. This must have been followed by an obscene gesture, because there was a burst of coarse laughter from his colleagues.

"You better watch your mouth, you dirty…" The rest of the eastern guard's retort was lost in the general commotion.

"Oh, yeah? I'll show you where you can stick your Dragons!" a western guard scoffed.

It was apparent the rude allusions to Angels and Dragons were a deliberate reference to Vodana's song. Vilam turned his attention back to his companions, but he felt it was unfortunate the two groups were sitting so close together. It could become a problem.

"I've never heard anything so lovely," said Natilya. "How can a single person bring an art to such perfection?"

"Yes, it is marvelous, isn't it?" said Tanola. "From what I've heard, she composes every song herself."

"I've heard she can play almost any instrument and generally practices six to eight hours a day," Catyana said, still in raptures. "Oh, it's just a silly dream of mine, but wouldn't it be wonderful if we could meet—*Tevas'an!*"

Folan had appeared at their table, and with him was Vodana. Catyana just sat there with her eyes wide open and her hands over her lips, seemingly embarrassed by the traitorous expletive that had escaped them. Folan nodded to the party with a wink and a smile and disappeared again as quickly as he had come.

A radiant Nova rose from her seat. She kissed the newcomer on the cheek and locked her in a fervent embrace.

Vodana held her back at arm's length, her smile as radiant as Nova's. "Well, little sister, what a surprise to see you here."

"A surprise? You don't say. Oh, Vodana, why didn't you tell us you were coming?"

"Come now, Tinasa, let's drop the charade. I'm sure you've long been informed of my arrival."

Nova shrugged with a bashful expression on her face. "You know how it is."

"Tell me about it."

Nova hugged her again. "Dearest sister, it's so good to see you." Then she deliberately turned to Catyana, who was still sitting in stunned silence. "But I think there's an admirer of yours here who is very eager to meet you."

Vodana embraced Catyana, who had regained her senses enough to rise from her seat. Then she nodded to Tanola and Natilya, who smiled and nodded in return.

Nova then introduced her to Vilam, who had risen from his seat as soon as Vodana had appeared at their table. "Sister, I would like you to meet a friend of ours, Vilam."

Vodana's deep eyes locked with his, searching. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Vilam."

"No, it's my pleasure," Vilam said. "I'm honored to meet the artist who performed that beautiful catoptric inversion. I'll never forget it."

Her eyes grew wide with astonishment, but then she bowed her head. "Glad to be of service. It is the greatest compliment for an artist to learn her work was genuinely recognized and appreciated."

They sat down again, Vodana taking a seat which had been placed between Nova and Catyana. Catyana's eagerness was getting the better of her shyness, and she began bombarding the famous artist with questions. Vilam found it interesting that, although they seemed excited, Tanola and Natilya didn't quite emulate Catyana's intense fervor, or her surprise at the revelation that Vodana was Nova's sister. Why would Nova keep something like that secret from her supposed best friend, but not the other acolytes?

Vilam again noticed Nova peering over to the other side of the hall, where the smirking and taunting between the two camps of guards was growing louder. She seemed apprehensive, but joined the conversation between her sister and the younger women. "Vodana, may I invite you to stay with us at the Lady Utalya's manse? I'm sure you'd be more than welcome."

Tanola and Natilya held their breath.

"Why, yes, Tinasa, I was hoping that would be possible," the artist replied.

While the two acolytes attempted to contain their excitement, Vilam smiled to himself at the pet name Vodana had used for her younger sister. So that was what Nova was called at home: Tinasa, *Little Blossom*. It reminded him of the pet name his foster parents had given him after he had been found. A silent shudder went through him as memories resurfaced of the Time Before. That was what he called it, the Time Before, with capital letters, because he—

"You take that back, ya slimy newt!" an eastern guard shouted, jumping to his feet and tearing Vilam from his musing.

"On the day hell freezes over, ya stinkin' toad!" a western guard snapped, shoving his red, angry face at his adversary.

"Go eat yer mother's britches! No wonder your friends have to watch their backs around ya!"

At this, the western corporal, whom they had dealt with earlier and whose expression had become more and more livid during the exchange, leaped to his comrade's aid. "Eh, what?" he roared. "You're gonna eat your words!" His enormous fist landed squarely on the transgressor's jaw, sending him flying backward into a table.

The two groups were on their feet, wreaking havoc. Any attempt at order in the hall had ceased, and everyone was standing. Vilam saw Nova inching forward. She was trying to get through to see if she could be of assistance, but there wasn't enough room, with the tavern packed as it was and everyone trying to get a look at what was going on. She gave up and scrutinized the situation as it developed.

Folan then made one of the biggest mistakes of his life. He apparently hadn't realized the quarrel had already exceeded the boiling point and was just on the verge of erupting into something really ugly. In an attempt to restore order, he bustled right between the quarreling parties, his hands waving in the air.

Nova saw it, attempted once more to press forward, and Vilam could just hear her hissing, "No, Folan, don't."

The two parties were so surprised, they actually stopped what they were doing to look at him. "My dear friends, please, get a grip on yourselves," Folan exclaimed. "Can't we settle this like grown men?"

The corporal grabbed Folan by the front of his shirt. “Eh, what? Who the *s’nevilas* do you think you are? Get the *cost’corvos’* out o’ my way!” Several people gasped at the guard’s vicious rape of their language as he hurled Folan aside and started back at his rivals.

Folan really was a courageous little man. He just picked himself up and stepped right back in front of the guard. “Please, my friend. You’ll damage the furnishings.”

Nova closed her eyes as the corporal whipped out his sword. “Eh, what? Damage? Yeah, I’ll give you some damage.” He swung the sword over his head.

There was a swish and a dull thump, then the loud clatter of metal on the tiled floor as the corporal’s sword fell unchecked to the ground. In the ensuing silence, the surprised guard snarled and attempted to twist around to see who had wrenched back his arm, pinning it to the wooden column behind him.

He cried out in shock when he saw the end of a silvery arrow protruding from his forearm.

25. The Way Station

Bejad leaned into the wind, almost touching his mare’s neck with his head as he raced through the bright night. Gevinesa’s escape route had been well planned, and he had received outstanding chyevi at each stop. He had therefore made excellent time, covering close to ten leagues every hour. By midafternoon, the blue waters of Lake Divestelan, visible between gaps in the forest to the south, had been left behind. Toward evening, he had passed Novesta, the fervent gleam of the setting sun at his back reflecting from the roofs and windows of the noble town. He had seen the dim lights of Pitaren on his right about twenty minutes ago. If he could keep this pace, he would reach Cemasena in the early hours of the morning and Tolares just after sunrise.

Had he been in the eastern provinces, the lights of the townships and farms he passed would have been much brighter, but the technology being advanced by the Selanian Order did not yet extend so far west. The population of the secluded western regions had to rely on more primitive forms of lighting, sometimes even falling back on torches and oil lamps.

His mare was beginning to froth at the mouth. She had been his most energetic mount yet and had needed hardly any coaxing, enjoying the feel of the wind in her mane as she sped forward. But even she was now beginning to tire. He was grateful the next way station lay just ahead.

He had hardly formed the thought when he rounded a bend and saw lights before him shining from the windows of a small farmhouse. His mare bawled gleefully, sensing her journey was over, and a cozy stall and fresh oats awaited her.

As Bejad galloped into the farmyard and reined his mount, the door of the house opened, and a young woman in a worn and patched dress stood silhouetted in the entrance. "Who's there?" she called, staring out into the darkness.

"A courier of the Lady Gevinesa," Bejad answered as he dismounted.

The young woman gazed at him as if considering, then turned and spoke some reassuring words that Bejad couldn't hear. She closed the door, took down the lantern hanging on the wall, and stepped out into the night to take his mare. "*Ulavelan mada, vil'anar.* Good evening, my friend. It's not often the Lady sends us a courier these days."

"Yes, and I fear I'll be the last. These are difficult times. The Lady has found it necessary to cease operations and hopes to find sanctuary for herself and her sister."

The young woman gaped at him, but he couldn't quite tell if it was shock. "Then let us hope the Emissary arrives soon," she finally said.

He looked into her pallid face. "There is always hope."

What was that strange gleam in her eyes? She seemed so tense. But the girl came to some kind of decision and her features softened. She sighed as she turned to his mare. "Let me tend to your mount, and then I'll get you some refreshments."

"*Sin', votal, tsemires ana jevar esa;* No, please, allow me to help you."

She stared at him in surprise but shrugged. "Alright, follow me." She led the mare to the stable, and Bejad opened the door for her. Inside, she hung the lantern on a post, and Bejad helped her undo the saddle.

When they were putting away the harness, he noticed there were eight stalls, six of them occupied. Two of them contained excellent steeds, similar to the mare he had been riding for the past few hours. Four stalls held simple farm beasts. But what especially caught Bejad's attention was a massive, cast-iron semblance of the Sword of Selanae attached to the main supporting beam in the center of the stable. He knew pious families living in the country sometimes did this, hoping for Anae's blessing and guidance.

He took a brush and began to curry the mare's reddish-brown pelt, pulling gently through the many whirls in her coat. The young woman pitched fresh straw into one of the empty stalls. When she had finished, she watched him for a while. "Where did you learn to care for a chyeves?"

He smiled. "I grew up on a farm, so I've been around animals all my life."

"Oh. How is it then that you became such an important official?"

He laughed. "I'm no important official. I'm just a simple deacon of the Selanian Order."

"Oh, you're in the Order?"

"Yes. Why does that astonish you?"

"It's been a long time since someone from the Order has visited us. Nowadays, all we see are those ominous Videsian priests who seem to be lurking everywhere. It was difficult enough, hiding the Lady's chyevi from them and the guards who patrol the area regularly. Why aren't you wearing your robes?"

"I've been a liaison officer for Her Eminence these past five years, doing intelligence work in Divestelan. But I suppose that time is now over. I'm on my way to Tolares and am not planning on returning."

The girl suddenly whirled away from him, covering a violent cough with her hands.

"*A'mada*, are you alright?"

She turned back, her eyes watering, but she seemed in good spirits. "Yes, yes, thank you, I'm fine. It's just the dust. But I can't believe it! You know the High Priestess?"

"Yes, although it's been several years since I've seen her."

"I'd so much like to know her. What is she like?"

"I don't know what to tell you. Kind, gentle, determined. She even has a sense of humor. I think she's the best thing that's happened to us in many years."

She sighed. "I wish so much I could join the Order."

"Why don't you?"

"My four brothers have all been drafted into the guard. I'm the only one left to help my parents work the farm."

Bejad shook his head. "I don't understand why so many men are being drafted. That's one of the mysteries we haven't been able to solve. The men disappear into the mountains and are never seen or heard of again."

The young woman paled. "Do you think my brothers might be dead?"

"I'm sorry, I just don't know." Bejad considered her somberly. "May I know your name?"

"Yes, I am Netira."

"And I'm Bejad. Your parents are devout followers of Anae's Golden Path, aren't they?"

"Why do you ask?"

He nodded in the direction of the symbol of the Holy Sword.

"You're very observant," she said with a playful smile. But her gaze seemed innocent enough as she continued, "Yes, it's true. My parents were always meticulous in their instruction. As a matter of fact, it was their love and kindness that first aroused my desire to join the Order." She hesitated. "Bejad, why are you telling me these things?"

"What things?"

"That you're a liaison officer working in intelligence, for instance."

"Why? Do you think I shouldn't?"

"I don't know. I don't have much experience in such matters. But intelligence has this air of secrecy about it. In the stories I've read, covert agents are always careful not to compromise their cover."

"Oh. Well, maybe you're right. But we're in the middle of nowhere out here, and you and your parents work for the Lady Gevinesa, so I can't see any harm in it. But I certainly admire the way you think. Maybe you'd make a good operative."

"Who, me? What would I know of such things? I'm just a farm girl."

"Maybe. But tell me, Netira, why do your parents let you tend to the Lady's couriers?"

"I'm sorry. I hope you weren't offended by their behavior. My parents are both in bad health and don't care for the night air. To be honest, we all prefer to stay inside after it gets dark."

"I understand only too well." He had finished currying the mare and led her into the newly prepared stall. Netira filled the trough with fresh water and the manger with oats. The mare bawled her gratitude and drank deeply. Then she buried her muzzle in the crib.

Bejad and Netira grinned at each other. "Chyevi are so easy to please," Netira said. "All they need is a warm and cozy stall and some fresh oats. I just love caring for them."

"Yes, I see that you do." He looked at her more closely. Netira was no extraordinary beauty, but her features were pleasant and her expression kind. She was quite short, hardly rising to his chin, with delicate features contrasted by dark eyebrows, full lips, and prominent cheekbones. She wore

her thick, black, wavy hair unbound so it streamed down her back, as did the priestesses of the Selanian Order.

She regarded him with a questioning gaze. “Is something wrong?”

“No, I was just wondering what kind of priestess you’d make.”

Her smile lighted her dark eyes and brightened her features. Bejad caught his breath. Maybe there was more beauty here than he had anticipated. “Listen, Netira, the Lady Gevinesa wishes to make a gift to you and your parents. She wants you to keep the two chyevi you’ve been holding for her. You may do with them whatever you like. The Lady suggests you sell them.”

Netira paled. She pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows. “Why, those chyevi are worth a fortune! We would be well-off to the end of our days.” Strange, was she angry?

“As I said, they’re yours to keep. Think of them as a gesture of the Lady’s kindness.”

Netira shook her head. There were tears in her eyes, but again, he couldn’t quite interpret her expression. “That’s more than just kindness, Bejad. That’s a miracle. Have you forgotten that she used to be known as the Demoness of Divestelan? But we never stopped praying for her. I can hardly believe Anae has answered our prayers so completely.” The words made her shudder.

Bejad stared at her in awe. “Netira, you don’t care about the money, do you?”

“Of course I care about the money. Who wouldn’t? I want my parents to be provided for. But isn’t such a phenomenal change of heart more precious than all the money in the world?”

“Yes, you’re right, of course.”

Netira stood pondering. “Oh, Bejad, this changes everything. I know I’m asking far too much, but would you please take me with you?” Her eyes pleaded with him.

“Take you with me?” he echoed in astonishment.

“Yes, please take me with you. If we may keep the chyevi, then my parents could sell them and the farm and buy a simple home in Pitaren. They would be safe there.”

“I don’t know, Netira.”

“Oh, please, Bejad. You don’t know what it’s like, living out here. So many of the farms around us have been attacked, the inhabitants butchered like cattle, and you know what they do to the women. I don’t know how much longer we can take it, constantly living in fear. The only reason we stayed on was to serve the Lady and her couriers. And even so, we were hardly getting by. We would never have survived if it hadn’t been for the additional income we were receiving from the Lady. Believe me, my parents would be so relieved if they knew I was in a safe place. I promise I

won't be a burden to you. And as soon as we get to Tolares, you can turn me over to the priestesses. I know they'll take good care of me. Maybe they'll even let me join the Order."

Bejad regarded her thoughtfully. "You're really serious about this, aren't you?"

She nodded, not once taking her eyes from his face.

"Netira, how old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

He sighed. "Well, twenty-two is the recommended minimum age for initiates, so there won't be a problem if you wish to join the Order."

Her face brightened. "Do you really think so?"

"I'm sure of it. But it'll slow down my journey considerably if I have an additional person on my mount."

Netira shook her head. "No, Bejad, we'll take a second mount. My parents can sell the one remaining, and I'll sell mine in Tolares. I'm sure to get an even better price for it there, and I can send the money to my parents later."

Bejad grinned. "You have a quick and practical mind."

She returned the smile. "It's very kind of you to say so. But what do you expect of a farm girl who had to learn to survive under such circumstances?"

Bejad knew what the High Priestess expected of him. He took a deep breath. "Alright, let's get our chyevi ready."

"Oh, Bejad, thank you." She grabbed his hand and raised it to her lips. Her eyes were moist. "I'll never forget you for this."

They quickly saddled the two steeds, led them into the farmyard, and tied them to the porch. Netira entered the house to inform her parents. A moment later she returned. "Bejad, I just want to pack a few personal things. I'll be with you in a minute."

"What about your parents?"

"I'm sorry, Bejad. Please don't be angry with them, but they would rather remain in the house."

"That's alright. I'll come in with you." He moved toward the door.

Netira took hold of his arm. He was surprised at how firm her grip was. "No, Bejad, please, let them say their good-byes to me in private." Her voice remained soft and she seemed relaxed, but he suddenly felt the slightest sense of danger, as if some fierce predator were lurking just beneath

that calm surface. A silly notion, really, considering how small and delicate she was, but it made the back of his neck tingle.

Bejad shrugged the notion off and sighed. “I understand. It’s tragic that conditions have grown too desolate for simple farmers to greet their guests.”

“Thank you, Bejad. You’re so kind.” She squeezed his arm and slipped back into the house. Bejad untied their chyevi and mounted his steed, holding the reins of the second animal for his new companion.

Netira returned almost immediately. She only had a small purse with her, which she strapped behind her saddle. Then she swung herself nimbly onto her mount, and the two riders galloped into the moonlit night.

26. Tragedy

Nova stood rigid in the stunned hush that filled the guest hall and gaped at the arrow protruding from the corporal’s forearm. She turned in the direction from where the arrow had come. Her eyes opened wide, and for an instant, she even forgot to breathe.

The Prophet’s Bow glistened menacingly in the dimly lit tavern. Vilam stood on his chair, motionless, his right foot braced against the table for support. He held the bow and a second arrow firmly in his slightly bent right arm, while his left hand hovered stationary behind his ear from where he had released the bowstring just seconds before. He lowered his arms and stepped boldly over the table and through the dazed crowd, which parted before him like a wave. When he reached the column against which he had pinned the guard, he glared at the corporal, who quailed before his smoldering gaze.

Vilam turned to the guards who had participated in the brawl. “You fools!” In the shocked silence, his words could be heard in every corner of the great hall. “Don’t you realize what you’re doing? Until now, your civilization has been characterized by love, wisdom, and righteousness, and you’ve been blessed for it. You’ve enjoyed peace and prosperity, your thriving culture has produced such wonderful works of artistry and beauty. You stand as yet united, with one mind and one heart, and nothing to hinder you from becoming greater still. You’ve created a society others could only dream of, and yet you go and throw it all away with your petty squabbling over wealth and power!

“If only you had seen what I have seen. So much pain and suffering because people refused to recognize the growing darkness and narrowness of their own hearts. The desolation of a world after all the fountains of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens burst open to utterly destroy everything anyone had ever lived and fought for.

“‘For so speaks the High and Exalted One, who inhabits eternity and whose name is Holy: I dwell in the High and Holy Place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite. But the wicked are like the tossing sea that cannot keep still; its waters toss up mire and mud. There is no peace, says the One, for the wicked.’

“Beware, for you have been warned.” There were tears in his eyes as he turned his back on the men and marched stiffly back to his table.

Nova watched the events from where she stood and noted the reaction of the overwhelmed crowd around her. When Vilam returned, she gazed at him with lips compressed in contained passion, a fire burning in her eyes. “Well, my friend, despite your aversion to the title that seemed to be such a burden to you, I’m afraid you’re stuck with it now.”

She snatched up her cloak and beckoned for her sister and her companions to follow. She grabbed the amazed Vilam by the arm and dragged him over to the stunned proprietor while the whispering crowd withdrew from their path, awe and reverence reflected in their eyes.

Folan was standing in front of the pinned guard, scratching the back of his head and looking confused. Pain had replaced shock, and the corporal moaned, but he pulled himself together when he saw Vilam returning. Blood had soaked through the fabric around the location where the arrow had penetrated his forearm.

Nova took a scalpel from a pocketbook Tanola handed her and fixed the guard with a penetrating gaze. “Will you allow me to examine your wound?” The corporal eyed her apprehensively but nodded. Nova sliced through the fabric with a few skillful cuts and inspected the injury. “Vilam, would you please remove the arrow from the column? I need to examine the exit wound.”

Vilam nodded and took a small cloth from the left side of the bow, which he was still holding. He held the bow out to Folan. “Thank you, my friend.” Folan took the deadly instrument, staring at it as if it were a venomous reptile. Vilam turned back to the guard with the cloth, which seemed to be made of rubber. He looked the corporal in the eye, and Nova could practically smell the fear the corporal emanated with his sweat. “Brace yourself. This is going to hurt.”

The corporal nodded and clenched his teeth. Vilam steadied himself by placing his right hand against the post and gripped the arrow with the cloth in his left. He twisted the arrow while pulling steadily. The impact of the arrow must have been immense because, although Vilam seemed strong, it took all his strength to loosen it.

The corporal's breath was coming in short gasps. After a few more circular motions, Vilam was able to withdraw the arrow from the wood. He relaxed his grip, placed his right hand behind the pinned arm, and eased it away from the column together with the arrow.

They settled the corporal, who had grown faint from shock, in a chair and placed his injured arm on the table. Nova sat down beside him. She removed the remaining fabric, took the corporal's pulse, and inspected the wound once more, giving particular attention to the side that had been hidden from view while he was pinned to the column. "It was a clean shot, no broken bones. The arrow penetrated exactly between ulna and radius." She cast a meaningful glance up at Vilam. Turning back to the corporal, she said, "You were fortunate. The ulnar and radial arteries weren't injured. The wound will heal tolerably after the arrow has been removed." She stood and fixed the corporal's comrades with a stern gaze. "Take your friend to the clinic or, if you prefer, to the healers at the sanctuary. And let's hope we won't have to send anyone else for treatment."

They hardly dared return her glance and shuffled uncomfortably as they attempted to help their commanding officer from his chair. But the corporal waved them off and reached out to touch Nova's arm instead. "Why…why are you doing this for me?"

Nova felt compassion for the man as she looked down at him. "Because it's our duty as servants of the Highest to love each other." She helped him up and surrendered him to his comrades, who slunk from the tavern supporting their friend. Nova watched them to ensure they really left, then turned to Vilam. "Come, my friend. I think it's time we resumed this morning's conversation regarding prophecy."

But before she could devote herself to Vilam, she needed to deal with a few pressing matters. She whispered to Folan, suggesting he clear the tavern. He nodded but was white as a sheet, and Nova couldn't determine if he had really heard. She gestured to her sister and their three companions, who had been waiting silently, and they quickly left the tavern with Vilam in tow.

Outside, Tanola and Natilya agreed to take Catyana home. Vodana said she would return to the chaos now audible from the tavern because she still had some unfinished business to attend to and wouldn't repair to the Lady Utalya's manse until later.

Suddenly, Catyana whirled around, facing south, her eyes wide with shock. “No, Soshia!” Tears were streaming down her face, and her hands shot up to her mouth. “No!” she wailed.

Nova, bewildered over this outburst, gaped at her. “Catyana, what’s wrong?”

“She’s dead!”

Everyone stared at the girl. Vilam had his mouth open. He was pale, and he looked shocked. Nova put her arms around Catyana, hoping to provide some comfort. “Dearest, why are you so sure she’s dead?”

Catyana just shook her head and couldn’t stop sobbing.

Nova sighed and stroked her back. When she realized it wasn’t helping, she looked in the direction Catyana had been staring, but she couldn’t see or sense anything. She shook her head in confusion. “Catyana, what—?”

A tremendous explosion rocked the town. Flames shot up well above the rooftops to the south, and an ominous glow dominated the sky. People ran in all directions, screaming, shouting, or yelling, “Fire!”

Nova took hold of Catyana’s arm and dashed toward the inferno. A quick glance back revealed that her friends were all following on her heels.

It only took them a few minutes to reach the site. Nova heard a terrible wail before they rounded the last building separating them from the scene. When they dashed onto the square, she saw Mara kneeling near what was left of the burning building, bending over Soshia, and sobbing at the fire. Soshia wasn’t moving. Mara looked up as they came closer, and Nova saw her face was streaked with soot and tears. Before them, the flames roared, shooting high into the sky. Building parts collapsed everywhere, and the fire had already spread to neighboring structures.

Nova grabbed Catyana. “Quickly, can you do anything for her?”

Despite her grief, Catyana kneeled beside Soshia and closed her eyes. A faint glimmer emanated from her hands, which she held over the girl. But only seconds later she looked at Nova and shook her head. “She’s gone,” she cried. “I’m so sorry.”

Mara wailed and flung herself over the unmoving Soshia. Sobs shook her body. Catyana put her hand on her back, hardly capable of restraining her own tears, but Mara was inconsolable.

Nova looked around. The firemen were already on the scene and taking charge of the situation. “What happened here?” she shouted.

Most of the bystanders shrugged, but one man said, “There were strange lights and sounds coming from the building. We heard smaller explosions, then a horrible shriek, and the building just blew apart. When we were finally able to get close enough, we saw this one,” he pointed to Mara, “standing over the girl in the middle of the ruins. She carried her out to where you are now.”

“Did you see anyone else?” said Nova.

“There…may have been a shadow. I thought I saw someone in a dark cloak hasten away, but looking at the figure gave me the chills.” He shuddered.

Nova beckoned to Natilya. “Please take down this man’s name. Then canvas the area and see if anyone else saw anything. We need to find out what happened here.”

Natilya nodded and turned to the witness. Nova scanned the crowd and saw that Constable Pirtas had arrived on the scene, talking to bystanders and taking notes. It seemed he had the night shift again. Security and liaising with law enforcement was Natilya’s job, so she made her aware of the man and asked her to discuss the situation with him.

As soon as Natilya was done with her witness, she went over to the constable. He actually seemed relieved to find the Selanian Order was on the scene. Natilya was very friendly to the man, and Nova saw her touch his arm, smile, and nod before leaving him.

“So, what’s the verdict?” Nova asked when Natilya returned.

“We’ve agreed that Constable Pirtas should continue to investigate,” said Natilya, “but the incident will remain in our jurisdiction, and he’ll share any findings with the Order. I figured that would be what you wanted.” She gave Nova a questioning glance, and when Nova nodded, she continued, “I did promise him we’ll share any information relevant to the town’s security with the constabulary and use him as our liaison.”

Nova smiled. “Smart. That will raise his status at the office and make him more compliant.”

“I did learn from the best,” said Natilya with a nudge and a smile before returning to her task of canvassing the crowd.

In the meantime, Mara had her head on Catyana’s shoulder, and Catyana was rocking her back and forth. Both of them were in tears.

Tanola grabbed Nova’s arm. “Look.” She pointed at Soshia. Part of Soshia’s blouse had been torn open. A gold necklace was hanging out, and an amethyst pendant glittered near the girl’s heart.

Nova moved closer and stooped down. She sighed and shook her head.

“Is this our enchantress?” said Tanola.

“Not now, Tanola,” said Nova. “Mara, do you know what caused the explosion?”

Mara shook her head and sobbed, “I can’t, Nova. I’m so sorry, but I just can’t.”

“What do you keep in this building?” asked Vilam.

“I think it’s mainly gardening supplies,” said Nova.

“Fertilizer?” said Vilam. “Do they keep fertilizer here?”

Nova nodded.

“How much?”

“I think quite a bit,” said Nova.

“Do you know if the fertilizer has any additives?”

“Yes, they enrich it with minerals.”

“Ammonium nitrate?”

“It’s possible.”

“Don’t you people know that ammonium nitrate can be volatile under certain conditions?”

“No, please explain.”

“Oh, stop, will you?” said Mara. She didn’t sound angry, but more despondent and worn out with crying. “It wasn’t fertilizer.”

“What do you mean, Mara?” When she didn’t answer, Nova said, “Do you want us to take you home?”

Mara shook her head. “I’m not leaving her.” She caressed Soshia’s cheek. The girl’s face was covered with soot, and there was an ugly wound on her head where a falling beam must have hit her.

Nova put her hand on Catyana’s shoulder. “Can you sense why she died?”

Catyana nodded and stretched out her hand. “It was the head wound. Something crushed her skull. She didn’t feel anything.”

Mara moaned and stroked Soshia’s hair. “Oh, Soshia, my little girl. I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“Please, Mara, we need to know what happened,” said Nova.

Mara shook her head. “Not now, please.”

“Mara, did an enchantress do this?” said Nova. “Did an enchantress kill Soshia?”

Mara hesitated for a moment. Without turning away from Soshia, she said, “Yes, it was an enchantress.”

“Was Soshia an enchantress?” said Tanola.

“Shut up, Tanola!” Nova hissed. “This is not the time!” Tanola gaped at her, obviously bewildered at the harsh rebuke, but Nova didn’t feel inclined to explain herself.

Mara finally gazed up at them, tears glistening on her soot-stained cheeks. “Please, I’m begging you. Whatever Soshia was or wasn’t, it doesn’t matter anymore. She’s gone. Please, just…leave it alone.”

Nova sighed. “Mara, dearest, we’re going to take Soshia to the manse. Do you feel up to it?”

Mara nodded and Catyana helped her up. It seemed Mara had arranged with the owner to pick up some gardening utensils and fertilizer for Culisa Sitenan after closing, and they had brought a wagon with them to transport the supplies. Vilam picked Soshia up and laid her in the back of the wagon. There was an old blanket on the front seat, which he used to cover her.

“Would you please take Soshia to the manse, same as you did for the boy this morning?” Nova said to Natilya and Tanola. “As soon as you have her and Mara situated, I’d like you to take Catyana home.” The acolytes nodded. To Vilam she said, “If you would like to go with them, I would understand.”

Vilam shook his head. “I don’t think I can right now. I need to get some air first. Besides, they’ll need time to…to make her presentable.”

“In that case, I’d be glad if you would join me. I think we should talk.” She watched as Catyana and Mara got in the back of the wagon with Soshia, and Tanola got on the front seat with Natilya. She waved as Natilya took the reins and pulled away. “Are you still going back to the tavern?” said Nova to Vodana. When her sister nodded, Nova said, “We’ll accompany you.”

In the meantime, the firemen had brought the bulk of the fire under control. Fortunately, buildings in the town were constructed with plenty space between them, so the fire hadn’t spread too far. Nova exchanged a few words with the man in charge, then she took Vilam and her sister back to the tavern. The walk to the center of town was quiet since nobody cared to talk.

After Nova had taken leave of her sister, she took hold of Vilam’s arm and pulled him around the corner of the tavern, leading him north and as far away as possible from any probing eyes. The road Nova followed led them through a wide and open meadow. The night air was mild and pleasant. Vilatanas was shining brightly, highlighting a few stray cumulus clouds sailing by above, while countless stars glinted down at them from the dark sky. To the east, the Tyenar Range was

visible as an outline of jagged, snow-capped peaks above the darker mass of the woods. Somewhere nearby, she heard the sound of a rushing brook.

They strolled on for a while, but when Nova felt they had put enough distance between themselves and the town, she broke the silence. “I’m so sorry, Vilam. I know you cared about Soshia.”

He nodded. “It’s true, I did, although I can’t quite understand it myself.”

“I wish so much I had known her better. From what I was able to gather these past four years, she wasn’t the easiest person to get to know, but I truly believe she would have been worth the effort.”

“That’s kind of you to say.” He shook his head, and when Nova cast a glance at him, his features looked grim. “Why do such terrible things happen?”

“I don’t know. I can’t understand it. It’s a horrible and senseless tragedy.”

“Such calamities make me wonder how anyone could still believe in a kind and loving God.”

“Soshia’s death wasn’t Anae’s fault,” said Nova.

“He could have prevented it.”

“But we don’t know what the consequences of that would have been. Things might have been worse because of it.”

“They might have been better.”

Nova sighed. “We’ll never know.”

Vilam sniffed. “Right.”

Nova tightened her hold on Vilam’s arm. Maybe it was time to change the subject. “I was never able to thank you for intervening in the tavern. I really feared for Folan’s life.”

“I was glad to be of service.”

“Your aim with the bow was outstanding.”

“No, it was pure luck.”

She regarded him with an astonished glance. Then she grinned playfully. “Well, now, if that wasn’t the most pitiful attempt at modesty I’ve ever heard.”

“No, really, you can’t draw an unfamiliar bow and expect to hit your mark on your first try. You don’t know how the bow is tuned, you’re not accustomed to the weight of the arrows, you don’t know how the fletch was designed. It’s almost impossible. There are just too many variables.”

“Look, Vilam, I may not be a master archer, but I’m not quite ignorant, either. You can’t hit a mark you’re aiming for dead center by chance. That would be too much of a coincidence. As you said, there are too many variables. That was either a perfect shot, or you were aiming for something else and missed, which is highly unlikely, given where the arrow ended up.”

Vilam hesitated. “Well, the bow did feel pretty good in my hands, almost as if it had been made for me. It was well tuned and completely silent. I can’t understand how it could remain in such good condition after all this time.”

“Thank you for being honest with me. It makes it easier for me to do what I feel we should have done all along.”

“And what would that be?”

“I believe we should have been completely open with you from the beginning. I’m sorry we were so secretive, but the Lady Utalya and I decided to keep further prophecies from you because we felt it might overwhelm you. I’ll attempt to correct that mistake now.”

He sniffed. “I doubt I have any say in the matter.”

She decided to ignore the biting remark. “I actually feel a bit responsible for what happened in the tavern tonight.”

“How could you be responsible?”

“Because I didn’t tell you about the prophecy regarding the Bow,” said Nova. “Things might have turned out differently if you had known to avoid it.”

“I…wouldn’t be so sure. The crowd was too dense, and I couldn’t see any other way to help Folan. Believe me, I did think about it. I even saw you inching toward him. But you couldn’t get to him, either, so you know what I’m talking about.”

“Maybe you’re right. But what do you know about the bow you used?”

“Folan told me it was called the Prophet’s Bow and was made more than five hundred years ago.”

“Yes, that’s true. The prophet’s name was Nevacad. He prophesied that the only person after him who would be able to use the bow would be the Emissary. I’m sorry, Vilam, but tonight was the first time in over five hundred years that anyone was able to draw it.”

The space between his eyebrows narrowed dangerously. “I almost feared as much. The way everyone stared at me... But I don’t understand. Why couldn’t anyone else draw the bow?”

“Well, for one thing, the weight on that bowstring is enormous. I even tried it myself once, of course to no avail. I therefore assumed you had superhuman strength, until I saw how you struggled to pull the arrow from the column. You are strong, but not that strong. How were you able to draw the bow?”

“It’s not really that difficult. The bow is a compound.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s a compound bow. Weren’t you aware of the pulley mechanism on the end of each limb? When you attempt to draw the bow, you have to overcome the initial drawing weight. For most compound bows, you hardly find one that draws over ninety pounds. For this bow, I guess the weight is substantially more. But as soon as you get past the initial resistance, the pulley mechanism kicks in and reduces the actual holding weight to something between sixty-five and eighty percent less than the drawing weight. The Prophet’s Bow has such a superb mechanism I estimate a let-off greater than eighty percent, so the holding weight would be significantly less than forty pounds. But when you release the bowstring, the arrow is launched with a force closer to the initial drawing weight, which is why it was so difficult to get it out of the column.”

Nova stared at him, feeling perplexed. “It’s hard to believe. So many experts have examined the bow, but nobody was able to discover the purpose of that mechanism, as if Anae had confounded our senses.”

“You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself. The mechanism is enclosed in a kind of black box, so all you saw were the three cables leading into it, which must have seemed pretty strange. And since your precious little bow is supposed to be holy, I doubt you took it apart for a closer examination.”

She nodded in agreement, although she hadn’t missed the cold sarcasm in his voice. “Of course, that might explain why nobody else could draw it. First of all, a person would have to be very strong to even try. After the initial attempt, most of them just gave up, not realizing there would be a decline in the drawing weight. I suppose their reverence for the weapon added to the dilemma, and some of them were probably just plain afraid, so the problem was most likely more of a psychological nature.”

“Afraid? Why should they have been afraid?”

“Well, um…in the past decades there have been several grave accidents while attempting to draw the bow.”

A corner of his mouth twitched upward. “Ah, yes, of course. If someone is strong enough, they might even be able to draw the bow. But then the bow suddenly gives way, and if you’re not used to that at such an immense drawing weight…oh, well.”

“We never found out exactly what happened in those instances. We always assumed the bow was somehow protecting itself from unauthorized access, which of course only leant more authority to the legends building up around it. But if you put it that way, it certainly makes sense. What is even more astonishing is that you were able to discern the mechanism’s function immediately.”

“Even that isn’t such a mystery. I’ve worked with such bows before, so I knew how to use it from the moment I first laid eyes on it.”

Nova shook her head. “Well, no matter. But I do hope you understand how staggering this event is for all of us. Although I should know better, to me prophecies are just something you study in old books, something to discuss with your friends and deal with on an intellectual level. You don’t count on them being fulfilled before your very eyes. It seems so strange. How could prophets predict something so far ahead? It all sounds fine in theory, but when you’re suddenly confronted with reality, it seems so bizarre, almost impossible. Yet, here we are.”

“Really? How can you be so sure? Couldn’t your prophets have been mistaken?”

“No, impossible. I just can’t believe that.”

“Or maybe you just don’t want to believe it. It might be too much of a blow to your precious faith.”

Nova gazed at him in concern and stroked his arm with her free hand. “I’m so sorry, Vilam. This topic may be a bit indelicate after what just happened with Soshia.”

She saw how hard he fought to get a grip on himself. “Why don’t they all just leave me alone?”

“I wish I could help you, but after what happened in the tavern tonight, I fear privacy may become a somewhat rare commodity.”

“But I don’t want to be the fulfillment of some ancient prophecy or be elevated to the status of a religious icon.” He helplessly lifted his hands and dropped them again. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“Then don’t do anything.”

He glanced at her, his brow creasing together. “Do you mean that?”

“Or do whatever you want.”

He gaped. “Well, thank you, Yoda. That was most enlightening.”

She awarded him a playful smile. “Of course, I have no idea who this Yoda is, but prophecies have a way of fulfilling themselves, so it doesn’t really matter what you do or don’t do. If a thing is preordained, it will simply come to pass when the time has arrived.”

“I doubt Frank Herbert would agree with you.”

“I’m sorry to say I’ve never heard of Frank Herbert, either.”

Vilam grinned and shrugged. “Yeah, probably not.”

She glanced at him. “You’re not going to tell me?”

“Alright, Frank Herbert was a well-known writer who wrote science fiction novels.” He must have noticed her confused gaze. “Uh, those are fictitious, visionary stories that speculate about the development of scientific knowledge, usually in an entertaining way. As I said, science fiction.”

“Oh, alright. Thank you. And what did this Frank Herbert write about prophecy?”

“In his best-known works, his so-called *Dune* series, he portrayed the prophet as a kind of superhuman and prophecy as a vision of a possible future. But in the universe he described, knowing the future became a trap for the prophet as well as for humanity. Contrary to your belief, the prophet didn’t just let the prophecy unfold by itself. He became a tyrant by forcing everyone onto the path to the future he wanted. In the extrapolation, God is a tyrant who forces us along the path to the future He wants.”

“I see.” Nova cast a sidelong glance at him. “Is that how you see Anae?”

He sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe, sometimes. Although I’d rather think of prophecy as an opportunity. If we know our destiny, we might be able to change it.”

Nova raised her fingertips to her lips in deep thought. “Hmm…so freedom of choice becomes a decisive factor. That isn’t such a strange notion. For instance, the Prophet Cades never completed all the tasks Anae assigned to him but passed the cloak of prophecy on to his successor, who completed the tasks.”

“Interesting. I remember a similar event described in another holy scripture, the so-called Bible. When the Prophet Elijah was on Mount Horeb, God told him to anoint Hazael as king of Aram and Jehu as king of Israel. Elijah did neither. Instead, he passed his cloak on to Elisha, who completed the tasks.”

“I’ve never heard of the Bible you mentioned, but the *Selani s’Ulavan* contain prophecies that are sometimes delayed or even overlap. So I don’t believe we’re trapped by our destiny. Anae

grants us much freedom. That's actually one of the core principles of our Order. It is written in the *Selani s'Ulavan*: 'Anae is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of Anae is, there is freedom.' But I'm just as convinced if She wants something to happen, it will. Perhaps a bit later, or by someone else's hand, but it will come to pass."

"I must say, I marvel at your faith. But to me, faith is often vague and incomprehensible. That's why I wonder how you can be so sure I'm the Emissary."

Nova pondered the question before replying. "Well, I suppose in the end, prophecy will always remain a matter of faith. You can't prove it. You can only believe it."

Vilam sighed and shook his head. "You know, I do understand what you're trying to tell me regarding faith and all that. I really wish I could love Anae as much as you do, but sometimes I just hate Him."

Nova understood Vilam only too well. The evening had ended on such a sad and tragic note, and as she remembered the lively Soshia lying there so lifeless, images of her own past rose up in her. She took a deep breath. "I can empathize. Not everything we experience is easy to digest. And sometimes, it can even be too much."

She realized too late what she had just done. Had Vilam noticed? Yes, he was too perceptive not to and gaped at her. It had only been for an instant, but she had allowed the pain buried so deeply in her soul to surface. She immediately shoved the horrible memories far down inside and slammed the lid back in place.

Vilam reached out and held her by the shoulders. "Nova, I'm so sorry."

She diverted her gaze and shook her head, fighting back the tears.

"Was it very difficult?" He rolled his eyes. "I'm such an idiot! Of course it was."

She swallowed and nodded. "It almost cost me my life and just as nearly my faith. If it hadn't been for the Lady Utalya and a few other good friends, I probably wouldn't be here today."

As they continued their walk, Vilam remained silent. Nova was grateful that he had enough tact not to intrude upon her with further questions. "Do you think I'll ever learn to trust Anae as much as you do?" he asked after a while.

She raised her eyes, sensing his momentary vulnerability. The short divulgence of her soul must have distressed him as much as it had her. "Oh, my dear friend, do you really know how much I trust Her? And are you sure my trust is so much greater than yours?" She sighed. "Sometimes, I feel so hurt and helpless I hardly know how to carry on."

Vilam's eyes seemed to be pleading with her. "And what do you do then?"

"Can we ever do very much? But I know there is always hope, even if we can no longer believe in it ourselves."

Vilam grinned bitterly. "Oh, what a comfort! Just what I needed."

She put her hand on his arm. "No, Vilam, it's true. I've experienced it myself. Sometimes, Anae can inspire some unsuspecting soul to utter a word that strikes deeply into our hearts and may bring healing, if we care to listen."

Vilam seemed to calm down and nodded. "You may be right. I can only pray I'll have the prudence to recognize such a word when I hear it."

"Wisely spoken, my friend."

"So, what else did the prophets say about the, uh…Emissary? That's what you wanted to talk about, wasn't it?"

She attempted an encouraging smile, but she was feeling the fatigue of a long and tragically eventful day. "Well, you've already heard about Nevacad's prophecy regarding the bow."

"Yes, obviously."

She felt resentment rise up in her and had to squelch it. "Vilam, I'm doing this for your benefit, and not for mine. Now, do you want to hear about the prophecies, or don't you?"

He nodded for her to continue.

"Alright, there's one prophecy I regard as particularly significant in your case. It states that the Emissary will be a master and teacher of the martial disciplines, come in a time of turmoil to prepare our people for conflict. You demonstrated tonight that you certainly know something about archery. And the way you dealt with the corporal of the Western Alliance on the street earlier this evening makes me suspect you're not ignorant of combat situations, either. But the most important prophecies have yet to be fulfilled. They concern the Demantar, the Elinar, and the Sword of Selanae. All three were lost a millennium ago, but they will be restored to us when the Emissary arrives."

Vilam regarded her calmly. "Dragons, Angels, and the Sword. Interesting. So how am I supposed to do that? Stumble over them here in the dark?"

Nova sighed wearily. This man wasn't going to make things easy for her. "Vilam, so much has happened today. Maybe we should just give it a little more time."

They were now standing in the garden behind the Lady's manse. The lights in the house were still on, probably because of Soshia.

"Will you be accepting Catyana's invitation to join her family for the midday meal tomorrow?" Nova asked. "I know it would mean very much to her if you did."

He nodded. "I think I'd like that."

"Good, I'm glad. Could you be here tomorrow an hour before noon?"

"Yes, that would be fine."

Nova saw Hyelisa at the workshop door. She must have heard them arrive, and Nova shot her a questioning glance while gesturing toward Vilam. Hyelisa nodded and disappeared back into the workshop.

Nova put her hand on Vilam's arm. "Would you like to see Soshia?"

"Yes, I think I'd like that very much."

Nova led him into the building. Soshia was lying on a table in the middle of the workshop. The table was covered with a clean, white cloth, and the acolytes had placed candles and plants all around the shop. Soshia had a simple, black gown on. Her head was resting on a burgundy pillow, her hair was freshly brushed, and her face was clean and peaceful. She had her golden necklace on with the amethyst over her heart, and her hands were folded over her stomach.

"She's beautiful," said Vilam. He bent down and kissed her on the forehead.

Mara, who was sitting beside her, smiled up at him through her tears and squeezed his hand in gratitude.

"Would you like to stay with her for a while?" Nova asked Vilam. Vilam nodded, and Nova pulled over a chair next to Mara so he could sit beside her. Then she took Hyelisa aside so they wouldn't disturb the bereaved. "Did Natilya and Tanola take Catyana home?"

Hyelisa nodded. "It was difficult getting Catyana to leave. She was so sad. She insisted on helping Mara clean and prepare the girl. I don't know how she did it, but she removed all of Soshia's wounds through Induction."

"Of course she did. Did anyone inform Culisa Sitenan?"

"Yes, I went by after I got Soshia's clothes from her and Mara's home. I think she really liked Soshia, she was so heartbroken. The Lady Utalya has allowed us to keep Soshia here until the funeral, so Culisa and the Mayor will come by tomorrow morning to pay their respects."

"Good. Thank you, Hyelisa."

Nova took another look around to ensure everything was in order. Then she left the workshop, shuddering at the thought of all the paperwork that awaited her.

27. Skull Alley

Dena was leaning against a grubby wall, and although the night was warm, she was shivering and had her cloak wrapped tightly around herself. She had spent most of the evening wandering the streets of Divestelan, and the constant activity had helped her to suppress the dreadful images and distressing thoughts that were stalking her. But when the time approached for her rendezvous, she had repaired to Skull Alley and, with nothing to do but wait for her contact to show up, the emotional impact of the day had again caught up with her.

Movement at one end of the passage made her look up. Her nerves were raw, and she followed the darkly cloaked figure with her eyes as it came toward her. When the man saw her, he reached up and threw back his hood.

"Tuval!" she cried and flew into her brother's arms. It was so good to feel his comforting warmth, the pressure of his arms around her, and she let her tears flow freely. Her brother was quiet and just held her until she could control herself again. She rubbed her face on his cloak to rid herself of her tears before looking up. "Oh, Tuval, I was so afraid that you—" She stopped when she saw the grave expression on his face. "What's wrong?"

"Dena, I'm so sorry."

"What is it?"

"Zetara is dead."

Her heart skipped a beat. "No. No, it can't be. I saw her myself just this morning. She told me she was going east and that she…"

But her brother's eyes never wavered, and she knew instinctively that it was true.

"No!" she wailed, as inexpressible pain and anger welled up inside her. "No, no, no!" she cried while beating her fists against Tuval's chest. He didn't move as she pounded him, but when her legs gave out he embraced her tightly so she wouldn't collapse. She hardly knew what she was doing as she sobbed her hurt and sorrow into her brother's garment. She felt like a rag doll in the clutches of her waxing emotions. Her brother waited patiently until she was able to hang on to his

cloak and support herself. It took even longer before she had quieted enough to contain her trembling. She deliberately kept her ear pressed against her brother's heart. "How did she die?"

"It was a quick death, Dena, not like the others. For some reason, she returned to the residence after she left you at the market. They were probably afraid she might slip away again and killed her at least an hour before the actual operation commenced. A minor informant was able to get the news out."

Dena took a deep, shuddering breath. "When will it end, Tuval? Zetara was such a kind and gentle soul. And I wasn't even particularly nice to her this morning." She wiped her nose and a few straggling tears on her sleeve.

"Why was that?"

"I…told her I was planning on going east, and she tried to dissuade me."

"It seems she was a very wise person. So you're determined?"

Dena clenched her teeth. "Yes, now more than ever."

"Dena, I really think—"

"Don't even try!" Her eyes blazed in anger.

"Alright, alright, simmer down," he said, raising his hands in a defensive gesture. "Besides, after what happened today, someone has to go to Tolares to inform the High Priestess. Will you accompany me?"

Dena glanced up at him. She dearly loved and respected her brother. In the dim light of the torches lighting both ends of the alley, she could see the resemblance to his father and his grandfather. He had a tall, robust frame, expressive features, a square jaw, and dark, wavy hair. Even in the simple dark brown cloak in which he stood before her, he was still capable of imparting an air of authoritative proficiency. She knew he would one day make an excellent Lord Cemasena and head of state of one of the richest and most progressive of the western provinces. "Come, brother, let's not argue. You know I'd be more than happy to accompany you. Do you know a safe place where we can stay?"

"Yes. Sheletas has called a meeting at exactly *setavelates* tomorrow. That's actually the reason you were asked to meet me here. But we can stay together now, so I'll show you where it is." He glanced at her and must have realized how worn out she was. "Dena, you've done more than your share today. You need to get some rest. Why did you take that last assignment?"

“Someone had to find out what happened to our missing operatives. There were only ten agents available at the time, and more than thirty had still not reported in, so we split the number in equal shares, and I took my three like everyone else.”

Tuval studied her quietly. “Sister, you’re amazing.”

“I do what I can.” She slipped her arm through his. “Come on, let’s go.” Nestling up against him, she nudged him in the direction of the alley’s exit.

28. Soshia’s Good-Bye

Vilam spent an hour with Soshia and Mara. Before he left, he embraced Mara, who kissed him on the cheek, and he kissed Soshia on the forehead. But when he got outside, he couldn’t bring himself to return to the tavern. There was too much on his mind, and he wasn’t ready to confront the crowd awaiting him in the tavern. The gaping hole Soshia had left where his heart used to be didn’t help, either. Instead of taking the illuminated road back into town, he allowed the crescent of a waxing Vilanevos rising on the eastern horizon to lure him in the opposite direction. The night was pleasant and peaceful, and it took him another hour to reach the tavern from the other side of town.

When he entered, he was grateful to see the place was empty except for Folan, Semanta, and Vodana, who were talking quietly. Folan must have cleared the tavern after what had happened earlier that evening. When he saw Vilam, he immediately ran up to him and grabbed his hands. “Vilam, my dear friend! I’m so sorry. I wasn’t able to thank you. I was stunned by what happened. I only realized after you had left that you probably saved my life.”

Semanta also came up to him and took his hand in both of hers. Tears were running down her cheeks. “Please forgive me for being so distant today. I’ll try to be a better hostess tomorrow. I just don’t know what I would have done if anything had happened to my husband.”

Vilam smiled at them. “What I did, I did gladly. There’s no need to thank me. I’m happy to know I was of some help to my friends.”

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Folan bustled back to the table, picked up the Prophet’s Bow and the quiver, and presented them to Vilam. “These belong to you now.”

Vilam stared at him, aghast. “But I can’t accept these.”

“My friend, you must. They’re rightfully yours. You’ve proven that beyond a doubt to everyone here tonight. Oh, and by the way, the physician brought this around from the clinic a while ago.” He held up the arrow which Vilam had put to such competent use a few hours before. Vilam accepted the lethal projectile with a wry smile and returned it to the quiver.

In the meantime, Vodana had risen from her seat and approached the group but stopped at a respectful distance. Folan saw her and beckoned for her to come closer. “Please, my friend, don’t be angry. Vodana asked if she could stay after closing to speak with you.”

“I’m very sorry,” she said. “I don’t wish to intrude upon your privacy.”

“No, it’s alright,” Vilam said. “You’re Nova’s sister.”

She looked into his eyes, searching, the way she had when they first met after her song. “I’m so sorry about Soshia. Nova told me she may have been more than just a friend.”

“She was, yes.”

“Then I’m very sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.” He realized she was hesitating. “Is there something else?”

“I just can’t believe Anae has deemed me worthy of witnessing the fulfillment of such a renowned prophecy with my very own eyes. And now I stand before the legendary Covatal himself.” She seemed tense as she said it, as if she were waiting for something.

Vilam fidgeted uncomfortably. “No, please. I’m not what you think. I’m just a regular guy. Please don’t treat me any differently.”

Vodana relaxed as he said this. “If I hadn’t witnessed your reaction to my friends’ distress a few minutes ago, I would have known it now. Anae doesn’t choose conceited tools to accomplish holy tasks. I’m very sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable, but I’m glad to see there is no arrogance or conceit in you. I would be very happy to call you my friend.”

“I don’t understand. Why are you testing me? Are you a priestess?”

“No, we don’t all have the same calling. But a true artist must also be one with everything beautiful and harmonious, and consequently requires many of the talents and skills a priest or priestess may need. We therefore work closely with our spiritual leaders.”

“Ah, I see.”

“On the other hand, I probably am a bit overprotective of my little sister. I wanted to be sure of the kind of man she’s dealing with. Please forgive me, but she is the only sister remaining to me.”

“Excuse me, did you say ‘remaining to you’?”

“Yes, we were once six sisters. But please, we’ve already experienced enough loss for one evening, and I’d rather not ponder such dark memories on this bright night.”

Folan had been attempting to gain his attention. “My friend, I have a favor to ask.” He walked over to the column to which Vilam had pinned the corporal earlier that evening and pointed to a hole in the wood at approximately face level. “Could you put another arrow in exactly the same spot?”

Vilam honored him with a weary smile. “Well, since it’s for you, I’ll give it a try.” He moved back to the corner from where he had shot the first arrow and removed two arrows from the quiver, nocking the one he had used earlier into the correct position on the bowstring. He raised the bow, breathing in, and then slowly exhaled through his mouth while drawing the bowstring back behind his left ear, keeping his left index finger above, and his middle and ring finger below the nock of the arrow, but without touching the arrow itself. He held his breath and took aim. There was a swish and a dull thump. The hole in the column disappeared, replaced by a silvery shaft protruding from the wooden post.

His audience gasped in astonishment, and Vodana awarded him an appreciative glance. “You’ve just proven once again what I’ve always maintained. Despite all their violence, martial disciplines can be just as much a form of art as music. But tell me, my friend, why did you remove two arrows from the quiver?”

“Oh, yes, sorry. It’s an old habit of mine, one that has probably saved my life many times. Always be prepared to fire a second shot.”

Vodana stared at him in dismay. “Wherever did you live to make such a habit necessary?”

“I’d, uh, rather not talk about it, if you don’t mind.” He removed the rubber cloth from the bow and proceeded toward the column to withdraw the arrow.

“Oh, no, my friend, please,” Folan said bashfully. “Would it be possible for you to leave the arrow in the column?”

Vilam managed a smile. “Ah, now I understand. Yes, of course. By all means, keep the arrow. But if you don’t mind, I need to get some rest. Would you be very offended if I retired?”

“No, of course not. *Nevela’mada,* my good friend. And once again, thank you.”

Vilam shook hands with each in turn.

“I really am very glad to have made your acquaintance, Vilam,” Vodana said when she took his hand in both of hers. “I hope very much that we shall meet again soon. As a matter of fact, I will make a point of it.”

Vodana left the tavern soon thereafter and Vilam retreated to his room. He sat on the bed for a while. If things had gone as planned, Soshia would have been here with him. But that wasn’t a thought he could entertain at the moment, it caused him too much pain, and he barred it from his mind. Instead, he opened one of the windows to let in the fresh night air. He didn’t bother to take off his clothes but fell on the bed just the way he was and soon drifted off to sleep.

When he opened his eyes again, he was in a lovely, sunlit park. The grass felt soft under his feet. Around the meadow, rhododendron bushes with colorful blossoms marked the edge of the park and the beginning of a conifer forest. In front of him was a tall weeping willow that swept the ground with its pendulous branches and flickering leaves.

“Hi,” said Soshia, shooting him a glance before turning back to look at the tree. She was standing beside him wearing a flowing, cream-colored gown, and her long, dark, wavy hair was freshly brushed and open.

“Hi,” said Vilam. His eyebrows drew together. “Hold on. Are we speaking English?”

“It doesn’t really matter in this place, but I think we are, yes,” said Soshia.

“Well, then, where are we?”

“Don’t you recognize it? A wedding was held here, right under that tree.”

“Ah, yes, Silana’s wedding, of course. But how did we get here?”

“Oh, it’s just something Anaterya conjured up.”

“Anaterya? But…that was years ago.”

“Yes, it’s years from now.” She hesitated. “Huh! Time seems to be a little wonky here.” She took his hand and smiled.

Vilam stared at her. “Wait a minute, you left me.”

Soshia sighed, and her eyes looked pained.

“I don’t want to lose you,” he said.

She turned to him and caressed his cheek. Her eyes were glistening. “It’s not what I wanted, either. I still yearn for you with every fiber of my being.” She put her arms around him and kissed him, and they stood together for a while, enjoying each other’s warmth. “I’m afraid I don’t have much time,” she said, “but I wanted to say good-bye.”

Vilam looked down and realized he was holding a handkerchief. “What’s this?”

“It’s what I said I had lost to you, although I did so willingly. Please keep it safe, and give it to the one you love. She’ll know what to do with it when the time comes.”

“The one I love? I love you, Soshia.”

“And I love you. I’m so glad we found each other, even if it was only for a day. But she’s waiting for you, and she needs you, although she’s too afraid of herself to realize it.”

“Who?”

“Listen to your heart, my darling,” she said with a sad smile. “It will know your *venora* when it sees her.”

“A wood flower? I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to. Now, close your eyes.”

He obeyed and felt her lips on his.

When he opened his eyes again, he was sitting on his bed in the tavern, still holding the handkerchief in his hand. But how could the handkerchief be here? What he had just experienced was a dream…wasn’t it?

He unfolded the handkerchief. It contained Soshia’s amethyst pendant. His fingertips moved over the stone. It seemed warm to his touch. Shaking his head in confusion, he put the pendant on the nightstand and lay down on the bed, staring at the ceiling. It was hours before he was finally able to fall asleep.

29. The Message

A vague bell-like tone of finality entered the dismal fantasies churning in the alleged priest’s mind as he tossed uneasily in his sleep. The bell sounded once more, tearing him from his disturbing dreams. He sat up and switched on the light, glancing at the clock on the mantle beside his bed. It showed five o’clock in the morning. The sun would be rising soon, but he had only been in bed for a few hours. He rubbed his eyes and massaged his temples. Downstairs, he heard one of his acolytes negotiating with a courier.

Talenon Novesta had left Nadil shortly after noon. The journey in his proud and heavy coach had been slow in the thick traffic flowing toward Tolares and had taken almost sixteen hours. It

would have taken them longer if the flood of carriages hadn't abated after sunset. By the time they had reached the Videsian Order's offices in Tolares, it had been nearly midnight.

He rose and pulled on his gray robe, then tied the burgundy sash neatly around his waist. He was straightening his clothing in front of the mirror when there was a knock on the door. "Come in, it's open," he called.

An acolyte apprehensively stuck his head in. "A message by courier, Your Grace."

"Yes, Fichyal, give it here."

The acolyte presented the envelope with his head bowed, not daring to raise his eyes to his superior.

"That will be all," Talenon said as he took the envelope from the acolyte's outstretched hand.

The acolyte bowed his way out of the room and quietly closed the door. The priest sat down at his desk. The envelope carried the seal of one of his operatives in Nadil. He felt his stomach knot up. Only the worst of intelligence could have compelled Mayor Sitenan to have the operative send a courier at this time of night. He broke the seal and took out a slip of paper. He stared at it for a few minutes. Then he let himself fall back into his chair with a grunt.

He couldn't believe it. The fact that they had detailed a squad of the Western Alliance to ensure the Prophet's Bow wasn't handled had resulted in exactly what they had hoped to prevent. Then again, how could they have known guards of the Eastern Coalition would be in the tavern that evening? The commotion induced by the two opposing parties had been so tumultuous his operatives had found it impossible to avert the dreaded event.

He pounded his fist on the desk. Hell and damnation! How had the accursed stranger managed it? That smug, clean-shaven man in his light gray uniform!

Ever since the Prophet's Bow had resurfaced, they had been attempting to place their own "Emissary." But no matter what they did, their coverts were always denounced as imposters. If they had succeeded, it would have given them leverage and probably put them a long way toward attaining seats in the Advisory Council in Travis. Maybe they would even have been able to commission their own High Priest. As it was, the Advisory Council was still firmly in the hands of the Selanian Order, and it didn't seem as if the status quo would be changing anytime soon.

He sighed. There was nothing anyone could do now. They would have to terminate their operations regarding the Emissary and concentrate their efforts on infiltration and aggression. They had hoped to plant a mole in the Advisory Council long before the Conference of Tolares to

discover the identity of the High Priestess and have her assassinated, as they had five years ago in Divestelan. But this time, the plan had only been partially successful. It had taken quite some doing to coerce one of the members of the Advisory Council to work for them. Their new mole was therefore not as compliant as they had hoped and had been positioned much too late. They would have to wait for the conference to activate their assault plans, which was cutting it close, since they couldn't allow the High Priestess to survive past that phase of the plan. He hoped they would at least find a competent agent to lead operations in Travis. The work there was proceeding far too slowly.

Talenon stared out the window. He could see a faint glow in the east. It would be a long day, trying to sort through the mess created inside of a few minutes yesterday evening. He picked up his quill and got to work.

30. The Ship

Although Vilam felt drained by yesterday's events, he rose early, shortly before sunrise. He hadn't been able to sleep well, and he had tossed and turned most of the night. Thinking of Soshia caused a dull ache in his chest, and he still couldn't believe she was gone. They had known each other for less than a day, and yet he knew he had been falling for her. How was it possible that he would never again hear her witty remarks or feel the warm pressure of her body against his when he put his arms around her?

His fingertips touched his lips. The last time he had seen her alive, she had kissed him. The thought wrung a feeble smile from him. But had she been sincere? Or had she just been playing with him? His instincts told him her feelings for him had been real, and he didn't believe she was deliberately trying to deceive him. Then again, he hadn't known her very well. She had said so herself.

He had no idea what to make of his dream last night. Had it been real? Had Soshia just wanted to say good-bye? Or had it been his way of dealing with the shock of losing her? And why would he dream of wood flowers? But when he looked at the handkerchief containing Soshia's pendant on the nightstand, he knew there had to be more to it than he could comprehend.

Maybe it would be a good idea to take up his training again. It had been several days since he had enjoyed a good workout, and he wasn't planning on getting out of shape. Besides, he needed to get some personal items if he intended to make the journey to Tolares.

His breath escaped his lungs in a slow stream and his shoulders sagged. The true reason for a workout was, of course, to get his mind off Soshia and what she might have meant to him. He rubbed his eyes, then he took a deep breath and exhaled to set off.

It was going to be another warm, beautiful day. The Tyenar Range was visible as a black chain of jagged peaks against the reddish-yellow glow of dawn. Since he had no appropriate clothing, he started with a slower pace that would produce no perspiration. He headed north along the route Nova had taken with him last night, then east to the pond, which he reached just as the sun rose. The inhabitants of the manse seemed to be early risers, because they were already out in the garden practicing some form of calisthenics.

He sprinted forward, hoping nobody had seen him, and continued to the forest bordering the town in the east. There he turned south, passing the field with the solar generators, and kept going until he hit the paved road he knew would take him to Travis, the "City of Light," as it was called, if he continued far enough along it. But he didn't intend to travel quite so far. At the point where he had emerged from among the trees and found the body of the stable boy yesterday, he disappeared from the road.

He was soon deep in the woods and speeding almost soundlessly through the underbrush. His razor-sharp instincts allowed him to reach the spot where his ship was buried in fifteen minutes. He was fairly certain nobody would be able to find it. He had used what was left of the ship's telatian field to slice into the earth, hiding it from any prying eyes. With part of the field, he had carved a tunnel to the ship's entrance. Even if the ship were found, nobody would be able to enter it because he had activated the security system.

Once inside, he flopped down in the pilot's seat and stared at the empty view screen. The last time he had been in here with someone he loved was that last fateful trip with his wife. But he had lost her, just as he had lost Soshia. His heart told him he and Soshia could have been good for each other. He needed someone like her in his life. But everyone he loved, or thought he could love, was taken from him. How could God do this to him? Who did He think He was, toying with people's feelings like that?

He banged his fist against the console and got up. First, he had to replicate more gold and some clothes. When he had finished, he looked around the cockpit one last time and shook his head. He still couldn't understand what had caused the ship to buckle the way it did when he had entered Piral's atmosphere. He had hardly gotten her down in one piece. The field stabilizers had overloaded and were completely shot. The computer had informed him that the telatian reactor had suffered severe damage and the hull was breached in several places.

He had tried to fix the stabilizers and reactor as well as he could with the small pattern transformer at his disposal, but the repairs to the hull would take some time. Fortunately, he could profit from his previous experiences, but there would be no way getting around building a larger pattern transformer to produce the parts he needed. He had no idea how long the repairs would take, but he had resigned himself to the fact he would probably be here for a while.

After his emergency landing, he asked the computer what the hell had happened. The computer told him feedback in the field stabilizers had caused them to overload. But that was impossible. Only an extremely powerful telatian field focused as a directional weapon could cause such feedback, and his sensors would have picked up any technology capable of producing such a field. But there was no such technology here. Nothing even comparable would be invented on this planet for at least another thousand years. He shrugged and packed his gear. He couldn't do anything about it now, but he made a mental note to look into it in more detail later.

When he was ready, he took a last glance at the console. If he had only been smart enough to download some data on Selanian history. But all he had been interested in were a few things a field medic might need, just in case, and of course any technical data he required to operate and maintain his ship. Had this been the yacht of a Council member, the computer's data storage would have contained tons of historical information. With a sardonic smile and a shake of his head, he left the ship.

He reappeared on the road about an hour after leaving it, wearing dark gray Nike joggers and a white T-shirt with the Aperture Science logo on the left breast pocket. Since his outfit now allowed it, he picked up his pace and cleared the forest in several minutes, turned south, then west again. He circled the entire town, staying clear of the frequented roads, and reached the tavern gardens from the north about half an hour later, having worked up a good sweat.

He opened the door to the veranda, letting some fresh air into his room, and began his stretching exercises: neck, arms, torso, and legs. He was thorough and systematic, a routine he had developed

over many years and which worked for him. When he had completed this phase, he sat on a bench in the garden for a while and watched the sun rise higher above the trees in the east, highlighting the wispy, high-altitude cirrus clouds the clear morning had produced.

After his break, he strolled back to his room and over to the main door, opening it a crack to listen into the corridor. Yes, his hosts were up, getting things ready for the day. He followed the sounds to the large guest hall, which was filled with rays from the morning sun shining in through the tall windows.

Folan saw him immediately and smiled cheerfully, only to have his expression change to one of dismay. "My friend, what has happened to you? Are you not well?"

Only then did Vilam realize what kind of impression his appearance must have made upon his host. "Oh, no. Sorry to worry you, Folan. I was only exercising."

"Exercising? Oh, yes, of course. I suppose a warrior like you must do that," he winked. "What can I do for you, my friend?"

"Please excuse me for intruding upon you, but may I borrow one of your swords to practice with?"

"Borrow one of my swords? Why yes, of course. My goodness, what an honor! The Emi—I'm sorry…my good friend Vilam, practicing with one of my swords. Take your pick, my friend."

"Thank you, Folan." Vilam examined the various swords hanging on the walls and decided on one with a distinct watering. He hoped the design wasn't faked but distinguished a genuine Tesalian blade. Steel didn't have to be pretty in order to be strong and flexible or to produce a robust and resilient weapon, but the Tesalian swordsmiths on the western slopes of the Covasins had a solid reputation and were known to manufacture only reliable killing tools. When he took the sword from the wall, he was immediately gratified. It was well balanced, with the percussion point near the tip of the blade to facilitate both thrusting and cutting. Its weight was about four pounds, which was comfortable for a two-hander of its size.

Folan winked at him. "You do know your weapons, my friend."

Vilam grinned and took the sword out into the garden. He had been more accustomed to other weapons lately, but given the circumstances, he felt boning up on his swordsmanship wouldn't be completely out of place. He spent the next hour practicing the various positions, attacks, defenses, and footwork, conscious of the fact that he was being observed from the windows. When he returned to his room and placed the weapon on the table, he knew it had proven itself to be more

than just an excellent tool. Its true test would, of course, be an actual duel, for which he hoped there would be no need at the moment.

After he had freshened up and changed his clothes, he returned to the guest hall with the sword, which he returned to its owner. “Thank you, my friend. It’s a truly exceptional weapon.”

Folan beamed at his guest, carefully wiped the hilt and cross without touching the blade, and returned it to its place on the wall. Turning back to Vilam, he said, “Now, my friend. What else can I do for you? Are you ready for breakfast?”

“Yes, indeed, that would be very kind. I’m starving.”

“Starving? Excellent, my friend! Let’s see if we can’t come up with a suitable remedy for your unpleasant condition.”

Semanta came out and greeted him most cordially, wishing him a very good morning. She then helped her husband to set the table and bring out the victuals, which was accomplished quickly and efficiently. They worked well together as a team. When the ceremony was completed, Vilam wondered how many people had actually been invited to the feast. “Uh, Semanta, excuse me, but is this supposed to be for me?” he asked, gesturing at the heavily laden table.

“Why, yes, of course. But don’t worry, dear, there’s more if you want it,” she shouted over her shoulder as she bustled back to the kitchen.

He sat back, an exasperated grin on his face at their overwhelming hospitality. “Well, I hope I don’t disappoint you,” he murmured under his breath. He helped himself and soon found he really was very hungry. His hosts were delighted with the way he dug in.

After breakfast, he returned to his room and brought out the Prophet’s Bow to examine it more closely. He placed it on the table and inspected it from all sides. It shone bright silver in the early morning light. The pulley mechanism really was superb. It didn’t resemble any normal single or twin cam system he knew of. The limbs and riser seemed to be made of one solid piece, but the whole bow didn’t weigh much more than five pounds, a weight he felt quite at ease with. The bowstring was comfortable to draw, although he didn’t have a tab to protect his fingers.

Situated directly in the front center of the bow, above the grip, a crystalline half-sphere protruded from the riser, with several smaller crystals positioned symmetrically above and below it. At first he felt they must be some form of decoration. On the other hand, their appearance reminded him of something, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. As he examined them more

closely, a thought occurred to him. He went looking for Folan and found him bustling about the kitchen. “Folan, I’m sorry to bother you, but could you help me?”

“Yes, of course, gladly. What can I do for you?” he said, wiping his hands on his apron.

“Were you given anything else that was supposed to go with the Prophet’s Bow when you originally received it from Elder Yonatan?”

Folan seemed visibly startled. “Why, yes, of course. I’m so sorry, my friend, but it’s been such a long time, and I never had any use for it because I displayed the bow on the wall. I’ll get it for you immediately.” He rushed off to some obscure part of the tavern but soon returned with a kind of rack. “There you go, my friend. Is this what you were looking for?”

“Yes, that’s it exactly.”

“May I ask what it is?”

“Yes, it’s an invertible double pull bow press.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s an instrument used to relieve the pressure on a compound bow for maintenance purposes.”

“Oh, I see.” The expression on his face made it plain that he didn’t.

“Thank you very much, my friend. You’ve been a great help.”

Folan beamed. “Glad to be of service.”

Vilam took the bow press back to his room and placed it on the table. The press wasn’t as heavy as one might have expected, but robust and constructed of an unfamiliar type of metal with a black, matted finish. The wheels that would hold the bow in place were of a semi-opaque crystalline texture. The rounded, massive base was more complex than the ones he was accustomed to, but he would discover soon enough whether he had correctly deduced the reason.

He turned the bow press over. There was a small compartment in the bottom of the base, directly in the center, covered by a craftily designed piece of metal. The cover and the compartment were of the same size and form as the Selanian brooches worn by the Lady Utalya, the High Priest Vordalin, and Elder Yonatan, but the compartment was empty. Maybe it was supposed to contain some kind of power source. Would the construction work the way he expected without it? He shrugged. There was only one way to find out.

He set the bow press upright on the table and mounted the bow into the press, inverting the bow so the crystals on the front of the riser faced the ceiling. He applied only enough pressure to the limbs to ensure the bow was fastened securely. Then he tapped the base of the press.

“Brilliant!” he said, grinning to himself at the result.

31. Aftermath

Sheletas took a deep breath and grimaced. The stench of decay was everywhere. Cobwebs adorned the corners and entries to the corridors. The rooms themselves were dank, mildew covered the walls, and rodents scampered across rotting floors. Despite the building’s appalling condition, the housing situation in Divestelan was so desolate every available spot was occupied by some wretched soul seeking shelter and the comfort of anonymous numbers.

He had deliberately chosen the site because of its repugnant and undistinguished nature. As expected, the small group huddling together in a musty corner on the third floor didn’t attract any attention. The somber, cloaked individuals stirred every now and then, but no words were spoken.

Sheletas probed the room one more time. It passed his inspection, and he walked across to join his friends. When he had taken his place in the circle, he glanced at the participants. Mirayla was sitting at his side, and his older brother, Picanas, had taken a place across from him. Next to Picanas were Tuval and Dena. Having ascertained the main operatives were present, he acknowledged the other eight agents in the group and looked at his brother. “How many?”

“We haven’t heard from all our operatives yet, but the number seems to have leveled off at twenty. I’m sorry, Sheletas.”

Sheletas buried his head in his hands and massaged his face. Then he dropped his hands and sighed. “So many good people.”

Mirayla caressed his arm. “How was such a thing possible?”

“It seems we’ve greatly underestimated our enemy’s capability to undermine our organization. They must have been observing us closely for quite some time without our knowledge.” He hesitated, then, “I’m afraid there might even be a traitor in our midst.”

The others exchanged shocked glances.

“What disturbs me most,” Sheletas continued, “is how swift and widespread this offensive was. The warning barely reached me in time. I observed the Black Guard entering the building just after I made my escape.”

“Yes, Corsen’s Black Guard seems to have grown immensely,” Picanas said.

“That’s not so surprising, since Varan discovered that Lady Gevinesa’s Crimson Brigade and Lord Corsen’s Black Guard have merged,” Mirayla answered.

Sheletas cast a glance over at Dena, whose face was grim and ashen. He shook his head at Mirayla.

Mirayla, clearly embarrassed at her lack of sensitivity, continued with her eyes fixed on the ground. “We haven’t noted any independent activity of the Lady’s Brigade in the past three or four years. They really do seem to have fused with the Guard.”

“On the other hand, it worries me that no female brigades were spotted during this offensive,” Picanas interjected. “It’s possible they’ve been pulled off for another assignment. Besides, I believe the growth of the Black Guard is due to other factors. Although I completely trust Varan’s intelligence, Anae rest his soul,” he said, bowing respectfully to Dena, “the Lady’s single battalion of Brigades doesn’t account for the large number of Black Guards we’ve observed.”

“True,” Sheletas answered. “But it’s also disquieting that the Black Guard is showing itself in broad daylight. They usually operate only after dusk.”

“Was Bejad able to make his escape?” Mirayla asked.

“Yes, although I must admit I’m almost glad he’s gone. Of all the inept—” Sheletas took a deep breath. “Anyway, I doubt he’ll be able to inform Her Eminence of the desolate condition in which the Resistance has been left. Picanas, we really need to get another courier to her while she’s in Tolares.”

“I agree,” the elderly man replied. “Besides, I’d very much like to get a message to our little sister while we’re at it. I’m relieved she made it safely to Tolares.”

“Alright, Tuval, how about it?” Sheletas asked, looking over at the young man.

“I think we can manage it,” Tuval declared soberly. “Would you like me to notify Her Eminence regarding our surveillance of the patrols and mercenaries heading for Navaresa and the Northern Forests?”

“We still have no reliable information regarding their objectives, only speculation. But you might as well bring her any intelligence we have.” Sheletas fixed him with a thoughtful gaze. “Tuval, I know your sister has a personal debt to settle,” he said, glancing at the young woman sitting so quietly beside her brother. “I trust you won’t let it interfere with your mission.”

“You can rely on us to do what is necessary,” Tuval replied.

Sheletas sighed. “It’s going to take a while to reestablish our contacts. After what’s happened, many of our informants may no longer trust us. As for the rest of you, lie low until we’re back up to speed. Are there any more questions or comments?”

There were none.

“Good. I’ll be in touch. You’re dismissed.”

Sheletas saw Tuval shoot a questioning glance at his sister, who hadn’t said a word during the short conclave. Dena nodded, and the siblings rose to follow their comrades into the hall.

32. The Prophet’s Bow

It was still quite early in the morning, but Vilam had a few errands to run. Nova had asked him to be at the manse an hour before noon, but he needed to talk to her and the Lady Utalya, so he wanted to get there an hour earlier. That still left him with plenty of time to complete his tasks. He decided to take the bow with him, mainly for effect.

His first stop was the site of the explosion. The blast must have been massive and blown half the building apart, as one witness had testified. The rest of the building had burned quickly, and there wasn’t much left but ash, beams, and posts, but the fire had decided to leave a few charred walls standing for good measure.

As he rummaged through the half of the site not destroyed by the blast, he realized something wasn’t right. The burn that remained of that half was strange. It didn’t seem as if the fire had originated with the blast, but began near the center of that half and burned outward, toward the blast. So another fire had started before the actual blast had occurred. The witness said there had been strange lights and sounds and smaller explosions, and Mara told them Soshia had been killed by an enchantress. Was it the same enchantress who had killed Normas? Or was Soshia an enchantress and she had killed Normas? What exactly had happened here?

Vilam sniffed. His examination was raising far more questions than it produced answers. He walked back to the part of the building that had exploded. The blast that blew that side of the building apart originated closer to one end, and it seemed as if a large circle around the origin remained unaffected by fire in the aftermath. Was that where the witness had seen Mara with Soshia? But Catyana had known about Soshia’s death at least a minute or two before they heard the explosion. He had known Theresa back on Earth quite well, and he was astonished at the many

similarities he had discovered between her and Catyana, especially the eerie premonitions. He therefore trusted Catyana's instincts implicitly. And if that was true, then it couldn't have been the explosion that killed Soshia.

He shook his head. This was very confusing. He wasn't an experienced fire investigator, and he didn't think he could get any more information from the site on his own. Maybe Nova's acolytes would have more luck. But the Prophet's Bow definitely had the effect he was hoping for. People stopped and stared at him and the bow, and when he walked in town, they kept a respectful distance and bowed to him with wide eyes and astonished faces. But mostly they left him alone, for which he was grateful.

His next stop was the stables. He had to ask around for directions, and he was fairly sure he would find what he was looking for. When he approached the cluster of buildings, he saw a group of about a dozen boys in their early twenties hanging around a veranda near one of the doors, looking despondent. Vilam mused that Soshia's death must have affected them, too. As he walked up to them, they jumped to their feet and stared, but mainly at the bow.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked, dispensing with the formalities.

The boys nodded. "You're the Emissary," said one of them.

"Good. I need some information, and I won't tolerate any falsehoods or evasion. We're all men here. Give me clear and honest answers, and we won't have any problems. Understood?"

They all nodded.

"Did you know the girl who died in the fire last night?"

"Soshia," said the boy who had answered before. He dropped his gaze. "Yes, we knew her."

"How well did you know her?"

The boys exchanged knowing looks. It was evident they were reluctant to answer.

"We didn't really know her that well, sir," said the group's spokesman.

"You were afraid of her?"

"Aye, sir. She was…different."

"In what way?"

"She…had some kind of powers."

"Really! What kind of powers?"

"For instance, when she was angry with someone, she would sometimes flick tiny balls of purple fire at them. The balls burned."

“Here, she did this to me,” said one of the boys, and showed Vilam a small round scar at the side of his neck.

Several of the boys nodded and murmured in agreement.

“I have one, too,” said another, who rolled up his sleeve and showed him a similar scar on his arm. Both boys’ burn scars coincided with the burn marks he had seen on Normas’s face and neck at the crime scene, only that these boys’ wounds had healed into scars.

“So, I suppose you’re glad she’s gone,” said Vilam.

The spokesman stuck his hands in his pockets and stared at the ground. “Well, sir, she was really pretty and could also be really nice. We didn’t want her to die.”

“Ah, so she could be nice to you, could she? Were any of you…intimate with her?” He was surprised the possibility caused a dull ache in his heart.

The boys could hardly make eye contact with him.

“Like I said, we’re all men here,” Vilam coaxed.

“We wanted to, sir, but we think she might have put a hex on us.”

“A hex? How so?”

“Well, there was a time about six months ago. We were having some fun with a few of the other girls in town, you know, trying to coax them into giving up favors. But nothing big, more like kisses and such. But then we would dump them and make fun of them. I suppose it wasn’t very nice of us, the girls really cried. When Soshia heard about it, she got so angry we thought she would fly into a rage and burn us all. But then a few days later, she was suddenly really nice. She said she would be with every one of us if we promised to leave the other girls alone.”

“Then what?”

“She took us into the loft one by one, but…”

“But what?”

All the boys mumbled, and none of them could meet his gaze.

“I said, but what?”

“We, uh…we…couldn’t get it up, sir.”

Vilam gaped at them. “None of you? Not a single one?”

“No, sir. We all wanted to. We really did. I mean, you saw her. Who wouldn’t want to be with her? So then many of us tried, but we couldn’t do it.”

The boys all nodded and mumbled again.

Vilam raised his head just a fingerbreadth. “Ah. Interesting.” He felt relief. “Many of you tried? What of the others?”

“When we realized what was happening, the rest of us got too scared to try.”

“I see. What then?”

“Well, she scolded us and said if we were ever mean to the other girls again, she wouldn’t just make it limp, she would make it fall off. I guess she tricked us good, sir, humiliated us like we humiliated the other girls.”

Vilam suppressed an urge to snicker. He doubted Soshia would have made the boys’ manhood fall off, or if she was even capable of such a thing. But she probably knew that no normal boy would ever want to risk it. So instead of laughing, he said in a grave tone, “I understand. Now I want you to listen to me. Soshia may be gone, but I’m going to keep an eye on you, and I want you to treat the other girls with respect. If I hear of any more broken hearts, I’ll come back and finish what Soshia started. I may not have her powers, but a sharp blade will do the job just as well. Do you understand?”

The boys gaped at him and nodded.

“Now, I’m going to need strong and reliable men with character and integrity to stand with me. When I come back this way, I hope you boys are well on your way to becoming those men. Are we clear?”

Again they nodded.

“Alright then, you know what you need to do. Now, get to it!” He turned and walked away. When he had the opportunity to glance back in their direction, he saw that others had swarmed to them to find out what was going on.

He sighed and continued on to Folan’s tavern. His excursion had only been a limited success, but he had received valuable information, and he now knew with a high degree of certainty that the girl he had fallen for had been an enchantress. Of course, he had never personally met an enchantress, at least that he knew of, but Soshia did not fit the description of any enchantress he had ever heard of. Enchantresses were rumored to be aligned with darkness and were supposedly evil to the core. The problem was he couldn’t bring himself to view Soshia as evil, not even close.

When he arrived at the tavern, he grabbed the bow press and used a strap to fasten the press and the bow to his back. He also took Soshia’s pendant. Then he went to bid his host farewell, promising to return in the evening. His next stop would be the manse.

He had already been in the garden a few times now, and he had no inhibitions to use the side gate to gain access to the backyard. None of the acolytes were to be seen, so he entered the workshop. Mara and Soshia were still there. Soshia had on a simple silver necklace with a pearl pendant instead of the amethyst pendant she was wearing last night. When he came closer, Mara looked up at him and smiled. She was still a bit pale but seemed more composed than the last time he had seen her.

"I have her amethyst pendant with me," he said, "if you'd like to put it on her again."

"No, she told me in a dream during the night that she wanted you to have it. I got her silver necklace from home this morning."

"How did her pendant come to be with me in the tavern?"

Mara shrugged. "I don't know how such things work, and I think it's best to just accept it."

"So you didn't bring it to me in the tavern?"

She shook her head. "I was with Soshia all night. I did fall asleep a few times, but I didn't leave until earlier this morning when I saw that her pendant was really gone. I wanted her to have the silver necklace before the mayor and his wife came to pay their respects."

"When will the funeral be?"

"Yes, well, I spoke with the Lady Utalya about that. She regrets she and her entourage need to leave for Tolares tomorrow morning and can't delay, but she's allowed me access to the workshop and the garden. We're going to hold the service for Soshia in the garden the day after tomorrow and then lay her to rest in the cemetery. I wrote a letter to her father this morning, but I know Soshia would want to be buried in Nadil and not in Marusen. She was happier here than she had ever been in her life, and this is where she found love." She said the last words with a sad smile in his direction.

"But did she really love me? I've discovered some things about her, and I'm not sure she wasn't just playing with me."

"Oh, Vilam, believe me, a truer heart than hers you will never find. She was lively and playful, yes, but she didn't play you, if you understand my meaning. I never heard her speak about anyone the way she talked about you yesterday. And she would never have left her pendant to anyone she didn't truly love."

Vilam nodded. "Mara, did you know Soshia was an enchantress?"

Mara took a deep breath. "Why do you say that?"

He told her about his encounter with the boys at the stables. “From the boys’ description of the things she was capable of, it certainly sounds as if she was an enchantress.”

“I suppose in that case it must be true.”

“You’re not going to give me more than that?”

Mara pondered the question before answering. “Vilam, I loved Soshia more than I can say, and I know she wanted to tell you everything, despite my reservations. I mean, we’ve hardly had the chance to get to know you. Soshia and I have been on the run for so long, and it’s difficult for me to expose my soul to just anyone. But that’s what it’s going to take if I tell you the whole truth. I will honor her wish if you promise to give me some time. Please understand.”

“I do understand. Take all the time you need.”

“Thank you. Culisa gave me a few days off to mourn my loss, and Nova invited me to join you on your visit to the Faeren farm, so I’m sure we’ll have time to talk more later.”

“I look forward to it. But now I need to speak with Nova and the Lady Utalya.”

Mara glanced at the bow on his back and smiled. “Culisa could hardly stop talking about what happened in the tavern last night. From what I could gather, you really are the Emissary, aren’t you?”

“I have no idea if I am or not. I certainly don’t want to be.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Feeling flustered, Vilam nodded and left the workshop in search of Nova. He soon saw her talking with Tanola and Natilya in the garden. She seemed surprised when she saw him approach. “*Setavela’mada,* Vilam,” she called as soon as he was in hearing range. “It’s a pleasure seeing you again, albeit earlier than planned and with such an unexpected cargo.”

“*Setavela’mada,* my friends. Yes, I’m sorry to intrude upon you like this, Nova, but I have a few things I need to discuss with you and the Lady Utalya, and I think there’s something you should see.”

“Oh.” She aimed an inquisitive glance at him and eyed the bow he was carrying with a playful twinkle. “Alright, then let’s go find her. She expressed a wish to speak with you before we leave for the Faeren farm, anyway. Come along,” she said, leaving her friends to their work and dragging him into the house. “I’m sure we’ll find the Lady in her study with Vodana. I hope you don’t mind, but my sister said she would like to accompany us to the Faeren farm. Is that alright with you?”

“Yes, of course. Catyana will probably be thrilled. And I heard Mara will be joining us, too.”

“Oh, did you get a chance to speak with her already?”

“I did. I went by the workshop first to see Soshia.”

“I understand. By the way, was it you we saw, running by the pond at sunrise?”

“Huh, you did notice.” He felt a bit embarrassed.

Nova flashed him a teasing smile and knocked on the last door in the hall. The Lady Utalya and Vodana were sitting on the sofa and seemed to be deep in serious conversation. They both looked up as Nova and Vilam entered the room. “My Lady,” said Nova with a slight bow of her head, “Vilam is here and wishes to speak with us.”

The Lady rushed over and took Vilam’s hand in both of hers. “Vilam, what a pleasant surprise! Come in and make yourself comfortable. Is it alright if Vodana stays?”

Vilam bowed his head. “Thank you, My Lady, for such a warm welcome. Yes, Vodana may gladly stay.”

When he nodded in her direction, Vodana managed a smile. “*Setavela’mada,* my friend. I promised I’d make it a point to see you again soon. I only wish it wasn’t under such sad circumstances.”

“Thank you, Vodana, and I’m glad to see you’re a woman of your word,” he replied.

“Vilam, I was so sorry to hear about Soshia,” said the Lady. “I only saw her around town every now and then, but I now wish I had known her better.”

“Thank you, My Lady,” said Vilam. “But that’s actually one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. Did any of you know that Soshia was an enchantress?”

The room became silent as the women exchanged glances.

“Why don’t we sit down for a moment?” said the Lady. She showed Vilam and Vodana to the sofa while she took the chair and Nova lowered herself onto the footstool. When they were all seated, she said, “Nova told us about Soshia’s amethyst pendant, but that doesn’t necessarily mean she was an enchantress. We wanted to take a closer look at the pendant this morning, but Mara told us Soshia wanted you to have it.”

“It’s true, I have the pendant.” He took it out of his pocket and handed it to her.

The Lady accepted it cautiously, as if she were afraid it would bite. Her fingers glided over the jewel’s surface and she closed her eyes. Her face was grave when she handed it to Nova, who also closed her eyes as she held it. When Nova was done, she gave it to her sister. Vodana didn’t close

her eyes but examined it from all sides. “It’s beautiful,” she said as she handed it back to Vilam. “It seems purer and more vibrant than other amethysts I’ve seen.”

“What did you sense?” Vilam asked the Lady.

“It’s definitely powerful,” said the Lady. “How about you, Nova?”

“Yes, I sensed it, too. But it was nowhere near what I felt from Normas’s chest wound yesterday morning.”

Vilam nodded. “I assumed you had conducted your own investigation. I wish you would have trusted me with your findings.”

“Yes, I’m sorry, but we’ll correct that mistake now.”

“I suspected an enchantress as soon as I saw the wound yesterday,” he said.

“Oh, you did?” said Nova. “How did you arrive at that conclusion?”

“The projectile, whatever it was, burned through most of the chest cavity, including the sternum. The wound itself was charred, and all blood vessels had been fused, so there was no blood whatsoever. Only something as hot as plasma can create such a wound, and the only beings I know of with such capabilities are enchantresses.”

“Interesting. We arrived at a similar conclusion.”

“What about the crime scene itself? Did you figure out why Soshia was intimate with Normas?”

Nova studied him for a moment before answering. “Vilam, the enchantress didn’t have any actual intimate contact with the boy.”

“She didn’t?” Vilam sighed in relief. “That’s, uh…good to know.”

“Oh, Vilam,” said Vodana, “I didn’t realize you felt quite so strongly about her.”

“Yes, um…I don’t know what exactly the enchantress wanted from the boy,” said Nova, “but it’s my guess she desperately needed it, and she was very afraid she wouldn’t get it. At some point, she realized he was going to betray her, and she therefore denied the boy what he wanted. He became angry and tried to force himself on her, but she was able to fend him off. What I can also tell you is the girl loathed herself for going as far as she had. It’s possible she wouldn’t have gone through with it, no matter the outcome.”

“Interesting. Well, I guess we’ll never know. The only two people who could have told us what happened are gone.”

“Is that what you believe?” said Nova.

“What? Why? Isn’t that what you believe?” said Vilam.

“You were the one who used Soshia’s name,” said Nova. “But I’m not so sure.”

“Nova, I have to agree with Vilam,” said the Lady. “Do you know of any other enchantress who could have done it?”

“We know there was at least one other. Mara told us Soshia was killed by an enchantress. An eyewitness believes he saw a cloaked individual leave the scene of the explosion last night, and we have several testimonies regarding strange lights and smaller explosions coming from the building before the actual blast.”

“But you have no actual facts in regard to what happened,” said the Lady.

“It’s true, I don’t.”

“Nova, why don’t you believe it was Soshia?” said Vilam.

“Because there are too many things that don’t add up.”

“Like what?”

“For instance, testimonies from the night of the crime reported red lights, not purple. And the impression I received from Soshia’s amethyst was that she was powerful, but nowhere near as powerful as the person who killed Normas. The echo of the enchantress’s power alone took my breath away when I attempted to examine his wound. I can only imagine what the real thing would do to me.”

“The reports of the lights on the road that night could be misleading,” said Vilam, “as could your examination of an echo.”

“Well, then there’s the enchantress’s character,” said Nova.

“What about it?” said Vilam.

“Soshia had a playful, vibrant, and dominant personality, at least that’s the impression I received from her in the past four years. I never sensed any fear in her until the episode with Catyana. And I’m not so sure she would have loathed herself for playing Normas for a fool. She just didn’t seem like that kind of girl.”

Vilam remembered what the boys at the stables had told him, and how Soshia had played them to humiliate them. “Maybe you’re right. But Soshia herself warned me that I didn’t know her very well.”

“Alright, I’ll give you that. I admit, I could be wrong.”

“But you don’t believe you are?”

“No, I don’t,” said Nova

“In that case, what about Mara?”

“What about her?” Nova’s voice seemed guarded.

“Did you know that Mara and Soshia were cousins?”

Nova took a deep breath and raised her chin just a fraction. “I…well, how did you find out?”

Vilam was surprised when both the Lady Utalya and Vodana fixed Nova with a penetrating gaze. Did Nova know, or at least suspect, more than she was letting on? “Soshia told me,” he said carefully. “Those two girls have some great secret in their lives, and Soshia was going to tell me everything. But she didn’t want to betray Mara’s trust and had to get her consent. Now that Soshia is gone, Mara promised she would honor Soshia’s wish, but she needs time.”

“It’s true, we don’t know very much about those two girls,” said Nova. “On the other hand, could you really imagine Mara as an enchantress whose power by far overshadows such a vibrant and dominant girl as Soshia?”

Vilam saw more doubtful and perhaps even worried looks from Vodana and the Lady. What was going on? “Not…necessarily. But that doesn’t mean she isn’t one.”

“You’re right, of course,” said Nova, “But, to be honest, I would rather know more about the other enchantress who left the scene of the fire last night.”

Vilam regarded her for a moment. Why was she trying to steer the conversation away from Mara? But if neither the Lady Utalya nor Nova’s own sister felt inclined to intervene, who was he to force the issue? “Were you able to examine the site?” he finally said. “I attempted it earlier, but I don’t have enough experience with fires. I was hoping you and the other acolytes could gain some information from it.”

Nova exhaled almost imperceptibly, like a sigh of relief. A casual observer wouldn’t have noticed, but Vilam had been watching for it. “I really would like to conduct a more thorough examination of the site,” she said, “but we don’t have the time right now. I did a cursory examination last night while we were there. From the little I could sense, the fires and explosions may have been caused by powers similar to the one I sensed from the boy’s chest wound yesterday morning. But it was all very confusing.”

“Why was that?”

“Because the energy fields all seemed to overlap. I’m sorry, but there was too much going on last night for me to get a more accurate reading from the scene.”

Vilam nodded. “I understand.”

“Vilam, tell me if I’m wrong,” said Vodana, “but I just heard that Soshia had such deep feelings for you that she was going to reveal to you the greatest secret of her life. Is that true?”

“It is.”

“And you had such deep feelings for her that it pained you to imagine her with anyone else. Is that also true?”

“Yes.”

Vodana shook her head. “Either you’re both complete fools, or it’s one of the most beautiful love stories I’ve ever heard. I haven’t quite decided yet, but I’m moved either way.”

“Hopeless romantic,” muttered Nova.

“Hold your tongue, little sister.”

They exchanged a smile.

“Well, I don’t think we’re going to figure this out right now,” said the Lady. “We’ll just have to wait until we have more information. Vilam, was there anything else you wanted to talk about?”

“Yes, but it’s something I need to show you. Could I please use a table? I need to set this up.”

“By all means,” the Lady answered, gesturing toward a table near the bookcases.

Vilam walked over to the table and set up the bow press and mounted the bow, just as he had in his room in the tavern. The three women joined him and studied the silvery instrument.

“What a wonderful weapon,” said the Lady.

“Yes, it is. But do you see these crystals here on the riser?”

The women crowded around the table to get a closer look. “Yes, they’re exquisite,” the Lady said. “The Prophet was quite an artist.”

“That may be. I also first thought they were just decorations, maybe even functional adornments to help balance the bow. But then I remembered Elder Yonatan’s light sculpture that Folan keeps displayed in the guest hall of his tavern. Do you remember the one?”

“Yes, of course. It’s quite unforgettable.”

“Well then, watch.” Vilam touched the base of the bow press. An image appeared above the bow, silently filling the space between the bow and the ceiling. The women stepped back in surprise. Vilam grinned.

“This…is amazing,” said the Lady.

“Yes, but, what is it?” said Vodana.

“It looks like some kind of map,” said Nova, “but of no kind I’ve ever seen.”

“It’s called a topographic relief,” said Vilam. “I didn’t realize they had this kind of technology five hundred years ago.”

“They didn’t,” said Nova, gazing at the map in awe.

“No, but everybody always insisted Nevacad was a man beyond his time,” said Vodana, “and this seems to prove it.”

“Vilam, would it be possible to show a larger section of the area indicated by the map?” said Nova.

“I don’t know, but it’s a good question. Let me see.” He studied the bow and the press. “Hmmm…this might be a possibility.” He turned the wrench of the press, which decreased the distance between the top and bottom wheels that were applying pressure to the limbs of the bow. The map zoomed in. “Ah, that’s it. But I turned it in the wrong direction.” He turned the wrench the other way. The map zoomed out. “This is brilliant. The information for the image must be stored in the limbs of the bow. The wheels of the press probably act as some kind of sensor or scanning device.”

“Yes, but look. I can see what it’s displaying now,” said Nova. “The map is facing south, instead of north. The chain of mountains on the left is the Tyenar Range, the center depicts the Desert of Vortelan, and what we see on the right are the Covasin Mountains. That blue smudge on the very right, beyond the Covasins, must be part of the Sea of Ventara. I…I’ve never been that far west. It would be wonderful to just once see Piral’s largest body of water,” she whispered. “I’ve heard you can’t see to the other side when you stand on the shore, and when it storms, the waves are so enormous they’ll sweep you off your feet.”

“Who’s the romantic now?” said Vodana, with a smile in Nova’s direction. Nova returned the smile along with a jab of her elbow.

“Let’s see where this map takes us.” Vilam turned the wrench to zoom in. The map centered on an outcrop of the Tyenar Mountains growing into the Desert of Vortelan between the eastern and western mountain ranges.

The three women looked at each other. “Malentisa,” they said in unison.

“Ah, so that’s the famed Malentisa I’ve heard so much about,” said Vilam.

“You know of it?” the Lady asked.

“Yes. It’s supposedly the home of the Elinar.”

“Well, it was their home. They disappeared a thousand years ago. But Malentisa’s location was never a secret. We’ve always known where it was. There are reports that during the height of its power, it harbored an extraordinary underground city. Even in that time it was a legend unto itself, because our people were hardly ever invited into it. It’s rumored the Elinar were very private. But today it’s nothing more than an enormous pile of ruins. Nobody ever goes there anymore. Some people even believe it’s haunted because of the terrible things that happened there.”

“Oh,” Vilam said, feeling a bit disappointed. “I was hoping I was onto something.”

“Maybe you are,” Vodana answered. “What are those two symbols over there?”

Everyone stared at the map. Near the end of the outcropping and leading west into the desert, they saw a small icon. A second icon was placed near the exact center of the map. Vilam cranked the wrench to zoom in a bit more.

“Why, that’s the ancient Elinian symbol for the Demantar!” said Nova, pointing to the symbol on the right. She must have seen the perplexed expression on Vilam’s face and continued, “Even in the days of the Three Races, there was only one language on all of Piral, but our writing developed along completely different lines. We developed an alphabetic form of written communication, as you well know, but the Elinar preferred a symbolic script, usually employing one symbol for each word or phrase. In order to decipher even a simple text, it was necessary to discern thousands of characters, which accommodated the Elinar’s preference for sophistication. This symbol on the map was their sign for the Demantar. Interestingly enough, there are no records of the Demantar using any form of verbal or written communication. Many people therefore felt they were just brainless, fire-breathing beasts, a theory which I, personally, can’t support.”

“Interesting,” the Lady said.

“What’s interesting?” said Vilam.

“Well, one of Nevacad’s prophecies says his bow will lead the Emissary to the Demantar. But I never imagined the prophecy should be interpreted quite so literally.”

“Could it be true?” Vodana whispered. She was still staring at the map, but at the other symbol at its very center.

The Lady glanced back at the map to examine the second symbol more closely. “Yes, it’s possible.”

Vilam looked from one to the other. “I don’t mean to pry, but I would be interested in learning what you’ve discovered.”

Nova turned to him, her eyes bright. “The Fountains of Malentisa. It was believed the Elinar had magical fountains deep below the caverns of the city that possessed the most magnificent regenerative properties. They’re only rumors, though. No prophecy has ever mentioned them. It’s remarkable Nevacad included them on his map.”

“If he put them there, he probably knew something we didn’t. Is it alright with all of you if I switch the map off?” They all nodded, and Vilam tapped the base of the press. The map disappeared instantly. “I’d like to leave these instruments here until we return this evening. Is that alright?”

“Yes, of course,” said the Lady.

“I wonder,” said Nova, her eyes unfocused. “If the prophecy regarding the Bow leading the Emissary to the Demantar was intended to be interpreted so literally, what about the prophecies regarding the Sword, or the Admonition, for that matter?”

“That’s an interesting question, Nova,” said the Lady. “But maybe we shouldn’t be speculating quite so much at this point. We have neither the Sword nor the Admonition.”

“What’s this about the Sword and an Admonition?” Vilam asked.

“I’m sorry, Vilam,” said Nova. “I keep forgetting there are points in our history you might not be familiar with. Would you like me to explain?”

“Yes, gladly, if it doesn’t take too long.”

“Did you know that the asteroid that fell from the heavens during the Cataclysm crashed in the Plains of Tesalin just south of the Sea of Ventara? It’s quite relevant to the story.”

“I did, yes.”

“Good. The Admonition was an artifact that was also lost to us at approximately the same time as the Sword of Selanae. After the Cataclysm, Anae commanded our artists and smiths through Her Prophets to construct the Sword and the Admonition from the remains of the asteroid. Both were forged in the asteroid’s crater. The Admonition must have been huge, as large as this manse, from what’s written of it. They were transporting it to Travis when the earth trembled, and an area thousands of armlengths around the Admonition began to sink. The people were so terrified they left the Admonition where it was and fled.”

“But an earthquake doesn’t usually last that long. They probably could have continued with the transport soon after that,” said Vilam.

“I can’t tell you what exactly happened back then,” said Nova. “Things sometimes seem different from our perspective, and we always know better after the fact. You also mustn’t forget

that people back then had never experienced an earthquake. That might be considered an extenuating circumstance."

"I guess that's true," said Vilam.

"Anyway, there were earthquakes on and off for months, and the landscape changed accordingly. The war against darkness was still raging, so nobody had the time to look for the Admonition. When they finally got around to it several years later, everything in an area of thousands of square leagues was overgrown with vegetation, and a search became impossible. The artifact is believed to be somewhere near the western slopes of the Covasins."

"Hmmm…the quakes must have been a result of the tension that developed in Piral's crust after the asteroid's impact. How large do you believe the asteroid was?"

"I believe its length was estimated at a league and its width at a quarter to half a league. Of course, it could have been larger, but much of it was pulverized by the impact."

"And what was its effect?"

"Devastating. Much dust was thrown into the atmosphere. Velana was red and dim for many weeks, and it rained very much. The Chronicles of Cades in the *Selani s'Ulavan* report that all of Piral used to be one marvelous paradise. But the climate changed after the Cataclysm, giving us extreme seasons, as we have now, and a diversified troposphere, resulting in hot, arid deserts on the one hand, icy wastelands on the other, and many variations in between. I'm grateful our climate here is still quite mild."

"Thank you for filling me in. You were fortunate the asteroid didn't do more damage. But what did you mean by a literal interpretation of the prophecies regarding these artifacts?"

"Well, the prophets said even if Anae were to one day punish us again and obliterate Piral because of our continued iniquity, She won't completely destroy Her people. She will lay open the paths of the cosmos, and the Sword of Selanae and the Admonition will show us the way to our new home: Chyoradan, the 'Heavenly Paradise.' I always believed these prophecies were meant metaphorically, but now…"

"Ah, I see. You believe Chyoradan might be shown to you in a similar manner as the Prophet's Bow is supposed to show me the way to the Demantar?"

"Maybe." The three women exchanged significant glances.

Vilam's gaze darted back and forth between them. "What? What did I do now?"

The Lady smiled at him. “You said the Bow would show you the way to the Demantar. But I believe the prophecy states it will show the Emissary the way.”

“Uh, well, yes, sorry.”

“Oh, no, it’s perfectly alright. For us, the situation is quite clear. After the events in the tavern last night, which have been recounted to me in great detail by various parties, there can no longer be any doubt. We’re just grateful you’re adjusting to the situation so well.”

“Well, I wouldn’t put it quite—” Suddenly, a thought occurred to him, and he felt his expression turn stony. “Just a moment. I know you’re expecting me to find the Demantar, the Elinar, and the Sword of Selanae. But please don’t tell me you also want me to find this…this Admonition?”

“No, of course not,” said Nova, but she seemed uneasy.

Vilam let the air he had been holding in his lungs escape in a loud rush. “Anae be thanked for that.”

“Vilam, I promised we would be honest with you,” said Nova, “so there’s something I need to tell you. But you may want to brace yourself.”

“Alright,” said Vilam, feeling queasy at this announcement.

“First, the easy part,” said Nova. “The prophets don’t say you will find the Elinar or the Sword. They only say they will be restored to us when you arrive. In the case of the Demantar, the prophets say you will be led to them. Also, the prophets say nothing about you finding the Admonition.” Nova took a deep breath, fixed him with her gaze, and said in a soft voice, “Vilam, they say that particular task will be accomplished by the *Covasatal*, the Traveleress, your wife.”

Vilam stared at her with his mouth agape. “My…wife.”

At the sight of his face, the three women could hardly contain themselves. A laugh actually erupted from Vodana before she could cover it with her hand, and Nova and the Lady had to suppress a chuckle. “I’m so sorry,” said Nova, touching his arm. “I know you’ve been through a lot in the past days, and we really don’t mean to laugh.” With a vague smile, she added, “Although you may have done the same if you had seen the look on your face.”

As Vilam emerged from his daze, he felt annoyed. “Alright, I admit, I must have looked pretty, uh…ridiculous. But what’s all this about a wife?”

Nova looked him in the eye and said in a serious tone, “The Prophets say you and your wife will both exhibit a distinct sign that will distinguish you as being one with the Three Races. That’s

why your union will mark the beginning of a long and lasting peace between the Three, although there will still be discord among the Selani for a long time."

"Do the *Selani s'Ulavan* really use the term 'Three Races'?" said Vilam. He realized too late that he probably shouldn't have mentioned it, but he was still annoyed with them.

"No, actually, you're right," said Nova, "The 'Three Races' is a theological term that was introduced because so many passages mention the Three together. Why do you ask?"

"No particular reason," he said.

Nova gave him a sorrowful glance. "I wish you could find it in your heart to be more truthful with us. But I do understand if you don't quite trust us yet, especially after our dreadful behavior just now."

"And I'm sorry, too. I was using the question to get back at you. That wasn't very mature of me."

"Thank you, Vilam, for being honest. And I understand," said Nova.

"You have to know," said Vilam, "there are things I just can't, or shouldn't tell you. It's sometimes necessary for people to discover the truth in their own time."

"That's actually very wise, Vilam," said Vodana.

"I agree," said the Lady. "But come, my friend, if we want to continue this discussion, why don't we have a seat?" They moved to the other end of the parlor. Vilam and Vodana again took the sofa and the Lady her chair. Nova decided on the carpet instead of the footstool. "We're very grateful you brought the bow with you, Vilam," the Lady continued. "Thank you for showing us what you've discovered."

"You're most welcome. I was very glad for your expertise in interpreting the map."

"*Tezatal*. But if you don't mind, we need to discuss another serious matter: the artifact. Nova, thank you again for informing me about the incident before you left for the tavern yesterday evening. It gave me some time to think the matter over. I was quite pleased when I discovered this morning that Vodana was staying with us. I immediately took advantage of her presence and asked her to join me to get an artist's expert opinion. We set out right after breakfast to have a good look at the artifact in the early morning light. It's needless to say we were both astonished. It's just as you described, Nova. I never would have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

“Yes, as an artist, I must say the artifact is now completely in tune with itself and its environment,” said Vodana. “That horrible, metal contraption always did bother me so. But now it’s been transformed into a thing of exquisite beauty.”

“That’s interesting,” said Vilam. “Those were exactly Soshia’s sentiments.”

Vodana shot him a sympathetic glance. “In that case, I really do wish I could have had the chance to know her.”

“Alright,” said the Lady, “but the question is: What does this imply? What do you think, Nova? Will Catyana’s parents allow her to join the Order?”

“I’m sure Catyana’s parents want only what’s best for her,” said Nova. “They’re such dear people. I’m fairly certain the reason they invited me for the midday meal today is because they wish to discuss the matter.”

“Well, we’ll discuss that point when you know more. It’s apparent Catyana’s abilities are extraordinary. With her gentle frame of mind and her tender heart, she would be a real asset to the Selanian Order. On the other hand, this event signifies a sensational breakthrough in the art of Induction, with or without Catyana. And it seems you, Vilam, played a key role in its advent. Would you be so kind as to explain again the resonance technique you described to Catyana?”

Vilam pressed his lips into a thin line. Was Catyana and the artifact all they could think about? “What do you want me to say?”

“Nova already gave me a detailed report this morning on what transpired yesterday and what you said to her and Catyana. Could you please just describe in your own words what you meant and why you said what you did?”

“I was kind of preoccupied with the state Soshia was in at the time,” said Vilam, feeling as if he had bitten into a lemon.

“Oh, yes, of course,” said the Lady. “I’m sorry, that was a bit insensitive of me.”

“It’s obvious whatever you told Catyana to do had a very adverse effect on poor Soshia,” said Nova. “When I asked Mara about it, she told me she believed they were both sensitive to changes in the ethereal currents, although Soshia more so than Mara. But I still believe Mara was holding something back. Vilam, if you could give us more information about what Catyana did, it might help us understand what happened to Soshia.”

The Lady gave Nova a relieved look.

Vilam nodded. “Alright, the way I understand it, it’s always been a problem for you to transform objects from one pattern to another because of the internal resistance inherent to the pattern itself, similar to the cohesive forces of an atomic nucleus, only on a lower, subquantum level. The resistance can be circumvented by using alternating inductive processes, kind of like an alternating electric current. When the alternating inductive process reaches the correct frequency, it creates a trans-dimensional, telatian field. It’s like the plasmatic state of matter, in which charged particles become unbound. But in this state, it’s not just atomic particles, but time, space, energy, and matter that are diverted, allowing the object’s ethereal pattern to be changed. It isn’t really that difficult once you’ve grasped the basic principle.”

The room had become very quiet, and the three women stared at him in astonishment. “Why, Vilam, I never realized what an expert you are in the sciences,” Vodana finally said.

“Well, I wouldn’t call myself an expert. I’m more the engineering type. I employ the underlying theories to create practical applications. But that implies a good working knowledge of the fundamental concepts.”

“Vilam, you used a few terms we don’t understand,” the Lady Utalya said. “Could you, for instance, explain to us what you mean by a ‘subquantum level’ or a ‘trans-dimensional, telatian field’? We’ve never heard of such concepts.”

For the first time, Vilam wondered if he had done the right thing by helping Catyana. Had he violated the Temporal Displacement Directive by disclosing such information? Why hadn’t he thought of this before? But it was far too late. They already believed he was the Emissary, for crying out loud! “I’m very sorry, but that’s something you’ll need to learn in your own time,” he finally admitted.

“Alright,” said the Lady, “we can accept that and, as always, we won’t press you further in this matter. But would you be prepared to instruct us in the basic concepts of this new technique, as you did Catyana?”

Vilam hesitated. If he thought about it, any damage he might have inflicted on this timeline had already been done. Besides, Catyana’s ability was so far advanced it would only have been a matter of time before she discovered the technique herself. She had used an alternating inductive process to change the artifact’s corten steel to platinum without his help. As a matter of fact, if he wasn’t mistaken, the Selanian Order’s discovery of the inductive pulse dated from approximately this

time. Could Anae actually be using him to speed these things along? Might there even be some truth to these people's belief that he was the Emissary?

He recoiled at the thought. He didn't want that kind of responsibility.

The silence was becoming awkward. The women were watching him curiously, so he took a deep breath. "Alright, if I can be of any help to you, I'd be glad to be of service."

"That's very kind of you, Vilam," said the Lady Utalya, "and we're very grateful."

"Vilam, if you don't mind my continuing on the subject," said Nova, "I find the concept quite fascinating. When you explained to Catyana what to do yesterday, you mentioned she had to feel for the object's heartbeat. Does that mean every object has its own pulse, or frequency? Almost like every object has its own pattern? It seemed that way when Catyana attempted it."

"Yes, exactly. As a matter of fact, it has great similarity with resonance phenomena. You know, when you pluck one string of a harp, the other strings swing along with it, depending on their various harmonics?"

Vodana nodded in agreement.

"So, all we really need to do is find each object's underlying inductive harmonic," Nova said. "It sounds simple."

"Well, as I said, it really isn't that difficult. Although I was amazed at how quickly Catyana grasped the concept. I hardly had to tell her what to do. The tricky part is using the pulse field once it's been induced and turning it upon the object to change the pattern of the ethereal substrate. Catyana mastered it brilliantly. But now I have a question."

"Of course," said Nova.

"What exactly happened to Soshia at the artifact?"

Nova took a deep breath as she pondered the question. "I'm really sorry, Vilam, but I'm just not sure. I need more information. But if I understand correctly what Catyana was doing to the substrate, she must have had a massive influence on the ethereal currents. I'm certain the effects would have been felt for hundreds of leagues in all directions, like ripples when you throw a rock into a lake. Just think what it would have been like to be right at the origin of such a force, especially if you were sensitive to it. I can't imagine what poor Soshia went through."

Vilam nodded. "Thank you, Nova. I appreciate your being so candid with me."

The Lady sighed. “I suppose I’ll need to write another report and send it on to Travis with the next courier. Let me express again how immensely grateful we are to you, Vilam. But now I have another matter I would like to place before you. Do you have any plans for the next few weeks?”

“Not really,” he answered carefully.

“Good. We would like to invite you to join our delegation to Tolares and maybe even return with us to Travis after that. We believe it would be, um…wise if we could remain together for a while longer after everything that has happened.”

“Well, I had actually planned to ask if I could join you, that is, if you didn’t feel I was being too much of a burden.”

The three women again glanced at each other, but this time they seemed relieved. Nova said, “Vilam, we would very much enjoy having you with us. But before you commit to such a journey, what about Soshia’s funeral? We’re leaving tomorrow morning, and the funeral won’t be until the day after.”

“I’ve thought of that, and I believe Soshia and I have already said our good-byes. Besides, it might ruin the service if the supposed Emissary were to participate and the garden were overrun with spectators. I’ll visit her grave when we return this way.”

“Good,” said Nova, “I’m glad you’re coming with us. Thank you.”

“No, thank you. I’m honored you wish to have me with you.”

“I wouldn’t be, if I were you,” Vodana said, a merry twinkle in her eyes. “You don’t know what horrific ideas we came up with to keep you with us if you had declined. We would have tried anything, from drugging you to seducing you to marry one of us.”

“Vodana!” said Nova.

“What? We were terrified! Since none of us exhibit any sign of being one with the Three Races, we felt the one who had to marry you would probably soon be struck down by the Almighty in order to make room for the one She has ordained for you.”

“Oh, Vodana, please stop!” said Nova, shooting an anxious glance in Vilam’s direction.

Vodana hesitated. “Oh, no. That really was extremely indelicate of me. I’m so sorry Vilam.” She nodded to Nova. “Alright, little sister, I promise to be more mindful of my words from here on in. But I still think you should lighten up.”

“Vodana, I feel quite at ease. You know I’m—”

"Yes, I know exactly who and what you are," Vodana interjected. "I'm your sister, aren't I? But that doesn't mean you have to lock yourself up in a cage of solemnity."

"Well, I'm not you, Vodana. Please stop trying to turn me into something I'm not."

"Nova, I can't believe that, after all these years, you still—"

"Stop it, Vodana, just stop it!" Nova shouted. "*Teva'lin,* sister, what do you want? Would you rather it had been you?" She turned her glistening eyes away and buried her face in her hands.

Vodana stared at her sister and swallowed. "Oh, Nova, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Oh, really! Then what exactly did you mean?" said Nova, her eyes ablaze, despite her tears.

"Please, Nova, believe me. I really am sorry. It's just that…sometimes, when I look at you, I feel so…so helpless."

Nova's glance softened. "Vodana, it's been more than twenty years. Don't you think I've learned to live with it, one way or another? I'm not a child anymore."

Vodana looked at her sister with worry in her eyes. "I'm not always so sure. Somehow, you'll always just be my little baby sister. And it seems there's still so much pain…"

"Yes, sister, there still is much pain. There's no getting around it. I just have to deal with it when the memories surface. But, Vodana, there's also so much joy, and beauty, and wonder. Please, don't keep picking on me because I'm not as perfectly beautiful and full of joy as your artistic sagacity might wish. Can't you just accept me for what I am?"

Vodana knelt in front of her and took her hands. "Dearest Tinasa, I am trying. Please believe how much I'm trying. Maybe we just need to learn to be more patient with each other. And, Nova, you are beautiful." She caressed her cheek and took out a handkerchief with which she wiped away her sister's tears.

"Well, I'm glad you two have finally gotten that out of your system," the Lady Utalya said. "It's been worrying the girls all morning. They even sent Tanola to come see me about it."

The two sisters looked up at her in surprise.

"Well, what did you expect?" the Lady said. "We aren't training you girls for nothing, are we? If they hadn't sensed what was going on, I would have thrown the whole lot out and started over with someone worth the effort."

It seemed Vodana could appreciate the Lady's humor and grinned up at her. "Thank you for your forbearance, Utalya, with two such cantankerous fiends as us."

"Yes, two very young, cantankerous fiends."

"Why, Utalya, I'm sixty-seven!"

"So, I've got almost a hundred years on you. We'll resume this topic when you've reached a full hundred. But I'd advise you two to spend more time together. I believe there's still a lot you need to work out. Even decades can't make up for the things you've kept buried in the past," she added discreetly.

Vodana nodded and got to her feet, pulling her sister up with her. As Vilam rose, he regarded Nova with an inquisitive glance, but Vodana saw it and intervened. "Not this time, Vilam. I'm sorry you heard even as much as you did, and it's all upon my head. Sometimes, I really am an obtuse old *cetesa*."

"Now, now, my dear, don't go overrating yourself," the Lady Utalya chided playfully.

Vodana gaped at her. "Why, Utalya, I didn't think you had it in you."

"You should know me better by now," the Lady replied. "But I do believe you need to prepare for your departure," she added, glancing at the timepiece on her desk. "Catyana would be very disappointed if you were late."

After the Lady had dismissed them, Vodana went up to her room. Nova tried to follow her sister up the stairs, but Vilam held her elbow and drew her aside.

Nova nudged his hand away from her arm. Her eyes were still glistening. "I'm sorry, Vilam, but it really is a family matter, so please don't be angry with me when I reiterate what my sister said: not this time." She dropped her gaze. "Besides, we need to leave, and I'd like to get ready."

Vilam's mouth popped open and he took a step back. "Oh, no, I'm so sorry, it's not about that."

Nova took a deep breath. "Alright, how may I be of service?"

"It's just that you, uh…deflected earlier when we were talking about Mara. May I ask why?"

Nova probed him with her eyes and sighed. "I should have known it would just strengthen your resolve. But please, Vilam, there's much more to this situation than you realize. I beg you to trust me when I tell you not to pursue it."

Vilam swallowed. "Alright, I promise I won't investigate. But I'll be honest with you: I can't swear I won't be compelled to follow any leads if I somehow just…stumbled across them."

"And I'll be honest with you: nothing good will come of it if you should decide to follow such leads. This mystery will and must unravel of its own accord, and believe me, it already is. As a matter of fact, I'm fairly certain we'll know more by the end of the day."

Vilam nodded. “Alright, I don’t know how you can be so certain of that, but I can definitely give you till the end of the day.”

“Thank you, Vilam.” Nova put her hand on his arm and gave it a gentle squeeze before proceeding up the stairs.

Vilam stood there for a while, pondering what Nova had just told him, but finally decided to go outside and wait in the garden. He was soon joined by Mara, Natilya, and Tanola. Nova and Vodana returned a short time later wearing their summer cloaks, and the group left for their rendezvous, heading northeast along back roads.

33. The Market

Bejad pressed through the unaccustomed masses of Tolares’s market with Netira, trying to steer her and her steed in the right direction. He couldn’t believe how difficult it had become. The market in Tolares was usually quite peaceful and certainly no comparison to the chaotic multitudes he had to contend with in Divestelan.

Of course, Tolares was fairly busy on any day of the year. Although Travis was the legislative capital of the world, Tolares was undoubtedly its economic center. The city was within a comfortable day’s journey of the western border and constituted a crossroad between Navaresa in the Northern Forests and Lake Elinas in the south, with the east- and west-bound Suviltan Highway passing directly by the market. Tolares’s dignitaries had taken advantage of the strategically significant location and gradually transformed the city into the progressive metropolis it was today.

With so much going for it, Tolares had always been prosperous and boasted more than two hundred thousand inhabitants, and its market—well known for its diversity, a diversity which bordered on opulence—was a typical example of its abounding affluence. But with the conference only three days away, Bejad realized the city was bursting at its seams, and the market seemed to have become a madhouse.

Netira’s bewilderment amused him. She had obviously never seen a market of this size. He could see her senses were overwhelmed by the sheer volume of merchandise on display as she led her chyeves through the dense crowd. The people around them eyed the pair curiously. Although it wasn’t unusual to see members of the Selanian Order leading a valuable mount, the nobility of this steed far surpassed the norm.

They had arrived in Tolares around six o'clock, right after sunrise, just as Bejad had predicted. Their first stop had been the Selanian Order's headquarters, which was located south of the city near the new conference building. The priestess in charge of the women's section had taken an immediate liking to the practical-minded Netira. She had been more than happy to aid a young maiden in distress by helping her escape the rumored poverty and horror of the western provinces, especially since the girl displayed such a fervent desire to join the Order.

Netira had been registered and instated as an initiate, the year-long trial period preceding the status of full acolyte. This gave the Order enough time to check her background and test her integrity and resolve, and the initiate time to reconsider. Since Netira was still well below the Age of Maturity and couldn't produce a sanctioned guardian to vouch for her, a letter to her parents was dispatched by courier, asking for their written consent. Then she had been assigned quarters with another initiate, where she was allowed to freshen up after her arduous journey and change into her new robes.

Bejad had received quarters in the men's section, where he had washed and changed and taken a nap. His first and foremost duty had then been to contact the High Priestess's liaison officer in Tolares. The officer told him the High Priestess would be arriving in Tolares by tomorrow evening. Since his message was urgent and concerned an extraction, she would probably wish to see him immediately. He would be notified regarding the time of the audience as soon as possible.

About half an hour ago, he had met with Netira and taken her into the city to help her find a reputable merchant who would give her a fair price for her chyeves. They were therefore now clothed in the cream-colored robes and black cloaks of the Selanian Order, and Bejad had a bronze brooch pinned to his robe, identifying him as a deacon.

They had reached the part of the market dedicated to pets, domestic animals, and livestock. Although the noise and smell couldn't possibly compare to Divestelan, Netira appeared tense but enthusiastic. "Oh, Bejad, look! What are those beautiful birds over there? They have such vivid colors!"

Bejad glanced in the direction she was pointing and smiled. "Those are *jitesi*. They're originally found in the forests south and east of the Plains of Tesalin."

"Where the *porodi* are from?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, there's a booth selling *porodi*, right over there," he replied, pointing at cages containing the peculiar squirrels with the golden pelt.

“Oh, aren’t they just adorable? I’ve always wished I could have one.”

“They cost a small fortune. But there are farms around the Sea of Ventara that have taken up breeding them. If they’re successful, the prices will probably be dropping.”

Netira stared at him in dismay. “Breeding *porodi*? But then they’d have to lock them up, the poor things. Such animals don’t belong in cages.” She shook her head. “I don’t believe this. Some people will do anything for money.”

“Well, that depends. I’ve heard there are breeders who build huge enclosures so the animals feel comfortable.”

“Still, I just don’t think it’s right.” She marched by the booths looking straight ahead, deliberately ignoring them. Bejad grinned at her vehemence. He led her to the area where the chyeves merchants had their stalls. Just before they reached them, Netira stopped and pressed the fingers of her free hand against her temple.

“Are you alright?” Bejad asked in concern.

She smiled up at him, but her expression appeared strained. “Yes, I’m fine. Everything’s so different from what I expected.” She sighed. “I suppose it’s just all the noise and the people. I’m not used to it.”

“I understand. Look, here are the chyevi. Let’s get this over with so we can leave.”

She nodded, and Bejad steered her toward the stall of a merchant he knew well. The businessman had his back turned to them and was brushing down one of his animals. Even seen from behind, it was evident the man was a giant with broad shoulders, muscular arms, wild, wavy hair, and a full, unkempt beard. “You call that old nag a chyeves?” Bejad called with a grin.

The merchant spun around, his brow bristling dangerously. When he saw who had addressed him, his face lit up. “Bejad, you old scoundrel!”

The two men flung themselves at each other, slapping each other’s backs and laughing. Bejad held his friend out at arm’s length. “Hyumosen, it’s good to see you. How long has it been?”

“It must be two years, at the least. When did you get in?”

“Just this morning.”

“Will you be staying?”

“Well, certainly for a few days. I might be going back to Travis after that.”

“I see. How about a round at Rotesil’s tavern?”

“We can do better than that. It’s almost noon. How about a midday meal? It’s on me.”

"That's a word, my friend."

Netira had been watching the reunion with a demure smile and Bejad now heard her discreetly clear her throat.

"Who is this charming companion of yours?" Hyumosen asked, glancing in Netira's direction. His smile faded when he saw the steed she was holding. *"Tev'anar!"*

"Yes, my friend. That's exactly the reason we've come to you," Bejad answered. "Hyumosen, this is Netira. She's just joined the Order and would like to sell this chyeves so she can send the money to her parents. Are you interested?"

"I'm pleased to meet you, Netira. But you can't be serious. Where did you get this extraordinary animal?"

"It was a gift to Netira's family from a prominent acquaintance," said Bejad. "I'm afraid I can't tell you more than that."

Hyumosen circled the chyeves and examined it from all sides. "I can't believe my eyes—a Sumelian steed. I've seldom seen its like. If it had been anyone but you, Bejad, I would have assumed foul play was involved." He glanced at his friend. "I take it everything's in order?"

"Yes, believe me. Nobody will come looking for this chyeves. The transaction would be legitimate."

Hyumosen gazed over at Netira, assessing her carefully. She returned his glance innocently enough. It was apparent he couldn't imagine having any problems with such an inexperienced young maiden. "Alright, I'll give you twenty *ayjeni* for this steed, my dear," he said, commencing the negotiations. "You must agree that's a reasonable price,"

"Yes," she answered, "that is a reasonable price. But I'm afraid I can't let you have him for less than thirty-five."

"Thirty-five *ayjeni!* Girl, are you out of your mind? Your father would be fortunate to earn that much in as many years! Twenty-five."

"That may be true, my friend. But you know as well as I that Lord Tolares just purchased two thoroughbred Tesalian mares a week ago. Lord Vetena doesn't want his stables rivaled and will easily pay you fifty for a Sumelian steed. You'll still be making a most generous profit. Thirty."

Hyumosen sighed and looked over at Bejad. "That's what you get for underestimating your customer. Alright, thirty it is," he declared, turning back to Netira. "You drive a hard bargain, my friend. Where did you learn to barter like that?"

The young woman didn't flinch when Hyumosen firmly enclosed her delicate hand in his huge paw to confirm the transaction. She held his gaze without wavering. "You learn much when you grow up on a farm. And I keep my eyes and ears open."

"I didn't realize the inhabitants of the Northern Covasins were into farming," Hyumosen said.

"Northern Covasins? She's from Pitaren," said Bejad.

"Oh? Then what about her complexion?" Hyumosen asked, letting go of Netira's hand.

Bejad looked at her more closely. "You're right. I'm sorry, Netira. I've been riding with you all night and never saw it. It's difficult to judge skin tone if you're not in the sunlight. Besides, I must have grown accustomed to the darker complexion during my time in Divestelan, so it didn't catch my attention."

"Please, my friends, don't quarrel. You're both right," Netira said. She was clearly embarrassed. "You needn't apologize, Bejad. You couldn't know. My parents were originally from the mountains but moved to Pitaren before I was born. But I'm afraid to the locals, we always remained foreigners," she added sullenly.

"Well, that explains it then," said Hyumosen with a smile that didn't quite touch his eyes. "Listen, my friends, I truly appreciate your business, but you must understand that I don't carry such funds around with me. If you accompany me to the municipal treasury before we go to Rotesil's, I'll be glad to withdraw the agreed amount for you. Then we'll go and celebrate the conclusion of a successful transaction, but it'll be on me," he said with a wink in Bejad's direction.

"That's very kind of you, Hyumosen," Netira said, "but I have some pressing matters to attend to. Would it be possible for you to advance a small amount? Bejad can bring me the rest. I trust him implicitly."

Bejad rewarded her with a smile for the compliment.

"Alright, how much do you need?" Hyumosen asked. "I could advance as much as three *ayjeni*, if you like."

"Oh, no, that would be far too much. Five hundred *domani* would be more than enough."

"That shouldn't be a problem. My equerry keeps the loose change around here. Let me bring him his new charge, and I'll fetch the brass."

Netira smiled at Hyumosen's words and handed him the reins.

Hyumosen fondled the fiery steed's neck, stroking the soft, curly black pelt and long, thick mane that covered the back of its neck. He turned toward the stalls. "Hey, Ludanes, get over here!

I want you to tend to this steed for me. And you'd better take good care of him, because he's worth more than you'll ever be, you no-good piece of *ate'felen!*"

Netira turned to Bejad as Hyumosen walked off with the steed in tow. "Does he always use such coarse language?" she whispered.

"Depends on who he's talking to," said Bejad with a grin. "But it's never meant to be as offensive as it sounds. Besides, you get used to it after a while. By the way, how do you know so much about what goes on between the Great Houses? Even I didn't know about Lord Tolares's mares."

"As I said, I keep my eyes and ears open. Listen, Bejad, I'm very sorry, but I really have to leave. I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am for everything you've done for me."

"Don't mention it, Netira. I did it gladly. But there is something I'd like in return."

"Oh? And what would that be?" She eyed him curiously.

"I'd like to see you again. And I don't just mean to bring you the money for the steed."

"Oh." She seemed to blush and gave him a shy glance. "Well, alright."

"Look, tomorrow is Velavides, the Holy Sabbath, and our schedules will probably be overloaded as it is. But the day after would be a good time. Could I pick you up about mid-afternoon?"

"Won't that be a problem with the head priestess? I'm not even an acolyte yet."

"No, don't worry, I know her well. I'll talk to her. Besides, with the conference and all, they usually tend to be less strict."

She nodded. "Alright. But shouldn't you be trying to get in touch with the High Priestess?"

"I've already contacted her liaison officer here in Tolares. I'll be hearing from her as soon as she arrives. All I can do until then is wait."

"Oh, I see."

"Are you sure you'll manage alone? Tolares is quite a large city."

"Yes, I'll be fine. I've always been good at finding my way around."

"Alright, then I look forward to seeing you later."

"Good-bye, Bejad."

Hyumosen returned and handed her the sum they had agreed on. She placed the coins in a small purse she kept in her robe. Then she thanked him, bade him farewell, and turned away. Bejad and Hyumosen watched the confident young woman disappear into the crowd. Their destination lay in

the opposite direction, so they turned and walked away with their arms around each other's shoulders, already engrossed in cheerful gossip.

34. Confessions

It was a beautiful day, with nothing but forests, meadows, and country lanes ahead of them as they strode northeast. Nova had taken along her basket, which contained several items she believed Catyana's family would enjoy. It also contained a package she was very secretive about and, depending on how her conversation with Catyana's parents went, she looked forward to watching Catyana's eyes grow round when she saw it.

Nova felt happier than she had been in a while, mainly because she was able to enjoy the scenic walk to the Faeren farm with her sister. How long had it been since they had done anything together? She smiled when Vodana took possession of her companions by linking arms with both of them, Nova on her left and Vilam on her right. It was so typical of her. Mara, Tanola, and Natilya were following behind and conversing quietly, although Mara seemed out of sorts and didn't participate much. Nova couldn't blame her. The loss of someone so close to her was still too fresh in Mara's memory.

"Well, my friend, you mustn't forget, they did almost marry us off," Vodana replied playfully to Vilam's inquisitive glance when she linked arms with him.

"That's still not funny, Vodana," said Nova. "Don't mind her, Vilam. She's been engaged for years now. And she's very devoted to her fiancé."

Vilam raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Who's the lucky man?"

"Just keep your eyes peeled when we get to Tolares, and you'll see him soon enough," said Nova with a laugh.

"Now, Nova, since when do we go revealing family secrets? I thought I could trust you," Vodana said in mock indignation.

"Well, I'm not the one who called myself an old *cetesa* and got chided for it by the Lady Utalya, now was I?"

"That's not true! I said I was an *obtuse* old cetesa." The sisters grinned at each other. "Anyway, I consider Vilam a good friend, after everything that's happened." Vodana tightened her hold on

his arm and gazed at him. “I don’t know, Vilam. I think I’m beginning to understand what Soshia saw in you. Somehow, a woman can feel very…secure in your presence.”

“Yes, sister, that’s the word I’ve been looking for: secure.”

“Well, I feel honored by your confidence,” Vilam said. “I just hope you won’t be too badly disappointed.”

“Not to worry, my friend,” said Vodana. “We’re always disappointed and disillusioned. It’s one of the basic facts of life. If someone or something becomes too important to us, disappointment is sure to follow.”

“Does that include disappointment in God?” he asked, bitterness rising in his voice.

Nova stared at him with wide eyes. “Yes, sometimes.”

They walked on in silence, Vodana glancing from the one to the other.

“Oh, it’s no use!” said Vilam.

“What’s no use, my friend?” said Nova.

“I know all those ridiculous arguments. I’ve used them myself so many times.”

“Which arguments?”

“Didn’t you know? It seems Anae gives us freedom of choice because He loves us and doesn’t want marionettes as His servants. Well, yada, yada, yada; blah, blah, blah. He supposedly wants genuine relationships with beings that can think for themselves. He says He wants us to make our own choices and love Him of our own accord. But what the instruction manual doesn’t tell you is how awfully hard it is to make the right choices.”

“Yes,” Nova whispered.

“Make a wrong choice and your sister dies. Make a wrong choice and your wife dies. Or someone else makes a wrong choice, maybe even deliberately, and you suffer the consequences. Now I ask you, is that truly a God of compassion, who never intervenes, no matter what happens and how bad the situation becomes?”

Vodana regarded her sister with a questioning glance. Nova responded by shaking her head, but said to Vilam, “Are you sure She never intervenes?”

He seemed to ponder the question. “Well, I wouldn’t say He never intervenes. But if He does, it’s only when He damn well pleases.”

Nova was certain Vilam felt Vodana stiffen at his words, but he apparently chose to ignore it. “Have you ever tried praying?” she asked.

“Praying? Well, what do you think? Of course I prayed. And believe me, it wasn’t just a short intercession of a few hours, or days, or weeks. No, I was down on my knees for months, but His ears were deaf to my pleas.”

“Vilam, you know I can’t give you the answer you’d like to hear.”

“Oh, yes, I know: Anae’s sovereignty. ‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?’ Or ‘indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God?’ Those are the only answers we ever get.”

“Excuse me, my friends. Would you mind if I just disengaged myself here for a moment?” said Vodana, releasing their arms and standing back.

They both turned and stared at her in surprise. “Why, what’s wrong, Vodana?” said Nova.

“Do you really think I enjoy playing the part of an undefended country between two battling nations? Is this all you do on your long, rambling walks together, argue theological points of view so Vilam can rationalize his bitterness?” She looked directly at him. “What’s eating you, anyway?”

Vilam took a deep breath, opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again and stared at the ground.

“Well, if you don’t want to answer, let me do it for you,” Vodana exclaimed, her eyes flashing. “I know we just lost Soshia, and that’s a terrible tragedy. And Nova told me you lost your wife. Alright, that must have hurt even more. But you’re not the first person these things ever happened to, and you won’t be the last. My father lost his wife in the most horrible way imaginable, and I never heard him whining about it. If your wife was a woman with any sense whatsoever, I’m sure she didn’t want you moping over her grave after she was gone, and neither did Soshia. They would have wanted you to get up and get on with your life. If it really took your wife all those months you spent howling on your knees to finally kick the bucket, then I’m sure she had time to express some kind of opinion. What did she say?”

Vilam just stared at her and swallowed.

“That’s what I thought,” Vodana said. “So, what exactly is your problem?”

Vilam remained silent, while Nova watched her sister in amazement.

“Alright, I’ll tell you what your problem is. Nova told you today that Anae possibly has a new wife in store for you, and now you’re just plain petrified, aren’t you? Afraid to fall in love again, afraid she’ll be struck down again, afraid to feel the pain again, right?”

Vilam gaped, but then nodded.

“Good. At least you have the guts to admit it. Tell me, Vilam, did your poor wife really have to listen to your whimpering all those months before she passed away? Or were you man enough to provide a bit of support during her last, difficult journey?”

Vilam gazed into her blazing eyes. “I tried,” he answered weakly.

Vodana sighed, and the fire in her eyes went out as quickly as it had come. “My friend, your life really must have been one hell of a mess.”

He shot her a disheartened glance, his bitterness momentarily consumed by Vodana’s fervor. “Well, I’m sorry I’ve disappointed you. I’m sure you despise me now.”

“Despise you?” said Nova. “Vilam, the only people who receive such passionate treatment from my sister are the ones she cares deeply about. If she despised you, she would either ignore you completely or, even worse, acknowledge her loathing by being sweetness itself.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, my friend,” said Vodana. “I’m afraid my little sister knows me a bit too well. So, for better or worse, I’m afraid you’ll have to get used to the fact that I really do care about you. As a brother, mind you. And I’m truly sorry you’ve been through so much. But please, Vilam, do try to get a grip on yourself. I sense so much potential in you, and I want to be proud of the people I care about.” Vodana again took charge of her companions by linking arms with them and dragging them forward.

Nova glanced back to see how their companions were doing. They had, of course, stopped out of necessity so they wouldn’t run into them and had witnessed most of Vodana’s discourse. The acolytes were somber, but they seemed fine. Mara, on the other hand, was pale and despondent, but she nodded to Nova to signify she would be alright and that she understood.

Nova leaned forward to look at Vilam. “I’m so sorry, Vilam. I knew my words regarding the Covasatal would affect you after your recent loss. I just didn’t realize how much.”

“That’s alright. But do you really think Anae struck Soshia down so I would be free to marry someone else?”

Nova caught a glimpse of Mara behind them, who had stopped dead in her tracks and stared at Vilam. But Vodana dragged them to a stop, too. “Oh, dear Goddess, no! This is my fault,” said Vodana. “I never should have made that stupid joke. It was completely inappropriate, and I’m truly sorry, Vilam. Please forgive me.”

“So, it’s not true?”

“Vilam,” said Mara in a quiet voice, “Soshia’s death had nothing to do with Anae. It was the deranged deed of a heart so cold, dark, and vile that—” She had to swallow to suppress her tears, but one of them spilled over and she wiped it away. “I’m sorry, I can’t talk about this right now. But please believe me, Vilam, Anae is light and joy and peace. She loves us with all Her heart and would never do something like that to us. The horrible things that happen in this world are almost always the consequences of deliberate choices made by people who couldn’t care less how much others suffer in the wake of their decisions.”

“Oh, Mara,” said Nova. She went over and hugged her. “Thank you for those words,” she whispered in her ear.

Nova returned to her two companions, and as the two groups continued toward the Faeren farm, no one seemed in the mood to resume their conversation. After a while, Vilam said, “Do you really believe Anae will force me to marry someone?”

Nova glanced at him, feeling compassion. During their walk yesterday, Nova had observed how good Soshia had been for him. She had somehow managed to keep him grounded, even when bitterness and anger had bubbled to the surface and boiled over. Now that she was gone, all barriers seemed to have been removed, and Nova felt he was coming apart at the seams.

Vodana sighed. “Oh, Vilam, for heaven’s sake, that’s not how such things work.” She looked at him in exasperation. “What kind of strange notions do you carry around regarding Anae’s inspiration?”

He seemed uncertain of himself as he gazed at her. “I guess I really don’t know.”

“Well, inspiration and prophecy can be challenging topics,” said Vodana, “but I always look at them from an artist’s point of view. When a prophecy is uttered, the prophet has usually been inspired by a momentary picture of how the situation will be at the time the prophecy is fulfilled. The prophet then attempts to paint the picture they have seen with words, but the picture doesn’t contain the events leading up to it. Since such a picture usually stands by itself, it’s often interpreted, but we can’t really understand everything about it until it actually comes to pass.”

“Yeah, right. So, how do I interpret it?”

“That’s what I’m getting at: you don’t. Interpretation and exegesis are great tools for scholars. But in the end, even the most intellectually profound interpretations aren’t going to change the way a prophecy unfolds. So when a prophet says you will have a wife, it stands to reason you’ll just fall in love and want to marry, like everyone else. You see, Anae doesn’t need to force you to

do anything. She just uses the feelings She's already planted inside of you, like a virtuoso playing a finely tuned musical instrument."

"Gosh, now I'm being played like an instrument! Be still my heart. So I guess freedom of choice just sailed out the window again. Hello-o-o, Frank Herbert."

"What in the Goddess's name are you talking about?" Vodana asked. "And who's Frank Herbert?"

Nova had to chomp down on her teeth so she wouldn't burst out laughing. "It's not quite that simple, Vilam. There are many factors involved here, and freedom of choice is just one of them. My sister was talking about personal calling and fulfillment. She's just trying to balance the equation."

"Alright, let's say we do have freedom of choice," said Vilam. "So what happens if I fall in love with the wrong woman?"

"Goodness, Vilam, fall in love as often and as violently as you like," said Vodana. "As a matter of fact, I'm beginning to believe that would be the best remedy for your condition. Find some pretty girl and court her ardently and passionately. It certainly won't have any effect on the prophecy's fulfillment."

"I did find a girl, and you saw what happened," said Vilam with a bitter smile.

"I know," said Nova in a soft voice, "and I understand you're still grieving for her. But so is Mara. Please don't just think of yourself, Vilam. Share your grief with her. It will help."

Vilam looked back and Mara managed a weak smile.

Vodana shook her head. "I seem to be making one faux pas after another today. I'm so sorry, Vilam."

Vilam nodded. "It's alright. I probably deserved it." He dropped back and stretched out his hand to Mara. She took it and gave Nova a grateful glance before putting her head on his shoulder. Vilam put his arm around her and drew her closer.

Nova and Vodana looked back at them. "There, that's better," said Vodana so only Nova could hear.

"Yes, it's interesting," said Nova. "Whenever he wallows in his grief or thinks only of his own problems, he seems to fall apart. But as soon as he has something or someone else to care for, he becomes a shining example of service to others. That's why, ultimately, I believe his heart is in the right place."

“At least you know what you have to do with him, then.”

“Yes, I have to keep him busy.

“Well, he seems to be a military man, and the worst thing for a soldier is inaction, so good luck with that.”

“Ha-ha, thank you.”

“He is your responsibility now.”

“I know. Don’t rub it in.”

“But it’s so much fun.”

“So is this.” Nova jabbed her with her elbow.

They grinned at each other.

“I’m so glad we can do that again,” said Nova. “I really missed it.”

“So did I.”

“Nova, may I ask a question?” said Vilam from behind.

Nova looked back. Mara still had her head on his shoulder, but she smiled at her. Nova returned the smile. “Of course, Vilam. Ask away.”

“How can I be sure Anae is guiding me? What do I need to do?”

“Oh, I can answer that,” said Vodana. “Have you ever tried steering a wagon that was standing still?”

“No, of course not,” said Vilam. “That would be pretty foolish.”

“Alright, what would you do?”

“Hitch a chyeves to it and get it moving.”

“Well then, get moving!” said Vodana. “How do you expect Anae to guide you if you just stand there doing nothing?”

“Yes, but how do I know it’s Anae’s voice or hand guiding me, and not something else?”

“One very simple word, my friend: experience. And you won’t get any of that just by moping around and licking your wounds.”

Vilam’s mouth worked silently.

“Come on, Vilam, spit it out. Or don’t you have the backbone for such a confession?”

He stared at her. “I guess I’m afraid of making more mistakes and being hurt again, or hurting others.”

“Well then, I suppose you’ll just have to grow up and take responsibility for your actions, like everyone else. There’s never a guarantee you won’t make any more mistakes, no matter how much experience you have. The difference between an adolescent and a mature individual isn’t the number of mistakes they make, but how they cope with the mistakes they do make. Do they cringe and whimper and crawl into some dark hole, or do they deal with the situation, learn what they can, and get on with their lives?”

“It’s not always that simple,” said Nova, “but Vodana is right, Vilam. You must learn to listen to your heart and do what you feel is the right thing to do. There never will be a guarantee that things will develop the way you plan them. But if you really wish to do Anae’s bidding, and your heart remains at peace, then you should proceed, even if the result turns out to be very painful. That’s a risk we all have to take.”

“Interesting,” said Vilam.

“What’s interesting?” said Nova.

“Soshia said something similar to me when she came to say good-bye.”

“Soshia said good-bye? When did she do that?”

“In a dream last night.”

Mara looked up at him. “You saw her, too? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Nova stared at them. “You both saw Soshia in a dream last night?”

Mara and Vilam nodded.

“Mara, may I ask what you dreamed?” said Nova.

“We were in a beautiful park with strange plants and flowers the likes of which I have never seen before. There was a large tree with sweeping pendulous branches and thin leaves that flickered in the breeze. Soshia said we were on *Halena Yazoral*, but at a time many years from now.”

“How astonishing!” said Nova.

“She just hugged me and wanted to say good-bye. But before she left, she told me she wanted Vilam to have her amethyst pendant. When I woke up, Soshia was no longer wearing it. The pendant was gone.”

“And what did you dream, Vilam?” said Nova.

“I was in the same park Mara described, but I was familiar with it because I had seen pictures of it before.”

They all stared at him. “Really! Please continue,” said Nova.

“Soshia said good-bye to me, too, but then she gave me her pendant wrapped in her handkerchief. She said it was what she had lost to me, to keep it safe, and to give it to the one I love. That person would know what to do with it when the time came. Then she said what you said, Nova. She told me to listen to my heart. It would know my wood flower when I see her. When I opened my eyes, I was in my bed in the tavern and had the handkerchief with the pendant in my hand.”

Nova hesitated. “Did you say ‘wood flower’?”

“Yes, a *venora*. I thought it was strange at the time.”

“Soshia said your heart would know your *Venora* when you saw her?”

“Yes.”

Nova realized that she, Vodana, Tanola, and Natilya had all come to a standstill and were gaping at each other. Mara and Vilam looked helplessly from the one to the other.

“What’s going on?” said Vilam.

“Oh, nothing to worry about,” said Nova. “It’s just so strange, is all.”

“Yes, it is,” said Vilam, shooting her a quizzical glance.

“What’s particularly astonishing is that you both saw Soshia in the same place,” said Nova, steering away from the dangerous subject as quickly as possible. “And it seems the pendant was somehow transferred from the workshop at the manse to your room in Folan’s tavern. That’s remarkable!”

“Personally, I’m inclined to believe a higher power was at work,” said Vodana.

“I’m sure of that,” said Mara. “I was sure of it even when Soshia was talking to me in my dream.”

“We really need to move along or we’ll be late,” said Nova. She pulled Vodana forward and the three parties continued their journey.

“Do you believe what Vilam just told us?” whispered Vodana

“I almost have to,” said Nova. “It would be too much of a coincidence otherwise. It’s as if Anae were trying to make us understand that She’s at work here. And there’s no way Vilam could know about Venora.”

“Do you really believe she could be the Covasatal?” said Vodana.

“You know her better than I do. She’s your friend, after all.”

“Yes, but she’s always held you in the highest regard.”

“I’m sure that’s mainly thanks to you, and I truly appreciate it,” said Nova. “To be honest, I don’t know what I would have done without her help these past five years. But if everything goes as planned, we should arrive at His Excellency’s residence in Tolares by tomorrow evening. We’ll just have to wait until we get there and see how things develop.”

“Oh, my, how will I ever be able to keep my mouth shut about this?”

“I’ll stitch it closed for you, if that would help,” said Nova with a playful smile.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, it’s been my dream since I was a little girl.”

“Nova, or Vodana, one more question, please.”

“What is it, Vilam?” said Vodana. Nova felt her sister’s tone was a tad impatient.

“How do you learn to listen to your heart?”

Mara looked up at him. “You have to stop using the wrong muscles.”

“What do you mean?” said Vilam.

“If you want to run, you shouldn’t use your arm muscles to do it,” said Mara. “Well, you can, but it would be extremely difficult. You run by using your leg muscles. It’s the same if you want to listen to your heart. You have to stop letting your mind get in the way.”

“That sounds awfully risky.”

“It is,” said Mara, “and at first you’ll make a lot of mistakes. But it’s like Vodana said earlier, it takes experience. Nova said something important yesterday, too. You want to achieve balance between your mind and your heart. But you’ll never achieve that balance if you don’t give your heart a chance.”

“I don’t know if I can hear my heart,” said Vilam. “I always feel there are too many things in the way, cluttering it up.”

“Then maybe Anae has to show your heart something that will make it sing so loud you can finally hear it,” said Mara. “Something like a wood flower, perhaps?” She gave him an impish smile.

Nova peered around and saw the others were all smiling, too. Bravo, Mara! It was the first time Nova had seen a genuine smile from her since Soshia had died.

“Granted,” said Vilam, returning Mara’s smile. “But when will you find your wood flower?”

Mara sighed. “My heart already belongs to another.”

“Really! Who’s the lucky guy?”

“Men!” said Mara, shaking her head. “They walk around in the world with open eyes and yet they see nothing. Soshia even told you yesterday. Weren’t you listening? Oh, right, you were with Soshia. Of course you weren’t listening.” There was a weak smile on her lips.

“There is another way to remove clutter from your heart,” said Vodana, “but it’s probably not the most pleasant.”

“Oh? And what’s that?” said Vilam.

“By chipping away at it,” said Vodana. “I compare it to a sculpture. The artifact is there, but you have to chip away at the surrounding stone until it becomes visible. I believe that’s what Anae does with us. We’re Her works of art, and She chisels and hones away at us until we’re beautifully polished artifacts, glowing in Her light, every one of us completely unique. But it takes time, and there’s often much pain involved in the process.”

“I’ll say,” Vilam responded bitterly.

Vodana looked back at him. “Come now, Vilam, stop sniveling and carry your share of the burden with dignity. I doubt our Goddess has given you more than you can handle. Unless, of course, you’re deliberately attempting to evade your destiny. Then you would be getting what you deserved.”

“Well, I guess I was running away for a while, but not anymore. At least I don’t think so. Although I do believe the load I was asked to carry was somewhat heavier than most.”

“Heavier than that of my little sister?”

Vilam fell silent and studied his feet while Nova glanced up at her sister and tightened her hold on her arm.

“Even going on the little I’ve heard, I don’t think I’d ever want to be the judge of that,” Vilam declared somberly. “But I really wonder why some people have to carry such overwhelming burdens, and others don’t.”

“My goodness, Vilam, isn’t that clear?” said Vodana. “First of all, there are so many different types of people. You wouldn’t give a five-year-old child a fifty-pound bag to haul, would you? There are some very sensitive souls out there. You could use a very fine tool on them, and even so, you might cause irreparable damage. And then there are some on which you could pound away with a sledgehammer and you would hardly scratch their surface. On the other hand, there is again the question of your personal calling. I believe a serviceable sword would need to be honed until it was a finely tuned instrument, but how much honing do you need for an anvil?”

“Thank you, Vodana, you really have a point there. Why is it you can explain things so well, even though it’s your sister who is in the Order?”

“My sister’s alright, Vilam. It’s just that Nova is probably more rational than I am, and more discreet in her approach. I’m usually more direct, as you’ve undoubtedly noticed. And as an artist, I’m more intuitive and see things from an artist’s perspective. As a priestess, or should I say, a potential priestess, Nova must think clearly and logically and formulate accurately. She’s more of a scientist than an artist—at least that’s my personal opinion.”

“Well, I never!” said Nova playfully. “Thank you, dearest sister, for telling me who I am.”

“I believe I stated that it is my personal opinion.”

“Vodana, you know your opinion has always been important to me.”

“Yes, dearest, and you can’t believe how sorry I am that I’ve been away so often. Utalya was right; there’s a lot I’ve kept buried. I confess, I have been keeping you at a distance all these years. I guess that’s the real reason I was away on so many extended tours or kept myself busy practicing until I dropped half dead. I just couldn’t cope with the situation, especially when I saw you in such agony. I’m so sorry, Tinasa.”

“Oh, Vodana, don’t you think I know why you stayed away? But look what Anae has made of it: She’s given us one of the greatest artists the world has ever seen. Knowing that has been such a consolation to me.”

“A consolation? Little sister, you’re so magnanimous. But you shouldn’t have had to content yourself with consolations.” She sighed. “I sometimes wonder if it was all really worth it.”

Nova leaned her head against her sister’s shoulder. “I love you, and that will never change, no matter what has happened in the past or will happen in the future.”

“Damn, I’m such a jerk,” Vilam mumbled to himself.

“Why do you say that, Vilam?” Vodana asked, looking back.

“Listening to you, I realize how much pain and anguish there must be around me, but all I ever do is indulge in my own misfortune. Why am I so self-centered?”

“Good for you, Vilam! That, in itself, is already a valuable insight,” said Vodana. “But I’m afraid it’s a question you’ll have to answer for yourself. If I may give you some advice, though: Stop torturing yourself with self-doubt and open yourself to your surroundings. We often don’t find the answers to our innermost questions until we look beyond ourselves. As a matter of fact,

let's begin right now. We still have a way to go, and I don't want to waste this beautiful day groveling over such somber matters."

"I agree," said Nova. "It's such a marvelously clear day. Look, isn't that Mount Vaduras over there? Travis would be right at its foot." In a low voice, she said, "By the way, Vodana, did you see Natilya and Tanola last night when you came home?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I did. They came in just after me. They took Catyana all the way home, one hour each way, in the middle of the night. They're such sweethearts."

"I would have gladly taken her myself, but it wasn't possible."

"Oh, yes, of course. Another long, rambling walk with Vilam, right?"

"Oh, Vodana, you're impossible. But, please, tell me. What do you think of Catyana?"

"She's an absolute darling with a gentle and vulnerable heart. I'd advise you to take very good care of her." Vodana shot her a significant glance.

Nova was silent for a moment. "Yes, she does have a gentle and vulnerable heart. But I think you'll soon find there's much more to her than meets the eye." She aimed a concerned glance back at Mara. There was definitely more to her than met the eye, too. Nova could well imagine what was going on in that lonesome and wounded heart of hers, and she wished she could help her. But to do that, Mara would have to meet her halfway.

35. The Debt

Tuval and Dena urged their mounts steadily southward along the western shore of Lake Divestelan. It was almost noon, and when Tuval looked left, he saw the sun glaring down upon the dark blue waters, transforming the waves into sparkling sapphires. He and his sister were both wearing simple, dark brown cloaks. If it hadn't been for Dena's long dark hair, it might have been difficult to tell the two apart from a distance.

Dena raised her head, closed her eyes, and took a long, deep breath. "Oh, it's just so wonderful. The fragrance of the conifers blends so well with the scent of the sea. Thank you, dearest brother. I bow to your superior judgment and admit you made the right choice—for once," she added teasingly.

Tuval smiled. It had been long since he had seen her so cheerful. "I thought you'd enjoy it, although it won't be easy getting the stench of the city out of our clothes. And I still believe there

was no other choice. The highway would have been impossible, and the roads to the north have become too dangerous."

"Yes, but it'll take us at least twice as long to reach Tolares by the southern route. And since we won't be able to change our chyevi, we'll have to spare their strength. When do you think we'll get there?"

"I estimate roughly four days. When we reach the southern boundary of the lake, we'll cut across and head directly east for Elinas. From there we can take the normal route north into Tolares. I doubt we'll have any problems at that point since we'll already be in the eastern provinces. We'll probably arrive there on the second day of the conference."

"I wish we could speed things up somehow."

"Please, Dena, don't be so impatient. I'd rather get there late than not at all."

"I'm trying, brother. You know me well enough to understand. I need to feel as if I'm really doing something, and not just sitting around."

"But sister, you've already done so much. You were the one with the deepest ties to His Excellency's family. And you were the one who passed on the warning when Zetara gave it, Anae rest her soul. By the way, who do you think was the source of her information? You should be able to tell me, now that the network has all but fallen apart."

Dena looked grave at the recollection. Tuval thought it would probably take a while before she resigned herself to the fact of Zetara's death. "Well, as the Lady's handmaiden, she never could tell me very much. But from the many clues I gathered along the way, I'm fairly certain her information came from the Lady Gevinesa herself. Some fundamental change must have taken place in that woman's life, although I can hardly believe it, after all the atrocities she committed. But it's the only explanation that fits the facts."

"Then what Mirayla said this morning is true," Tuval said. "The Lady dissolved her Crimson Brigade after her transformation."

"Yes, I'm sure of it. But the members of her Brigade couldn't understand it. They had been hand-picked and trained by the Lady herself. They were completely loyal to her and must have felt betrayed when she dissolved the group. I still can't believe Tavita was actually once her right hand and later even captain of the Brigade. But she's the one who regrouped and merged them into Corsen's Black Guard."

Tuval didn't like the direction this conversation was going. He only had to look at his sister's face to know what she was thinking because she had become grim and pale.

Dena gazed into the distance without really seeing. "How could someone we once knew so well, someone we once loved and cared about, revel in such gruesome deeds? It seems she can't get enough of it, as if the scent and taste of her enemy's blood were the essence of her life. She's become a monster, Tuval."

Tuval shot her a troubled glance. Varan had been killed two months before he and Dena would have been married. In addition to the obvious political advantages of a union between the Houses Marusen and Cemasena, Tuval knew it wouldn't just have been a marriage born of practicality. Varan had meant everything to his sister. Dena had helped Varan infiltrate the Black Guard, and through his work, they had finally acquired concrete proof that the Black Guard was directly connected to House Divestelan.

But Varan's cover had been compromised. When his sister Tavita discovered his betrayal, she slit him open, cut out his tongue, and left him to die in agony. He had barely been alive when Dena found him. Since he couldn't talk, he wrote down as much as he could on a piece of paper, the section of parchment with rusty brown smudges Dena was holding. Varan had died in her arms.

"Dena, why do you torture yourself by keeping that parchment?"

She glanced at the paper. "No, brother, it's not like that. It helps me to focus on my task and to remember why I'm doing this."

Tuval sighed. "So you really believe Tavita has gone east?"

"Yes, we're sure of it. Just last week we received reliable intelligence that she's initiated a covert operation of some sort. Lord Divestelan's intelligence network in Travis seems to be in poor shape since the High Priestess hit them so hard five years ago, and they probably want to get someone in there with hands-on experience. I must admit, Tavita is an excellent choice. But I'm afraid we have no idea where she is now. All I can do is go east and attempt to track her down."

"And what will you do when you find her?"

"I'm going to make her wish she had never murdered my love. Believe me, she will pay her debt."

"Dena, she's a trained killer. Please, promise me you won't go after her by yourself."

She awarded him a quick glance. "Why so concerned, brother?"

"We've already lost enough good people."

She raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Tuval gave up. “For goodness’ sake, Dena, you’re my sister! I love you and I don’t want to lose you.”

Her expression softened. “That’s all I wanted to hear. I love you too, Tuval. I promise I’ll be careful. But you must admit we do make a good team, don’t we? I mean, the way we raided His Excellency’s stables to get these two chyevi was just splendid.”

Tuval grinned. “It wasn’t really that difficult. With Lord Divestelan and most of his family gone, their security has become a bit slack. And besides, it’s the last thing they expected after their assault yesterday. By the way, do you know why Lady Divestelan didn’t go to Tolares with the rest of the family?”

“I’m not quite sure, but from what Zetara told me, it seems Lord and Lady Divestelan have been living separate lives for years, decades even. She has a handsome residence up in the mountains and doesn’t really come to the city very often.”

“Hmmm…Has anyone ever tried recruiting her?” Tuval asked.

“That’s an interesting thought. Why don’t you run it by Sheletas when you get back?”

“I might just do that.”

Dena chewed on her lip. “Tuval, what was Sheletas talking about this morning, regarding patrols in the forests of the Navaren?”

“That’s just the problem: We don’t know. All we know is that Lord Divestelan has been sending patrols and hired mercenaries to Navaresa. It seems they’re looking for something up there.”

“But Sheletas did mention there was some conjecture.”

“Yes.”

“Does it have anything to do with the ancient legends, the Tinavar?”

Tuval sighed. “It’s possible. For some reason, a few of the Great Houses in the west have been delving into ancient lore, but we have no idea what they’re up to.”

“I thought that might be that case. I’ve been hearing some rumors along those lines myself.” She took a deep breath. When she raised her head, she gasped. “Oh, Tuval, look! Isn’t that a *mivelin*?”

He turned west, in the direction his sister was pointing. “Yes, it is. What a magnificent bird! I believe their wing span can reach fifteen armlengths. But look, it’s sailing in the direction of Mt. Toradeh. What a wonderful view!”

“It’s breathtaking! Oh, Tuval, I’m so glad we’re here together. It really does feel good not to be under any pressure for a change.”

He returned her smile. He was grateful her desolate mood had passed, and she seemed almost cheerful again. She had earned a break after everything she had been through in the past two years. It was the main reason he had chosen the southern route, and he hoped a slow and peaceful journey might help to heal her pining spirit. But he hoped even more the High Priestess would help her to see reason. If not, he would probably never see his sister alive again.

36. A Solemn Mood

“Caty, would you please lift me up?”

“Well then, come, my *porodesa*.” Catyana lifted her eight-year-old sister Sinara onto her lap and pressed a kiss onto her cheek while brushing her sister’s golden locks out of the girl’s face. Then she looked up from her task of chopping vegetables and glanced at her mother, who was supervising the contents of various pots on the stove. “Mother, do you think she’ll be arriving soon?”

Her mother glanced at her eldest daughter with a patient smile. “Yes, dear heart. I’m sure she’s at least five minutes closer than the last time you asked.”

Catyana slipped with the knife and cut her finger. She dropped the tool in agitation. She sucked the blood off her finger and put her hand over it. The hand glimmered for a few seconds. When she removed it, her finger had been completely restored. The process itself had been entirely routine. Catyana hardly realized what she was doing. To her, it was a simple procedure, regenerating a disrupted ethereal pattern. Neither her mother nor her sister had taken note of what had happened. But even if they had, they wouldn’t have thought anything out of the ordinary had occurred. “Oh, Mother, I’m sorry to be hassling you so. I wonder what’s wrong with me?”

Her mother put down the ladle with which she had been stirring the gravy, walked over to her daughter, and stroked her hair. “Well, for one thing, you suffered quite a trauma last night. I’m so sorry about Soshia. I didn’t always agree with everything she did, but she meant well, and I could sense she had a good heart. I wish I could have known her better.”

Catyana regarded her with a solemn expression, unconvinced.

“And then, I gather you’re preoccupied with several very essential questions.” She smiled at her daughter. “Catya, why don’t you go outside and wait? I can finish in here.”

“Are you sure?”

Yes. There isn’t much left to do, anyway. And take Sinara with you.”

Catyana picked up her sister, who straddled her waist and put her head on her shoulder, and walked out of the kitchen into the bright spring day with her precious, golden-haired cargo. She gazed up into the intensely blue sky and took a deep breath of fresh air while swaying her sister back and forth. “Are you tired, my little one?”

Sinara nodded.

“Are you looking forward to seeing Nova?”

Sinara vehemently shook her head.

“Well, why not?”

Sinara raised her head and looked at her while letting her finger glide down her sister’s nose. “Nova’s going to take you away, and I don’t want that to happen.”

Catyana stared into her sister’s deep blue eyes in astonishment. She hadn’t realized how aware her sister had been of all the various discussions that had taken place in the family in the past weeks. She should have known better. “Oh, Sinara, I’m so sorry.” She hugged her sister tightly to herself. “I love you very much, and nothing is ever going to change that, no matter how far away I am.”

Sinara plucked around on her sister’s shoulder. “Caty, will you write to me?”

“Why, yes, of course, every day, my little *poroda*, if you want me to. Will you promise to write back?”

Sinara nodded. “As often as Mommy lets me. You know how she is about paper.”

Catyana sighed. “Yes, dearest, I know. I hope one day you’ll have all the paper you could ever want.” She rubbed noses with her, and Sinara giggled. “If you keep practicing the trick I showed you this morning, you probably will. Just take a pile of leaves and change it into anything you want.” They grinned at each other.

Catyana hadn’t kept what she had learned during her walk with her friends yesterday to herself. Although she would never have told anyone else, she always shared everything with her family. Her siblings weren’t quite as gifted as she was in regard to Induction, but they got along quite well and had grasped the concept rather quickly. It would still take quite a bit of practice, though, before

they began changing large artifacts from metal into stone. Not that they would. After she had told them what had happened to Soshia, most of her siblings had been reluctant to try, and when they finally did, they kept any practice down to very small objects. Her mother now had several very nice gold and platinum sewing needles.

A solemn mood befell her as she thought about the episode yesterday afternoon. Catyana hadn't meant to hurt Soshia. How could her Induction of the artifact have caused her such agony? Was it always going to be like this? If she used her gifts, others would suffer? And now Soshia was gone. She knew she liked Mara better, and she felt drawn to her gentle and quiet ways. But Soshia had always been kind to Catyana, except after the episode yesterday. Catyana couldn't even blame her. She might have behaved in such a way herself if someone had hurt her like that.

Catyana had, of course, sensed Nova's apprehension after the event, and she knew it wasn't just because of Soshia. What had really caused her friend's anxiety? Could it be related to the ominous shadow that had been bearing down on Catyana's spirit for weeks? But she had never discussed it with Nova and certainly didn't want to think about it now, so she quickly shoved it back down into the darkest confines of her heart, from where it somehow must have crawled out to invade her thoughts.

She shook her head. So many questions! For instance, that incident with the chyeves yesterday evening as they were walking into town. That poor animal! Catyana had wanted to heal it. She knew Nova understood her hopeful gaze, but Nova shook her head. Catyana was still very disappointed. Why was her friend acting so strange? She would have to ask her about it. Maybe they would get a chance to talk about such things on their journey to Tolares. Just thinking about the possibility sent a surge of excitement through her. Would her parents allow her to go? Would they permit her to join the Order?

"Caty, they're coming!" Her brother Torvos came tearing down the road toward the house, with their sister Minora following not far behind. No surprise there. Wherever Torvos went, tomboy Mina was sure to follow. The two of them had been helping their father load the wagons for a log shipment that was going into town early the day after tomorrow, but were given some free time just before noon. They had immediately taken up position at the bend in the road to watch for their guests. Both of them were barefoot and dusty, and Catyana was shocked when she realized from afar that Mina's skirt was torn in several places.

Torvos ran up to Catyana and stopped, bending over and supporting himself on her free shoulder, gasping for breath. When Mina caught up, she continued to skip around them, jumping up and down with excitement like a rubber ball gone out of control.

"My goodness, look at you two!" exclaimed Catyana in dismay.

"But, Caty, there are six of them!" cried Mina.

"What? Six?"

Torvos had caught his breath and stood up straight, nodding vigorously. "Five women and one man."

"A man? Oh, how wonderful! Vilam has accepted the invitation! But who could the other women be? There's Nova, Natilya, and Tanola, that's only three. Oh, of course! Knowing Nova, I'm sure she decided to bring Mara with her so the poor dear can get her mind off her loss. That leaves one more. But who—? Oh, no, it can't be possible. That would be too much! I must inform Mother immediately. I want you two in the house, cleaning yourselves up, right now! No, I won't take any of your insolence, Mina. Get inside, at once! They mustn't see you like this. I'm sorry, honey, but I'm going to have to put you down."

The bustle around the house swelled when everyone heard who Catyana believed was coming. Catyana's second oldest sister, Zetavira, or Vira for short, appeared from the family room, where she had been preparing the flax, and her father came in from behind the house, wiping the dirt from his chores on his overalls. But they were accustomed to working quickly, and the family was soon assembled in front of the house to greet their guests.

37. The Grave

Vordalin stooped down and picked up a charred piece of wood lying at his feet. It was still warm. All around him, the blackened, smoldering ruins of what had once been a small farm cried out to the heavens, silently denouncing the terrible injustice that had been committed there. The scene was eerily quiet. In the distance he could hear a *zicises*, the black herald of death, cawing its somber message from the tip of a conifer.

He stared at the mound before him. His friends had told him the grave contained the remains of an elderly male, an elderly female, and a girl. He shook his head. It was so often the same heart-breaking pattern. The young men were drafted and were either recruited into the guard or more

frequently just disappeared without a trace. The rest of the family was left without protection and hardly enough hands to run the farm. At some point the farm was attacked and the men slaughtered. Then the women were ravished and also slain. Sometimes, as in this case, the farm was burned to the ground.

But somehow, this situation didn't quite fit the pattern. Here there was a grave, and the grave was already several days old. Usually, an attack lasted only a few hours, or a night at the most, and the carnage of the victims was left as a feast for the birds and wild animals. This family had been murdered several days ago and then buried behind the stable. But the fire hadn't been set until around midnight last night. That had been about sixteen hours ago, since it was now noon of the following day.

His acquaintances, who were neighbors and good friends of the murdered family, hadn't been asleep at that time and had seen the glow of the flames over the trees. The heat must have been immense, and the fire had been visible for leagues around. When they had arrived at the scene, some of their neighbors were already there, and more had come as they waited, but there was nothing any of them had been able to do. Now, all that was left of the four buildings were the charred remains of some of the more solid beams, and here in the center of the stable, a blackened, cast-iron semblance of the Sword of Selanae fixed to what must have once been a solid supporting column.

There could be several explanations for what had happened here. But his intuition, based on his decades of experience in the wild followed by his twelve years incumbency as High Priest, told him something was very much amiss. He wished he had the time to better appraise the situation, but his mission was urgent, and he couldn't linger. After talking with Nova and Elder Yonatan, he had left Nadil yesterday evening and made fairly good progress, averaging about eight leagues an hour, although he hadn't been able to change his chyevi very often. He was now just northeast of Pitaren and had another 110 leagues to go to Divestelan, then on into the mountains.

Vordalin sighed. He rose and strolled back to his chyeves, where he unstrapped his bag and took out several pieces of parchment. He sketched a quick outline of the premises and jotted down a few notes so he could compile a report when he returned to Travis. He had already recorded the names of the victims, which his friends had given him, and now added his own observations. When he had finished, he replaced the parchment and secured the bag behind his saddle. He made sure

his sword was still strapped firmly to his side, nimbly swung himself onto his mount, and galloped toward the dark chain of the Covasins looming in the distance.

38. The Final Clue

When Vodana rounded a bend in the road with her companions, she saw a typical farmhouse: a square, whitewashed structure with rounded corners and a red tiled roof built around a courtyard. A gallery rose up over the courtyard, so the court was probably being used as a closed herbarium. Two solar generators were visible near the barns and sheds in the background. Vodana was still several dozen steps away when she realized with surprise that all members of the Faeren family had golden hair and deep blue eyes.

Nova immediately rushed forward and embraced Catyana. But as soon as Vilam approached, the entire family bowed their heads. Catyana's father said, "Your Holiness, we are greatly honored that you should visit our modest home. Please forgive the plainness of our situation, but we are simple people."

Vilam just stood there with his mouth agape and stared at him. Catyana's father quickly realized something was amiss and had an accordingly perplexed expression, so Vodana stepped forward and took his hands. "Thank you so much for your warm and well-meant welcome, but I believe our friend here is just as simple a man as you are and isn't accustomed to such formal introductions. Please, just call him Vilam and treat him as an equal. My name is Vodana, and I'm Nova's sister."

A relieved smile spread over the man's face as he clasped Vodana's hands in his own and shook them heartily. "Thank you, Vodana, for making things so easy for us. I am Lotis, Catya's father. Yours is, of course, a household name, although we never realized you were Nova's sister. She could have mentioned it, since she's practically become a member of the family. But she always has been a bit private," he said, grinning over at the acolyte, whose eyes twinkled back at him. Then he stepped up to Vilam and firmly took his hand. "Vilam, I'm very pleased to meet you, and I hope you'll feel at home in our humble abode."

Vilam grinned broadly at his host. "Thank you, Lotis. I'm sure I will."

Lotis introduced his family, all of whom seemed relieved after realizing that no formality would be necessary. "This is my wife, Matila; my son, Torvos; and my daughters Vira, Mina, and Sinara. Catya you already know."

The family already knew Natilya and Tanola, and Catyana and her mother ensured Mara received the warm welcome she deserved. After the greetings, the family began to disperse. Vodana grinned when she saw her sister conceal the package she had been so secretive about under her cloak. Only then did Nova present the basket to Catyana's mother. "Matila, these are just a few things I thought you might be able to use."

"Why, Nova, that's so kind of you. Let me put them in the kitchen, and I'll get the basket right back to you."

Vodana followed Matila into the kitchen to see if she could help, but everything had pretty much been taken care of. "Matila, I don't mean to embarrass you, but you and Lotis do make a handsome couple, although it seems you're a bit young for a family of this size."

Matila beamed at her. She was certainly very attractive, with her thick, golden hair cascading down her back to her waist and her deep blue eyes. Vodana assumed she usually wore her hair bound together during work but now had it open because of the special occasion. As with the rest of the family, she was dressed in simple attire that was a bit worn but clean and well-tended. "Thank you for the compliment. Yes, Lotis and I married very young, even before our Age of Maturity. We therefore needed our parents' consent, but they knew us both well enough and agreed. I, for one, have never regretted it."

She was about to return the basket to Nova, who had joined the rest of the family in the dining room, so Vodana reached out and touched her arm. "I just wanted to tell you, Matila, what a wonderful daughter you have. I was only able to get to know Catyana briefly yesterday, but she made a deep impression on me. Even if you are a hard-working family and must probably exert yourself immensely to get by, I know your hearts are in the right place, and I'd like to thank you for it. It's no longer such a matter of course in these difficult and increasingly unstable times for a family to follow Anae's Golden Path as you do. I admire you greatly for it."

Matila's eyes glistened. "You're very kind, but I would normally reply not to judge a thing too quickly. You hardly know us."

"Yes, but my sister knows you, and I trust her judgment implicitly. Just don't tell her I said so."

"Well then, thank you, Vodana. You don't know what it means to a mother's heart to hear something like that."

On the spur of the moment, Vodana embraced the younger woman, who clung to her with spontaneous affection. When they separated, Matila rushed out of the kitchen, probably to conceal

her embarrassment. Vodana followed a bit more leisurely. The family was already seated at the table when Matila returned Nova's basket.

"Thank you, Matila," Nova said as she rose to store the basket with her cloak.

"No, thank you, Nova," Matila replied, squeezing her guest's arm in gratitude.

Lotis presided at the head of the table and Vilam, as guest of honor, had been assigned the seat at the far end. Matila took her usual place at Lotis's left, while Vodana sat at his right. Nova, Mara, Catyana, Sinara, and Natilya made up the rest of the group on Matila's side of the table. Sitting next to Vodana were Vira, Tanola, Mina, and Torvos. "Shall we sing a song before we commence with the meal?" Matila asked.

"Oh, that would be wonderful," Vodana replied. "What shall we sing?"

"*Anae Pirae cel Pesati Mada,*" Sinara yelled at the top of her voice. The other children immediately agreed.

"Alright, 'The One Provides All Good Things' it is. Who will lead us?" Matila asked, glancing hopefully in Vodana's direction.

Nova also looked over at her sister, her eyes pleading, and Vodana gladly complied. "I will, if you like." The expectant looks at the table didn't call for any further approval, so Vodana began the song.

It was a simple children's tune, which even Vilam, who didn't know the words, could follow easily. Vodana didn't draw on her training but deliberately let her voice blend in with the family. They sang the short chorus once. Then Vodana split the party at the table into four groups, and they sang it again as a canon. She was astonished at how well the family did. When they had completed several rounds, Vodana signaled for them to close, and they all stopped at the end of their verse, filling the dining room with one last, ringing chord.

When it had died away, Lotis said, "Alright, let's take a moment." He turned his head toward a representation of the Sword of Selanae adorning a wall of the room.

The family complied with the custom by bowing their heads, although Vodana had to suppress a grin when she observed Vilam peering around to see what was going on. After Lotis signaled that a minute's silence had been observed, a low hum of activity filled the room as bowls were passed and conversations resumed.

In the meantime, Vodana made sure the family realized how much she objected to any special treatment. Her status as one of the world's most celebrated musicians sometimes made such

gatherings awkward, but all she wanted was to blend in and enjoy being around the children. She had especially taken the eighteen-year-old Vira, who was sitting next to her, into her heart and had resolved to get to know the girl better, although her motives weren't quite selfless. "Vira, could you please pass the *fetara*?"

"Yes, of course. There you go."

"Thank you. You have a beautiful voice. Do you know that?"

Vira put down her spoon and stared at her neighbor, her eyes wide. "Please, don't say that. You're only being polite, aren't you?"

"No, Vira, I really mean it. I'm the kind of person who says what she means, nothing more, and nothing less."

Vira swallowed. "Oh, please, don't raise my hopes. You do realize that, coming from you, such a statement would mean so much more than if it had come from anyone else." She dropped her gaze and continued with a low voice. "I've always dreamed of becoming a musician."

Vodana also put down her silverware and turned to her neighbor, probing her eyes. "Do you really mean that, Vira?"

The girl nodded.

"Do you know what it takes to become a good musician?"

Vira shook her head and stared at Vodana, holding her breath.

"Well, it's really quite simple," Vodana said. "It takes a lot of hard work and endless hours of grueling practice. You push yourself to the limit, and then you push yourself beyond that, until you wished you had never started. Imagine your father loading logs for eight hours every day of the week, every month of the year, for years without end; then imagine yourself doing the same with your music. And if, after years of intense training and nerve-wracking rehearsals, you discover you might possibly have a spark of talent, you may even become a great musician, instead of just a good one."

Vira sighed with relief. "Thank you so much for telling me that. You've given me hope. If what it takes is mostly just plain, hard work, then I believe I might stand a chance."

Vodana gave Vira a sidelong glance and caressed the girl's cheek. "You dear child, you really would be prepared to work that hard, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, ma'am. Hard work is nothing unusual if you grow up on a farm."

"Oh, don't *ma'am* me, please. Just call me Vodana."

"Yes, ma…Yes, Vodana."

Vodana pursed her lips as she reflected. "Listen, Vira, do you think your parents would allow you to practice here, at home, in your spare time?"

"Well, yes, what little spare time we have, we can usually employ as we wish."

"I'll tell you what, when we're finished with the meal, I'll ask your mother if she'll allow me to test you. All we need is a room to ourselves, and if it turns out at all the way I expect, then I promise I'll visit you as often as possible and help you with your studies."

Vira's jaw dropped. "Oh, Vodana! Why would you do something like that for me?"

"For a very simple reason: I hate to see good material go to waste. From the little I've heard, I do believe you have the necessary talent. And if you're as willing to work at it as you say you are, then I don't see why you shouldn't be given your chance."

They were interrupted by a disturbance at the other end of the table. "Mommy, tell Mina to stop making faces at me," Sinara cried.

"Yes, but Sinara keeps kicking me under the table," Mina retorted.

"Alright, that's enough, both of you!" Catyana exclaimed. They both dropped their gaze at their sister's intent glare. "Sinara, did you really kick Mina?"

"Not on purpose," Sinara replied in a whiny voice. "I was practicing the new dance steps you taught me yesterday, and I guess it got a little out of hand."

It was apparent how desperately Catyana was trying to keep a straight face, but the corners of her mouth twitched dangerously. "Well then, perhaps it would be better if you practiced after the meal. And apologize to your sister."

Sinara cast a shy glance across the table. "*Votalaran*, Mina."

Mina just glared back, her lips jammed into a thin line and her eyes flashing defiantly.

"Mina!" Catyana looked directly into her sister's eyes.

Mina flinched as if she had been slapped and dropped her gaze. She finally looked over at Sinara, her expression softer. "*Tezatal*, Sinara. I believe you if you say you didn't do it on purpose."

Everyone had followed the exchange with interest, but Vodana looked at Lotis and Matila in astonishment. "That was most enlightening. I never would have believed Catyana had it in her."

Nova smiled knowingly. "I told you there's more to her than meets the eye. But then, I've had a lot of time to get to know her in her accustomed environment." She looked past Mara and smiled at Catyana, who smiled back at her friend.

Matila seemed to be beaming with pride. “Yes, she’s quite the housemother. I know I can rely on her to take care of anything that needs to be done, from dealing with squabbling children to organizing the household. The children all bow to her authority, even Torvos, although he’s already twenty-two. It is kind of amazing, if you think about it.”

Lotis took his wife’s hand. “You see, Nova, that’s what makes this decision so difficult. Catyana has made herself indispensable around the house. We hardly know how to get on without her. That’s why we wanted you here today. We really need to talk about this and get your perspective on the matter.”

“I understand,” said Nova. “Of course, in the end, this has to be your decision.” Nova suddenly winced. Vodana saw that Mara had grabbed Nova and her knuckles were white, so strong was her grasp on Nova’s arm. Mara had her eyes closed, her face was pale, and Vodana thought the girl might be trembling.

Vodana rebuked herself. Mara had just lost her cousin and best friend, and Vodana should have paid more attention to the poor girl. She saw Nova put her hand over Mara’s and squeeze. Mara opened her eyes and looked at her, but she was still white as a sheet.

“Yes,” said Matila, “we know it’s our decision. But you’re her best friend, and we trust your judgment. We would really value your advice in this matter.”

“I agree with Matila,” said Lotis. “We need to talk about this. But if there aren’t any pressing reasons for Catyana to go, it may be better for the time being if she stayed here, in her accustomed environment.”

“No!” shrieked Mara, jumping up from her chair and sending it flying backward. “No, you can’t do that!” Tears were streaming down her face, she was trembling, and her sobs made it difficult to understand her words. “You don’t understand. She’s not…” She buried her face in her hands.

The whole table was silent. Everyone stared at her. Nova got up and took her in her arms, holding the girl as she sobbed into her robes.

“Oh, you poor dear,” said Matila, also standing and reaching for her. “You’re still so filled with grief for Soshia.”

“No!” shouted Mara.

Matila recoiled. “Nova, what’s wrong with her?”

Nova shook her head at Matila. “Mara, honey, what is it?”

Mara gasped. “Oh, Nova, I just can’t do this anymore.” She continued sobbing.

As Vodana looked around the table, she saw different reactions. Sinara had tears in her eyes and seemed almost as distressed as Mara. Catyana just wanted to help her friend but didn't know how, so she stood next to her with her hand on her shoulder, looking helpless. Natilya and Tanola were both concerned and sympathetic, but remained at the table. Vilam's face was pale and solemn. Torvos was mainly embarrassed. Mina seemed sympathetic but not too engaged, and Vira looked on with concern. Lotis just looked confused.

Nova stroked Mara's back. "Would you like to talk?" When Mara nodded, Nova said to Matila, "Would you mind if we used the study?"

"Of course," said Matila. "You know where it is."

Nova led Mara out of the dining room with her arm around Mara's shoulder.

When they had disappeared into the hallway, the activities around the table resumed, and Matila and Catyana took their seats again. Everyone was still too shaken to discuss what had just happened and continued with the meal as best they could.

"I'm sorry to announce this," said Lotis, "but I'm afraid I'll have to return to the woods soon to finish loading the wagons, and that will take most of the afternoon. We usually don't work on Velavides, so I'll have to finish today if we're to complete our delivery for the coming Velanav. Of course, everyone else is more than welcome to stay as long as they wish."

"Excuse me, Lotis," said Vilam, "but may I offer my assistance? It might expedite matters."

Lotis looked at him in surprise. "Well, yes, gladly. But it's very hard work. Are you sure you're up for it?"

Vilam grinned. "Yes, I actually love that kind of work. It's good and honest and a great workout at the same time. Although I'd be most obliged if you had another pair of working gloves and some overalls for me."

"Yes, of course. We always have more than enough of those."

Torvos turned to Vilam to continue their previous discussion. "I heard the Tesalian steel forged on the western slopes of the Covasin Mountains is so resilient, it'll even split stone."

"You shouldn't believe every rumor you hear, my friend," Vilam replied. "Yes, Tesalian steel has a distinguished reputation, but you should never forget that a sword blade has a very specific function. It's used to cut flesh and bone, not wood and stone, and it's honed for exactly that purpose and no other. Although the carbon content of the alloy is much higher in Tesalian blades than in

most others—over two percent, I believe—and the blade itself is therefore very hard, I'd never use it on material it wasn't intended for. If you do, you could easily chip the blade."

Torvos looked disappointed. "I always thought you could cut down trees with a blade like that."

Vilam's expression remained solemn. "When you're facing your opponent in battle, believe me, you'd rather your tool fulfilled its intended function well and saved your life. Knowing you could cut down a tree with it wouldn't be much help in such a situation."

Torvos nodded. "I see I still have a lot to learn."

"Let's hope you never have any need to learn it," Vilam replied soberly.

"I do," Mina said. "It sounds exciting, what you said about cutting through flesh and bone. *Whoosh! Whoosh!*" She made a gesture of slicing through the air with a two-hander.

"So, you like swords, Mina?" asked Tanola, who was sitting beside her.

"I love them! There's nothing I would rather be doing all day long."

"Mina, come on! You're a girl. When will you finally grow up and act like one?" said Torvos indignantly.

Mina placed her hands in her lap, raised her chin, and stared at him with an air of incredulity. "Torvos, really, could you be any more inconsistent?"

"Well, then, at least act like a thirteen-year-old girl."

"Oh? And how exactly does a thirteen-year-old girl act, in your opinion? Besides, if Caty joins the Order, she'll be learning to use a sword, so why can't I?" She raised her hands as she had before, but in slow deliberation, and glared defiantly. *"Whoosh! Whoosh!"*

Vilam regarded her with a wry grin. "Alright, Mina, does your father have any swords?"

Mina stared at him, her eyes wide. "Why, would you teach me?"

"I could give you and your brother a short lesson, if you wish."

She cast down her eyes, her expression crestfallen. "We don't have any swords."

"We still have the wooden imitations we made last winter," her brother offered. "Maybe we could begin with those."

Mina looked hopefully up at Vilam, who grinned at the dissimilar pair. "Alright, I'll tell you what. When we get back from the woods, we'll take a look at your swords, and I'll see what I can do."

Mina jumped eagerly up and down in her seat. "Oh, how exciting!"

"Mina, calm down," said Catyana with a stern glance in her direction.

“Oh, alright. But I really can’t help feeling excited,” Mina mumbled to herself, while pushing her food around on her plate.

Lotis rose from his seat. “I’m very sorry, but I need to get back to work. Those of you who are staying are welcome to continue the meal. My beautiful wife has once again outdone herself and made such wonderful delicacies that I’m actually tempted to stay myself.” The couple smiled at each other.

Vilam and Torvos also rose from their seats to join Lotis, and Mina looked over at her father. “Daddy, may I please come with you? I’m not very hungry, anyway.”

Lotis winked at her. “You were a big help to me this morning. Nobody can swing an axe like you, my little shieldmaiden. If you really feel like coming and your mother has no objection, you’re welcome to join us.”

When Matila nodded her consent, Mina jumped from her seat and rushed to her father’s side, throwing her arms around him. He stroked her silky, golden hair, and she looked up into his eyes, smiling eagerly. “Thank you, Daddy,” she whispered.

The party left soon after that, and the women cleared the table and carried the dishes into the kitchen. When things were pretty well cleaned up, Vodana took Matila aside and told her about her conversation with Vira.

“Yes, I know,” Matila said. “Vira just loves music. But I’m afraid we never could have done for her what you might be able to do. We have a music room in the back of the house that you can use. Vira will show you where it is.” It seemed she didn’t know how else to express her gratitude, so she embraced Vodana. Vodana hugged her back, delighted she had found a way to benefit this family she had come to admire so much in such a short time.

Catyana, Natilya, and Tanola were standing near the table, discussing Catyana’s newest sewing patterns, when Natilya realized she had a handkerchief in her pocket. “What’s this?” She unfolded it and saw several long, dark, wavy strands of hair. “Oh, these are the ones Nova gave me yesterday morning. You remember, Tanola? From the road?”

“Yes, yes, I remember,” said Tanola. “No need to talk about it here.”

“Do you suppose they belonged to Soshia?”

“I have no idea,” said Tanola.

“They’re not Soshia’s,” said Catyana.

“How do you know?” said Tanola.

“Because every object has its own individual ethereal pattern,” said Catyana. “So does hair. Those are Mara’s.”

The acolytes gaped at each other. Vodana came over. “What are you talking about?”

Tanola and Natilya stared at her but still couldn’t get a word out.

Suddenly Natilya shouted, “*Tevas’an!* Nova’s alone with her!” She raced off, and the others followed on her heels. When she reached the study, she threw the door open, and everyone tumbled into the room behind her.

From the dumbfounded expressions on the acolytes’ faces, Vodana assumed they had been prepared for the worst, but not for what they actually found.

Nova was sitting quietly on the sofa with her arm around Mara. Mara, despondent and dissolved in tears, was cuddled up against Nova and had her head on Nova’s shoulder. The young woman had her legs pulled up onto the sofa and her arms wrapped around them. She was wearing a gold necklace with a pendant resting over her heart. But what caught Vodana’s attention was the dark red ruby gleaming at her from the pendant.

39. The Dispute

Cetila closed her eyes and took in the tranquil voices of the wilderness. Velana shone down upon the dense branches sheltering her, casting the scene in a hushed, emerald glow, and the air was filled with the fresh scent of resin. Everywhere she looked, she saw rocks, like islands, covered with moss and fern, as if her eyes were drowning in green, while the brook beside her gurgled merrily, seemingly amused at her astonishment.

She stared up into the mammoth tree’s branches as she leaned back against its massive trunk, reclining in a luxurious carpet of pine needles. A sense of awe befell her. When her eyes returned to the earth, the aggressive black and crimson design of her uniform seemed like a rude intrusion into this peaceful sanctuary. “I don’t think we should be here,” she said in a low voice. “I feel as if we’re trespassing.”

“Well, then, I suppose it’s best it’s not your decision.”

She looked up at her captain, who was leaning against a tree across from her. “No need to rub it in, Pira,” she said, annoyed at the renewed provocation.

Her companion eyed her with a piercing gaze. “Interesting.”

“What’s interesting?”

“That wasn’t quite the point I was trying to make. I wonder you took it that way.”

Cetila bolted upright and jammed her lips together. She would have glowered, but that seemed just as childish as the silly game Pira was playing. Instead, she closed her eyes, took a few deep breaths, and allowed the soothing atmosphere of the forest to calm her. Then she opened her eyes. “Pira, believe me, just because I’m Tavita’s sister doesn’t mean I’m looking for exclusive treatment. She had a good reason for leaving you in charge, and I’m perfectly happy with the status quo.”

Pira glanced at her, doubt in her eyes. “We’ve known each other for a long time, Cetila, and I’m still fond of you, whether you believe it or not. I really want to trust you. But so much has happened, and I somehow can’t seem to place you anymore.”

“And I beg you not to try. I don’t enjoy being categorized.”

“And I thought you didn’t want to be reminded of your rank. But you’re second in command now. You have certain responsibilities toward your sisters in arms, and as your commanding officer, I have to know where your loyalties lie. You’re not making things easy for me. Why won’t you play along?”

Cetila sighed. “I don’t want to always be weighing every word everyone says. Can’t we just have a normal conversation and say what we mean?”

“Tavita felt mind games help us stay sharp.”

“My sister has her own way of doing things. But I think there are better ways of sharpening our minds than learning how to drop veiled hints or seeing through ambiguous speech.”

“And then there’s the question of your brother.”

Cetila paled. “I really don’t feel like having that particular subject brought up again,” she said with cold deliberation. She struggled to contain the pain and anger building up inside her.

Pira eyed her warily. “Your reaction isn’t very comforting.”

“Well then, Lady Novesta, tell me truthfully. How would you feel if your younger sister had killed your brother, a brother you had been very close to?”

“I would bridle my emotions and cultivate a mindset that adheres to—”

Cetila’s long, black dress fluttered as she lunged at her companion, coming almost face-to-face with her. “How dare you use that propaganda on me!” she hissed, as her left hand gripped the hilt of her sword.

Pira cringed at the intensity of the attack, but then she raised her chin and looked Cetila in the eye. “Alright, if you’re so eager to know what’s on my mind, why don’t you tell me honestly if I need to watch my back around you.”

Cetila sucked in her breath and stared at her comrade, clenching her teeth to suppress the tears she could feel burning just below the surface. “Pira, that really hurt. Why do you doubt my loyalty?”

“Varan was working for the enemy, and I’m almost certain Dena is, too,” Pira countered. “Why do you continue to defend them?”

Cetila looked into her comrade’s eyes. How could she explain to this devoted warrior the reasons why she still respected and cherished Varan and Dena without seeming like a traitor? “There’s an immense difference between defending someone and hurting for them,” she finally answered. “I would never betray our cause, Pira. I’m fighting for a free world just as much as you are.”

“You have a strange way of showing it. Must I rebuke you for insubordination?”

“No, of course not. Command me as you will, Captain,” she replied, snapping to attention and bowing her head. “I am at your service. Although I was really hoping we could be friends again,” she added meekly, looking up at Pira through her lashes.

“So was I,” Pira said, regarding Cetila evenly. “As you were, Brigadiess.”

Cetila stood at ease but kept her hand leisurely on the pommel of her sword.

“Cetila, despite my rank and service to the Brigade, I haven’t grown as cold-hearted as you might believe,” Pira said, softening her voice. “I’ve never lost a brother, and I can hardly imagine what you endured. I suppose my approach might not have been appropriate for your particular situation. Why don’t we start over again?”

“I’d like that very much.”

Pira let herself slide down and rested her head wearily against the trunk of the immense conifer behind her. Cetila sat down beside her, a bit tentatively.

“When did Tavita leave?” Pira asked.

“Tomorrow will be a fortnight.”

Pira sighed. “I’d really be grateful for your help, Cetila. I suddenly have an entire battalion of energetic young women to command. Neither of us has Tavita’s vigor or prowess, and I fear it’ll

take our combined effort to handle them. I must admit, the Lady's request was a godsend. It gives us something to do."

"Yes, my mother has been very adamant about such things lately. I wonder why she's suddenly become so interested in the Tinavar. Wouldn't it be wonderful, though, if we really caught one?"

"A Unicorn? Are you seriously implying such creatures exist?"

Cetila stared at her. "Why, yes, of course. Just look at this forest. It's like a presence all around us, as if it were some enchanted, sentient being. Don't you feel it?"

"You've always been a bit odd that way. And what's worse, you're beginning to sound like a Selanian priestess. What's next, Sensation and Induction?"

"I wouldn't underestimate the Selanian Order if I were you."

"I suppose you're right."

"How much longer do you think we'll need to wait?" Cetila asked.

"As long as necessary. But with the entire battalion closing in, I'm sure we'll hear some report within the hour. We'll see soon enough if we're chasing a phantom. The tracks we found did seem promising, though. I've never seen anything like those hoofprints. Who knows, maybe you'll get your Tinavar after all."

"I wish I'd traveled to the Navaren earlier in my life," Cetila said, filling her lungs with fresh air and looking around. "I never knew the Northern Forests were so breathtaking. It's exciting, being at the heart of ancient lore. It makes me wish Mother would send someone to the Sea of Ventara to look for Mermaids."

"Oh, didn't you know? She did."

"What? I can't believe this! Why wasn't I informed?"

"I suppose it was on a need-to-know basis."

Cetila fell into sullen silence. It was bad enough that her sister Tavita didn't seem to trust her anymore. Why her mother, too? But then, her relationship with her mother had always been difficult at best. Not that Lady Lusina Marusen had ever shown much interest in raising any of her four children, but it seemed to Cetila her mother had always gone out of her way to be particularly cold to her.

"Are you grateful the Lady reassigned us away from Corsen and his Black Guard?" Pira asked.

"Yes, absolutely."

"Don't you think it was a good idea for Tavita to merge the Brigade with the Guard?"

"No, and I believe Tavita knows it, too. She just did it to be closer to Corsen. But in the end, even she had to recognize it was a grave mistake."

"Our sisters in arms insist it was…invigorating."

"That's what they've been taught to say, but it's just more indoctrination. It's brigade policy, so it must be true, no matter how they feel about it. But those men only saw us as objects of gratification to satisfy their own perverse cravings, or maybe even as a chance to prepare for the attacks on the farms. I felt violated just by the way they looked at me." Cetila shuddered.

Pira shot her a sidelong glance, obviously shocked. "You've become a very outspoken person, Cetila. That could be dangerous."

"Why? I haven't done anything wrong. Besides, what could they do to me?"

"Look what Tavita did to your brother."

"Well, I'm not planning on giving her a reason. Besides, how are they going to fight a war with an army of pregnant women?"

"You've got a point there. I'm certain that's why Tavita and Corsen finally put an end to it."

"Corsen is an idiot."

"Cetila!"

"It's true. If your Uncle Citenes wasn't still captain of the Black Guard, I doubt there would be a glint of common sense left in them. Corsen thinks of this whole campaign as a game, and we're the pieces he plays with. He's just a spoiled brat who uses others to accomplish his own vain notions. Tavita would see it, too, if she wasn't so infatuated with him."

"Why don't you talk to her?"

"Tavita hasn't listened to me since…well, you know, since the Nursemaids. Besides, I'm certain she's aware of the problem. That's why she allowed Mother to have the Crimson Brigade reinstated for this assignment. As a matter of fact, I think she even went on this covert operation of hers to get away from Corsen, although she probably would never admit it, even to herself."

"Well, at least it'll be interesting, working with you again on such close terms."

"Why did you choose me as your right hand, Pira? I still can't understand it. You could have promoted any of the other Brigade leaders when Tavita left. I mean, it's not as if we were very close anymore."

Pira eyed her solemnly. "I know, and you can't imagine how much I regret that. I can't really tell you why I chose you, Cetila. Maybe it was just a feeling. To tell you the truth, I was getting a

bit tired of the other girls' exaggerated submissiveness. You're probably right about all the indoctrination. Hardly anyone dares to express their own thoughts anymore."

"Yes, I sometimes can't understand why it's necessary to brainwash people who are supposedly fighting for a free world."

"I was taught it's an essential means to an end, like the attacks on the farms, and that everything will change when we emerge victorious."

"Exactly: You were taught," Cetila said. "More indoctrination!"

"I see what you mean. How is it that you've become so…unconventional?"

"Well, I wasn't, really. I was just like the other girls, eager to serve toward this noble ideal that had been drummed into us. Please, understand me correctly, I still completely agree with the ideology. I mean, who needs the bigoted laws and hypocritical concepts of the Selanian Order? It's just our methods I'm sometimes in conflict with. Anyway, Tavita ensured I quickly came up through the ranks. But then Varan, um…died. That really shook me up, and I started thinking."

Pira leaned toward her. "Cetila, will you promise to always tell me what's on your mind, no matter how unorthodox your thoughts are?"

Cetila stared at her. "Well, yes, of course, if that's what you want."

"It is. It'll be just like old times." Pira grasped Cetila's hands, and the two women smiled uncertainly at each other, then lapsed into uncomfortable silence. There were still too many unanswered questions regarding their relationship, and Cetila realized renewing their friendship would probably take more than just a little effort on both sides.

40. Mara's Story

After Mara's meltdown in the dining room, Nova led her into the study. The room was the same size as the family room, but faced north and was lined with bookcases. There were several comfortable seating arrangements available, and Nova chose a sofa near the west wall of the room, allowing them a view out the north window on their left. When they sat down, Mara pulled up her legs against her body and wrapped her arms around them, still sobbing. Nova couldn't help but feel sorry for the poor girl and put her arm around her, drawing her close. They stayed that way for a while until Mara's sobs had become less frequent.

"Mara, dearest, please tell me what I can do," Nova finally said.

“You have to get Catyana out of here,” she whispered.

“I’ll do what I can, but you have to give me something. What should I tell her parents?”

“That she’s in terrible danger.”

“What kind of danger?”

Mara brushed away a few tears and sighed. “I’m so tired, Nova. Soshia and I have been running for so long. We finally found a place where we hoped we could live in peace. But now Soshia has been torn from me, and I don’t know how to go on alone.”

“What have you been running from?”

Mara searched Nova’s eyes, tears streaming down her face. Then she sighed and reached into her blouse, where she revealed an elegant, gold necklace with a delicately worked, dark red ruby pendant. She took it out and left it dangling so the pendant rested near her heart. Nova sucked in her breath when she saw it.

“Now you know,” said Mara. “Please don’t hate me, Nova.”

“Oh, Mara.” Nova drew her close again. “I must have been a horrible friend these past two days if you could ever think that.”

“But aren’t you in the least surprised?”

“Um…yes?”

Mara pulled away and stared at her. “Alright, I admit, if Soshia was an enchantress, it wasn’t such a huge leap to assume I was, too.”

“On the other hand, you must also admit enchantresses have quite a reputation for being malevolent. You, on the other hand, don’t seem that way at all. You’re too compassionate.”

Mara wiped a few tears from her cheek. “That’s so kind of you to say. It’s what I want to be, you know, with all my heart.”

“Compassionate?”

“Yes, and kind and patient and gentle.”

“You are.”

Mara smiled at her through her tears. “I’m getting there. But you haven’t answered my question. Did you know I was an enchantress?”

“I did, yes.”

“And you knew since yesterday, right? Since you knew Soshia was an enchantress?”

Nova sighed. “I’m sorry, but there’s much more to this situation than you know.”

"And I hoped so much my instincts were wrong. What's going on, Nova?"

"I'm afraid we only have two options here. The first is that I lie to you, but you'll immediately see through that and resent me for it, and I know I'll hate myself for doing that to you."

Mara nodded. "Alright, and what's the second option?"

"I promise to tell you everything, but only when it's safe for everyone involved, and we agree to drop the subject until that time. Do you think you could find it in your heart to trust me until then?"

Mara gazed at Nova in silence. After a while, she took a deep breath. "I don't particularly like either option, but I do trust you. Consider the subject dropped."

"Thank you, Mara. That really means a lot to me. But…would you mind if I…scanned your pendant?" Mara caught hold of it and held it out to her, but Nova flinched away. "I'm sorry, but not so close, please. It might overwhelm me."

Mara nodded and put it back near her heart. Nova cupped her hand over it without touching it and closed her eyes. She immediately sucked in her breath, and her eyes popped open as she moved her hand to a safe distance. "That's…unbelievable! How is that possible?"

Mara shrugged. "Our coven sisters always believed I had the potential, but I never wanted it, and I resisted. It was Soshia who encouraged me to try after we had already left the coven. She felt we might need it someday. But even after I had unlocked the ruby's power, I didn't want it." More tears streamed down her cheeks.

Nova rocked her a little. "It's alright, honey."

"If only I had listened to Soshia…" Mara shook her head. "But we always kept our gems hidden and shielded, and we were extremely careful when we did practice with them."

"Why? Was there anything special about them?"

"Well, for an enchantress, a ruby is extraordinary in itself. I know of only one other enchantress in this past millennium who was able to unlock its power."

"Oh, Mara, that's amazing! But enchantresses usually use amethysts, right?"

"Yes, we traditionally go with amethysts because quartz is fairly easy to unlock and master, and we do tend to appreciate the magenta hue of its light. I knew a coven sister who once tried a rose quartz instead of an amethyst, but the other sisters ridiculed her as too maudlin and girly, so she switched back to an amethyst. A few of us have even been able to unlock beryl stones such as

aquamarines or emeralds. But I've never heard of anyone who could unlock a sapphire, let alone a diamond."

"What about Soshia's pendant?"

"Yes, Soshia's gem is an ascendant, which are very rare and very powerful. If you're perceptive, it feels warm to the touch. Some amethyst ascendants have even been known to surpass the power of a beryl, and Soshia's gem is such a stone."

"So, if I understand correctly, the order of magnitude for gemstones is amethyst, emerald, ruby, sapphire, and diamond."

Mara nodded. "An amethyst is a class one gemstone, an emerald is class two, and so on until you reach a diamond at class five. But, like I said, I don't know of anyone who's been able to unlock anything higher than a class three gemstone. Soshia's gem would be rated as a high class two."

"Mara, can you help me understand? I'm in the Selanian Order, and our realm is the ether in its various manifestations. What gives enchantresses their power? It's not the gems, is it?"

Mara shook her head. "From what I've learned since I've been here in the eastern provinces, you believe the ether is the basis for everything in the universe. That's what you and your brothers and sisters of the Order are attempting to understand and control. But it's a slow and difficult process, and you're bound by the moral and ethical constraints imposed upon us by Anae. Enchantresses are more pragmatic. They don't believe in Anae, nor do they want to, and they certainly don't want to live by the doctrines and covenants She has asked us to observe."

"You say 'us.' So you count yourself among the faithful?"

"Oh, Nova, do you even need to ask?"

Nova squeezed her hand. "Of course not. I'm sorry I brought it up."

"No, you're right. I'm an enchantress, and with our track record, it's probably good if you hear me say it. Yes, I believe in Anae, with all my heart, and I want to follow Her Golden Path and no other. So did Soshia."

"Thank you, Mara. I believe you. So, how do enchantresses get their power?"

"It's mainly a question of focus and discernment. Every gem type requires us to focus in a particular way. The higher the gem class, the more focus is required, and the more we can focus and discern, the more power we can ultimately unleash and control."

“Alright, but what kind of power are we talking about? We’ve been working with the ether for more than a millennium, attempting to elicit its secrets, and we still don’t have even a fraction of the power I’ve sensed from you.”

“Oh, but you do, Nova. You just haven’t realized it yet. But the power you’re referring to is what we call manasic power. Personally, I believe it’s a by-product of the ethereal currents. It lives in everything around us: in gravity, in the forces that hold atoms together, even in the surface tension of a drop of water. Because it’s so much closer to us than the underlying ethereal substrate, it’s also easier to access. But because manasic power is so dependent upon the ethereal currents, any change in those currents has a profound effect on how we access them.”

Nova raised her head just a fraction. “Oh, I see.”

“Yes,” said Mara, “that’s what happened to Soshia yesterday afternoon. When Catyana induced the artifact and changed the ethereal currents, she was effectively blocking Soshia’s access to her powers. To Soshia, who was particularly sensitive to the flow of manasic power around her, it must have felt as if Catyana was draining the very life from her. I felt it, too, but not quite as strongly, probably because I have more experience and have learned to adapt. If only I had given in and allowed us to practice with our gems more often…” She shook her head and wiped away a few tears.

Nova pulled her closer and gave her a kiss on her head. “Please, don’t do this to yourself. You did what you felt was necessary at the time. I assume there would have been consequences if you had used your gems?”

“Yes, our sisters might have been able to sense them. As long as we didn’t use them, our sisters weren’t very interested in finding us. That’s why we swore to keep them secret and inactive as much as possible.” She sniffed. “Our sisters never believed Soshia could control an ascendant, but I knew she had it in her, and she did. I was so proud of her! But if our sisters had discovered that I had unlocked the powers of a ruby, they would never have stopped looking for us.”

“Why did you leave?”

“Because Soshia and I always hated the dark side of what our covens represent. We’re trained from an early age to find a balance between light and darkness, good and evil, until the distinctions become vague and blur together. But the true horror starts just before we turn twenty-two. We don’t celebrate the Age of Confirmation like you do. For us, it’s the Age of Consecration, when

we are consecrated to the Dark Lord through the Rite of Passage. It's a horrible, degrading ritual, Nova, one you should fear in your darkest nightmares."

"Who is this Dark Lord you're referring to?"

"You probably know him by the name Nevilan."

"Nevilan! I haven't used that name in ages. Does he really exist?"

"Oh, yes," she said bitterly. "If only I had never heard that name." She wiped some tears from her cheeks. "But Soshia and I always yearned for the light. We wanted love, and peace, and hope, and joy, and not the misguided visions of a free world propagated in the western provinces. Many of our coven sisters ridiculed us for our dreams and wrote us off as weak and pathetic. At one point, we just had enough of it all and ran."

"Maybe we should start at the beginning," said Nova. "Who are you, Mara? Vilam told us you and Soshia are cousins. But I assume your family names aren't Cemasena or Rotasen."

"True, but I think you already know who I am."

Nova opened her mouth, but she wasn't quite sure what to say.

Mara sighed. "Look, Nova, I promised I would trust you and drop the subject you were referring to earlier, but that doesn't mean I'm stupid. And as you already know, I'm gifted in the Art of Sensation. I know you're not deliberately trying to mislead me, but you certainly know more than you're letting on, and you're at least partially familiar with the things I've been telling you. Can't we just drop the charade and be honest with each other?"

Nova took a deep breath. "I'm so sorry. I truly wish I could tell you everything, but there's too much at stake. I'm afraid the best I can do is let you know when I'm familiar with something you say. But I was glad to hear it in context from someone with your experience. You've closed quite a few gaps for me."

"I suppose that will have to do. Now, who do you think I am?" Mara wiped away a tear running down her cheek.

Nova regarded her with a sympathetic gaze. "You're the young Lady Maralena Novesta, the eldest daughter of Lord Merelan and Lady Tsenera Novesta, and the heir apparent of one of the oldest and most powerful of the western houses."

"I am, and how I wish I wasn't," Mara said through bitter tears. "What gave me away?"

"Well, first of all, you wear your hair in a tucked braid, and Soshia wore hers in a chignon: the traditional styles of your houses. Add the fact that you both repeatedly demonstrated knowledge

and breeding well beyond your supposed station as domestic servants, it wasn't difficult to figure out the rest, even if I hadn't known people were looking for two young women named Soshia and Maralena."

"How long have you known?"

"Actually, almost from the moment the Lady Utalya settled down with us here in Nadil, so perhaps four years."

"That long? Really? Were we so transparent?"

"Don't worry," said Nova, "most people just see what they want to see or what others expect them to see."

"So, you also know who Soshia is?"

"I do, but if you don't mind, I'd rather hear it from you."

Mara nodded and took a deep breath. "Soshia is the young Lady Marusen, the eldest daughter of Lord Amendel and Lady Lusina Marusen. Sorry, was," said Mara, as a tear slipped down her cheek. She quickly wiped it off. "I can't believe she's gone. I've known her all her life. But not many people know the actual degree of our relationship because most people don't know that our mothers are actually sisters. But it's time someone knew. Soshia wanted to tell Vilam everything, but she never had the chance."

Nova sighed. She knew she couldn't let this one go, so she put on her most compassionate face. "Alright, let's try that again," she said as softly as she could. "Who is Soshia?"

Mara gasped and several tears slid down her face. "How…how did you know?"

"This I've actually known for quite some time. Please, Mara, for your own sake, don't be afraid to say it."

Mara opened her mouth, but it took her a moment to get the words out. "So-…Soshia is my daughter." Tears were streaming down her face. "Oh, Nova, that witch killed my little girl."

Nova took her in her arms, swayed her back and forth, and whispered soothing words in her ear until Mara had calmed herself. "Can you talk about it?"

Mara shook her head. "I'm so sorry, but I just don't have the strength."

"Let me try, and feel free to correct me if I'm wrong. Every enchantress must pass several trials before her consecration. The last three are an assassination, a seduction, and finally the traditional pilgrimage through the mountains to Covatinalis, which must be completed before the winter

solstice. In the case of your second trial, you were instructed to seduce Lord Marusen and bear him a child."

Mara gaped at her. "Nova, how is this possible? The Trials of Consecration belong to our most sacred and closely held secrets. How can you know all this?"

"I promised I'd tell you, and I will. But I can't right now."

"So you already knew that my mother, Tsenera Novesta, and my Aunt Lusina Marusen are sisters?"

"I did, although Tsenera is supposed to be from House Caldaran and Lusina from House Rotasen."

"Yes, that's what they want everyone to believe. But in reality, they both descend from a long line of enchantresses of the House Covatinalis."

Nova shuddered. "That name is only whispered in the mountains, if that."

"And the enchantresses ensure it remains that way."

"In that case, Talenon is your younger brother, right?"

"Yes, but we don't speak."

"I can see why."

"Actually, I'm an embarrassment at home, and the situation is hushed up, which makes it easy for me to avoid Talenon."

"What about your sisters, Pira and Davina?"

"Pira, by some miracle, might turn out alright one day. It's Davina you need to watch out for."

"Why is that?"

"She's…different," said Mara. "Let's just leave it at that for now."

"You've had to endure a lot of secretiveness on my part today, so that's only fair. But what about Soshia? Is it alright if we talk about her siblings?

Mara searched Nova's eyes. More tears slid down her face, and the pain in her expression was evident, but she finally nodded.

"So, after Soshia, you and Amendel had Varan and then Cetila, right?"

Mara took a shuddering breath. "Thank you, Nova. When you didn't mention Tavita, you told me everything I needed to know. You may not believe this, but Soshia and I actually had high hopes for all three of them. But Varan is gone now. And for Cetila and Tavita it would take a miracle of the same magnitude as for my sister Pira."

“Did Tavita really kill Varan?”

“Oh, Nova, it’s such a wretched state of affairs,” said Mara as more tears spilled over. “Yes, Tavita killed Varan. But it’s not as simple as that.”

“It never is.” Nova held Mara for a while again. When the flood had abated, she said, “So when did Soshia and you leave your coven?”

“A few years after Soshia’s consecration. We’ve been on the run for more than twenty years.”

“But you sometimes visited your families, right?”

“Yes, every now and then, we would go back west for a week or two. Soshia wanted to visit her father and her siblings as often as possible, and of course, I wanted to see them all, too, but we only went when we knew Lusina wasn’t there.”

“What about your family?” said Nova.

“For me it was more difficult. I could never really trust my parents or my siblings, and they don’t trust me. I did visit Pira a few times, and we got on fairly well. I think what she really wants is to be friends, but she won’t allow herself to admit it. Talking to Davina, on the other hand, is like taking poison. And because the girl is so incredibly bright, you never see her coming. She’s similar to Tavita in that regard, only I believe Tavita actually has a heart.”

“I’m so sorry about that, Mara.”

Mara took a deep breath. “So am I. But there’s more. Because of the way enchantresses commune, they can’t block individuals out, and Soshia and I could listen in on what they were doing any time we wanted.” She glanced at Nova in surprise. “Oh, I see. You already knew that, didn’t you?”

Now it was Nova’s turn to look surprised. “You really are exceptionally gifted. Yes, I did know that. But please continue.”

“Well, our coven sisters naturally didn’t like that we could listen in, and they’ve often tried to find us in the past, but we’ve become masters at shielding ourselves.”

“Yes, I know. I realized that when I tried to scan Normas’s chest wound.”

Mara paled and started sobbing again, so Nova had to hold her, whispering to her now and again that everything would be alright. “Oh, Nova, I’m so sorry,” she finally said. “I didn’t mean for him to die.”

Nova drew her closer to herself. Mara must have kept the guilt bottled up inside since the night before last, which is why she had been so withdrawn and moody. “Can you tell me what happened?”

Mara sighed. “I do want to tell you, but I need to back up a bit. Did you know that Culisa and Menirel Sitenan and Semanta Revan work for western intelligence?”

Nova sighed. “Yes, I feared as much.”

Mara smiled bitterly. “Working as maids has its advantages. People have no idea how much you actually see and hear. We knew almost everything they were up to after we started working for them. As you know, I’ve become more and more concerned about Catyana.”

“Yes, I realized that.”

“Her powers have been growing so quickly. For a long time, it wasn’t enough to attract anyone’s attention. But then you started training her four years ago.”

“I did, yes.”

“Since that time, Catyana has caused more and more disturbances in the ethereal currents. They still weren’t substantial enough to be pinpointed, but the sisters got nervous, so they started using Talenon’s intelligence network to gather information and figure out where the disturbances were coming from. It’s gotten so that informants and operatives everywhere are on alert and have been ordered to report any kind of odd activity, no matter how unimportant it may seem. Do you remember the incident two days ago that I told you about? The one where Catyana healed the little girl who fell from a swing?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Well, Culisa heard about the incident, too, and she put it in a report. The report was going to be sent out to Videsian Headquarters in Vetena per special courier, where it would have come to my brother’s attention. After that, it would only have been a matter of time before an enchantress came here to investigate.”

Nova took a deep breath. “Why didn’t you come to me with this?”

“Nova, I had no idea who I could trust, except Soshia, of course. I still don’t.”

“You still don’t trust me?”

Mara sighed. “I do, and I really want to. But, like I said, we’ve been on the run for such a long time. It’s difficult for us to trust anyone. Was…difficult. I still can’t believe she’s gone.” More tears streamed down her face and Nova pulled her closer.

Suddenly, there was a ruckus in the hall, the door burst open, and Natilya barged in with Tanola right behind her. Others followed, and Nova could see Vodana, Catyana, Vira, and Matila in the background. They all stared at Mara and Nova, seemingly speechless.

Mara could hardly look at them, shuddered, and cowered closer to her.

Nova drew her tighter to herself. "Seriously?" she said, staring back at Natilya.

Natilya finally said, "Nova, are you alright?"

"No, I'm getting a headache from trying to wrap my head around the fact that you would just barge in here like this."

"But Nova, she's—"

"An enchantress, yes," said Nova.

Natilya just stared at her.

Nova sighed. "Natilya, I appreciate that you're trying to do your job, but does it look as if I'm in even the slightest bit of danger here?"

"No, not…really," said Natilya.

"Alright, then thank you for your concern, but would you please leave the room and close the door behind you?"

"Yes, Nova. Sorry."

She was ushering the others back outside when Nova said, "Oh, Natilya, how did you know?"

"Catyana actually gave us the final clue."

"And what was that?"

"The hair you gave me yesterday morning. I still had it wrapped up in your handkerchief."

"And Catyana knew it was Mara's?"

"Yes."

"Amazing! Catyana, we'll talk about this later, alright? Now get out, all of you! Please?"

Natilya nodded and shut the door behind her as she left.

"I'm so sorry about that, Mara. Natilya takes her job as chief of security very seriously, and she just wanted to make sure I was safe."

"Of course. Protect the acolyte from the big, bad enchantress."

"Something like that. So, Culisa was going to send the report on to Vetena."

"Yes. She hired Normas to do it. He's always had an eye on me, so I slipped into the stables and made a deal with him. I told him I would meet him near the town sign on the road east later that night, after it got dark, if he gave me the documents he was carrying as my reward."

"Wasn't he suspicious?"

"I'm sorry, Nova, but Soshia and I are both trained seductresses, and we used to be very good at what we do. The poor boy was young and inexperienced. There was no way he could have resisted the proposition phase."

Nova stared at her. "I know enchantresses are schooled in seduction techniques, but you're telling me you're a fully trained seductress?"

"Yes. It just keeps getting better and better, doesn't it?"

Nova shook her head. "I'm not even sure I know what that means."

"It's pretty much how it sounds. A seductress seduces her target to commit intimate acts with her. Of course, there's almost always an ulterior motive."

"I might not want to," said Nova, "but I'm afraid I can imagine. So later that night, you met Normas near the town sign."

"I did. He hobbled his horse at the side of the road, and I led him closer to the trees where it was dark and no one could see us. There aren't any lights that far east."

"I know. What happened then?"

"Are you sure you want details?"

Nova sighed. "No, not really. But it might be important."

"I'll try to give you an abbreviated description of the procedure. For training purposes, a seduction is divided into seven distinct phases: proposition, preparation, bequeathal, dissociation, impassionment, descension, and separation."

"Does every seduction follow this pattern?"

"No, of course not. Every person is different, and the phases can bleed into one another."

"That coincides with my experience in regard to almost everything. Nothing is ever really simple, is it?"

"No, I'm afraid not. But we need to isolate the individual elements or we could never learn how these things work, or teach them. For instance, the first phase, proposition, involves preliminary flirting and enticing, which can be both playful and serious. Normas reacted best when the enticement was solemn and heartfelt. That's how I lured him into meeting me later that night."

“And the next phase?”

“Is preparation. It began when I met Normas on the road. During preparation, a seductress prepares both her target and herself for what is to come. It can be as simple as lying together and holding hands while gazing at the stars. You shouldn’t rush through this phase, but I thought I wouldn’t have to read him again since I believed I knew him well enough. That was my first mistake. Since preparation also contains elements of foreplay, I used a mixture of words, gestures, and caresses to tantalize and mesmerize him. I hated every second of it.”

“I know.”

Mara stared at her. “You do? How?”

“I was able to sense the echoes of your emotional distress at the scene. I couldn’t sense you because you had shielded yourself, but you couldn’t shield your emotions. I really felt for you, the way you loathed yourself.”

“I really did. That’s probably why I failed.”

“What’s the next phase?”

“Yes, the bequeathal. During bequeathal, your movements become more empathic and therefore more seductive and more intimate. Bequeathal is extremely important because, as a seductress, you always have to give a part of yourself.”

“Why is that?” said Nova.

“Well, if you want to lure your target in, they have to believe you truly yearn for them. How are they going to believe that if no part of you actually longs for them?”

“I see.”

“Because bequeathal is so important,” said Mara, “it can begin as early as the preparation phase. Some targets are very perceptive and might sense you’re only simulating. The more you bequeath of yourself, the more believable you become and the less suspicious they’ll be.”

“I still can’t understand why you put so much effort into it. Most men aren’t that perceptive.”

Mara’s smile was filled with sadness. “You’re just as bad as Vilam.”

Nova felt her brow crease. “I don’t understand.”

“Clearly. But, Nova, enchantresses aren’t just trained to seduce men.”

Nova gaped at her. “Enchantresses seduce women?”

“Yes, we’re usually trained to seduce both sexes. But it’s best if I show you.” With tears in her eyes and appearing so vulnerable, Mara drew Nova closer until their foreheads were touching. She

caressed Nova's cheek with the back of her free hand, gliding down until her fingers were under Nova's chin. She caressed her cheek one more time with her thumb, brushing delicately over her lips. Using only the slightest amount of upward pressure, she closed Nova's mouth so she wasn't gaping anymore and followed it up with a tender kiss. Then Mara moved back to give Nova room to breathe.

"Oh," whispered Nova as she touched her cheek. It felt hot. She placed her hand on her chest. "My heart is racing." She took a deep breath. "Would…would you be able to seduce even me?"

"Would you want me to seduce you?"

Nova swallowed. "I…don't know."

"Thank you, Nova. I hardly ever get such an honest answer. For someone like you, I believe I would come out of retirement. But you know my heart belongs to another."

"I do."

Mara probed her face. "I sense you haven't had much passion in your life, at least not the sensual kind. It makes you extremely susceptible to tenderness, like my caress just now, and could leave you vulnerable to a seductress's wiles. Just a bit of friendly advice."

"And I appreciate it," said Nova. "But I think we got sidetracked."

"Yes, I'm sorry. Where were we?" Mara sniffed back a few tears and wiped her cheeks.

"You were talking about bequeathal, and that you have to give of yourself so your, uh…target, won't become suspicious."

"Right, but it can be dangerous, because you can bequeath too much of yourself and fall for your target. The less experienced a seductress is, the more she usually has to give of herself, which is why young seductresses are strictly supervised." Mara sighed. "I haven't been active for quite a while, so in Normas's case, I should have bequeathed more of myself, but I just hated myself too much for doing it."

"I understand. What happens next?"

"The next phase restores the balance and is called dissociation," said Mara.

"What does that mean?"

"You dissociate yourself from your target to the point where you consider them an object that exists solely for your own pleasure."

"That seems more like contradiction than equilibrium," said Nova.

“I understand, but you need dissociation to balance out your bequeathal. You don’t want to become too attached or too dependent on your target, and dissociation helps you concentrate on what you need to do. If you’ve done your job well up to this point, your target will be so far along they shouldn’t notice you’re distancing yourself from them. Besides, the boundaries between bequeathal, dissociation, and impassionment aren’t abrupt, they’re fluid.

“Which brings me to the next phase: impassionment. This is where you impassion yourself and your target to the absolute heights of ecstasy. Of course, the more impassioned you become, the more your target believes it’s because of them. If you play your cards right and have balanced everything correctly, it becomes a vicious circle for the target, and they become addicted.”

“Isn’t it possible for you to become addicted to your own impassionment?”

“It is, which is why the balancing act I just mentioned is so important. Even so, it can still happen. But we’ve discovered the best cure for addiction is a stable environment and stable relationships. If you’re embedded in a family that loves and cares for you, as you love and care for them, the chance of addiction is much, much smaller. And if you do become addicted and already have such an environment in place, you can usually be cured with little effort. That’s why the covens are so important.”

“And that’s probably why so few enchantresses ever leave. I assume Soshia and you were the rare exceptions.”

“Yes, I suppose you could say we created our own little coven consisting of just the two of us.”

“So your seduction of Normas didn’t work.”

“Only partly. I told him I would only go along if he gave me his courier satchel before we started, but he wanted to give it to me after we were done. What I didn’t take into consideration was Normas’s acute sense of duty. Delivering the message was extremely important to him. If I had taken more time to prepare, I would have realized Normas had no intention of ever giving me the documents.”

“And that’s when you felt betrayed,” said Nova.

“And how! I was in bequeathal and on the verge of dissociation when I finally realized my mistake and tried to abort. But Normas was already too far gone and attempted to take me by force.”

“Wasn’t there anything else you could have done?”

"Well, I never planned on giving myself to him completely. I was going to enchant him instead so he would fall asleep."

"So you were actually going to betray him, too."

"That's not how I see it. I bequeathed a part of myself to him. That in itself is quite a prize. And if I had been able to enchant him, he would have awakened the next morning believing he had experienced the best night of his life."

"But it didn't work out that way."

"No, I'm afraid not, and that's my fault. It would have been easy to enchant him during preparation, or during my initial bequeathal while we were just lying together exchanging caresses. But I thought Normas had more integrity and would honor his end of the bargain, which is why I felt I had more time to execute my plan. But I was afraid for Catyana, and I felt so humiliated, so I let my emotions get in the way and missed my chance. That shouldn't happen to a trained seductress. I behaved like a complete novice."

"I sensed you were very afraid."

"Yes."

"For Catyana."

"Yes. Nova, what are you getting at?"

"Exactly how afraid for Catyana were you?"

Mara looked at her with a forlorn expression. "Oh, Nova, please don't."

"I'm sorry, but I have to."

Mara took a deep breath, and a tear rolled down her cheek. "You know I love her, or you wouldn't be asking these questions. Please don't torment me."

"I don't mean to torment you, Mara. Please believe me. But I have to know exactly how deep your feelings for her are. I know you can't understand why I'm asking you this, but in a few days, I'm sure everything will become clear."

"This is too important to me. If you want me to trust you, you have to give me something."

"Alright, but if you truly love Catyana, you mustn't breathe a word of this to anyone."

"I would never do anything to harm Catyana. You know that."

Nova nodded. "Catyana has a very special…status within the Selanian Order. Only very few people know this. Not even Catyana knows about it. But if it were to get out, she and her family

would be in grave danger, independent of whether she has any powers or not. It's my job to keep her safe, which is why I need to know how far your love for her goes."

"That sounds very mysterious. But I believe you if you say she could be in grave danger. I'm sure you already know this, but since you need to hear it, I will say it. My heart and soul belong to Catyana, and I love her with every fiber of my being. I would do almost anything for her."

"Almost anything?"

"I don't want to go against my conscience. It's not what our Goddess would want from me."

"I'm glad that's where you set the boundary. But why do you love Catyana so?"

Mara stared at her. "Nova, that's not fair. You know I can't answer that question, and neither can you. Only our Goddess knows what she puts in our hearts and why."

"Right. I'm sorry, that was unfair of me. But what are you going to do?"

Another tear rolled down her cheek. "What can I do? We're in the eastern provinces. What I feel for Catyana isn't considered acceptable here. Even in the western provinces it would probably only be tolerated. And Catyana would never give in to anything like that, even if it were appropriate. She likes boys."

"She does? Oh, she does."

"I don't understand. Don't you know that?"

"I…" Nova sighed. "I have a hard time when it comes to romance, which is also why I don't know very much about seduction. It seems to be the one area where my senses don't work very well."

"May I ask why?"

"I don't like talking about it; it triggers too many horrible memories. But something happened to me about twenty years ago, something very bad, and I think it broke something inside of me."

"I'm so sorry, Nova. I didn't know."

"Not many people do. But what about you, Mara? I hate seeing you like this, pining away for someone you can't be with."

"It's not something I can just change. I have tried. I've known Catyana almost since Soshia and I first arrived here in Nadil eight years ago. She was only eighteen then, and I remember the first time I saw her. It was evening, the sun was setting, and there she was, walking down the street, her hair on fire like a stream of molten gold. I almost couldn't catch my breath. I know those feelings

were only sensual, but I've had a lot of time to get to know her since then. She has such a good heart, and my love and admiration for her has only grown."

"She does have a good heart, and in many ways she's still so innocent," said Nova. "But lately, she's been so moody and conflicted."

"I know. I'm very worried about her, but she won't talk about it."

"She won't talk to me, either, and it goes against my nature to pressure her. But I'm glad to know there are two of us worrying about her now." She squeezed Mara's hand.

"Nova, aren't you shocked, I mean, that I love Catyana?"

"You mean because you have feelings for women instead of men?"

Mara nodded. "I'm not completely exclusive, but yes."

"I…wouldn't say shocked. Surprised, maybe. It's a rather new concept for me."

"Most people here would tell me I'm damned to the most horrible regions of hell for expressing such feelings, let alone having them."

"Yes, I know, and I'm so sorry. I'm afraid our Scriptures do contain passages that could be interpreted in that way. But I'd be more concerned about the people who say such hateful things. The words of Scripture are a double-edged sword and are meant to discern and expose what's in the hearts of those who hear or read them. Anyone who uses them to point fingers or spout words of hell and damnation only reveals the sad state of their own hearts."

"I never thought of it that way," said Mara. "But is it possible my feelings for Catyana are wrong?"

"I don't think it's that simple. Although I do believe what you said earlier, that only our Goddess knows what she puts in our hearts and why. We usually can't help the way we feel. It's what we do with those feelings that matters. For instance, if you would try to…seduce Catyana or force her to do something against her will only to satisfy your own desires, those are things I would consider wrong, or sinful even. But as far as I can tell, your love is pure. You're even willing to sacrifice your own happiness so she can be safe. I trust you, Mara."

Mara sniffed back a few tears, and her eyes were glistening. "You can't believe what your words mean to me," she said softly.

"And I'm so grateful to you for trusting me with this," said Nova. "I appreciate your openness and honesty, and I won't forget it. But we never finished your story about Normas. What happened in the end?"

“Yes, we never got to impassionment, let alone descension or separation. When he was trying to force himself on me, I flicked what Soshia and I call fire beads at him. They’re tiny plasma pellets that burn the skin and leave a nasty scar. That got him off of me. He was angry and indignant and marched away, but I couldn’t let him leave without getting the report. I think I panicked. I grabbed a branch and swung it at his head. He went down, but he was up again so fast, and he was so angry. There was a wild and vicious look in his eyes. I’ve seen that look before, and even now I still believe he would have tried to kill me. My reaction was pure reflex. I even tried to abort at the last moment, but I couldn’t hold it all back. A remnant of the plasma sphere struck him full force in the chest. He probably died instantly.”

“That huge hole in his chest was from a remnant?” said Nova, gaping at her.

Mara seemed speechless. Another tear rolled down her cheek. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“Oh, honey, I know,” said Nova, squeezing her hand. “So in the end, you took the documents and hid the boy as well as you could.”

Mara nodded. “After I had removed the hobble from his chyeves and sent it galloping into the forest, yes. How did you find the boy so quickly?”

“Vilam did. He must have come from the forest at that spot and stumbled over the boy’s body. Constable Pirtas informed us and we came to investigate the scene.”

Mara seemed drained and just sat there for a while. She had moved away a little, but she looked so lost that Nova slid closer and put her arm around her again. Mara put her head on her shoulder.

“I was hoping I would be able to tell Normas’s parents the truth about how he died,” said Nova. “But by doing so, I would have to expose you. I don’t know if I can do that.”

“I would also like for them to know the truth. But wouldn’t it be cruel, leaving them with such an image of their son? At least this way they had closure, and they can keep him in good memory.”

“You may be right. I just don’t know. Let’s think about it some more. We’ll talk again when I return from Tolares.” Nova took her hand and squeezed. “Mara, I’m so sorry, but I still need to know what happened to Soshia last night.”

Mara nodded and sighed, and new tears overflowed and ran down her cheeks. “It’s actually the most important and the most dreadful part, and it’s why I’m so afraid for Catyana now.”

What Mara then told Nova was disturbing and heartbreaking. Soshia and Mara had gone to the gardening supplies warehouse with the wagon where the owner had allowed them access to grab a few things they had purchased earlier that evening. They were in the building when a woman in

an exquisite black velvet cloak with black silk trimmings entered and closed the door. She threw back her hood. Soshia froze and turned white as a sheet. “Mother!”

“So, at least you still recognize me,” said Lusina with a frosty smile. Like Soshia, she had her long, dark, wavy hair bound back in a massive chignon, but held it together with a lovely jeweled clip. She didn’t look much older than Mara. “I wasn’t sure what to think. You don’t write, you don’t visit. Not even birthday wishes for your dear mother?”

“Leave her alone, Lusina,” said Mara.

“She’s officially mine, so I can pretty much do with her what I want.”

“Over my dead body,” said Mara.

“Yes, I’m getting to that, but Soshia first. She is officially *my* daughter, after all.”

“You’re not making any sense, Mother,” said Soshia. “What do you mean by ‘officially your daughter’?”

“Unbelievable!” said Lusina with a sneer at Mara. “Even after all these years, you still haven’t told her.”

Soshia glared at Lusina, then gazed at Mara. Her expression softened. “She didn’t have to.” She held out her hand and Mara took it, a tear running down her cheek.

“Aw, isn’t that just adorable?” said Lusina. “Mother and daughter, standing together at last. What a tender and unforgettable moment.”

“What do you want from us?” Soshia blurted angrily.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I thought I had made that clear. I want your worthless lives snuffed out like the flame of a candle. Now, let me see.” She glanced around the building, tapping her finger on her lips. “Well, Soshia, dear, you may be disloyal, but you are a princess, so your demise practically dictates some kind of tiara, even if it’s only made of wood. Yes, I think that would do nicely.”

Mara and Soshia stared at her.

Lusina laughed. “Come, now, girls, why so surprised? You knew this day would come eventually. But we have a little time, and since you’re not getting out of here alive, we might as well catch up first.” She sat down on a crate.

“How can you be so cold? You’re a monster!” said Mara.

“Why, thank you, Maralena. That is so sweet!”

“You haven’t changed a bit,” said Soshia, her eyes narrowed in anger. “But I’m surprised you even cared enough to come looking. How did you find us?”

“Don’t give yourself so much credit. I haven’t thought of you in years. You’re just a bonus. I wasn’t expecting to find you here in Nadil.”

“Then what are you doing here?” said Mara.

“There were several massive surges in the ethereal currents this afternoon. Since I was in the area, it was my duty to investigate. But then, you two would know all about those incidents, wouldn’t you?”

Mara glared at her.

Lusina regarded them with a cold smile. “I usually send my adjutant to get information from Culisa Sitenan when I’m near Nadil, and she’s always been very helpful. But imagine my surprise when I heard that a Faeren family lives near town. It seems their eldest daughter—who had just been on a walk this afternoon with Culisa’s two maids, Mara and Soshia—had healed a little girl in a park only yesterday. What was the daughter’s name again? Ah, yes, Catyana.”

“Don’t you dare touch her,” hissed Mara.

“Oh, I’ll do so much more than touch her.”

“I’ll never allow it,” Soshia yelled.

Lusina sneered. “You? You’re just a pathetic, traitorous little bitch. I should have slit your throat the moment you slithered from your mother’s womb. But I’ll let you live long enough to see your golden-haired friend whimpering for mercy as I have her and her sisters slowly tortured to death.”

Soshia screamed in outrage and flung a magenta-colored sphere at Lusina. The enchantress was ready and deflected it into the back wall, where it exploded into the room containing the fertilizer and burst into flames. Lusina’s own sphere sailed toward Mara, but Soshia wrenched her out of its path, throwing Mara to the ground, and the plasma ball blasted into the side wall.

“So predictable,” smirked Lusina as she calmly flicked a second sphere at a supporting column close to where Soshia was standing.

“No!” cried Mara, but all she could do was watch helplessly from the ground as a huge crossbeam and part of the loft came crashing down on Soshia’s head.

“And there’s your tiara, honey,” said Lusina. “But—oops!—how clumsy of me. I overestimated your size.”

Sobbing and with the building ablaze around her, Mara crawled to where her daughter was lying and dragged her free of the debris.

Lusina sauntered over while plucking a few strands of hay from her cloak and looked down at Mara. “The girl has only herself to blame, you know. Although I was surprised. She actually managed to tame an ascendant. But I expected more from you, Maralena. You showed so much potential. To go and waste it on the likes of her? But you’ve done me a few favors in the past, and I know what I owe my sister. So for you, my dear niece, I allow us to part enchantress-to-enchantress, with a quick, clean death.” She regarded Mara over the magenta glow of another plasma sphere and, with a stony smile, blew it at her like a kiss.

With a furious shriek, Mara flung her arms wide, releasing a massive surge of red energy that threw Lusina through the wall and blew the building apart.

Mara got up and stood there with the unmoving Soshia at her feet, while the dumbfounded enchantress lay on the ground near a neighboring building, staring at her. But Mara saw something else, too. For the first time in her life, she saw fear in Lusina’s eyes. The enchantress scrambled to her feet, threw her hood over her head, and disappeared into the darkness. With a last remnant of self-control, Mara lifted her daughter’s body and carried her a safe distance from the flames, where she collapsed to her knees, and Nova found her only minutes later.

As Mara finished the story, Nova held her tight and kissed her on the forehead. “I’m so sorry you had to relive that, Mara. I can’t believe Lady Marusen killed her own stepdaughter.”

“Oh, she’s done so much worse than that. At least my poor little girl died a quick death. But, Nova, everything I did, trying to seduce Normas and getting his documents, it was all for nothing. Soshia would still be dead, and Catyana would still be in danger.” She started sobbing again, and Nova had to hold her for a while before Mara could control the flood of tears. Finally, she whispered, “I’m just so tired of it all. I’m tired of hiding, I’m tired of being careful and being afraid.”

“I know. But what about your mother? Don’t you think she might help?”

Mara shook her head. “I can’t trust her. I think she’s more balanced and more reasonable than my Aunt Lusina, and I also believe she still loves me. But in the end, she will probably choose the coven over her daughter.”

“Alright. I’m so glad you told me everything. I will never forget you for this. But I know what you want from me in return, and with what you’ve given me, I’m sure Lotis and Matila will see reason and let me take Catyana away from here.”

“Thank you, Nova. That’s all I wanted.”

They sat together for another half hour. Nova felt the little bit of warmth and affection she could provide hardly offset everything the poor girl had been through. Fortunately, it seemed to be the only thing Mara needed, and Nova was glad to share it with her.

41. The Audition

After Nova had thrown them out of the study, Vira returned to the dining room with the others. Vodana took her aside and told her about her talk with her mother. When Vira heard her mother had given Vodana permission to test her, she could hardly contain her excitement and wanted to get Vodana to the music room right away. She grabbed Vodana's hand and dragged her into the hallway, which completely surrounded the herbarium. Catyana and the acolytes had overheard the conversation and smiled at the departing pair. But Vira saw how her sister Sinara followed her retreat with her eyes, an anxious expression etched on her face.

Vira had lived in the house all her life and knew it like the contents of her apron's pocket. The front side of the house contained the dining room, the main entrance foyer, and the family room. She and Vodana also passed the guest and children's bedrooms on the left side of the house, then the study in the back, at last coming to the music room. The right side of the house contained a storage room, the master bedroom, a pantry, and the kitchen, which was connected to the dining room. A wooden spiral staircase on one side and to the back of the herbarium would have taken them up to the gallery where the children usually did their schooling or enjoyed reading and painting on lonely winter evenings.

Vira could tell that Vodana admired the herbarium as they went around it. The corridor was windowed so the view to the herbarium was unobstructed. It was well cared for and had a beautiful fountain in the center. Vira was proud of the substantial variety of plants it contained, many of which she had grown herself. Large skylights in the roof surrounding the gallery allowed generous quantities of light to illuminate the room.

The music room was the same size as the dining room and also had large windows, which faced north. Every member of the family was musical, so there were many instruments lying or standing around. Torvos had even constructed a glass organ, which stood dormant on one side of the room.

Vodana seated herself in front of the harp and let her hands fly gracefully over the strings. She nodded her approval, since the harp was well tuned. "Alright, come and stand here, Vira, right next

to me," she said. "No, don't look at the harp, look at me. I'm going to see how far along you are in aural comprehension first. Now, tell me which interval I'm playing." Vodana plucked two strings.

"A perfect fifth."

"Very good. How about this?"

"Major seventh."

"And this?"

"Minor third."

"Alright, what about this?" Vodana asked.

"That's not an interval."

"Well, what is it?"

"A major triad in its second inversion."

"And this?"

"A diminished ninth."

"I see you're solid on your chords."

"Yes, I'm sorry, I should have told you. Mother taught us all that when we were little."

"And a very good job she's done of it, too. Now, can you tell me which tones these are?" Vodana plucked a short progression of strings.

Vira's eyes opened wide. For some reason, the theme brought disturbing images to her mind, and for the first time since her discussion with Vodana at the dining table, she faltered in her eagerness. She dropped her gaze.

Vodana must have mistaken Vira's hesitation for embarrassment. "What's wrong, dear? I sense you're holding back. Just open up and let yourself go."

Vira shook her head. "I'm sorry, Vodana, I don't have absolute pitch," she answered untruthfully, staring at the ground in sudden confusion.

"Not to worry, my dear. Many people who do often don't have a very good feeling for harmony and dissonance, and their ability to recognize melodic patterns is sometimes severely impeded. It can be very aggravating having to work with them. Can you at least make an educated guess?"

"I would say it's approximately D, A, B-flat and F, all in the fifth octave."

"Not just approximately, but exactly. Very good, Vira. Did you reach that conclusion by working from a familiar reference tone?"

Vira nodded. She knew Vodana was right in her assessment of people with absolute pitch. She had experienced it herself during the few times someone with that particular talent had visited them. But she also knew the impediment didn't apply to her. She couldn't understand why she felt so reluctant to reveal herself to her new friend.

"Alright, now we'll try some rhythmic exercises," Vodana continued. "How do you usually acquire your reference tempo?"

Vira felt for her pulse.

"Excellent! I always do it that way, too. Now, I'm going to clap out a fairly lengthy rhythm. I want you to close your eyes, and when I'm done, I want you to repeat it."

Vira continued and didn't miss a beat, although her heart was somehow no longer in it.

42. The Tinavar

Itinales raised his head and sniffed the air. His herd was in danger. He nervously pawed the ground and then sniffed once more. The noose was tightening. He was still undisputed prince of the forest, yet who would respect him if he allowed his herd to be entrapped? From the realms north of the Sea of Ventara to the regions north of the Chyenesar, the forest was his. He still had not found his Tinasal and therefore could not mate. And he had not yet fought the *becintas* in the far north and was therefore not yet King of the Navaren. But he had always believed there was still time. Now, time was running out. And if he couldn't even protect his own herd, he didn't deserve the title.

Through the dense foliage, he cautiously eyed the two women leaning against the trunk of a mammoth conifer in the clearing. There was evil brewing. The two women themselves were not necessarily malevolent, nor were the many women who were hunting down his herd. But the purpose that had brought them here was born of malice, and behind that purpose, he could sense an even darker power. The shorter woman, who was called Cetila by her friend, had already partaken of the refining pain that led to purification and might someday make a good Tinasal. He could even sense the beginnings of the process in the taller of the two young women. But alas, many of the women were no longer pure, and all of them had been poisoned. He perceived the shadow of darkness in their auras.

He raised his head and sniffed the air once more. The women were slowly surrounding his herd, and he knew there was no escape. In the past years, they had encountered more and more men who had wandered into the forest, looking for them. It had usually been easy to evade them, but this time there were just too many. He had counted more than five hundred. Why hadn't he listened to his instincts and traveled farther north? It would have been the safe thing to do.

On the other hand, where there were no people, there were no Tinasal. And without the Tinasal, the mares would remain barren, there would be no young, and his race would die. In this sense, the past millennium had been good to them. There had been peace, evil had been held at bay, and there had always been maidens with a pure heart who could be found wandering in the forests, drawn by a burning desire they couldn't quite define. Of course, it was necessary for the steeds to leave their beloved Navaren to search for a Tinasal, but until a few decades ago, the forests in the south had been safe for the Tinavar to travel in.

All that was changing quickly. Evil lurked everywhere. What would happen if they were forced to bond with an impure Tinasal? Itinales shuddered and tossed his thick, silvery mane. The consequences of such an act would be horrendous. And yet the possibility of such a thing happening was becoming ever more likely. The safeguards the One had put in place to shield the precious balance of life on the planet were melting away with each day in which the Millennial Peace was undermined by the forces of darkness.

The Elinar would have known what to do. They had been the divine Heralds of Wisdom and the Guardians of Passage. With their singular insight, they would have distinguished the subtle alterations in the currents of ethereal space that jeopardized equilibrium. They would have taken the necessary steps.

But the Elinar were long gone, and his herd was in immediate danger. There was really only one thing he could do. He stood still and called silently to his herd, informing them of his plan. Without a sound, they cried out in anguish, pleading with him to reconsider. He didn't respond. He knew they would obey.

He gazed once more at the two women sitting at the base of the tree. They were the leaders. If they recalled their troops, his plan might work. His thoughts wandered back to his hopes and dreams and conjured up the image of the Golden Messenger who had been the longing of his heart for so many years. What a Tinasal she would make! But it was probably just a fantasy born of false pride. Not his desires were important, but the safety of his herd. He shook the alluring thoughts

from his mind and steeled himself to the task ahead. He had made his choice, and he knew what he had to do.

43. Empty Assurances

After they left the study, Nova went to the kitchen, where Natilya and Tanola were helping Matila with the dishes. “Matila, may I talk to you for a moment?” said Nova.

“Of course, dear.” Matila dried her hands, and Tanola took her place at the wash bin. When they were in a secluded corner, Matila said with a worried expression, “Nova, is Mara really an enchantress?”

“Yes, but please Matila, I have to be able to trust you. No one outside of this family can know about Mara.”

Matila nodded, but she still seemed concerned. “I’ve heard such horrible stories about enchantresses. Do I need to be worried? Is my family safe?”

“If there is danger to your family from any direction,” said Nova, “I guarantee it won’t be from Mara. What does your heart tell you about her?”

“I feel she’s gentle and quiet, and I’ve seen how compassionate she can be. I feel so sorry for her for losing Soshia. But I would never have believed her to be an enchantress.”

“And she doesn’t want to be. It’s a decision that was forced on her, and on Soshia. They escaped their coven, and they were just trying to lead a normal, peaceful life. Please trust your instincts.”

“I will. Is that what you wanted to talk about?”

“No. Mara gave me some valuable information that I need to share with you. As soon as Lotis gets back from the woods, we need to talk about Catyana’s future.”

“Alright, but we wanted to talk to you about that while you were here anyway. I’ll let Lotis know as soon as he gets back.”

“Oh, and Matila, if you ever feel your family is in danger, Mara could probably help.”

“She could?”

“I believe so, yes. And I also think she would be receptive to your friendship now that Soshia is gone.”

"Alright, I'll do what I can. Thank you, Nova. But why don't you go outside with the others? It's such a beautiful day. I'll finish up here with Natilya and Tanola, and we'll join you in a little while."

Nova took Matila's advice and went outside with Mara, Catyana, and Sinara. They sat on one of the benches in front of the house, enjoying the afternoon sun. Mara put her head on Catyana's shoulder, and Catyana automatically put her arm around her, while Nova lifted Sinara onto her lap. "Sinara, I have the feeling you're angry with me."

Sinara looked up at her and shook her head. "I'm not angry, Nova, just dreadfully sad. I do like you, very much even, but I also know you're going to take Caty away. But if Caty has to leave, then I'm glad it's with you and not someone else. But it still hurts so much in here," she said, pressing her hands against her heart as a tear slipped down her cheek.

"Oh, you poor thing," Nova exclaimed, hugging the girl to herself and rocking her back and forth. "I do promise you, though, that I'll take very good care of her."

Sinara looked up at Nova and nodded, brushing a tear from her eye, and cuddled up against her.

"Sinara, your sister told me you've been having nightmares again. Is that true?"

Sinara nodded.

"Would you like to talk about it?"

The girl sighed. "I don't know. I don't really like talking about them. They're scary."

"I understand, honey. Could you tell me what's so scary about them?"

"Well, it's not so much the fire and the black men. But then I hear the song, and suddenly there's blood everywhere, and a big, black hole opens up, and I'm swallowed by…" Sinara shuddered.

"Swallowed by what, dear?"

"By her," Sinara whispered, as another shiver went through her.

Nova, Catyana, and Mara looked at each other in concern. "She calls her *'Tevasala se Nemata,'* the Goddess of Death," Catyana said.

Nova gazed out across the fields, contemplating the words her friend had just revealed to her. "Yes, it's an ancient prophecy, foretold by Cades himself, and one of the first prophecies regarding the Emissary: 'Let the accursed beware, for he will awaken the Goddess of Death when he comes and the song of the siren will unleash the Goddess's wrath upon his enemies,' 1 Cades 24:16. Such passages have been known to induce anxiety in tender individuals, which is why we're very careful with them. You haven't been reading such accounts to her, have you?"

Catyana thought about it and shook her head. “Not that I’m aware of. Mother has been concentrating on the latter prophets of late.”

“Could this be another prophecy that must be taken literally?” Nova sighed. “Everything I’ve been taught seems to be falling apart.” She looked down at her young charge and realized Sinara was trembling.

“Please, Nova, don’t let him wake her up,” the girl whispered.

Nova hugged the little girl tightly to herself. “It’s alright, Sinara, it’s alright.” Nova couldn’t think of any other way to comfort her, although she realized her assurances must sound empty because she couldn’t even believe them herself.

44. The Sacrifice

Cetila caught her breath and felt the blood draining from her face.

When Pira looked at her, she recoiled. “Cetila, what’s wrong?”

“*Teva’lin*, it’s so beautiful,” Cetila whispered. She heard Pira gasp but couldn’t budge. Her eyes were fixed upon the most wondrous creature she had ever seen. The Tinavar’s translucent horn gleamed dully in the soft light of the forest. Its silky coat shone like silver, and its thick mane and luxurious tail rekindled dreams the little girl still buried somewhere inside of her must once have had.

Cetila’s heart reached out. Was this what she had been yearning for all her life, calling to her on moonlit nights when she tossed restlessly in her sleep? Had its alluring voice drawn her out to wander the forests, seeking her desire, searching for that which had been lost in the depths of her soul? “Pira, where’s your horn?” She could hardly breathe.

“No, Cetila, it might be a trick.”

“I don’t think so. It’s as if I can feel its thoughts. I believe it wants to be caught.”

“Why?”

“It’s going to sacrifice itself for its herd.” As she spoke, the Tinavar turned and walked leisurely back into the forest. “See? It’s heading right back into our trap.”

Pira swallowed. “Alright, let’s try. At the worst, we’ll lose a day. My horn’s in my bag.”

Cetila reached for her friend’s bag and pulled out the horn. Then she stood and blew a short burst of isolated notes. They soon heard the theme being repeated from different locations in the

distance. The two women took up their gear and followed the clearly visible tracks the Tinavar had left. From its stride, it was apparent the animal wasn't moving very quickly.

"How's your brother?" Cetila asked in a hushed voice.

"Talenon?"

"Yes."

"I haven't really heard much from him since Lord Divestelan made him head of his intelligence organization."

"It seems like an interesting idea, though, using a religious order as a cover."

"An interesting idea? Come on, I thought you didn't like ambiguity."

Cetila grinned. "Alright, interesting, but ineffective. From what I heard, the new High Priestess is very devious. I'm sure she's long since discovered that the Videsian Order is just a front for covert activities."

"Is it really just a front? I'm sure many of the followers are true believers and have no idea what's going on behind the scenes. Cetila, what's really bothering you?"

Cetila sighed. "It just seems your House is very involved. Your brother is head of intelligence, your uncle is captain of the Black Guard, your father is practically Lord Divestelan's right hand, Davina is with us here in the Brigade, and who knows what your sister Maralena is up to."

"We…don't talk about her."

"Perhaps, but you know what I mean," said Cetila.

"Are you saying House Marusen isn't involved?"

"My House is a known variable."

"Really! Then what about Soshia?"

"What about her?"

"Where is she, and where do her loyalties lie?"

"How should I know?"

"She's *your* sister."

Cetila jammed her lips together to silence the sharp rebuke she knew she would come to regret. Just as Varan had been a devoted brother, so had Soshia always been a wonderful sister and friend. But Pira was right, no one really knew where she was or what she was doing. Her older sister reappeared at the oddest times, bringing her sharp wit and warm heart, only to vanish again for years without a trace. The last time Cetila had seen her was two years ago when Varan had died.

She had returned for several days to just sit and cry with Cetila and lend her comfort, but Soshia had also been the first to make her laugh again. Cetila missed her dreadfully and wished she knew where she was.

Pira fixed her with a reproachful gaze. “Your silence speaks volumes.”

Cetila sighed and shrugged. “What do you expect me to say?”

“I expect you to be honest with me. Look, Cetila, I oppose these methods as much as you do, which is probably why I chose you as commander of the Brigade. I promise, if you watch my back, I’ll watch yours, alright?”

Cetila took a deep breath. “Well, I do want to trust you, and I’ve wanted to renew our friendship for some time now. I was somehow hoping you might understand. But it seems Tavita has a lot of influence over you. You were her first officer after Lady Gevinesa stepped back. It would hurt me very much if someone wanted to get close to me for the sole purpose of reporting back to my sister.”

“No, please, believe me, it’s not like that. You know for yourself how confused we all were when that bitch Gevinesa betrayed us. Tavita was the one who held us together and gave us the moral support we needed during that difficult time. I pledged to be faithful to her and her cause, and I intend to honor that pledge. But Tavita’s gone, and I really could use a good friend by my side right now.”

Cetila cringed. “I don’t feel comfortable when you talk about Gevinesa like that. The Crimson Brigade wouldn’t even exist if it hadn’t been for her. Besides, she might have had some very good reasons for leaving.”

“Then why didn’t she talk to us? We practically worshipped her and would have followed her anywhere.”

“Things change.”

They fell silent and concentrated on the tracks they were following, both hesitant to resume the conversation. But something seemed to be in the air, some tingling sensation stirring up Cetila’s thoughts and emotions. She couldn’t quite understand what was happening to her, but something had pierced her heart, called out to her. Deep down, she knew exactly what it was, and a dark part of her resisted. But the struggle was only of short duration. The shadows in her soul evaporated like dew in the sun as she opened herself up to the enthralling effect of the animal they were pursuing.

Suddenly, she grabbed her captain's arm and dragged her to a halt. "Pira, I just can't do this anymore. And I'm so sorry if I've been making this more difficult than it had to be. But please, can't we just sweep all that aside and be friends again?"

Pira stared at her in astonishment. "Oh, Cetila, that's all I ever wanted." She shot her a perky smile and held out the little finger of her left hand. "Nursemaids?"

With a grin, Cetila wrapped her little finger around Pira's. "Nursemaids."

They beamed at each other in relief, falling into each other's arms, and Cetila felt a swell of joy surge through her. When they finally parted and looked at each other, Cetila gasped at the elated glow in Pira's expression, which highlighted her friend's almost divine loveliness in a way she hadn't seen in ages. It seemed as if Pira's face had been washed clean of all the darkness of the past years, and Cetila couldn't even begin to describe how the look on her friend's face touched her heart.

Pira turned and, clasping Cetila's hand tightly in her own, pulled her forward to continue their search. Cetila felt as if a terrible weight had fallen from her.

After half an hour, they came upon the creature grazing in a clearing. As Cetila waited, she saw her sisters in arms signaling from all sides, surrounding the animal. She took the net from her bag, stepped out of her hiding place, and strode toward the Unicorn.

"Cetila, wait," Pira hissed after her.

But she couldn't. Something inside her drew her toward the enchanting beast. The clearing remained silent. She couldn't hear a sound from her sisters in the underbrush, who were undoubtedly watching her outrageous behavior. As she approached the Tinavar, it stopped grazing and eyed her cautiously. She reached out and stroked the soft coat of its neck. "You're so beautiful, you know that?"

The Tinavar whinnied softly.

"Of course you do." She stepped back. "I'm so sorry, but I have to do this."

In an abrupt motion, she threw the net and let it glide out of her hands. It draped itself over the Tinavar, which snorted anxiously but otherwise remained calm.

The underbrush around her came alive as her sisters in arms jumped out, cheering her for her supposed courageous performance. The net was quickly fastened to the ground. When she turned around, Pira was standing behind her.

"You couldn't help yourself, could you?" Pira said.

Cetila shook her head.

“I understand. I won’t tell the girls it didn’t take as much courage as it seemed.” They grinned at each other. Cetila went over to Pira’s sister to discuss transport. From the corner of her eye, she saw Pira beckon to the leader of the first company, who had just entered the clearing with her brigadiers. “Lieutenant, you have your orders. Begin the treatment.”

The lieutenant bowed and gestured to two of her junior officers, who took out their whips. Cetila wondered what they were up to. Did they have their whips out as a precaution? That didn’t make any sense. There were more effective ways to keep the animal contained. And what did Pira mean by ‘treatment’? She continued her conversation with Davina, but kept an eye on the three women.

The two brigadiesses with the whips hesitated when they saw the beast gazing calmly at them from inside its latticed prison and glanced back at their commanding officer. The lieutenant swallowed. Then she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and nodded for them to begin. The women raised their whips and struck out at the animal, whose squeals sounded like a woman screaming in terror.

Cetila whirled around and paled when she finally realized what was going on. “Pira, are you out of your mind? What are you doing?”

“I’m sorry Cetila, but those are the Lady’s explicit orders. The Tinavar must be near death when we deliver it to her in Tolares.” When she saw Cetila’s anguished expression, she said, “I really am sorry. I have no idea what your mother is up to.”

Cetila jammed her lips together to keep them from trembling and turned back to Davina. “Prepare the crate. We will begin transport immediately.” Then she walked stiffly out of the clearing and back to the camp with her head held high but bitter tears stinging in her eyes.

45. Golden Gifts

Nova was relieved when Matila, Tanola, and Natilya joined them for a walk around the farm. Although she loved Sinara like a little sister, she knew the presence of the girl’s mother would have a more calming effect on her than she ever could. The farm itself was quite diversified, and Nova marveled at the family’s iron resolve every time she was here. They not only owned many types of livestock and poultry but had also sown a large quantity of grain and vegetables. It clearly took a lot of work to keep everything running smoothly.

Nova smiled when she saw the little *cetesi*, which reminded her of her sister's remark earlier that day. The colorful creatures came scampering up to the women, butting against them with their little horns to get their attention and blatting disappointedly when they discovered no supplementary fodder was forthcoming.

The women returned to the house after about an hour, where they found Vodana sitting in the family room, conversing quietly with a radiant Vira. They all looked at Vodana expectantly.

"Don't look at me," she said. "Matila's the one who instructed this young, musical genius. And I must admit she's done an excellent job. I've started Vira on a few advanced breathing techniques and shown her some exercises that will help her develop volume and intensity in her head voice. I hope they'll keep her busy until I can stop by again, but I doubt it. If I'd only brought some advanced training manuals with me."

Matila vanished into the kitchen, wiping her eyes. Nova and Catyana sat down facing Vodana and Vira, with Sinara on Catyana's lap. Tanola and Natilya continued their conversation on the sofa, and Mara found a quiet corner where she started knitting.

"Come now, sister, tell us exactly what happened," Nova urged.

"It was actually quite amazing. Vira had no problems whatsoever with basic musical comprehension. And when we got to the vocal exercises, she just closed her eyes and felt herself into the songs and techniques. The moment I explained something to her, she had already grasped it. Her perception for music is astonishing. I still feel you're holding back, though, Vira. I'm sure you could have done even better. It reminds me of what Nova told me about you and the art of Induction, Catyana. It seems to be the same domestic trait, only Vira's ability focuses on musical instead of ethereal patterns."

Catyana's eyes opened wide, and she subtly shook her head at Nova.

Nova nodded to her sister, ignoring Catyana's pleading glance. "I've been reasoning along the same lines myself. Every one of the children exhibits some remarkable form of perception, although I haven't been able to categorize them all yet. It's especially difficult with Mina. Sinara's talent is quite clear. Her domain is emotional and social perception. Torvos seems to excel at any form of practical scientific applications, just like his father. I believe Vilam calls it 'engineering.' Vira, you've inherited your mother's musical abilities. And your talent, Catyana, is the Sensation and Induction of ethereal patterns." She saw the color rise in Catyana's face and smiled to herself

when the girl attempted to hide behind Sinara's locks. "But Mina remains a mystery. She seems to be the most aggressive one of the family, although I have no idea what that will lead to."

"Do you believe it has to do with your golden hair and blue eyes?" Vodana asked, speaking to Catyana. "Those specific traits only surface very rarely. Maybe they're somehow related to your perceptive abilities."

Catyana looked as if she had been stung. "Yes…I mean no, I mean…Ugh!"

Sinara and Vira exchanged a knowing, albeit somewhat restrained, smile.

Catyana's eyes narrowed, and her glance darted between her two sisters. "Not funny!" She took a deep breath and looked directly at Vodana. "Yes, that might be possible. I've heard other members of our House back west have also exhibited such, uh…talents." She cast another dark glance at Vira and tugged on a lock of Sinara's hair.

Sinara only gave a slight shrug and nestled deeper into Catyana's embrace. Nova saw the girl glancing over at Vira. The sisters' eyes met. Despite Vira's apparent delight, her joy seemed subdued, and Sinara's expression was troubled. Nova wondered what the problem was.

Matila returned with a tray of cups and plates for the traditional post-meal deventas, a drink brewed from roasted cereals. Nova followed Matila back to the kitchen and helped her bring out more trays loaded with pastries and drinks. Then they all sat around the deventas table, enjoying the refreshments and talking. Catyana browsed through a colorful book with Sinara, portraying the flora and fauna indigenous to their homeland west of the Covasin Mountains. Sinara especially dwelt on the pictures of the *porodi*, the golden squirrels that inhabited the forests east of the Plains of Tesalin and were popular as pets in those houses that could afford such luxuries.

After half an hour, they were surprised to hear the party returning from the woods. Matila rushed to the window. "Goodness, they can't be back this early. Is something wrong?"

It didn't seem so, because the arriving party appeared quite cheerful. They had soon washed and changed clothes and joined the women in the family room.

"Dearest, what happened? Couldn't you finish loading the wagons?" Matila said, pulling her husband down beside her.

"On the contrary," said Lotis, wincing as he sat down. "Although I'd hardly believe it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. The way Vilam launched into the job was incredible. Nobody could keep up with him. He worked like an automaton. He even showed us a few tricks that helped speed things up considerably. I've already asked him if he's for hire, but he politely declined," Lotis

added teasingly. “We even got the wagons hitched up and deposited them in the barn, so we won’t have to worry about the dew in the morning.”

“Oh, it was nothing,” Vilam answered. “If you and Torvos hadn’t caught on so quickly, it would have taken twice as long. And Mina, of course, was incredible. She seems to be a real bundle of energy.”

“Why, that’s wonderful, darling,” Matila exclaimed. “Now we can spend the afternoon together.”

“There’s still some work for *Tevasala se Nimata*, the Goddess of Life, though,” Mina declared playfully.

Catyana looked up from her book. “Why, what’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing serious,” Lotis answered. “One of the logs slipped and grazed me. It’s just a minor flesh wound.”

While Catyana rolled up her father’s trouser leg and removed the makeshift bandage to examine the wound, Vodana gave her sister an inquisitive glance. “Goddess of Life?”

Nova grinned. “It’s a kind of family joke. Catyana’s capacity for restoring disrupted ethereal patterns is so pronounced that most wounds and illnesses are treated by her. The other members of the family can do it, too, but not nearly as easily. The children therefore often tease her by calling her *Tevasala se Nimata*, the ‘Goddess of Life.’”

Catyana had, in the meantime, finished her inspection of the deep, ugly gash in her father’s thigh and fixed him with a reproachful look. “This isn’t just a minor flesh wound, Father. I can’t understand how you could have continued working like this. It must have been very painful. Why didn’t you come to me as soon as you got back?”

“You know how I feel about such things, Catya. Besides, I knew you’d be there if I needed you.”

She gazed into his proud, careworn face. “I might not always be here. You really need to be more careful.”

Nova had seen this procedure often before, but Vodana and Vilam watched in fascination as Catyana placed her hands over the injured area and closed her eyes. Nova knew her spirit was feeling for her father’s ethereal pattern, unconsciously transcending the boundaries of time and space while doing so. As Catyana knitted the disrupted pattern in her mind, a bright glow emanated from her hands. The sides of the ugly wound seemed to phase out, dissolving into each other and

becoming clean, unscathed skin. Only the excess blood around the wound betrayed the fact that there had been a rift in his leg.

When she had completed the task, Catyana rolled down her father's trouser leg and planted a kiss on his cheek. Then she returned to her seat, where she lifted Sinara onto her lap and continued reading as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred.

Nova saw Mara take a deep breath and put down her knitting. She came over to her and said in a low voice, "I promised Vilam I would tell him everything, and I think this might be a good time to talk to him. Is that alright with you?" Nova squeezed her arm and nodded, so Mara walked over to Vilam and leaned close to his ear. After a moment, they both retired to Mara's corner, where Mara pulled her chair close to Vilam's and began talking to him in whispers. Nova soon saw new tears streaming down Mara's cheeks, and Vilam put his arm around her, but Mara continued bravely. Nova felt it best to give them space for the time being.

After things had settled down, Nova gave Matila a quick, inquiring look. Matila nodded and whispered in her husband's ear. They both got up, and Nova joined them in the dining room.

"What is it, Nova?" said Lotis when they were seated at the table.

"I had a long talk with Mara," said Nova. "It seems she had every reason to be concerned for Catyana's safety. I don't think I ever told you this directly, but I would like as few people as possible to know about Catyana's abilities."

"We did notice you were telling her to be more cautious in the use of her gifts."

"Did she tell you what happened to Soshia at the artifact yesterday?" said Nova.

"She did, yes," said Matila. "She was very distressed about hurting Soshia."

"I know. The thing is, enchantresses are sensitive to changes in the ethereal currents. When Catyana uses her gifts, they know about it. Last night, an enchantress came to Nadil to investigate the disturbances at the artifact. It was Lady Lusina Marusen, and although I hate to say this, she's the one who killed Soshia."

"Nova, that's horrible!" said Matila.

"What's even more horrible is that Soshia is Lord Marusen's eldest daughter."

"Oh, dear Goddess!" said Matila.

"Yes, Soshia and Mara have been running from their coven for years and therefore had to hide their true identities. But since you know now who Soshia was, I'm sure Mara would want you to know she's Lord and Lady Novesta's eldest daughter."

Lotis and Matila stared at each other. “Of course, we’re more than honored to have the heir apparent of House Novesta as our guest,” said Lotis. “But why are you telling us all this?”

“Because you need to know, for your own safety. But please, this information cannot leave this room.”

“I’m sure you know by now that you can trust us,” said Lotis.

“I do, which is why I’m disclosing this to you. I know it’s a lot to process, but I want you to understand the full scope of the situation. Lady Marusen knows Catyana is responsible for the disturbances in the ethereal currents, and she knows where to find her. I’ve already been concerned about how to protect her, but this is so much worse. If Lady Marusen was prepared to kill her own stepdaughter, I shudder to think what she would do to Catyana, or to you and the other children, for that matter.”

Matila sucked in her breath, but also shot her a puzzled glance. “Oh, Nova, that’s terrifying news. But…stepdaughter? If that’s true, then who is Soshia’s mother?”

Nova bit her lip. That shouldn’t have slipped out. “I’m sorry, but that’s not for me to say.”

Matila nodded. “Alright, I understand.”

“But because of what I just told you,” said Nova, “I’m asking, no, I’m begging you to please allow Catyana to join the Selanian Order. I believe we can do a much better job of protecting her in our ranks.”

Matila and Lotis exchanged a glance. “I agree,” said Lotis. “I think Matila and I were both uncomfortable keeping Catya here instead of giving her the chance she’s dreamed of for so long. I’m grateful you’ve been so open with us, Nova. We would be proud to have a daughter in the Selanian Order, and we allow you to take Catya with you.”

“I know what a great sacrifice this is for you,” said Nova, “but I’m sure she’ll make you very proud one day.”

“Oh, no, we’re already very proud,” said Matila.

Nova searched her eyes. “Yes, I believe you are. But there’s another matter I need to discuss with you. Do you realize we’re leaving for Tolares tomorrow morning?”

“Yes, we do,” Lotis answered. “It’s unfortunate you’ll be traveling on Velavides, the Holy Sabbath, but that can’t be helped. On the other hand, you’ll have much less traffic, which will speed your journey. Personally, I believe it would be more efficient if Catya returns with you to the Lady’s manse tonight. It might make things…well, easier. What do you think, Matila?”

“I agree, although I hate to see her go,” said Matila. “Nova, we feel honored that you brought Vilam, Vodana, and Mara with you today. It will make this parting a very memorable one, for all of us.”

Nova felt relieved. “We’ll probably be returning this way after the conference. I promise we’ll stop by on our way to Travis, so we should be seeing you again soon enough. But, if it’s alright with you, we’ll stay until later this evening, so we still have some time.”

“That’s wonderful, Nova,” said Matila with a sad smile.

Nova put her hand on Matila’s arm. “I brought a little surprise for Catyana. Would you like to see her in her new robes before she leaves?”

“Oh, Nova, you’re such a dear. I’m sure everyone would like that very much.”

When they returned to the family room, everyone looked up at them.

“We have an announcement to make,” said Lotis. “Catya, we’ve decided to let you join the Selanian Order. If that—”

“Oh, Father!” Catyana jumped up and flung her arms around him while planting a firm kiss on his cheek.

“As I was saying,” said Lotis with a twinkle in his eye, “if joining the Order is still what you truly wish—and your reaction seems to indicate that it is—then you’ll be leaving with Nova tonight for the Lady Utalya’s manse so you can accompany them to Tolares tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, Father, thank you! I can’t believe it! I’m going to Tolares!” Catyana pressed her lips against his cheek again, then she whirled around and clutched her mother to herself with tears glistening in her eyes. “Oh, Mother, I don’t know what to say. I don’t know if I should rejoice that you’ve allowed me to go, or if I should cry because I’m leaving you.”

“Caty!” A heart-wrenching wail sent Catyana plunging back to her seat, where she took Sinara in her arms. Tears were streaming down the girl’s cheeks in torrents. “Caty.”

“Oh, my poor little darling,” said Catyana.

Catyana’s siblings swarmed around her, wanting to congratulate her and making it difficult for her to comfort her little sister. Vira was hugging her, Mina was jumping up and down beside her and clapping her hands, and Torvos was slapping her on the back, making her wince. It took a few minutes before Vodana, Natilya, and Tanola had a chance to kiss her on the cheek and let her know how happy they were for her.

After the room had calmed down, Mara awarded Nova a grateful glance from her seat in the corner. It seemed she and Vilam had finished talking, and Mara had resumed knitting. The young Lady put her hand on her heart and managed a weak smile.

Nova nodded to her, but in her heart, she felt for the young Lady Novesta, who was sacrificing so much. She hoped Mara would visit the Faerens often. With her daughter gone, and Nova and Catyana in Tolares, Mara was in danger of isolating herself in her sorrow, a fate Nova wouldn't wish on anyone. She was relieved when she saw Matila walk over to Mara, put a hand on her arm, and begin a quiet conversation with her. Nova smiled to herself, thankful that her faith in Catyana's parents had paid off.

46. A Goblet Together

It was well past noon, which coincided perfectly with the amount of wine Hyumosen had consumed, because it was well past his limit. He was sitting at a table in Rotesil's tavern in Tolares with his friend Bejad, clutching the goblet in front of him in fear of sliding under the table if he loosened his grip, seeing as the room was twisting so dangerously. "I'm in your debt once again, my friend," he said, wheezing the words in Bejad's face.

Bejad carelessly waved the stench away and mumbled, "Think so?"

"Oh, yeah, certainly. How much of my fortune do you think comes from you bringing me customers?"

Bejad waved away another cloud of alcohol. "I never thought of it that way. Uh, don't you think we should slow down on the drink?" he slurred.

"Well, you know what they say: 'A goblet alone no one can condone. But a goblet together goes down so much better.'"

"Oh, yeah." Bejad grinned stupidly.

Hyumosen stared at the table, attempting to concentrate. "Bejad."

"Yeah?"

"You plannin' on gettin' hooked up?"

"Nuh-uh. Not 'nough time. Career's been more important lately, ya know?"

"Well, listen, 'bout that little companion of yours."

"Oh, yeah? You mean Netira. She's cute, isn't she?"

“What? Yeah, guess so. Listen, I don’ wanna get too personal.”

“Well, then don’t.”

“Yeah, but you’re my friend.”

“I am? Aw, shucks, Hyumosen. What a nice thing to see…uh, say,” Bejad babbled, blearily eyeing one of the waitresses as she walked by.

“Yeah, anyway,” Hyumosen continued.

“What?”

“Maybe you should keep your eyes peeled.”

“What for?”

“’Cause o’ your companion.”

“What companion?”

“That girl…uh, Netira.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“’Dunno. Just think you should. You know, she might be the one who finally gets ya.”

Bejad beamed deliriously. “Oh? Alright.” His head banged onto the table.

Hyumosen stared over at his friend, trying desperately to focus. He then attempted to rise from his seat. With a little more effort, he might even have succeeded, if the room hadn’t tilted precariously at exactly that moment.

The waitress who strolled by stopped and put her hands on her hips, shaking her head at the two men slumped over the table. She went to fetch a pail of cold water.

47. Awakening

Vilam was still processing everything Mara had told him, but he grinned to himself when he noticed Mina sidling up to him. She cautiously plucked his sleeve. “Please, excuse me, but you did promise.”

“Aren’t you tired, Mina? You’ve worked hard for almost two hours, collecting and chopping up all our leftovers,” he replied, but he already saw the answer stamped on her face.

“But I’m not tired, really I’m not.”

“Mina, why don’t you let Vilam rest for a while,” her mother said.

“No, that’s fine,” Vilam answered. “If she’s willing and up to it, I’d be glad to take her on. Torvos, would you like to join us?”

Torvos shook his head. “Why don’t you go on ahead. I wouldn’t mind sitting for a moment. I’ll join you later.”

Vilam stood, and Mina raced to her room. She returned almost instantly with two wooden swords.

Nova glanced at Vodana and Catyana. “This should prove informative. Vilam, do you mind if we watch from the window?”

“No, I’m getting used to that,” he said with a grin, recalling his training that morning. “What do you say, Mina?”

“Well, I guess it’s alright,” she replied, although she didn’t sound very enthusiastic. “I’m not accustomed to having an audience. Please don’t make fun of me if I make any mistakes.”

Catyana gazed into her sister’s eyes. “I promise, Mina, if anyone should say or do anything even slightly resembling any form of mockery, I will rebuke them most severely.”

Mina squeezed her hand. “Thank you, Caty.” She wanted to jump away, but Sinara took hold of her skirt and shook her head, her eyes pleading with her. Mina brushed a golden lock out of her sister’s face and said, “It’s alright, Sinara. I trust Vilam. He won’t let anything happen to me.” She caressed her sister’s cheek when she saw a tear rolling down, wiped it off for her, and kissed her on the forehead. Then she grabbed Vilam’s sleeve and dragged him outside, eager to begin.

When they stepped into the sunshine, Vilam walked away from the house, assessing the distance needed to give them enough room to maneuver comfortably. “Alright, Mina, now show me one of your swords.” She handed him one. Vilam gripped it firmly in both hands and nodded. “Not bad. Good, solid workmanship for a wooden imitation, all the way down to the leather grip and the steel pommel. I must say, your brother does have a gift.”

Mina smiled.

“I watched you swinging that axe of yours earlier, Mina. That wasn’t bad, really. But do you know what to look for in a sword?”

Mina shook her head.

“It actually depends on the weapon. Different blades will respond differently, depending on whether they’re long or short, straight or curved, thick or thin, wide or slender. You test them by

hefting them or striking and thrusting with them. Sometimes you even flex them." He glanced at Mina to see if she was following before he continued. "When you grip the sword and swing it, you can immediately feel whether the sword resists or facilitates your swing. A good sword can be honed to facilitate thrusting, cutting, or both."

Vilam demonstrated every detail as he explained it. Then he asked Mina to try. She did, and proved to him that she understood everything he told her.

"Very good, Mina. Now, as you heard at the dining table, the making of a good sword is a science unto itself. I won't tell you about the different types of steel that are used and what to look for, but I do want you to be aware of the fact that it's an extremely delicate art. If your swordsmith is a quack, you're in big trouble. A good sword can mean *etino*, the difference between life and death."

Mina nodded, her eyes wide, not missing a single, precious word.

"Alright, now we'll get down to the real thing. Swordsmanship, like most other physical arts, relies on four basic principles, which I call the pneumatic, static, dynamic, and rhythmic components. The pneumatic component is air. If you can't breathe, you can't fight. The static component deals with your stance and your posture. If your stance or posture is off, you'll overbalance and fall. End of story. The dynamic component involves your movements, which must be accurate or you'll lose momentum and energy. If your attack or ward carries too far, your opponent will ruthlessly exploit your weakness. That leaves the rhythmic component, which deals with timing and cadence. Even if all your movements were absolutely perfect, you wouldn't want to be too late to ward a thrust, now would you?"

Mina vehemently shook her head.

"Now, grip your sword firmly in both hands, close your eyes, and just breathe, while being aware of yourself, your sword, and your surroundings."

Vilam instructed her in basic breathing techniques, stances, positions, and footwork, taking his time without rushing her. He was amazed at how adept she was. She just soaked everything up like an insatiable sponge, and he felt she would probably suck the knowledge right out of him if she could.

The thought had hardly crossed his mind when she looked up at him with her deep, blue eyes, an odd expression on her face. Then she stepped forward and hugged him, her head barely reaching his shoulders. He put his arms around her and stroked her long, golden locks, thinking she was just

showing gratitude, but he sucked in his breath when he realized she was glimmering. His eyebrows drew together, and he gently tried to dislodge her, but she clung to him and wouldn't let go.

After a moment, she released her breath in a long sigh and stepped back. The subtle glow around her disappeared, and she opened her eyes. They seemed to be an even deeper blue than before, and they had a shine to them that was difficult to describe. But Vilam suddenly had to reach for his head. He felt dizzy and might have teetered, but Mina smiled and took his arm, stabilizing him. Why did he feel so drained? What had she done to him?

Just then, Torvos joined them, and Vilam shook his head to clear the cobwebs out of his mind. He regarded Mina with an apprehensive glance, but she returned it innocently enough, and it seemed as if the last few minutes had never happened. With a shrug, he turned to Torvos and patiently explained everything again, although he looked over at Mina every now and then, feeling puzzled. But the girl seemed unperturbed and listened in on Torvos's lesson without once missing a beat of her own exercises. Sometimes, when Torvos wouldn't get it right, she got impatient and intervened, showing Torvos exactly what Vilam was attempting to teach him, but in terms Torvos could better understand.

An hour later, Vilam was already dueling her, something he would never have attempted with any other student unless they had been through at least a week of intense training. Astonished at her progress, he dropped the swords and showed her basic hand-to-hand combat techniques, explaining the different uses of each extremity as a deadly weapon and how to discern various targets on her opponent in regard to their vulnerability.

But it was strange, because he didn't really believe he was still teaching her anything. Instead, it seemed as if Mina was just humoring him, and enjoying herself immensely while doing so. When they resumed sword practice, he realized her speed and precision had improved to the point where she was actually giving him a run for his money.

Vilam felt overwhelmed. Who was this young girl who, at only thirteen, was already the most talented, but also the deadliest student he had ever encountered? Only time would tell. But in the meantime, he would have to focus if he didn't want her to get the drop on him.

48. The Operative

Talenon Novesta sat back and sighed in relief. He had been scribbling all day, had even skipped the midday meal, and his fingers were sore. The doorbell had been ringing incessantly, and countless couriers had been in and out since he had commenced his dismal work just before sunrise. Despite the many messages that had gone back and forth, this was the first decent piece of news he had received all day.

He took another look at the page on his desk. Their new operative had finally arrived in Tolares and would be continuing on to Travis after the conference. The girl had an excellent track record, and he had to admit the report on her skills was unprecedented. He was astonished at the amount of experience she had accumulated, despite her young years. It was general knowledge, though, that the members of Lady Gevinesa's personal guard were usually recruited at the age of sixteen. In this case, it had even been fourteen. The Lady had trained them as ruthless and efficient killers, and Tavita had been her most talented apprentice. She had soon become the Lady's personal aid, had risen to the rank of captain, and led the Crimson Brigade in countless assignments. Every task had been completed competently and resourcefully.

But for some reason, Gevinesa must have grown tired of her Brigade. Corsen had been more than happy to merge it into his own Black Guard, and Tavita had continued her steep climb, quickly earning Corsen's trust. He was the one who had recommended her for this assignment.

Her full name was Major Tavita Marusen. Talenon knew her father, Lord Amendel Marusen, personally. The man was quite competent and head of one of the oldest of the Great Houses, which had its residence in the mountains north of Divestelan. And, of course, Talenon also knew Princess Tavita well enough. She had been the charge of the renowned Nursemaids, of which his sister Pira had been a member. He snickered at the notion. Who would have thought the sweet, innocent little girl, whom he had seen playing at their residence in Novesta so often, would one day become such a competent and formidable operative?

Talenon grinned to himself. He could imagine how it must have happened. The Lady Gevinesa was, of course, acquainted with all the daughters of the more distinguished houses. None of the Lords and Ladies realized how she had gradually spun her webs, biding her time, evaluating the girls, and recruiting the most promising of them into her Brigade. After all these years, many of the families still didn't know what their daughters were up to when they visited Divestelan. Some

of the young women had even persuaded their parents to allow them to take up permanent residence near the city so they could be closer to their comrades in arms.

Well, it was no matter of his. He was grateful he could now begin coordinating the plans for Tavita's transfer, ensuring she would be assigned to the mole they had planted in the Advisory Council. He bent back over his desk and continued writing.

49. The Ballad

Vira tried sewing in the family room, hoping to find some comfort in the presence of her siblings and friends, but it didn't help. On the contrary, she felt as if she were being torn apart inside. She couldn't understand what was happening to her, as if Vodana's audition had opened up some dark chasm in her soul that was now trying to suck her in. With an impatient sigh, she dropped her work in her lap and watched the others exchange significant glances as they observed the speed with which Mina was assimilating the deadly skills of swordsmanship. "Is her progress really so remarkable?" she asked Nova.

"Yes, it's absolutely astonishing. I've never seen anything like it. Although, to be honest, I think she cheated."

"Cheated? How so?"

"There was a moment earlier when she hugged Vilam, and I saw her glimmer. I'm almost certain she tried to join with him. Strange, because joining is a very advanced and strenuous technique, even for experienced priestesses. But she must have succeeded somehow because afterward, Vilam could hardly keep up with her anymore. Look at him now. It's taking all his concentration just to—Oh! Well, let's be thankful those aren't real swords."

Vira felt the color rising to her cheeks. Nova must have seen it, and she pursed her lips. "Vira, you know something. What is it?"

"Well, what you said about Mina joining…"

"Yes?"

"It's…very possible."

"Vira!" said Catyana, shooting her a stern glance.

"Don't you think it's time she knew?" said Vira.

"Knew what?" said Nova.

"It's just supposed to be us four sisters, remember?" said Catyana to Vira.

"Yes, but you're leaving now, so the circle will be broken. And she is your best friend. I think you should tell her."

"Catyana?" said Nova.

Catyana took a deep breath. "Alright, you may have a point." Looking at Nova, she said, "We sisters have been joining since we were little. It was just Vira and me at first, but as soon as Mina and Sinara were old enough, we inducted them into our little circle. It was like a secret society, and we swore never to keep anything from each other. It was always a lot of fun and brought us closer together. Of course, Mina is just as adept as we are. It wouldn't be difficult for her to join with someone else if she felt that were, um…necessary."

"It's remarkable that you're all able to do that," said Nova. "But I must warn you that it can also be a gross violation of someone's privacy. That's why any joining is always strictly supervised, at least in the Order, and why we instruct our members so rigorously in the ethics involved."

"I understand," said Catyana. "I really do. But I know Mina. She's very spirited, kind of like Soshia, but I don't believe she would have intruded upon Vilam's private thoughts. She probably just took what she needed and got out."

Nova nodded. "Alright, but even that is morally ambiguous, especially when doing it without the other person's consent. But I'm glad you have such faith in her. In regard to your sisters, I certainly trust your judgment, Catyana, so that means a lot."

Catyana nodded. "Thank you."

"But on a slightly different note, a joining doesn't change your natural abilities," said Nova. "If Mina really did join with Vilam, she didn't gain anything she wouldn't have been capable of on her own. Knowledge alone is no substitute for talent." She glanced out the window again. "But if Mina was able to assimilate Vilam's abilities, then the skill she now demonstrates is also a reflection of what Vilam himself can do. I really marvel at his expertise. It reminds me of the prophecy that characterizes the Emissary as a master and teacher of the martial disciplines."

"So you really believe he's the Emissary?" said Vira.

"I don't like to admit it, but I really do, yes."

Vira attempted to concentrate on her sewing again, but the dark cloud hanging over her was making that very difficult, and she sensed Nova watching her. When she looked up, her eyes met Sinara's. Although her little sister didn't say a word, Vira felt a chill go through her. Yes, they had

all joined with each other and therefore knew each other very well. But Sinara was different. Vira knew from experience that Sinara could see right into her heart, and she saw dread in her sister's eyes. Why did the girl have to have such an uncanny gift?

Nova must have observed this exchange. "Vira, what's wrong?" she asked. "You haven't been yourself all afternoon."

Vira shook her head. "It's nothing. I guess I just have a lot on my mind."

Of course, Nova didn't believe a word and regarded her with a concerned glance. Then Nova took Sinara's hand and pulled her closer. "And what about you, sweetheart? You look like you've seen a ghost."

A tear spilled down Sinara's cheek. In a small voice, she said, "Why, Nova? Why did you let him do it?"

"Let who do what, dearest?" said Nova.

Sinara stood there, pale and terrified. Vira saw she was trembling. "It doesn't matter," she whispered. "It's done."

"Sinara, what are you talking about?"

The girl burst into tears and collapsed into Nova's arms, shivering and sobbing as if her heart had broken. "You let him wake her up," she said between sobs.

Vira felt another chill go down her spine and stared at the pair with wide eyes.

Nova hugged Sinara and stroked her hair, whispering comforting words and looking helpless until Matila came and took her out of her arms. The girl clung to her mother as if her life depended on it, and it took at least another hour until she had quieted enough for Matila to let her down. Sinara curled up in a corner of the sofa with a pillow and remained there, quiet and despondent.

After a while, Vira looked over at Sinara from her sewing. She felt so sorry for her that she left her work on the table, sat down beside her, and pulled her into her arms. Every now and then, she felt a quiver go through her, and she pressed her sister to herself and rocked her back and forth. When the tremors had finally ceased, Vira let go of her and stroked a golden lock out of her face. "Everything alright?" she asked.

Sinara shook her head. "But thank you."

"Is this about Caty going away?"

Sinara sighed. "I wish it was only that. It's all happening so fast. But if I talk about it, I'll just start crying again."

“I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“There were two awakenings today, so I’m sure you have your own problems to worry about.” She took a deep, quavering breath. “Go on. I’ll be alright, eventually.”

Vira attempted a smile and caressed the girl’s cheek before returning to her sewing.

At some point, her mother rose to prepare the evening meal. Vira hoped the work might distract her from her dark thoughts and joined her and the acolytes. Her father also stood and collected Torvos to attend to the evening chores. Mina, who seemed indefatigable, would rather have continued with swordplay, but Vilam decided to lend the two men a hand, so Mina tagged along.

The evening meal was simple, consisting of bread, cold meat, vegetables, and milk. After everything had been cleared away, they all returned to the family room and made themselves comfortable. Nobody realized Nova and Catyana had disappeared until the two women suddenly stood before them. Catyana was wearing the official cream-colored robes of the Selanian Order and had a black velvet cloak draped over her arm.

They were astonished at how stunning Catyana looked in her new robes. Her thick, golden hair was freshly brushed and cascaded elegantly down her back to her waist. She looked like some kind of heavenly messenger, illuminated by the light of the setting sun. The robe was high-necked and long-sleeved, coming together to accentuate the waist, then slipping gracefully over the hips and draping to the ground. The material and workmanship looked soft and comfortable.

The family crowded around Catyana to admire her robes firsthand, and everyone realized the time of her departure was drawing near. Sinara tugged at her mother’s skirt while leaning against Catyana. “Mommy, maybe we could sing something.”

“Why yes, that’s an excellent idea,” Matila replied, while brushing a few tears away. “What would you like to sing?”

“*Cozatenae se Malentisa,* the Destruction of Malentisa.”

“Alright, we all know that one. Why don’t those of you who would like to accompany the ballad get your instruments? Vodana, would you like to lead us again?”

“I have a better idea,” Vodana replied. “Why don’t you let Vira lead, and I’ll support her.”

Vira stared at her with her mouth agape. Vodana probably thought she was blushing at the compliment and reassuringly patted her arm, when she really felt as if a black hand was slowly crushing her heart. She could hardly breathe, and her glance darted around in search of an escape.

She would have fled the room in panic if Vilam's steady gaze hadn't caught her eye and given her something to hold on to.

What was going on? What was wrong with her? She took several deep breaths and tried to calm herself. "Is this a favorite piece of yours, Vilam?" she said, trying to hide her growing terror behind trivial gossip.

"No, I've never heard it before." He reached out to support her. "Are you alright, Vira?"

She flinched and took a step back. "Yes, I'm fine."

"If you say so."

"No, really, thank you, Vilam."

"Alright, so what's this song about?"

"It's an account of the events surrounding the Cataclysm. The ballad describes how a high Elinian scholar named Vilasan, 'the Bright One,' was corrupted by his lust for power and became the Dark Lord Nevilan." She shot him a sidelong glance. "Are you really interested in this ballad, or are you just trying to calm me by getting me to talk?"

He grinned at her. "Both. Is it working?"

She listened into herself and realized she was feeling a bit better. "I guess it is. Would you like me to continue?"

"By all means."

"Alright. Nevilan seduced many of the Selani to stray from Anae's Golden Path and bound them into darkness. In the year 496, he launched an unprovoked attack on Malentisa and slaughtered the Elinar and Demantar with his army of shadowy slaves, effectively committing genocide on his own people.

"But Anae could no longer endure the suffering Nevilan had inflicted and allowed an asteroid to crash in the Plains of Tesalin. The catastrophe jolted those Selani who hadn't been enslaved to their senses and got them to take action. They forged the Sword of Selanae, and the High Priest, Lord Pival Tolares, used it to lead them into battle. After a long war, they finally overthrew Nevilan's army on the eastern slopes of the Covasin Mountains. Nevilan fled into the Desert of Vortelan with Lord Tolares in pursuit. The High Priest caught up with Nevilan at the ruins of Malentisa, but he was no match for the Dark Lord, and Nevilan slew him. But to this day, no sign has ever been found of the Dark Lord or the Sword of Selanae."

As she talked, Vira became aware of a buzzing in her ears. She suddenly teetered and would have fallen if Nova hadn't grabbed her from behind. "Just keep breathing, Vira. Easy now."

In the meantime, the family had assembled again, and her brother helped Nova lead her to a chair, where she sat down. "Thank you, Nova. I really don't know what came over me."

"You haven't been well all afternoon. Maybe you should sit this one out."

"Oh, no, please. It was only a momentary dizziness, but it's passed. I think singing would actually help."

"Are you sure, Vira?" her mother asked, stroking her hair and feeling her forehead. "You look awfully pale."

"Yes, I'm certain." She got up to show them she was serious. "See, I'm alright."

"Well, if you say so, dear." Her mother squeezed her arm and gestured for everyone to take their positions.

They had performed the piece often, so everyone knew what to do. At Vodana's signal, the instruments began the introduction, after which Vira closed her eyes and commenced the song. Vodana soon joined her, assuming a lower voice to subtly accentuate Vira's solo.

Vira just let go and allowed herself to flow with the music. The black chasm that had opened inside her was still there, but for some reason, she no longer feared it. When the darkness tried to engulf her, her spirit soared, and she felt a surge of such immense power that the shadows melted away. She herself had become song, flowing through time and space with no barriers to hold her. The currents carried her off, surrounding her with a soft blue radiance, and everything became so quiet and peaceful.

But gradually, the glow faded, and fear crept back into her heart. The silence grew until it seemed like thunder in her ears, and she realized her limbs had gone numb and cold.

Her eyes popped open in shock. She was lying on the floor, and her family and friends were staring down at her with wide eyes. "Look, she's regained consciousness." She was sure it was Catyana's voice.

She tried to sit up. "What happened?"

"You tell us," Vodana said, staring at her in awe and caressing her cheek. "After we finished the ballad, you just sank to the ground."

"Really? I'm so sorry. I didn't want to ruin it for you."

"Ruin it? *A'mada,* Vira," said Vodana with a strained little laugh that immediately caught Vira's attention.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Let me put it this way: if a song had been any more divine, it couldn't have been sung by a mortal. For a moment there, we even thought you had died and gone to heaven, taking us along with you. You sure gave us a good scare. How do you feel?"

Vira took a deep breath. She felt terrible, but that was probably the price you had to pay for a glimpse of eternity. "I'm alright. Would you help me up, please?"

As they eased her up off the floor, Vodana asked, "Vira, could you tell us what happened?"

Vira diverted her gaze. "I have no idea."

"Is there anything we can do?"

"No, please, I think I just need to rest for a while. I hope you don't mind." When the others had ensured she was no longer in any danger, they decided to sing a few simpler tunes and left her to herself.

Vira felt uncomfortable, knowing she had just lied to her new friend for the second time today. She wasn't accustomed to concealing the truth and could hardly suppress the uproar of her emotions, so she retired into a quiet corner. But the sadness and confusion in her heart remained, together with an indistinct feeling of some impending doom.

50. An Approaching Storm

"I'm sorry, Culisa, but I just can't do this any longer, not after everything that's happened." Semanta gazed pleadingly at her friend.

"I understand, and I'm not angry. As a matter of fact, I'm thinking of quitting myself."

"You are?" Semanta asked in astonishment.

"Yes. Don't get me wrong, it was fun while it lasted. I've always been a hopeless romantic, and an adventurous lifestyle does appeal to me. But currently, I've been getting this strange feeling we're working for the wrong side. And after Soshia's death, I somehow just don't have the heart for it anymore."

"I know what you mean, and I feel the same way. Poor Soshia! Besides, I think Folan is getting suspicious. I could hardly get your message to Talenon out last night."

“Oh? What are you going to do?”

“I’d really like to come clean. I’m probably going to tell him everything.”

“Won’t that be a problem?”

Semanta bit her lip. “Well, I’ve tried to be a good wife to him all these years. I’m sure he’ll understand. What about you?”

“Oh, you know how it is. In the end, Menirel will always do as I say.”

Semanta sighed and attempted a smile. It was an open secret who the real mayor of Nadil was. She glanced nervously over her shoulder. The evening rush hadn’t quite begun, and Semanta was taking a short break to exchange a few words with her friend in the little room adjoining the side entrance of the tavern. She would need to return to work soon, or Folan would probably come looking for her.

“Semanta, are you alright?”

Semanta looked back at her friend and noticed her worried glance. “Yes, yes, I’m fine. Um, Culisa, do you sometimes feel worn out?”

“No, not really. What’s wrong?”

Semanta bit her lip again. “I don’t know. Sometimes I feel as if I could sleep for a week.”

“You haven’t seemed quite yourself lately. You should take better care of yourself, dearest.”

“It’s not that easy, with the tavern and all.”

“Yes, your tavern is very successful. Folan is quite proficient, and he employs as little personnel as possible to save costs, doesn’t he?”

Semanta gave her a bittersweet smile.

“When are you going to tell him?” Culisa asked.

“Tomorrow being Velavides, it will be a full day. I’ll wait until the morning after. We hardly have any business on Velanav morning.”

“Semanta, where are you?” they heard Folan calling from down the hall. “Come quickly, woman, we have guests.”

The two women glanced at each other, and Semanta felt her lips form an embarrassed grin. “I need to go,” she said. “Thank you so much for stopping by.”

The mayor’s wife embraced her and kissed her on the cheek. “I was glad to. Please remember, if you ever need anything, my door is always open.”

They parted and Semanta turned hastily to the guest hall, biting her lip. Disheartened by her constant fatigue, she couldn't rid herself of the sense of a swiftly approaching storm, or of the feeling that their small and secure world would soon be viciously disrupted and forever torn apart.

51. Taking Leave

The evening had advanced, and Catyana could no longer postpone the inevitable moment when she had to depart with her friends. She only took a few personal belongings because everything else would be provided by the Order. When she was ready to leave, her mother touched her arm. "Are you alright, Catya?"

"Yes…I mean no, I mean…Oh, I just don't know," Catyana said, shaking her head. "I feel an urge to be off, as if a completely new life full of mystery and wonder were about to begin. You know, like the bedtime stories you told us at night before you tucked us in. On the other hand, I feel so reluctant to leave. You're all I've ever known, and I love you all so much." She hesitated. "Mother, when will I see you again?"

Her mother attempted a smile. "We never know what our Goddess has planned for us, dear heart. But I hope we'll see each other again when you return from the conference."

Catyana looked into her mother's eyes, incapable of expressing the sadness and puzzling anxiety in her heart.

Sinara stayed close to her as Catyana embraced and kissed each of her siblings and then her mother and her father. But in the end, Sinara caressed her eldest sister's cheek one last time and hugged her fervently while Catyana knelt in front of her. Then she deliberately let Catyana go and stood beside her mother, tightly holding on to her as if she were afraid she would drown if she released her grip.

Surprisingly, it was Mina's last, simple words that echoed in Catyana's mind long after she left. When Mina embraced her, she looked deeply into her eyes and spoke in an uncommonly serious voice, "Dearest Caty, I know I wasn't always very good or very obedient, but I want you to know that, no matter what happens, I love you very much. Please, don't ever forget that."

At length, the party took leave of the family. Before they disappeared around the corner of the woods, they turned and waved. Catyana saw them one last time, standing in front of the house,

illuminated by the warm light falling through the windows, but in her heart, she wondered if she would ever see them together like this again.

END OF THE EMISSARY

Note: The plot of *The Emissary* will be continued in the second volume of the Selanian Chronicles, *The High Priestess*.

Acknowledgments

Many people assisted me in the compilation of this manuscript, and I'd like to give thanks where credit is due. I apologize to anyone who's been of help and isn't mentioned here, but the list of supporters would be longer than this short acknowledgement would allow. Sorry guys!

Thanks to my wife, Rita, and my boys, Conrad and Caleb, for your love and patience.

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Author's Note

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." This is not inattentiveness on my part, and 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 clarify any misunderstandings regarding this concept.

For more information on the Selani and Selanian culture, including examples of the Selanian script and full color maps of Piral, please see the author's website:

www.PeterKrausche.com

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.

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.

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 *Selani s'Ulavan*.		
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**

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 *Selani s'Ulavan* during the third Synod of Travis.	816 TC	
First Conference of Travis.	861 TC	
Battle of Malentisa. 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	
Selanian 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 *sitanem* developed by Lord Chyardal Tolares), the main responsibility of the swordmasters is to suppress such attempts in compliance with the Vetenian		

ERA	From	To
Short Description		
Singular Events	**Date**	
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 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 *sitanem* 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 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		

ERA	From	To
Short Description		
Singular Events	**Date**	
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 *Mivelin*, 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.		
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	

ERA	From	To
Short Description		
Singular Events	**Date**	
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**
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. 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.		
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**
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		

ERA	From	To
Short Description		
Singular Events	**Date**	
Enlightenment, sweeps the worlds of the Alliance, yielding new forms of art, music, and literature.		
The Galactic Intelligence Division (*Sevon Costenan Velitra*, 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 *The Swordmaster*, 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	
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	

Appendix A: 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).

Selanian 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

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.

Selanian 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, 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	Selanian 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

Appendix B: 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 or armlength. 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.

Selanian Unit	English	Consists of	US Equivalent	Metric Equivalent
Fires	Thread		0.09 inches	2.3 mm
Runam	Fingerbreadth	5 Firesi	0.45 inches	1.15 cm
Bemar	Handbreadth	5 Runami	2.24 inches	5.74 cm
Vitel	Armlength (Ell, 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

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.

Selanian Currency	Consists of
Tseval	(approx. 1 cent)
Doman	100 Tsevali
Ayjen	1000 Domani

Appendix C: 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*.

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: *fa*, as in do, re, mi, fa.
M	mayen	M as in *mother*.
B	benu	B as in *bat*.
P	pilas	P as in *pilot*.
E	eti	European pronunciation: *re*, as in do, re, mi, fa.
V	vedan	V as in *value*.
F	fola	F as in *fast*.
I	ino	European pronunciation: *mi*, as in do, re, mi, fa.
T	tulas	T as in *table*.
D	domay	D as in *dive*.
N	navin	N as in *nothing*.
L	lode	L as in *large*.
S	sina	S as in *Santa*.

Letter	Name	Pronunciation
J	jevis	French pronunciation, as in *jardin*.
SH	shoval	SH as in *shovel*.
Z	zedi	Z as in *zebra*.
TS	tsutal	TS as in *whatsup* or as the *z* in the German word *zimmer*.
R	retu	R is rolled softly on the tip of the tongue.
O	onay	European pronunciation: *do*, as in do, re, mi, fa.
CH	chyadas	CH is pronounced softly as in the German word *Licht*.
C	ceta	C as in *cake*.
G	guvin	G as in *garden*.
Y	yamel	Y as in *yellow*.
H	hesot	H as in *hurricane*.
U	ulan	European pronunciation, as in *luna*.

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
vedan	six
fola	seven

Selanian	English
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-fola	seventeen
an-ino	eighteen
a-tulas	nineteen
maya-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-fola	twenty-seven
may-ino	twenty-eight
ma-tulas	twenty-nine
benu-nel	thirty
pila-nel	forty
eti-nel	fifty
veda-nel	sixty
fola-nel	seventy
ino-nel	eighty
tula-nel	ninety

Selanian	English
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.

Selanian	English
anav	first, beginning
mayav	second
benav	third

Selanian	English
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

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 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	Selanian	English
Singular		
	ana	I/me
	esa	you
	adae, ada	he/him, she/her
Plural		
	anu	we/us
	esta	you
	atae	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	Selanian	English
Singular		
	anar	my
	esar	your
	adaer, adar	his/her
Plural		
	anur	our
	estar	your

Person	Selanian	English
	ataer	their

Possessive Pronouns

Possessive pronouns are built from the possessive adjectives by adding the suffix *–ae*.

Person	Selanian	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 Selanian 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 Selanian language doesn't use personal pronouns in combination with a verb. The pronoun is implied by conjugation, as in Spanish or Italian. Selanian verbs are conjugated by adding the corresponding suffix to the end of the verb.

Person	Selanian	English
Singular		

Person	Selanian	English
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	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

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	Selanian	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

Appendix D: 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.

Selanian	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	1st letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
ana	one	adjective
ana	I, me	personal pronoun
Anae	The One	noun; masculine
anam	once	adverb
anar	my	possessive adjective
anarae	mine	possessive pronoun

Selanian	English	Function
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 *talas*, little man, or *porodas*, 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	Selanian currency	noun; feminine

Selanian	English	Function
B		
becintas	Large feline predator of the Far North.	noun; masculine
bemar	hand	noun; masculine
benu	3rd letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter

Selanian	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 becintas of the Far North.	noun; masculine
cel	for	preposition
celuvan	forever, always	adverb

Selanian	English	Function
cemitar	to kill	verb
cena	who	pronoun
cerat	cricket-like insect	noun; masculine
ceta	21st letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
cetesa	goat-like creature	noun; feminine
chyadas	20th 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
cozar (arch. cozatalar)	to make to nothing, destroy	verb
cozaten	destruction	noun; masculine
culen	What	adverb; pronoun
cunatir	to act	verb

Selanian	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	Selanian currency	noun; masculine
domay	10th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter

Selanian	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 *enir*)	adjective
enimar	to revive	verb
enir	to return	verb
-esa	little (as in *teresa*, 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	5th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
etino	The difference between life and death. (The Selanian words for life and death, *nemata* and *nimata*, are only distinguished by the second vowel.)	adverbial phrase; idiom

Selanian	English	Function
F		

Selanian	English	Function
felen	dirt	noun; masculine
feles, felesen, felenis	dirty	adjective
fetara	dish of something similar to beans	noun; feminine
fires	thread	noun; masculine
fola	7th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter

Selanian	English	Function
G		
gedashol	rat-like rodent	noun; masculine
guvin	22nd letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter

Selanian	English	Function
H		
halen	planet	noun; feminine
hesot	24th 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

Selanian	English	Function
I		
i	and	conjunction
imala	kindness	noun; feminine
imalan, imasen, imalis	kind, kinder, kindest	adjective
inar	to write	verb
inaren	script, writing	noun; masculine
ino	8th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
isa	most	adverbial escalation
isan	joy	noun; feminine

Selanian	English	Function
isanes, isanelen, isanelis	joyful	adjective

Selanian	English	Function
J		
jevan	help	noun; feminine
jevales, jevasen, jevanis	helpful	adjective
jevar	to help	verb
jevis	14th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
jites	colorful bird native to the Southern Covasins	noun; masculine
jotan	Selanian inquiry, similar to question mark	letter; character

Selanian	English	Function
L		
lar	to reign (as a king or queen)	verb
lara	queen	noun; feminine
laran	king	noun; masculine
licosar	to praise	verb
linos, linosen, linosis	large, big, important	adjective; adverb
lode	12th 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
luves, luviren, luvaris	light, easy, simple	adjective

Selanian	English	Function
M		
mada, madalen, madalis	good, better, best	adjective
madan	good, goodness	noun; feminine

Selanian	English	Function
madanimata	summer (good life)	noun; masculine
mayen	2nd 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

Selanian	English	Function
N		
nar	to walk, to wander	verb
navin	11th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
ne	no, 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
niles	Selanian union, similar to apostrophe	letter; character
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 + adjective; feminine
nolasa	priestess	noun; feminine
nolavelan	afternoon (low sun)	noun; feminine

Selanian	English	Function
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

Selanian	English	Function
O		
onay	19th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
osal	water	noun; feminine
Osatal	Women of the Water; the name the Ventaren give themselves	noun; feminine

Selanian	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	Selanian terminator, similar to period	letter; character
petar	to stop	verb
pilan	fire	noun; masculine
pilar	to make fire, to breathe fire	verb
pilas	4th 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

Selanian	English	Function
pora, poralen, poralis	golden	adjective
porodan	golden squirrel	noun; masculine

Selanian	English	Function
R		
reta	that	pronoun; adjective
retu	18th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
runam	finger	noun; masculine

Selanian	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
seten	before	preposition
sevonatar	to scatter	verb
sevaten	the scattering, Diaspora	noun; feminine
sevon	division	noun; masculine
shoval	15th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
sina	13th letter of the Selanian 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	adverb

Selanian	English	Function
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

Selanian	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 *teval linos*. 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
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,	calm	adjective

Selanian	English	Function
tesanelis		
tesar	to balance	verb
tev'anar!	Abbreviated form of *teval anar*. Best translated as "Oh, my god!"	expletive
teva'lin!	Abbreviated form of *tevasal linos*. Best translated as "My Goddess!" or "Great Goddess!"	expletive
teval	god	noun; masculine
tevas'an!	Abbreviated form of *tevasal anar*. 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
Tinasa	Little Blossom	proper noun; feminine
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
tsemir	to allow	verb
tseval	Selanian currency	noun; masculine
tsutal	17th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
tulas	9th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
tusat	difference	noun; masculine
tyenar	glory, majesty	noun; feminine
tyenares	majestic, glorious	adjective

Selanian	English	Function
U		
ulan	25th 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

Selanian	English	Function
V		
vamir	to know	verb
vanar	to meet	verb
var	to go	verb
vatalas	little wanderer	noun; masculine
vedan	6th 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
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

Selanian	English	Function
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
vilasenim	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

Selanian	English	Function
Y		
yamel	23rd letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
yazoral	forbidden	adjective

Selanian	English	Function
Z		
zat	hole	noun; masculine
zatal	nothing	noun; masculine
zatulavan	void (eternal hole)	noun; masculine
zedi	16th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
zicises	bird similar to a raven	noun; masculine

Appendix E: 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.

ﻣﺮﺣﺒﺎ

ﻣﺮﺣﺒﺎ

ﻣﺮﺣﺒﺎ ﻣﺮﺣﺒﺎ ﻣﺮﺣﺒﺎ ﻣﺮﺣﺒﺎ ﻣﺮﺣﺒﺎ

Appendix F: 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 pirae, Anae milantarae. Alicosar vonala s'Anae. Camar tesiranu anam se pirala, enaviranu alin a pirala. 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.

Appendix G: The Destruction of Malentisa

The Destruction of Malentisa is a well known Selanian ballad by an unnamed musician from the time following the era termed the Cataclysm (see chapter "The Ballad" in *The Emissary*). Many scholars attribute the song to the Prophet Cades. The lines of the ballad are grouped in cinquains. The eighteen stanzas are organized in groups of three, reaching a climax after nine stanzas. What follows is a loose English translation of the song:

Hear now this tale that transpired long ago
In an era long past and hardly remembered
Ancient scribes have recorded this tragic account
So we all may tremble and forever recall
The Destruction of Malentisa

A world had been born, a paradise unrivaled
Where Elinar persisted in gathering wisdom
And Demantar peacefully grazed in the plains
Not perceiving the evil that soon would yield
The Destruction of Malentisa

Caverns of light harbored the diligent Elinar
As they grew in knowledge and sophistication
But their unbalanced eagerness before long brought forth
A pride so immense that no soul could prevent
The Destruction of Malentisa

The Emissary

Vilasan was his name, the Bright One his distinction
His understanding and insight of unrivaled perfection
The sole power on Piral he deemed to become
An Elinar so conceited he at last conceived
The Destruction of Malentisa

There was no relief when Elinar and Selani
Perceived his deception and feebly resisted his designs
The Selani he seduced to forsake their ways
Binding many to darkness so they might achieve
The Destruction of Malentisa

In the fated year four ninety-six
His dark army of slaves smote the unwary Elinar
He showed no mercy but slew them all in their homes
His Selanian bondmen cruelly carrying out
The Destruction of Malentisa

Nevilan was his name, the Dark One his distinction
No longer did light shine upon the former Bright One's face
He continued his devices of Piral's systematic subjugation
His lust for power yet unquenched by
The Destruction of Malentisa

The Lord of Light, Anae Herself, no longer could endure
The agony and suffering this malicious being had produced
Down She came in glory and supreme sovereignty
To call to account the one who had realized
The Destruction of Malentisa

The Emissary

The Asteroid fell in a great Cataclysm
From the heavens it came to chastise us all
For in our conceit and proud complacency
We stood not against darkness but passively allowed
The Destruction of Malentisa

Yet Anae had discovered that not all had complied
In the anguish and pain She even now found a spark
Of love and righteousness that one day could restore
The wisdom and knowledge that was consumed in
The Destruction of Malentisa

Anae showed mercy in Her righteous Judgment
And did not allow Piral to utterly perish
But Her punishment was severe on the day She descended
And Her heart was grieved as She perceived
The Destruction of Malentisa

Her people stood up to reprimand evil
No longer did they permit darkness to prevail
In the twilight the Cataclysm had spared of the sun
The Selani waged war in the shadow of
The Destruction of Malentisa

Anae bestowed wisdom upon artists and smiths
To forge the metal of the Rock from the Heavens
A symbol was born of vast strength and great hope
The Sword of Selanae that at last would revenge
The Destruction of Malentisa

The Emissary

Lord Pival Tolares bore the Sword into battle
A High Priest to repel the dark forces of evil
His army of light converged upon his rival
While tears were wept and memories evoked
The Destruction of Malentisa

In one last battle upon the eastern slopes
Of the Covasin Range was the foe overthrown
No longer did darkness obscure the light
Nor wickedness revel in the tragedy of
The Destruction of Malentisa

The Evil Lord fled through the Desert of Vortelan
While Lord Tolares pursued through the night to his doom
In the Ruins of Malentisa the two rivals met
Adding one further loss to the fatalities acquired in
The Destruction of Malentisa

Lord Tolares's remains were in the Ruins discovered
But no sign of the Dark Lord could ever be found
And the Sword of Selanae had utterly vanished
Leaving a mere silent hope to commemorate
The Destruction of Malentisa

The tale is now told and peace long been restored
But in the silence of wreckage and ghostly remains
An injustice cries out and beckons to be heard
So that through all time we shall never forget
The Destruction of Malentisa

Appendix H: 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.

Material	Office	Attribute
Bronze	Deacon, Deaconess	Compassion
Gold	Priest, Priestess	Holiness
Platinum	Elder	Wisdom
Sapphire	Covatal	Clarity

Appendix I: Index of Persons (by First Name)

Name	Description
Amendel Marusen	His Excellency Lord Amendel Marusen. Husband of Lady Lusina. Father of Varan, Cetila, and Tavita. He is mentioned in the chapter "The Operative" as Tavita Marusen's father.
Bejad Tsimerel	Former liaison officer of the High Priestess in Divestelan. Brother of Hyelisa. Deacon of the Selanian Order. First appearance in the chapter "The Contact." 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 wish for extraction. While en route from Divestelan to Tolares, he met Netira Cilenas at one of the waystations near Pitaren and decided to allow her to accompany him to Tolares.
Bill Marten	Husband of Carol Marten. Friend of Philip Brannon. He and his wife Carol first appear in chapter 7 of *The Rose*.
Carol Marten	Wife of Bill Marten. Friend of Silana Tolares Brannon and Melina Tolares. She and her husband Bill first appear in chapter 7 of *The Rose*.
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). 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 *Golden Messenger*.
Cavan Tolares	His Excellency Lord Cavan Tolares. Father of Chyardal and adoptive father of Venora. He is mentioned in passing in the chapter "Confused" as Natilya Revan's possible love interest.
Cavara Venural	Wife of Constable Pirtas Venural. Introduced in the chapter "Running Errands."
Cetila Marusen	Daughter of Lord Amendel Marusen and Lady Lusina. Sister of Tavita and Varan. First Lieutenant and commander of the Crimson Brigade. Friend of Captain Pirena Novesta and one of the former Nursemaids. She is first mentioned in the chapter "The Dispatch" as Dena Cemasena's former friend. Her first appearance is in the chapter "A Pining Soul."
Chyardal Tolares	Prince of House Tolares. Son of Lord Cavan Tolares. Mentioned as Nova Satural's possible love interest in the chapter "Confused."
Citenes Novesta	Brother of Lord Merelan Novesta. Uncle of Talenon, Pirena, and Davina. Captain of the Black Guard. Mentioned in passing by Cetila Marusen in the chapter "The Dispute."

Name	Description
Corsen Divestelan	Son of Lord Vechiles Divestelan and Lady Ilanya. Brother of Gevinesa and Yanita. 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 and for Zetara's death in the chapter "The Dispatch."
Covasatal	Selanian: *Travelleress*. Mentioned in the chapter "The Prophet's Bow" as the prophesied and future wife of the Covatal, the Divine Emissary of the Selani.
Covatal	Selanian: *Traveler*. The Divine Emissary of the Selani. Nova believes Vilam may be the Covatal.
Culisa Sitenan	Wife of Mayor Menirel of Nadil. Best friend of Semanta Revan. She and Semanta seem to be working for Western Alliance intelligence. First mentioned by Semanta in the chapter "Gold of the Heavens." First appearance in the chapter "An Approaching Storm."
Davina Novesta	Princess of House Novesta. Daughter of Lord Merelan Novesta and Lady Tsenera. Younger sister of Pira (Pirena) and Talenon. Niece of Citenes. Second Lieutenant of the Crimson Brigade and commander of the Brigade's Second Company. First appearance in the chapter "A Pining Soul."
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. Former fiancée of the late Varan Marusen. She has sworn vengeance on Tavita Marusen for killing Varan. First appearance in the chapter "The Dispatch."
Don Ferris	Husband of Julie Ferris. Mentioned during Philip and Silana's meeting with Julie and her daughter Theresa in *The Rose*.
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. Mentioned in the chapter "Confused," but not by name.
Eratis Rotasen	Brother of Zetara. Steward of the Tolares estate. Mentioned by Zetara and Dena in the chapter "The Dispatch."
Fatasa Gisatena	Acolyte in the entourage of the Lady Utalya Revan. First appearance in the chapter "A History Lesson."
Folan Revan	Husband of Semanta. Cousin of Lady Utalya Revan. Owner of a first-rate tavern in Nadil. First mentioned by Natilya Revan in the chapter "Sound Arguments." First appearance in the chapter "Folan's Guest."
Gevinesa Divestelan	Princess of House Divestelan. Daughter of Lord Vechiles Divestelan and Lady Ilanya. Sister of Corsen and Yanita. Founder

Name	Description
	of the Crimson Brigade. Friends with her handmaiden Zetara Rotasen. First appearance in the chapter “The Dispatch.”
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. Appears in *The Rose*.
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. First mentioned in the chapter “The Contact” and then again in the chapter “Echoes.”
Hyelisa Tsimerel	Acolyte in the entourage of the Lady Utalya Revan. Sister of Bejad. Gifted botanist. First appearance in the chapter “Echoes.” Tells Natilya Revan about her fears in the chapter “Confused.”
Hyumosen	Friend of Bejad Tsimerel and a chyeves merchant in Tolares. Buys Netira’s chyeves in the chapter “The Market.”
Ilanya Bevelas Divestelan	Her Excellency Lady Ilanya Divestelan. Wife of Lord Vechiles Divestelan. Mother of Corsen, Gevinesa, and Yanita. Sister of Utalya, Renestal, and Tilon Bevelas. Mentioned by Tuval and Dena Cemasena in the chapter “The Debt” as a possible candidate for recruitment into the Resistance because the Lady and her husband Vechiles have been estranged for years.
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. First appearance in *The Rose*.
Lotis Faeren	Farmer who lives northeast of Nadil. Husband of Matila, father of Catyana. The family is characterized by golden hair and blue eyes. First mentioned in the chapter “The Sinaven.” First appearance in the chapter “A Solemn Mood.”
Ludanes	Equerry of the chyeves merchant Hyumosen in Tolares. Mentioned in the chapter “The Market.”
Lusina Covatinalis Marusen	Her Excellency Lady Lusina Marusen. Wife of Lord Amendel Marusen. Mother of Varan, Cetila, and Tavita. First mentioned in the chapter “The Dispute.”
Lutrisya Cemasena	Wife of an important member of the town parliament in Nadil and well-known as a gossip. First appearance in the chapter “Dark Premonitions.”
Martan	Courier of Lord Vechiles Divestelan. First appearance in the chapter “The Games of the Noble.”
Mara	see Maralena.
Maralena Cemasena	Maid in the service of Culisa and Menirel Sitenan. Friend and cousin of Soshia Rotasen and friend of Catyana Faeren. Introduced in the chapter “Quid Pro Quo.”

Name	Description
Matila Faeren	Wife of Lotis, mother of Catyana. The family is characterized by golden hair and blue eyes. First mentioned in the chapter "The Sinaven." First appearance in the chapter "A Solemn Mood."
Melina Tolares	Sister of Silana Tolares Brannon. Silana talks about her and how much she misses her after her first big quarrel with Philip in *The Rose*.
Menirel Sitenan	Mayor of Nadil and husband of Culisa. First appearance in the chapter "The Guest." 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 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. Mara mentions him in the chapter "Mara's Story."
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. First appearance in the chapter "A Solemn Mood." She receives a lesson in swordsmanship from Vilam in the chapter "Awakening" and shows extraordinary skill.
Mirayla	Operative of the Resistance in Divestelan. Love interest of Sheletas Catanin. First appearance in the chapter "Vicious Revenge."
Natilya Revan	Niece of the Lady Utalya Revan and acolyte in her entourage. First appearance in the chapter "Sound Arguments." She has a difficult talk with her aunt in the chapter "Confused" about her relationship with Lord Cavan Tolares.
Netira Cilenas	Young girl from a farm near Pitaren. Companion of Bejad Tsimerel. First appearance in the chapter "The Way Station" where Bejad allows her to accompany him to Tolares.
Nevacad	Prophet of the Selani who constructed the Prophet's Bow. Mentor of Elder Eluset of the Advisory Council. First appearance in the Prologue of *The Emissary*.
Nevilan	Selanian: *Dark One*. The Dark Lord of the Elinar. Previously called Vilasan. He is mentioned by Nevacad in the Prologue of *The Emissary*.
Nisa	see Tamenisa Larutas
Normas Tunilen	Stable boy who worked in Nadil. His body is found by Vilam in the chapter "Arrival." He was most likely killed by an enchantress for unknown reasons.
Nova	see Novantina Satural

Name	Description
Novantina Satural	Acolyte in the entourage of the Lady Utalya Revan and Utalya's chief of staff. Best friend of Catyana Faeren. Usually referred to as Nova. She is one of the three main characters of the story along with Vilam and Catyana.
The Nursemaids	A nickname given to the princesses Dena Cemasena, Cetila Marusen, and Pira Novesta, because of their charge, Tavita Marusen
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 *The Rose*.
Picanas Catanin	Brother of Sheletas. Operative of the Resistance in Divestelan. First appearance in the chapter "Aftermath."
Pira	see Pirena Novesta
Pirena Novesta	Princess of House Novesta. Daughter of Lord Merelan Novesta and Lady Tsenera. Sister of Talenon and Davina. Niece of Citenes. Friend of Cetila Marusen. Captain of the Crimson Brigade. One of the Nursemaids. Usually called Pira. First mentioned in the chapter "The Dispatch" as Cetila Marusen's former friend. First appearance in the chapter "A Pining Soul."
Pirtas Venural	Constable in Nadil. Introduced in the chapter "Arrival." 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."
Redina Navaresa	Acolyte in the entourage of the Lady Utalya. Younger sister of Sitenayla. First mentioned in the chapter "A History Lesson." First appearance in the chapter "The Sinaven." She's the acolyte who, along with Tanola, greets Vilam after his rest. She and Sitenayla 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.
Semanta Vetena Revan	Wife of Folan Revan. Possibly working as an operative for Western Alliance intelligence. First appearance in the chapter "Folan's Guest." 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. First appearance in the chapter "The Contact."
Silana Tolares Brannon	Wife of Philip Brannon. Sister of Melina Tolares. Main character in *The Rose*.
Sinara Faeren	Youngest daughter of Lotis and Matila. Sister of Catyana. The family is characterized by golden hair and blue eyes. First

Name	Description
	appearance in the chapter “Chosen,” where she is called the *Golden Keeper* by the Tinavar.
Sitenayla Navaresa	Acolyte in the entourage of the Lady Utalya Revan. Older sister of Redina. First mentioned in the chapter “A History Lesson.” She and Redina like to cook.
Soshia Rotasen	Maid in the service of Menirel and Culisa Sitenan. Friend and cousin of Maralena Cemasena. Introduced in the chapter “Quid Pro Quo.”
Sutanay	Selanian: *Wandering Dove*. Eldest of the Demantar. First appearance in the Prologue of *The Emissary*.
Tal	see Vatal Penates
Talas	see Vatal Penates
Talenon Novesta	Son of Lord Merelan Novesta and Lady Tsenera. Brother of Pirena and Davina. Priest of the Videsian Order and head of Western Intelligence. First appearance in the chapter “The Guest.”
Tamenisa Larutas	Friend and protégée of Silana Tolares Brannon. Usually called Nisa. Mentioned by Silana after her quarrel with Philip in *The Rose*.
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. First appearance in the chapter “Sound Arguments.”
Tavita Marusen	Princess of House Marusen. Daughter of Lord Amendel Marusen and Lady Lusina. Sister of Cetila and Varan. Former captain of the Crimson Brigade. Covert operative for Western Alliance intelligence. Mistress of Corsen Divestelan. Charge of the Nursemaids. First mentioned in the chapter “The Dispatch.” 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.
Theresa Ferris	Four-year-old daughter of Don and Julie Ferris. First appearance in *The Rose*.
Tilantes	Elder of the Advisory Council. Protégé of Elder Yadez and mentor of Elder Yonatan.
Tilya	see Natilya Revan
Tinasa	Pet name of Novantina Satural, often used by members of her family. Nova’s sister Vodana called her Tinasa in the chapter “An Evening in the Tavern.”
Torvos Faeren	Son of Lotis and Matila. Brother of Catyana. The family is characterized by golden hair and blue eyes. First appearance in the chapter “A Solemn Mood.”

Name	Description
Traveler	Called *Covatal* in Selanian. The prophesied Divine Emissary of the Selanian Order. Nova believes Vilam may be the Covatal.
Tsenera Novesta	Her Excellency Lady Tsenera Novesta. Wife of Lord Merelan. Mother of Talenon, Pira (Pirena) and Davina. Mara mentions her in the chapter "Mara's Story."
Tuval Cemasena	Prince of House Cemasena. Brother of Dena. Operative of the Resistance in Divestelan. First mentioned in the chapter "Vicious Revenge." First appearance in the chapter "Skull Alley."
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. First mentioned in the chapter "Arrival," but not by name. First mentioned by name in the chapter "Sound Arguments." First appearance in the chapter "A History Lesson."
Varan Marusen	Prince of House Marusen. Brother of 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. First mentioned in the chapter "Vicious Revenge."
Vatal Penates	Adopted son of Regas and Novisya. Also known as Vatalas, Talas, or Tal. First mentioned by Silana in *The Rose*.
Vechiles Divestelan	His Excellency Lord Vechiles Divestelan. Husband of Ilanya. Father of Corsen, Gevinesa, and Yanita. General and founder of the Western Alliance. First appearance in the chapter "The Dispatch."
Venora	First mentioned by Soshia in the chapter "Soshia's Goodbye." Mentioned again as a friend of Vodana Satural and as a possible love interest and future wife of Vilam in the chapter "Confessions."
Vilam Tavasin	Main character of the story, along with Nova and Catyana. Took his name from the Nadil town sign in the chapter "Sound Arguments." Nova believes he may be the Covatal.
Vilasan	Selanian: *Bright One*. High Scholar of the Elinar. Later known as Nevilan.
Vinesa	see Gevinesa Divestelan
Vira	see Zetavira Faeren
Vodana Satural	Sister of Nova. A renowned musician during her time. First mentioned in the chapter "The Sinaven." First appearance in the chapter "An Evening in the Tavern."
Vordalin Penates	Prince of House Penates. High Priest before and during the Selanian Civil War. Brother of Tanola and the late High Priestess

Name	Description
	Halita Penates. First mentioned in the chapter “Hide and Seek.” First appearance in the chapter “An Evening in the Tavern.”
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. First mentioned in the chapter “The Dispatch.” First appearance in the chapter “The Games of the Noble.”
Yonatan	Elder of the Selanian Order. Protégé of Elder Tilantes. First mentioned by Folan in the chapter “Quid Pro Quo.” First appearance in the chapter “An Evening in the Tavern.”
Zanatol Bevelas	Third-degree cousin and first husband of Lady Utalya Bevelas Revan. Mentioned by Natilya in the chapter “Confused,” but not by name.
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. First appearance in the chapter “The Dispatch.”
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 talented musician and singer. First appearance in the chapter “A Solemn Mood.”

Appendix J: 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

Bevelas, Renestal

Brannon, Philip

Brannon, Silana (Tolares)

C

Catanin, Picanas

Catanin, Sheletas

Cemasena, Denadya (Dena)

Cemasena, Lutrisya

Cemasena, Maralena (Mara)

Cemasena, Tuval

Cilenas, Netira

D

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

H

I

J

K

L

Larutas, Tamenisa (Nisa)

M

Marten, Bill

Marten, Carol

Marusen, Amendel

Marusen, Cetila

Marusen, Lusina

Marusen, Tavita

Marusen, Varan

N

Navaresa, Redina

Navaresa, Sitenayla

Novesta, Citenes

Novesta, Davina

Novesta, Merelan

Novesta, Pirena (Pira)

Novesta, Talenon

Novesta, Tsenera

O

P

Penates, Halita

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, Soshia

Rotasen, Zetara

S

Satural, Novantina (Nova)

Satural, Vodana

Sitenan, Culisa

Sitenan, Menirel

T

Tolares, Cavan

Tolares, Chyardal

Tolares, Melina

Tolares, Pival

Tolares, Silana (Brannon)

Tsimerel, Bejad

Tsimerel, Hyelisa

Tunilen, Normas

U

V

Venural, Cavara

Venural, Pirtas

Appendix K: 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

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.
Toradeh, Mount	Highest peak of the Covasin Mountains. Measured at 41,425 feet

Name	Description
	(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 *majestic*). 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.

Appendix L: Maps of Piral

Maps on the following pages:

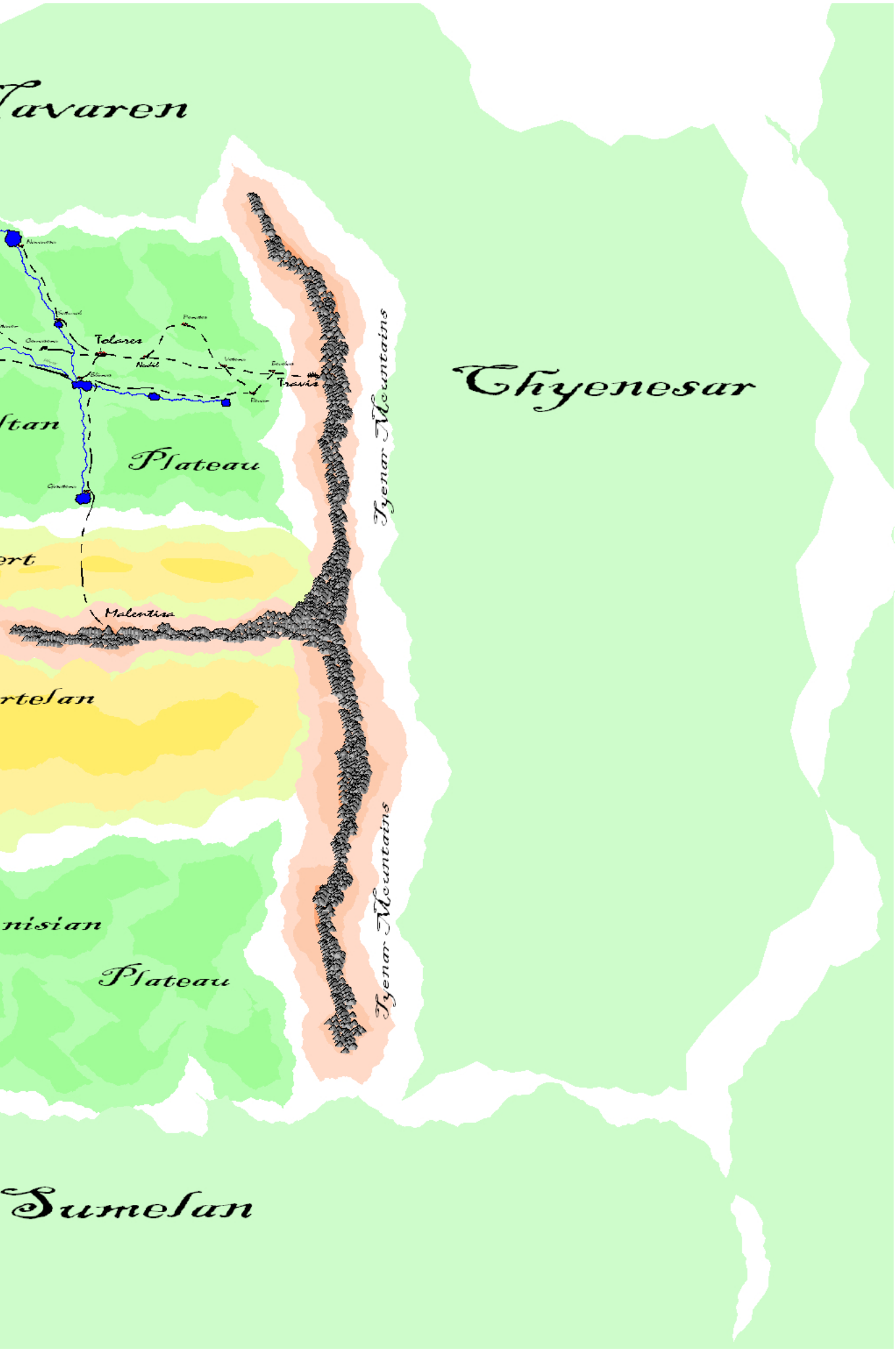
1. Map of the northwestern hemisphere
2. Map of the area surrounding the Suviltan Plateau
3. Map of the Suviltan Plateau

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.”

Sea of Ventara
Plains of Tesalin
Cevasin Mountains
Cevasin Mountains
Divestelan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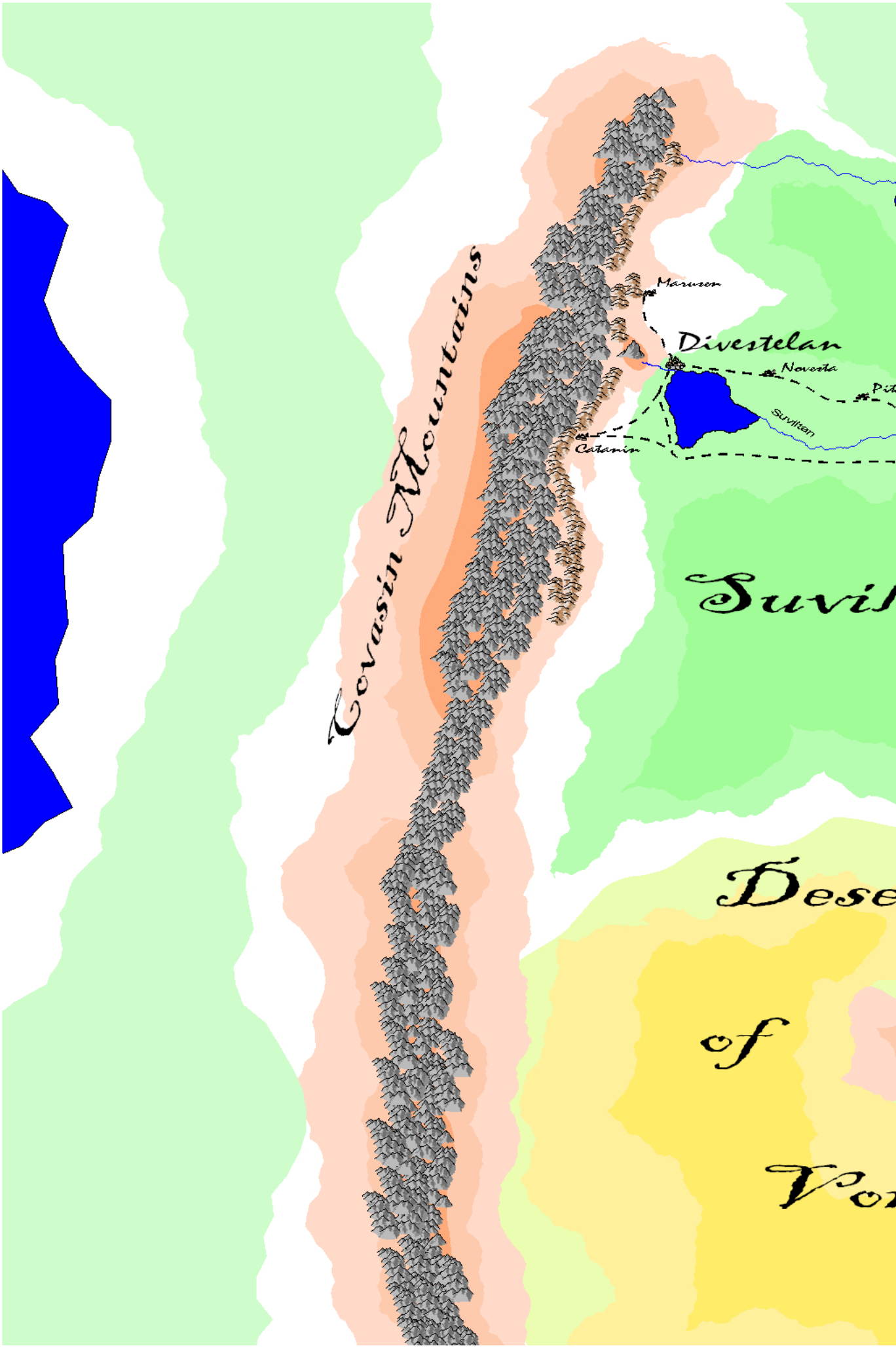
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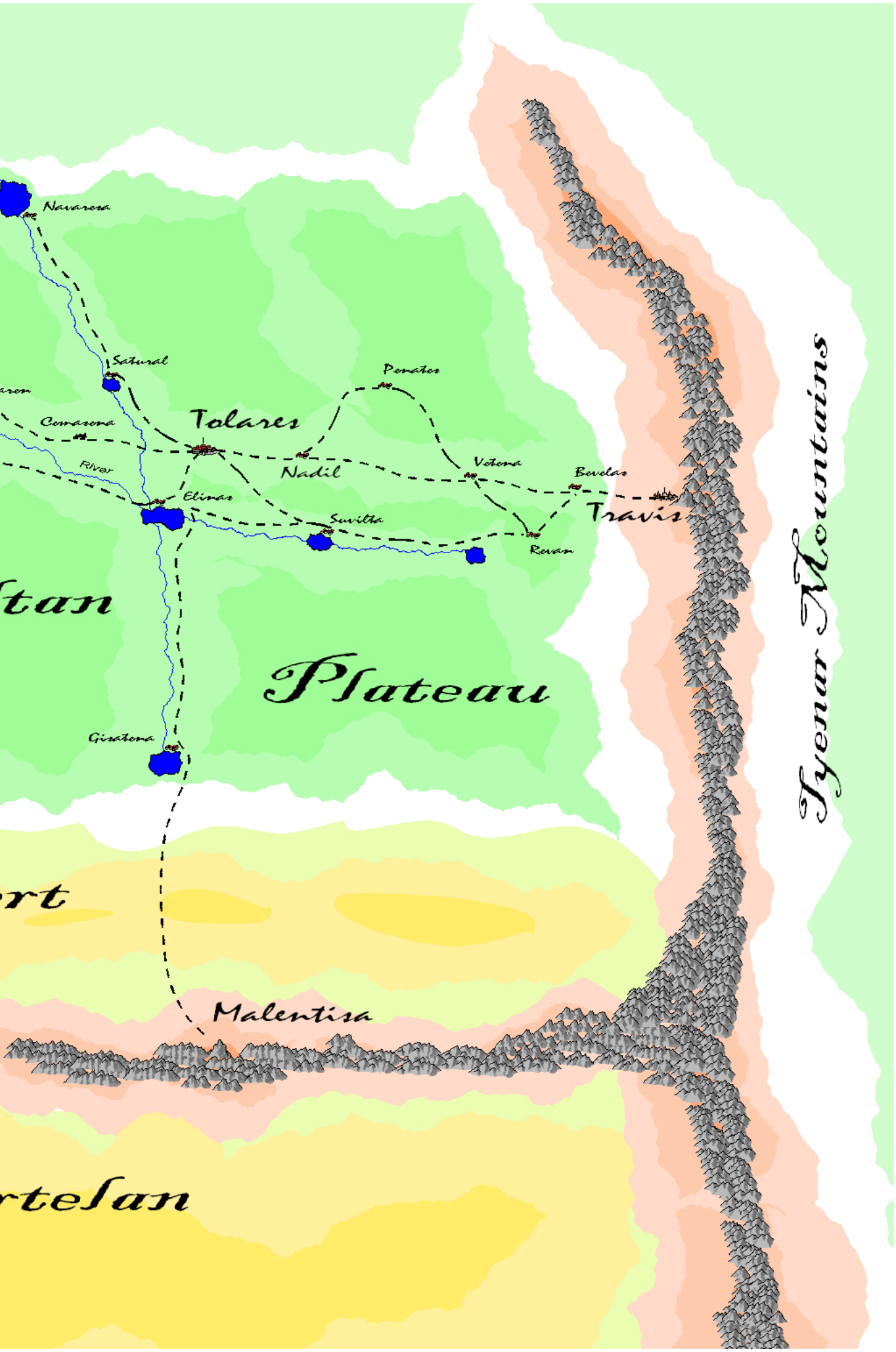
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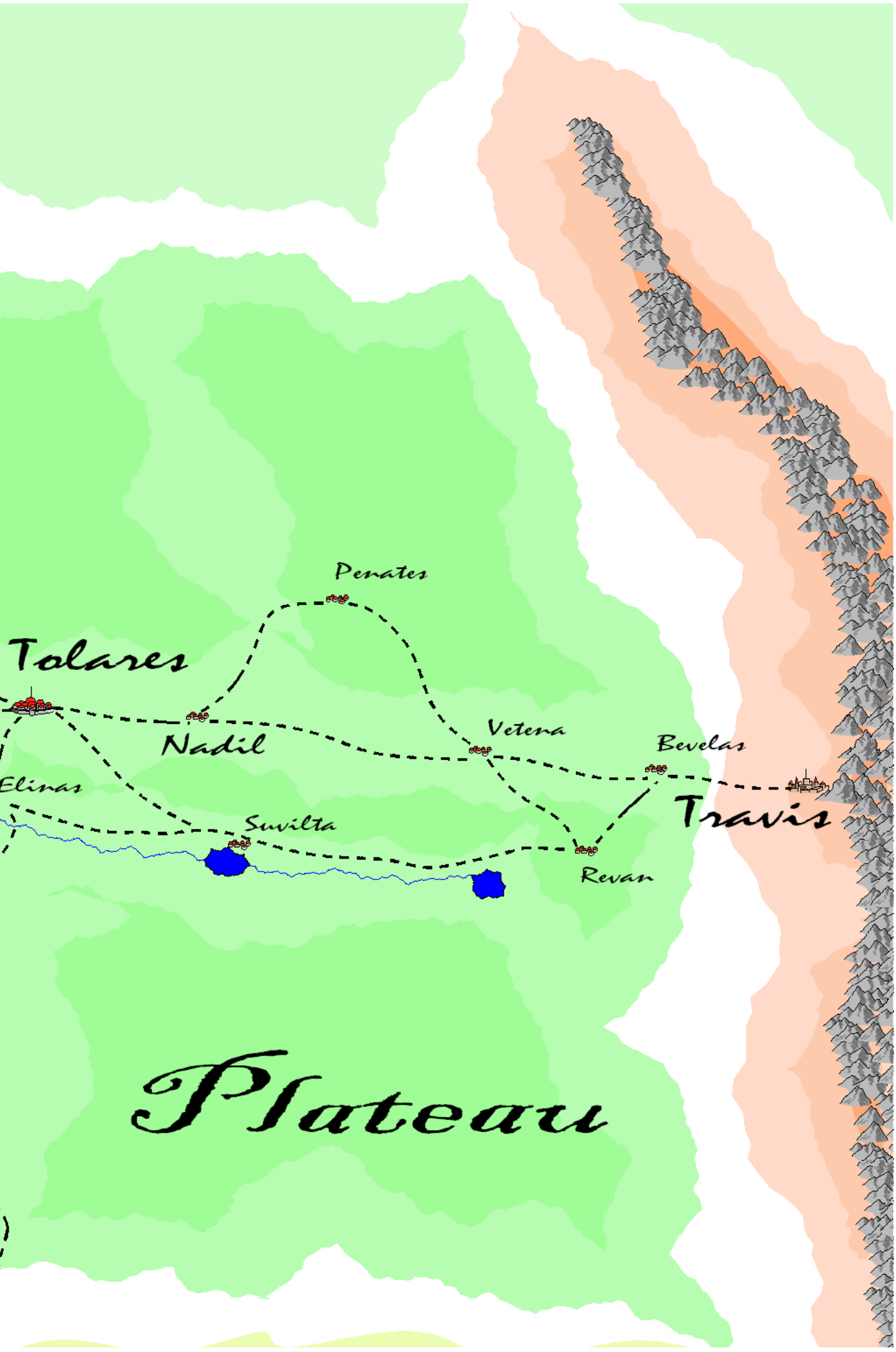
Perates
Tolares
Nadil
Vetera
Bevelas
Elinas
Travis
Suvilta
Revan
Plateau