



# SHIFT

BOOK 2

“Dragon’s Bride”



S.L. THORNE

SHIFT: Dragon's Bride

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DRAGON'S BRIDE

S. L. THORPE

## **Shift Book 2**

### **Dragon's Bride**

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For those who haven't read Stag's Heart... I'd highly recommend it. For continuity if nothing else

*“I give you the ability to Become, that you might understand the world and your place in it. I give you Understanding, that you might be one.”*

*-Caelyrima, Mother Chimera*

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Caelerys's dream ended before she actually woke. She slept a little longer than was her wont and eventually had to force herself to rise. Finally, she slipped out of bed and allowed herself to be dressed simply, as nothing was really going to be happening today. She mentioned that she might go riding later if she was allowed to, stretch Tempest's wings, maybe go to the archery field. The more she thought about it, the more the archery sounded appealing. She had a strong need for physical exercise, to drive out the thoughts of the night before, when her best friend had lit her candle with Lord Rorik Griff, a man more than twice her age.

As they were dressing her hair, Coral informed her that, according to her sources, Lady Liliwyn had not yet had any offers made. Cae hummed thoughtfully, as if this was news to her. "Perhaps a young man himself told her this... said he would ask and then either hasn't yet or had his mind changed."

"Or his father thought he hadn't any real chance," Pansy offered. "That happens sometimes too."

Sorrel nodded in agreement.

Cae looked up at Coral. "Were it her ladies you queried?" she asked.

Coral's smile was full of secrets. "Of course not, my lady. I have sources at House Cygent. That is why it took me so long. Granted, an offer may have come in

through one of her present brothers and it simply has not made its way to the duke, but I have no connections within Lord Selgan's household."

"Oh. Who *do* you have connections with?"

"Too many to name, my lady. Best you ask me for information and I will tell you if I can get it. This is a part of the game best kept in the shadows. But rest assured, I am loyal to you, and will do nothing to compromise you or your House."

Cae frowned. "But you are employed by the crown, are only assigned to me whilst I am here. Are not your first loyalties to them?"

"Everyone's first loyalties should be to the crown. But my rules are simple. Any lady I am assigned to serve has my loyalty, deserving or not. I will betray none of their secrets during nor even after my care of them has ended." Coral watched her carefully, reading things into the line of questioning, of that Cae was certain. She could almost see the pieces falling into place behind her eyes and pleasant smile. "Beyond that, I make friends and trade information, and keep friends among staffs I have previously served. At the moment, your well being is my only concern, and while I almost daily reassure the queen of that, and give her some information of you, I tell her no secrets, nothing intimate. She only has your welfare in mind, as do I."

Her conviction was firm, and Cae was satisfied she was not the spy but now suspected one. It did not make Cae feel any better that it was either Rosie, Sorrel or Pansy. She liked all three maids for different reasons.

Whilst she sat to breakfast, Rosie brought her a letter, delivered by a page.

The seal was intact and her father's. Cae immediately left off eating and sat back to read it, only paying attention to Tempest's helping herself to keep her from eating over much. The letter assured her that he was doing better, first and foremost, but that he needed her to come home. Not a permanent thing, but for at least a week, to talk with her. He had some important things to discuss. He also suggested that she come as quickly as she could to minimize her absence from the court, and to use a subterfuge to do so. As someone was keeping tabs on the family, he wanted nothing to happen to her on the way. Mace was to return with her.

Cae folded the letter up neatly, and rose, looking as happy as she could. "Fern, come with me please."

Fern bobbed ascent, handing what she had been mending to Rosie. "Good news, my lady?"

"Yes. I have to go show this to Lili. Jelma, no more!" she said sharply, catching the bird trying to steal one more bite. "In fact, you come, too. We're both going to



need a little comforting now that Syera has left.” She looked up at Coral, “She and her husband have already left, yes?”

Coral gave a stately nod. “Yes, my lady. They were up at dawn and gone within the hour. I believe the queen saw them off.”

She nodded her thanks. “It is a long way to Griff lands. Did she look well?”

“Like a blushing bride, my lady. None the worse,” she added pointedly.

Cae realized then, just how much Coral knew that went on within the Citadel. She decided she would have to put her to better use in the future.

With a smile and a thank you, she shouldered Tempest and she and Fern headed into the hall. When Caelerys turned toward the stairs, Fern looked back with confusion. “My lady, Lady Liliwyn’s rooms are the other way.”

“We’re not going to see Lili just yet. First we have to see the queen.”

“Ah,” she said, understanding now that a ruse had been in place. “Do you think... Coral is trustworthy, my lady?”

“I do now. You’re to let her in on things as soon as you can, but only her. We’re going to need her help. And maybe Rue,” she added as she swept up the staircase to the royal floor.

She paused outside the royal apartments, waited as one of the guards slipped inside to announce her. As she stood there, she felt fiercely determined and yet uncertain. There was a sensation of sorrow followed by anger and stubborn pride and.... She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath, trying to purge herself of what she was feeling, knowing suddenly that this was not hers.

The door opened and she and Fern were admitted into the audience chamber. She was fully aware that the domestic tableau before her was at least partly staged. The queen sat in her usual chair, just handing off the infant prince, Verlan, to his nurse. The king stood behind Balaran’s chair, his hands upon its back, and Valan was seated in another chair, leaning back with an air of indolence that Caelerys knew to be feigned. They looked like a family who had just been interrupted in the midst of a very ordinary breakfast.

Cae observed the formalities, curtsying and remaining down until requested to rise. “What may we do for you, young lady?” asked the king.

Cae started to flush, as she had not really expected to be facing all of them at once. “Forgive me, Your Majesty, but I have received a letter this morning from my father requesting that I return home at once.”

The king shot a look at Valan who ignored it.

“Is everything well?” asked Balaran.

“I think so, Your Highness. He does not really say his reason for sending for me, but that I am to... be circumspect in my travel plans,” she said painfully. “Apparently there is some reason for concern, what with what happened to Willam.”

“I see,” said the king.

The look the queen shot him clearly questioned the truth of that. But she quickly turned and smiled at Cae. “When do you leave, my dear?”

“Well, as soon as I can arrange it. With a little assistance and some leeway, I could be away in an hour, but... I did not want to just leave without my hosts knowing the reasons. Father said I will only need to be home for a week, which will be a full fortnight all told, with travel to and from.”

The queen nodded, thinking. “Things can be arranged. Provided my husband has no objections,” she added, looking over at him as if daring him to do so.

He shook his head. “I see no reason to deny your father his request. You are returning to the capitol?” he asked.

She gave a small bob, “As long as I am welcome, Your Majesty. I would not leave at all but that he has called.”

“He trusts you a great deal, yes?” the king asked.

Cae blushed. “He... does value my input on certain matters. And I have assisted him in the last five or six years with some of the day to day matters of the Duchy and its people.”

The king seemed to absorb this. Valan stood, gave a half bow in his direction. “By your leave, father, I am going to see what I might do to help. Make any arrangements that might be necessary.”

It looked as if the king might protest, but he finally waved his hand. Cae thought there was more to it than a mere gesture of dismissal.

Valan took her by the hand and led her back to the door where he turned again. “I am going to ask,” he stated, obviously answering a previous argument.

The king sputtered, his anger rising like ice in water.

“It is already done,” Valan added.

“I am the King!” he roared.

Cae desperately wanted to melt into the wall, not wishing to be privy to a family squabble.

“Yes, Father,” he said with a fierce joy. “You are right. You are the king and can refuse. You are well within your rights not to allow it. But I warn you: It is this or nothing. I will accept nothing less.” With that, he drew Cae and Fern from the room, closing the door behind him with finality.

Cae caught a glimpse of Bal smirking even as the argument suspended for her benefit began again seconds before the chamber door was closed.

Standing in the hall, stunned, Cae looked up at the prince, afraid to ask what that had been about, and very much afraid she knew. He looked down at her and gave her an apologetic smile. "Forgive me," he said. "I had to put my foot down. Shall we go and deal with your problem?" he asked.

Cae could not seem to find her voice, was still overwhelmed by the riot of emotions. Fern stepped forward, curtsying. "Your Highness, if we could find a place of absolute privacy? It might be easier to explain what my lady needs," she said.

Valan gave her a long look, but Fern did not back down, in spite of showing him every deference. Finally, he nodded, lead them down a side corridor with a very low ceiling and tapestries lining the walls. He stopped about halfway down, looked to make sure the hall was empty, then reached behind one of the tapestries and fiddled with the wall. There was a scraping noise, and then he was holding side the hanging and gesturing for them to hurry.

Cae stepped willingly into the dark, and Fern followed. Valan was close behind, easing the door shut behind him.

He reached out in the darkness, felt the fabric of Cae's dress and sought out her hand. She gave it to him willingly. Then he was pulling her close and finding her lips in the pitch black and setting them on fire.

"Oh, by the Mother, I can hear you," Fern said, exasperated.

"A bit impertinent, aren't we?" he growled.

Her tone took on a bit more deference. "I would be remiss in my duties to my lady if I failed to point out that fact. Half my job is chaperone, Your Highness. Even with one as highborn as yourself."

There was a rumbling growl, but Cae knew it was good-natured. "Back, beast," she whispered.

"That is where you had better end up," he rumbled.

"What?"

"Back. Here. Soon," he quipped, still not letting go of her. "But for now, let us see how we are going to get you out of here. The sooner gone the sooner returned, aye?"

"Aye," she shivered, and not from the chill in the passage. "I have an idea. We are going riding."

"We are?" he asked.

“Well, you are. With Fern.”

“My lady!” she protested. “I should go with you!”

“You are more valuable to me as a decoy right now.”

Valan’s voice said he was nodding. “You are of a height, rough build.”

“My hair is no where near as dark and I look nothing like her, Your Highness. My lady, I haven’t your grace.”

“T’is a good thing it has grown colder since the moons have turned,” he said. “A cloak will not go amiss. The question is, what is she a distraction from?”

“Well, for that I have your uncle to thank,” she smiled. “And I will likely need Rue.” She outlined her plan and the pair of them ironed out any hitches that might arise. The prince added a few stipulations of his own.

They were making the final touches when they began to notice the darkness growing noticeably lighter. The prince put the ladies behind him and turned to face the approaching light source. Cae slipped her dagger from the sheath beside her pocket.

A chirp made her groan and put it away again. She could hear the clicking of talons on stone as the bird ran around a far bend and appeared at the end of the long, narrow hall. Bal was right behind her, holding a candle. As Cae came into sight, the bird launched herself into the air, landing on her upraised wrist fussing at her.

Bal joined them at a more sedate pace. “You left her behind,” he said.

Valan rolled his eyes, cracking his neck. “I was the one, feather-head,” he grumbled at Tempest. “I didn’t see you. *I* closed the door. Now leave off your scolding, you old fish-wife, before you give us away. It’s not her fault.”

Tempest twisted her head to look at him, huffed and promptly ignored him, but she shut up.

“Finally,” he complained. “So you figured I headed for the nearest secret passage to talk?” he asked his twin.

Bal chuckled. “Where else are you going to go? Your room? This is closer than the gardens. So what have we decided?”

“Oh, you are going to love this,” Cae smiled.

In short order, the plan was in place, and Liliwyn dragged into it. Fern went downstairs to draft Rue and then to inform Coral privately what was going on.

Cae went to her rooms to prepare for a ride with the princes. She distracted Rosie, Sorrel and Pansy with questions about what they did during the wedding, whether they had slipped off with anyone. Pansy was a wealth of information, hav-

ing seen and recognized quite a few of the couples slipping off into dark corners. Meanwhile, Coral and Fern were packing up the barest minimum Cae would need, including her armour and her bow, which had taken both women to unstringing, and hiding it in the bedchamber. When they were done, Coral came through the dressing room door to admonish the others that her ladyship would never be ready in time if they did not stop distracting her.

While they ushered her into the dressing room to change into a riding habit, Fern brought the two modest packs to Rue in the hall disguised as laundry. The bow box and quiver was harder to disguise, but putting it on the bottom to support the whole with linens draping off it, hid it well enough. Rue would then pass it, minus the laundry, off to Roan, who would whisk it off to the stables with other instructions.

Cae had her hair dressed simply, just braided and coiled. It would be easier to hide that way. When she was ready, she and Fern put on their cloaks and headed downstairs to meet the princes and Lili in the courtyard. They rode out in a stately procession around the Citadel and out through the side gate, Tempest flying over head as was her wont.

As they approached the stables, Roan stepped out and waved the party down, bowing and claiming to have need of Balaran's time on some matter. Cae did not hear what excuse he had come up with, but was certain it was clever. Valan ordered everyone to dismount for the moment, that they would resume their ride shortly, and went with Roan and his brother.

The ladies took this opportunity to go for a short walk and explore the stables. They found the tack room without too much trouble, slipping in and barring it from the inside. Fern and Cae undressed as quickly as they could, with Fern putting Cae's clothes on and, after binding her breasts as best they could, Cae put on the clothes of a guardsman. Tempest watched with confused curiosity. In the end, Cae looked like any random Citadel guard, without the identifying tabard. Because of the increasing cold, the helm was worn over a hood that was little more than a sack with a hole in it for the face, but it kept the head and neck warm under the metal skullcap. It served well to hide her coil of hair.

“Now,” Cae said, helping Lili make final adjustments of Fern's costume, “this is not going to hold up much past your return to the Citadel, but that should give me enough of a head start they won't be able to catch up with me even if they find out.”

Lili was tucking Fern's clothes back where they had found the guardsman's. "Don't worry, we'll get her back as Fern before then. You were met by some of your father's men and taken to a waiting ship," she smiled. "There's a late outgoing tide today, I checked."

Cae kissed her cheek. "Thank you for this. I won't forget it. And don't let them take advantage of this," she added.

"As if I would," Lili huffed. "They get too vicious, I might even spread a few counter rumours of my own. See how they like it."

Cae crossed to Tempest and lifted her up. "Jelma," she began, shifting to Vermian. "*I need you to stay with Fern. Guard her like you would me until she tells you to find me, all right?*"

The bird chirped forlornly.

"*No, this IS to keep me safe. Watch her. I'll be guarded. When she says leave, you can find me then. All right?*" Tempest gave her a reluctant nod, pressing her head to her cheek. She pulled back, frowning at the hood and helmet, but obediently went to Fern's shoulder.

"Oh, but she's heavy," she moaned.

"She'll be heavier on your wrist, so don't do it often."

She nodded and Cae pulled the hood up for her. Lili did the same and Cae unbarred the door, following the two of them out of the tack room, trying to walk as much like a man as she could while getting used to the idea of treads. She felt so exposed, in spite of the long cape the uniform provided for warmth.

They met the princes on the way out. Bal nodded with delighted approval. Val almost did a double take, finding a conflict between what he felt and what he saw. He walked up to Fern and offered her his hand. She took it, trembling. "Just breathe," he said. "I shall not bite. All you have to do until we are in the woods and out of sight is sit and ride. Can you ride astride?" he asked.

Fern managed a weak smile, "If I would keep up with my lady, Your Highness, I had to learn."

"Good," he smiled, aiming it more for Cae, standing behind all of them. "Then we ride."

Cae felt the kiss he had planted on her in the passage burning her all over again, and was secretly glad she'd have that to take away with her, as they would not be getting a decent farewell. She chastised herself. She would see him again in a fortnight.

She followed them out to the horses, where the men were beginning to remount. She held Wraith's head as Valan helped Fern into the saddle.

Wraith was confused, nosing Cae forcefully. She pressed her gloved hand to her face and whispered in Vermian to her. *"Not this time, my sweet. Be good for her. I'll be back before you know it."*

Wraith did not like it, but settled down. Her ears let Cae know she would be taking up the issue with her later. When Fern was settled, Cae stepped back, watched the party ride off without her and felt a reluctant sadness. Tempest glanced back at her briefly, but stayed where she was, identifying Fern as her mistress for any who did not look close enough.

Larch came up to her leading another horse, handed her the reins. "We should take advantage of every moment," he said, swinging up into his own saddle. She noticed he wasn't wearing his tabard any more. He looked down at her. "I'm not going to have to help you up, am I? It would be... awkward to say the least." His eyes were laughing at her.

She smiled. "No," she said, vaulting into the saddle. "This is so much easier in treads," she said softly.

"I imagine," he chuckled. "Come on, lad. Our errands won't keep," he added loudly, clapping his heels to his horse and trotting off.

Cae rode after him. No one challenged them, not even at the dragon gates. They rode with other traffic up the long, winding slope of the King's Road as it wound up to the entrance of the Mistwood. There was a crossroad just before the wood itself, and a number of people diverted one way or another here. Only about a quarter of the traffic headed into the wood itself. Once they had passed the majority of carts and foot traffic, they opened up and galloped.

It was a short ride to the Mist's End Inn just a few miles inside the wood. Cae remembered the neat little place from her trip to DragonsPoint. She looked around in wonder, feeling nostalgic for a place she only visited once, and that only for a bath and a meal. She had come a long way since then.

Larch clapped his hand on Cae's shoulder as he would have any young man in his charge. "Wake up, lad. You've seen an inn before. Where's your friend?"

Cae snapped back to the present, glancing around until she saw Mace sitting at a table by the fire eating. She almost missed him with the eyepatch he was wearing.

She crossed over and dropped onto the bench across from him much as she had watched her brothers do for years. "How's your head, old man?" she asked, trying to keep her voice as gruff as possible.

He glanced up at her, scowling a moment, then grunted, “Don’t talk so much.” He looked her companion over, seemed to find him to measure. “You eaten?”

Cae shook her head.

Mace nodded, waved to the serving girl and held up two fingers. She nodded and headed to the kitchen. “Eat light, we have a hard ride.”

Cae looked him over. He looked far more grizzled than she remembered him being, as if he had aged in the week since she’d seen him. “How’s your head?” she asked again, keeping her volume low enough not to carry.

“Fine. Won’t keep me from the hard ride ahead. We’ve more’n an ‘undred miles t’ cover,” he growled.

Cae wondered what had gotten into him, then she realized what was off about his behaviour beyond it being out of character. It was just that, a character. His demeanour was gruff and coarse, but his emotional state was not. That was merely worried and cautious.

The proprietress brought over their food, smiled flirtatiously at Cae. “And who’s this handsome thing?” she grinned.

Cae blushed, and buried her head in her food, mumbling her thanks.

“New recruit,” Larch quipped. “Still wet behind the ears. Not man enough for a woman like you,” he smiled.

She was suitably distracted. “Hmmm, maybe later,” she said as other customers began to clamour for her attention, including a trio of men in rough black leathers who came in and looked around before choosing a table near the wall. They watched the room even as they ordered drinks. They seemed to be settling in for a long wait.

Cae noted a trace of copper on one of them, and another wiped his neck with a grey kerchief. She concentrated on her bowl of stew, eating with as little grace as she could. She tapped Mace’s foot under the table three times, reached across Larch to grab the salt cellar just past him instead of the one closer to her. Mace flicked an eye in that direction and went back to polishing his bowl.

They finished their food casually and rose. Larch tossed the proprietress a couple of coins on the way out with a smile. At the stable door, after calling for Mace’s horse, Larch handed him the reins to his own animal, said in a low voice. “I’ll get your mount and catch up. I want to make sure those toads don’t follow.”

Mace nodded and climbed into the saddle. Cae thought she felt a burst of pride from him as she vaulted easily onto her own. The pair of them rode out of the courtyard and down the road.



## SHIFT: Dragon's Bride

“So,” she began when it was safe to talk, though making sure her voice would not carry too far. “The patch a disguise?” she asked hopefully.

He nodded. “And driving me buggered,” he swore, reaching a finger under it to rub it. “I’ll take it off when we camp tonight.”

“No inns, huh?” she commented, smiling.

“No hunting lodges either, my lady,” he said softly.

She shrugged. “I think I’m going to like this little adventure.”

He chuffed, “We’ll see how you feel about it after a night of the cold hard ground.”

They cantered for a little ways down the road, rode for maybe half an hour before they heard hoof-beats galloping up behind them. They turned in the saddle, drew to opposite sides of the road and Mace drew the sword strapped to Larch’s saddle.

They relaxed when they saw it was only Larch on Mace’s horse.

Larch eyed the sword in Mace’s hand. “With my own blade, no less?” he chuckled.

Mace shrugged, re-sheathing it and dismounting. “You had my crossbow,” he quipped.

“So I did. My lady, you may wish to string that bow of yours, just in case,” Larch advised.

She dismounted and pulled the plain box from where it had been strapped to the saddle. Opening it, she saw that all the decoration that could be identified from a distance, everything that made it special, had been wrapped with linen strips as if to hold together an older, inferior weapon. She smiled. Her friends had thought of everything. She bent and strung the bow with swift ease and slid the box back into place, looping the quiver over her shoulder to situate it comfortably on her back. Ready, she remounted.

“If they are looking for us,” Larch said, “they have been blind to their quarry.”

“Good,” Mace grunted, remounting on his own horse. “We should put as much distance between us as we can. We’ll change horses at the way station.”

The two of them then turned to look at their charge.

Grinning at the two men watching her, Caelerys turned her horse’s head down the road. “Hope you two old men can keep up!” she crowed, and spurred her horse to a full gallop.

Mace flipped up his eyepatch and cursed, charged after her with the prince’s personal guard at his heel.



Cae was wise enough, or rather, in tune enough with her mount, to know how long he could keep what pace. They rode as hard as they could without running their animals into the ground, changing mounts at a way station about twenty five miles from the Inn. They paused there long enough to stretch, grab a swallow of water and rest whilst their gear was transferred to the new horses before they were off again.

They were well over halfway home when they stopped to camp, slipping off into the woods, far enough away from the road that their fire would not be seen.

“My lady,” Larch began, “I must commend your saddle skills. I admit, at first I was worried for you at the pace we were going to be setting, but you have owned the challenge admirably.” He gave a self-deprecating laugh, “Of course, after that ride through the woods after the fight I should have known better.”

She smiled. “I suspect you were more worried how I’d take to dressing like a man. I admit, I will be glad to pull out my skirts and dresses again. I feel far too exposed in these,” she said, rubbing her hands on her thighs. “But with the two of you... I do feel safe.”

“Well, it’s not like you’re flashing bare ankles,” he said, trying to keep a straight face.

She looked at him in horrified shock, then laughed, throwing the heel of her bread at him. He laughed and dodged. “He told you?!”

“More like interrogated me.” He held up his hand at her concerned look. “Nothing to worry about, my lady. He’s actually pleased about the incident. It gives him something to tease you with.”

Mace was looking from one to the other, frowning. Cae took pity on him, explaining. He hung his head before shaking it and mopping his plate with the last of his bread. “Well, my little bird never was one to mind her modesty when there was a crisis. ...Or she was in a temper,” he chuckled. “Speaking of birds,” he added, jerking his thumb in the air.

Tempest came crashing through the canopy, managing to right herself before she crash landed. She walked over to Cae holding something in her beak.

Cae set down her plate and took the roll of paper from her. She gave the bird a bone from the rabbit they had cooked which still had a good bit of meat on it.

“It’s from Prince Balaran,” she said.

“He signed it?” Mace frowned, worried that the prince had lost enough of his mind to actually do so.

She shook her head with a smile. “No, he doesn’t have to. I know his handwriting. He says ‘everything went to plan. Fern is at Stag’s Hall for the duration. Claim is a messenger caught up with us and you had to rush home. Two hooded women were seen boarding a ship headed to the Reach. Fear not, there will be a Navy ship near at hand should anyone attack it.’ That was thoughtful of him,” she mused, tossing the message into the fire.

She reached down and stroked Tempest fondly. “Thank you, my sweet. Was it so terrible?”

The bird gave an indifferent reaction and continued to pick the meat from the bones.

“Well, we should not have too much trouble then,” Mace sighed. “I will give you this for your princes, they have more care and wit than rumour gives them credit.”

Larch’s eyes flashed at that. “My prince only has his responsibilities to the kingdom in his mind.”

“Of course, Mester Larch,” Cae said soothingly. “We do not say otherwise. But he is said to be distant, unapproachable and ill-tempered. And he does very little to discourage such rumours. I doubt there are very many, if any, young women who dream of him beyond merely being his princess and eventually his queen with little thought to the man who comes with it.”

Larch studied her. “And my lady?” he asked simply.

She met his gaze. “I dream of the man,” she said simply, standing. “I don’t give a damn if he is king or not. I would prefer him a beggar.” With that she walked off, cleaning her plate in the little stream they’d made their camp by and going off into the trees to attend the call of nature.

She could still hear the two of them talking though.

“Would she really rather he were Folk?” Larch asked Mace, incredulous.

Mace’s voice was proud, “What you need to understand about my little bird, is that rank means nothing but responsibilities. She takes them very seriously. And to those to whom she holds responsibility, she is warm and caring and inviting. They are not strangers to her. To be responsible for more people than she can personally know? That terrifies her.”

“So she is not a good candidate for my prince in spite of any attachments,” Larch began.

“She’ll make it work. Always does. That one does not run from what she fears. What she prefers is not the same as what she’ll accept and make work. She prefers not to tend to battlefield wounded and the nastiness that it can present, but I’ve seen her swallow her gorge and wade in, not giving a damn about the blood on a new dress and getting her hands as dirty as the rest of us. Afterwards, she dyed the dress to hide the stains and wore it proudly.”

Cae wiped a tear from her eye and finished her business. She returned once she had control of herself, laying her folded blanket on the ground and curling up on top of it, her back to the fire and her hand resting on the handle of her bow.

Mace chuckled softly. “I told you she’d be fine. Been hunting since she were a mite.”



It was nearing dusk when they emerged from the forest and onto the long road to the cliff-side castle. Cae felt her heart soaring at the sight of the rusty brown spires rising above the grassy ridge with their rod-like outer edges. The castle had been hollowed out of the existing basalt columns that formed the cliff portion of the Reach.

She took a deep breath of the salt air, listening to the cry of seabirds and the breaking of waves far below. She felt happy, and at home at last. Here she did not have to worry about what might be in her food or her drink or watch what she said for fear of gossip-mongers using it to destroy her.

She sent Tempest into the air and spurred her horse to the fastest pace he could set, heading down the road at a dead run. Mace and Larch had a hard time keeping up with her. She slowed down a little through the village at the foot of the castle, not wishing to run anyone down, and her escort caught up with her. Galloping into the courtyard, she vaulted from the saddle, calling the stable hand by name as she threw him the reins and he looked after the strange young man with confusion. Mace, trailing behind, calmed any fears he might have had.

Entering the main hall, Cae smelled food, and turned immediately towards the great hall, where supper would be being served. No one tried to stop her when they saw Mace following with a grin, but they got out of her way as she pushed open the hall doors and strode in. She threw off her helmet and ripped the hood from her head as she stalked her way up the centre aisle towards the head table where her father and Will sat. Will looked absolutely shocked at the sight of her, and her father only laughed.

She ran around the table as her father pushed his chair back and threw herself into his arms. While he did not get up from his chair, he hugged her with all the strength she remembered. “Ah, the hind has returned home at last! I have missed you.”

She sighed, breathing deep of his scent, slightly musky, slightly leathery, all father. She leaned back as he let her go to get a good look at her. Ever one to flaunt conventions, Duke Maral was bearded, and built more like a barrel than any of his sons. One of his upper arms was easily as big as Cae’s thigh. His black-brown hair was streaked with silver, a little more so than she remembered, and his blue eyes danced in his face, though not as vividly as his children.

He gestured for her to take the seat next to him and for servants to bring her food and drink. It wasn’t until Willam rose to push his chair back in that Cae realized the man had never gotten up.

Will looked at her before he went back to his own chair. “Why are you dressed like a man?” he asked, horrified.

“Because our enemies were looking for a woman,” called Mace, bowing before the head table with Larch beside him.

“Mace!” crowed her father. “Got her here safely, swiftly and damned cleverly! Who’s your friend?”

Cae introduced him. “Mester Larch, one of Prince Valan’s personal guard. He made certain I got to the rendezvous without incident. I would have him treated as a guest whilst we are here.”

Larch bowed. “I am pleased to have been of service, Your Grace, but a bed in the barracks is more than enough for me.”

Mace chuckled. “I will see to him, if it pleases you, Your Grace.”

The duke nodded, waving them to find a space at a table and eat. He looked over at his daughter as drinks were brought around. “I dare say we haven’t any wine quite so fine as what you’ve gotten used to, though someone sent me a barrel of this Northern nectar I am not ashamed to serve.”

She smiled. “Ale will be fine, father. I am finally home. Let me feel like it for a little while? I promise you, court has not spoiled me.”

“Well, we’ll see if I can’t,” he grinned.

The meal was spent reacquainting each other and events of the last two months, and lasted into the late hours of the night. Tempest had flown in somewhere in the middle of the feasting and settled on the back of Cae’s chair. And it was about that time that Cae realized that she hadn’t seen her brother’s squire at all.

“Where’s Harlan?”

He smiled. “Left him in Benhurst with his sister. Promised him a fortnight with his family.”

Sometime after midnight, a woman appeared on the duke’s right with a wheeled chair and Will rose to help him into it. Cae was a little surprised to recognize the woman as Rosemary, Janem’s Folk mother, her father’s old concubine.

Settling himself into the chair, the duke caught his daughter’s look and set his hand tenderly upon Rosemary’s. He smiled softly. “She’s no longer a concubine. She’s... been very good to me, these last few months especially. I’ve officially made her my mistress.”

Cae was surprised by this, as mistresses rarely came from the lower estates. Even Rosemary seemed a little embarrassed by the title.

“Does Janem know yet?” she asked.

Rosemary shook her head. “I haven’t... had the ...words yet. I would be grateful if you would help me later.”

“Of course, I will.”

“Also,” she said, beginning to pull the chair back to wheel him towards his chambers, “if you would help me with an herbal matter? I would treasure your expertise.”

Cae got the feeling it was more in the lines of her father’s health that she wished to consult with her. She suddenly realized that the woman had lost the final vestiges of her rustic way of speaking, though traces of the accent remained. It came as a bit of surprise as it had only been three months since she had last spoken with her. “Of course. Perhaps after you have settled father in? I can meet you in the still room?”

She nodded and pushed the duke out of the hall.

Cae stood and watched her go. “How long have you known?” she asked.

He frowned, said nothing.

She turned on him, hands on her hips. “How long, Will?” she demanded.

“Three cycles of the Southern Lord.”

Her jaw dropped. “Three... I was here for the first of that!” Her voice carried in the hall and those who were finished eating promptly found other places to be.

“Caelerys, you know how proud he is,” he began.

“To keep this from his own daughter, who stood by his side, nursed him through all other ailments? His...”

Will turned on her, raising his own voice. "His precious, darling daughter!" he yelled. "The daughter who with every passing day reminds him more and more of his late wife? Yes, he kept it from you. Because he cannot bear to see you unhappy, and if you knew, you'd worry."

She was near to tears, "But to tell you?"

"Yes, I was nearly two hundred miles away, came home only twice a year, if that," he snarled. "But I am his heir. I have to be prepared... for the eventuality. The eminent eventuality."

She sat down, her legs just giving out under her. "He's... but you kept telling me..."

"Yes. Because he was. It's... being held at bay. But it can't be held off forever. You'll have to talk to Rosemary if you want to know more. She's the one who's been taking care of him. The Physicians have done all they can. He has time, and he's not too near, but... he'll go out fighting."

Tears sprang to her eyes. "When? How did I..."

"Not know?" he asked, his voice softening. "That last excursion against the pirates."

"Will, that was *more* than three gold months ago."

"Not that much more," he shrugged. "He took a wound to the hip. It was tended by a ship's Physician, and he was mostly fine. It wasn't that bad a wound, really. But then it started to fester."

"Why didn't he ask me for..."

"Medicine? He had been planning on sending you to court and knew you would not go if you knew you were leaving him wounded. And then the king... went mad..."

"Shifted," she breathed.

His eyes flashed to her. "What did you say?"

She looked around, making sure none of the servants were near enough. "The princes and I believe the late king was a shift. That was why you saw claw wounds on lord Mambyn. That was why he was trying to scratch his way out of his own skin. Why he went mad. We think he was fighting it. We don't know the particulars yet. We believe Valan to be one, too."

Will's eye hardened. "You will have nothing more to do with him then," he said flatly. "I will not have you go the way of the late queen. You didn't see what I..."

She set her hand on his arm, a finger on his lips. "It is too late for that, Will. The difference is that I know what is going on and so does Valan, as much as anyone can right now. ...And I calm him."

"I still..."

She shook her head. "It's like you and Syera. Only he's not half so noble," she chuckled. "Or so he says. The dragon drives."

"That is what I fear."

"I know. But the Eastern Lady will have her hand." She turned away, looking towards where she knew her father's chambers to be. "So he hid it from me and sent me to the coronation in his stead? With you?"

"Yes. He would see you happily wed before..."

She lowered her head, examining her boot tips. "Would that it were so easy," she mumbled. "I have to go. I promised to meet Rosemary."

"We'll talk later. I want to know more," he said. "You have yet to convince me."

She merely nodded and walked away.

She found the still room easily enough, had to stop outside the door when she realized she no longer had the key. She did not have to wait long before Rosemary arrived and unlocked the room for them, turning the key behind them so no one else might interrupt.

Once they were alone, Rosemary buried her head on Cae's shoulder and just cried. Cae held her, feeling her sorrow as her own, not that she did not have her own measure. Soon enough they both wept until they had nothing left.

Finally Rosemary drew back, went to one slow drip potion and added a few drops to a pair of cups, topping them off with a warm cider and handed Cae one. They tapped the cups together in salute and drank.

Cae mulled over the taste. "Sister's kiss?" she asked.

Rosemary nodded. "Just a drop. Helps."

"So what is wrong with him?"

The woman took a deep breath, her carefully cultivated accent slipping. "Hard to tell. Never seen anythin' like and neither has the Physician. Even be sendin' fer one from the 'Point; seen them from afar North and across the Sea. None know it. Well, the Telmar claimed to've seen it in pearl divers, those what fish the true deeps. But he were no help as none survived it. He was amazed Elyas lived this long."

"How is it father has?"

"Theriac."

"Really? That only works on venoms."



Rosemary nodded. "We'd tried everything else, I thought, what could it be hurting? He takes the seeds in his drink and the nectar in honey as a salve. It an't a cure, but it holds at bay. Keeps it from spreading."

Cae was worried, tried to wrack her brains to figure out what it could be. "Symptoms?"

"None at first beyon' an itch. That were expected widda stabbin'. It hadn't been very deep at all, didn't even need sewin'. But within a week it began to itch. Then the black lines came."

"Black? But the lightning is red," Cae frowned.

She shook her head. "This isn't the festerin' rot. T'is something else. Had it begun farther down the leg we'd'a cut it off. But we can't cut whence it grows."

"How does it smell?"

"Sweet."

Cae made a face. "Sickly?"

Rosemary shook her head. "Lightly. Like honey blossom. Though there is something else under it I can't place or describe. When I change the bandage tomorrow night, I'll have you help. Maybe you can identify." She sobbed, "I tried everything."

Cae set her hand on her shoulder. "You've performed miracles, Rosemary. Please don't sell yourself short. He would not still be here were it not for you. Sounds like everyone else has written him off."

"Thank you. I have be tryin'. I know I'll never be as mother to ya, but... when he called, how could I say no? I do love him. I know that now."

"And I think he loves you, too, in his own way," Cae soothed.

She shook her head. "Not like he loved your lady mother."

Cae gave a short, rueful laugh. "No one loves as he loved our mother." One, came to her mind. Maybe. She told that part of her mind to shut up. "But he can love others differently. It helps, I think, that mother approved of you."

She gave a laugh of her own, drying her tears, getting her speech back under control. "Approved? She chose me. There's a lot of her in you."

Cae blushed. "You were a mother to Janem, that was more than enough. And you never resented us or mother. I love you too in my way."

"Thank you," she sniffled. "How is my Jan doing?"

Cae sat down on the table and told her, just about everything, including how some of the noblewomen were starting to think about pursuing him.

Rosemary laughed at that. "Oh, how he's gonna hate that."

The two stayed up a little while longer before both of them sought their beds. Rosemary walked Cae to her old room before heading to the duke's. Everything was much as she had left it, and Cae kicked off her boots and fell across the mattress, falling asleep before she could even think about changing or crawling under the covers.



**C**ae awakened just before dawn, rolling out of the bed and putting the boots back on. She took Tempest up to the highest tower point that faced the ocean and let her fly. She was not really surprised to find her father already there, seated upon a bench where he could observe the sunrise.

Smiling, she came to sit beside him.

He lifted his arm and drew her against him, rubbing hers against the chill. “So have you decided to become my son?” he teased.

She shook her head. “No, I fell asleep in this. I did not bring Fern with me. She stayed behind to play decoy.”

“Ah. I’ll have Rosemary assign you someone.”

“So she’s running the house now?”

“She helps. She’s not your mother but... she’s good, to me and to the household. They like her. They listen.”

“No indications of resentment?”

“Not that I’ve seen or that has been reported. And if there were they’d have voiced them to Will soon after he got here,” he said.

“What provisions have you left for her?” she asked softly, watching Tempest playing in the morning currents.

“What she wants. She’s got a modest sum, more than she really wanted,” he added with a chuckle, “for the rest of her life. She can either take a cottage or move to the City to be near Janem. She’ll be technically Second Estate, like it or not. Though I still expect the family to see to her in her dotage.”

“So what did you wish to talk to me about? Was it this?” she asked, holding her hand over his injured hip.

“Partly. I gather you spoke with Rosemary about it,” he sighed.

“I have. Why didn’t you tell me?”

He shrugged, his weathered face looking more gnarled than ever in the early dawn light. “At first, I didn’t want you to want to stay behind or worry whilst you were supposed to be concentrating on other things. Then, when this set in...” he shook his head. “There was nothing for it but to carry on as things were. I didn’t need you distracted. Don’t think I don’t know what I sent you into. Run afoul of the Asparadane yet?”

“Semelle,” she groaned.

“Late queen’s sister,” he nodded. “She’d be queen now had she her way twenty-five years back. She a crone yet?”

Cae smiled. “As beautiful as ever, I expect. She’s a handsome woman. Her daughter hasn’t much upstairs though. Kind of naïve.”

He looked down at her. “And you weren’t?”

She shook her head. “I was ignorant. I learned better. She’s... she’s hampered by her mother’s religion.”

He gave her a sidelong glance, as he turned back to the sea. “Do not let her religious manner fool you. That woman’d no more bow to a pontifex in her heart than would a viper. She’s using that faith as a cloak, though I’m surprised she’s so thoroughly indoctrinated her daughter to it.”

“She’s always going on about how a ‘real lady’ behaves and what a ‘real lady’ doesn’t do.”

He chuckled. “Let me guess, you don’t qualify?”

“Hardly.”

“I am sorry you ended up there at the same time as her unmarried daughter. You’re going to tangle with her.”

“I’ve already tangled her plans,” she smiled. “She’s refusing plenty of eligible offers for Malyna because she’s holding out hopes for a prince.”

“Think she’ll get one?” he asked. She could sense another reason behind his question.

“Not if the queen has any say. Though I think the king may still be toying with the idea.”

“Speaking of marriages,” he said, sidling into the subject neatly. Cae wasn’t fooled for a moment. “Your brother Vynce has asked for me to offer for a maid named Balyra Roshan. I’m not as up to date on my inner houses, so you’ll have to enlighten me. Is she worthy of him?”

“She’s Will in a skirt,” she said with a soft laugh. “The question is more is he worthy of her. She’s his match in every way. I think she’ll temper him nicely. They’re both interested. She’s the heir to Roshan, so he’ll be in a good position if you can manage to get Lord Roshan to agree. He won’t be full Lord, of course, when Balyra inherits, but she’s Lord enough for them both. He’ll be a good wife,” she chuckled.

“She’ll wear the trews, is that it?” he chuckled.

“Literally,” she nodded. “She wears trousers under her skirts when she rides. And she’s a very good rider. Mean castle player. She can beat him three out of five games.”

The duke looked impressed. “I may have to challenge this maid myself. It would be good to have him settled with his own expectations. One can only divide one’s lands so many times before there is nothing left for younger sons.”

She nodded, leaning her head on his shoulder.

“So, Will? Any prospects?” he asked.

She sighed. “Leave him alone for a while.”

“I can’t, my hind. He’ll be duke long before I want him to be and I mean him wed before then. With Vynce marrying the Roshan heir if I can arrange it, I will have no choice but to pass it to Janem and he won’t thank me for that.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” she agreed. “Arrangements can be made in case of the worst. You can contract it so that at least one child of Vynce’s can be designated heir if need be. Her house needs her. She’s the only child they have capable of handling it. Poor Onelle is so ...mousy, whoever she marries will be in control, not her. Plus, marrying into a Great House might help bring Roshan back to its old glory. Closer at least.”

He chuckled. “That’s my girl. Always looking for the solution that will help the most people. But that is not the ideal situation for us, Vynce’s children being Will’s heir. The boy needs to marry, soon. I’ve put it off too long as it is.”

She set her hand on his chest, looking up into his eyes. “Please, give him more time. He’s... taken a hard blow to the heart.”

He looked down into her eyes. "Will fell in love?" he asked.

She sighed, "Of course he would not tell you. Yes, Will fell in love. With no less than the princess."

The duke closed his eyes and breathed deeply. "Ah. He'll do no woman any good as he is then. I shall give him a *little* time." He looked at her again. "Can I leave it to you, no matter your situation, to make sure he finds someone?"

She frowned. "Is it so eminent as that?"

He shrugged. "Do any of us ever know how long the Mother gives us? I know more than most: soon."

"But not yet?"

"Not yet. I may even last Fallow. But I'll not see another Harvest, and I'll see my children wed before then."

She leaned back. "Janem will sort himself out. Like as not, he'll marry low by choice. If he marries at all."

"I've always known that. I would have given him everything his brothers had," he sighed, crossing his arms over his chest.

"He didn't want that," she said, shaking her head. "He wanted what he got, his own way. Master Illet has already named him heir to the forge. If they can recover from the robbery, he'll be set for life."

"You've diverted the topic from yourself long enough, my hind," he said, looking sternly at her. "You've had offers."

"I have?" she asked, staring out over the water to where the falcon was wheeling with some seabirds.

"At least one of them is a mockery," he grunted. "More threat than offer."

"Kaladen," she said simply. "Still trying to pirate their way through life. It is only a matter of time before we connect them."

"I know that better than you, girl," he smiled, bumping his shoulder into hers.

"Who else?" she asked.

"Not a man of them worthy of my jewel-eyed hind."

She felt a little disappointed. "Is any man worthy in your eyes?" she asked, not daring to look at him.

"Well, that would all depend on whether or not he was worthy in yours." He remained silent until she looked at him. "What man do you want?" he asked. "And don't give me any of your disseminations like that letter, 'he gambles too much, he has lands of strategic value for us'."

"Might as well ask for the Southern Lord," she sighed.

“Well, I can see if he’s available,” he shrugged.

She shot him a glare which made him smile.

“Out with it, girl. Or do I have to grab you by the antlers and shake it out of you? I know you have a preference.”

“Valan,” she said finally, rushing the word because she dared not speak it slowly or loudly.

“Will said you wouldn’t aim low,” he chuckled.

She looked at him again, studying his manner. “You knew?”

“He’s one of the princes who’ve asked. Granted, his offer came in first thing this morning with that man you brought with you.”

“Princes?” she asked. “Balaran asked?”

He shook his head. “No, Alumet. But those’d be opposed and vehemently. Princess Semiana is determined they’ll not have you. Seems to think you’d be wasted on them,” he chuckled.

“You know Semi?” her head was beginning to reel with all the shocks and surprises flying at her.

“Semi, is it?” he smiled.

“Wait, Cyran offered?” she asked, completely floored. “I thought he hated me.”

He shrugged. “Some men cannot resist a challenge.”

“Or a mystery,” she added to herself. “So.. you will consider Valan?”

“Only because it is what you want. If you had said no, I would never have forced you into that. You think things are bad at court now?”

She groaned, nodded her head. “I know. I know. But you’re going to be hard pressed getting his father to agree.”

“Why is that?” he asked, his eyes narrowing.

“I don’t know. I just know there is some conflict between them. I think I came in at the end of a family argument, his father roaring that he was the king and that was the end of it, and Valan...” she took a deep breath. “Valan’s at the point of ‘fathers be damned’. Said it was ‘that or nothing. He’d accept nothing less’,” she told him, folding her arms over her chest.

Her father actually laughed. She looked at him in confusion. “Now he’s worthy!” he exclaimed. “And if he loses the fight?” he asked once he’d stopped laughing, watching her carefully.

She held her breath. “Then the king, I think, loses an heir.”

Her father’s eyes were fierce as he leaned forward. “And would you take him even against his father’s will? Accept the banishment you know will follow?”

She met his gaze with equally fierce determination. "I would live in the lowest hovel in the worst corner of the world happily if I could live there with him."

"But you don't think that will happen?" he prompted, reading her eyes.

"No, I don't," she said, turning away. She walked to the battlement as Tempest came in for a landing, stroked her for comfort. "His mother wants the match. His father... I feel is somehow being manipulated by Lady Asparadane. Her most off-hand suggestion sits in his mind and festers until he brings it up. I think he was seriously considering Malyna for a while until he put her through the same questioning test he's put all of us through. She failed utterly. Even he can't justify her now. Once Semelle figures that out, she'll try another, more direct attack: getting him for herself. The queen has already said, that once one of her children is married in, soon there will be no one left on the throne but them. And I am certain she'll poison the queen if she can."

"Sigrun is a smart woman, wise with the Mother," he said. "She'll out think her in the end."

"If only the Mother would nudge her in the direction of proof. Then she'd be safe and..." Cae sighed. She hadn't realized how much she had come to love the queen.

Her father smiled. "Sigrun'll do that to you."

"You knew her?"

He chuckled. "I helped arrange her marriage to Rorlan. I used to be very good at coming up with reasons to make an unreasonable match seem perfectly advantageous. Hell, it only took a little nudging to get grizzled old Kylar to accept the Roshan cousin for his heir. Of course, if Vynce is accepted by Lord Roshan, Lord Marrok is going to think that was why I pushed."

"It won't cause too many problems, will it?"

He shook his head. "Nothing I or Will can't handle. His son is happy and I hear she is a delight. She'll win him over. Don't think he'd have warmed to the mouse."

She shook her head. "Don't know what to do for that one."

"She's not your concern," he said, dismissively. "You are not a matchmaker and we'll have enough on our hands negotiating your candle." His eyes narrowed, "You are going to have a candle ceremony, right?"

She laughed. "I have not converted, father, and Valan does not have the patience for this false religion. He feels as we do. Though I think the Asp may be slowly winning herself a convert in the king. Something must be done to cut off her



influence. She's been banished from the Citadel by the queen, but some how she's still getting to him."

"Might want to start watching for who has access to him."

"You mean other than her son who is one of his guard?" she snapped bitterly.

"Oh. That may be it right there."

"Maybe. I really think that if Lili and I had not explained to him how badly it would make him look if he took a paramour or a mistress at this point, I think he would have taken her openly by now. As it is, she might be a secret paramour." She froze.

"What is it, daughter?" he asked softly, concerned, but knowing she just realized something.

"Her son could be sneaking her into the Citadel. There are secret passages by the mile in there. It's like a castle within a castle."

"Could be. Might want to cultivate some spies," he advised.

"Might have a few already," she mused.

Will came out onto the battlements just then. "Thought you'd be up here," he said.

Cae leaned back against the crenelated wall and watched Will take her seat beside their father. Minus the beard and the age and the wear and tear, they were similar men. Not so close as the twin princes, but close enough there was no doubt as to lineage. "Since you're here, Will, I think it time to explain a few things where father can hear."

He narrowed his eyes as he looked at her. "Like what?"

"Like what Balaran, Valan and I have been researching and what we've discovered."

She then explained to them their theories of the moonsilver, and shifts. Both men sat through it in stunned silence.



Cae returned to her room after that to bathe and change, leaving the men to discuss whatever they were going to discuss. She knew they had a lot to process. That and Will would be negotiating for both her and Vyncet, so they needed to discuss that, too. She spent the rest of the day wandering the castle, reacquainting herself with it and its people. Now that she wasn't dressed as a strange man, everyone was happy to see her again.

When she came to supper that night, her father was silenced by the beauty she had become, entering with grace and poise, unlike her earlier, brash entry.

“So this is what you were wearing when you took down the bearsarker?” he asked with a broad grin.

“No,” she blushed. “I was in my nightdress and my armour, ...my hunting leathers,” she amended.

He shook his head in amused wonder. “I would like to see this bow.”

She promised to bring it after the meal, and the conversations turned to far more pleasant things.

After supper, Cae joined Rosemary in her father’s chambers. She brought the bow with her and handed it to her father who was already in his nightshirt and in the bed. He turned it over, marvelling at the ornamentation and the quality of the wood. He asked questions about it, which she answered.

Then Rosemary returned with the tray of medicines and peeled back the covers carefully, making certain the sheet was placed to cover his modesty. Cae took a deep breath, trying hard not to gasp in horror or cover her mouth. The wound wasn’t quite the breadth of her thumb, but it wasn’t completely closed, either. The tissue around it wasn’t red and angry, it was tinged with blue and black, withering and dry. Much like the red lightening of the festering rot, striations radiated down his leg from the wound, grey and black.

She touched it gingerly. The lines were hot to the touch and slightly raised. She could feel his pulse through it, sluggish. She lightly pressed one. He did not react at first, then began to take a deep breath of controlled pain and she let go.

“We tried tying it off early,” Rosemary said, “but as long as the black flows unimpeded, he doesn’t feel any pain. When we cut off that circulation it becomes agony. Quicker now than it used to.”

“I’ve never felt pain like it,” he groaned. Cae knew what it meant for him to admit that. She also had a very good idea what levels of pain he’d experienced in his long past.

“How does it feel?” she asked.

“It starts kind of pulsing, then it just burns, like acid in the veins.”

She bent and sniffed the wound. It was sweet, almost fragrant. It also made her a little light-headed. Sighing, she stepped back, helping Rosemary to apply the theriac to the wound, spreading the creamy, honeyed nectar, then bandaging it up again. Once she was done, she tucked him back in and got him comfortable before leaving with the tray.

Cae sat on the edge of the bed, being careful to not jostle his side. “I should get back immediately,” she said, taking his hand.

“Miss your prince that much already?” he smiled.

She shook her head. “No. I have full access to both the library and the archives. I might find something for this. Or at least know what it is.”

He shook his head. “Not yet. I have never gone so long without you at my side. I want a little time first. Call me selfish. Besides,” he added as his eyes began to droop, “I have a surprise coming. You can’t leave until then.”

“You don’t have to...” she began, then realized he was already asleep.

She rose, blew out the candle and slipped out of the room.

That night she wrote a letter and sent a message via Toomi to the keep. The message was in Vermian to Balaran, asking him to tell his new research partner the answer was yes, that he only needed to do the work on his end. She felt that both succinct enough and roundabout that any one who intercepted it would not necessarily know either what it referred to or what it meant. The letter was actually two. The inner missive was to Valan himself, in Vermian for safety and clarity, and, she had to confess, she waxed a little poetic. She also explained her father’s symptoms and asked him to check with the Great Worm to find out if there might be any references that would help. She would be looking into it when she returned. The outer letter was addressed to Fennel wherein she asked her to arrange by whatever sneaky means she could to get the inner letter to the prince for her. She told her that Fern might know the best people to use.

That done, she went to bed.



She occupied her remaining time between her father and riding out with Wilam to visit the nearest villages and towns. The people were genuinely happy to see her, wishing her all the best at court. They had high hopes for their lady, though they would miss her. One young man had the cheek to ask her if she would marry him, and thereby not deprive the Duchy of their lady’s presence.

She laughed, even though Will scowled, “Alas, I am doomed to break your heart,” she told him.

She was out riding along the seaside cliffs during the second half of the week, when she sighted strange sails. It was an open boat, long and low slung with two masts graced with brightly coloured sails. The centre of the main one sported a blood red circle with a great spotted cat in its centre wielding a dagger in its raised

fore paw. Cae paused, trying to make out the figure standing on the front of the painted prow. All she could tell was that it wore exotic furs and leaned arrogantly upon a spear with feathers waving at the tip.

She did not know who's ship it was, but she was absolutely certain that it belonged to one of the Alumet royal family. She spurred her horse into a gallop and sent Tempest on ahead to check it out. Coming into the town, she quizzed the returning bird who was chattering excitedly. So she knew whom she would see climbing the steps up from the harbour on the Reach side of the castle and rode to meet her.

She had to wait for nearly half an hour as the ship navigated the entrance to the reach and harbour. Will had joined her by the time Princess Semiana and her honour guard had climbed the last of the steps to meet them.

Semi stepped out from among her guards and hugged Cae with little regard for ceremony, even though Will had bowed. She turned to him, swatting at his shoulder playfully as she told him to never mind the formalities. "This is not a state visit." She shivered in her heavy furs. "How can you stand such cold?!" she exclaimed, eyeing Cae's much lighter attire with open jealousy. "You are barely dressed!"

Cae laughed as they walked towards the horses her brother had brought for their guests. "This coming from the woman that came to a state ball all but naked?"

"It was warmer then! And all those bugging eyes warms the soul," she laughed. "How are you?" she asked as they mounted up and rode for the warmth of the hall.

"Well."

"I have heard there are offers, though not whose."

Cae blushed. "Well, only one is being accepted."

She looked over at her, trying to read who in her reaction. She glanced over at Willam. "Were we successful?"

"We were," was all he answered.

"Ah," she beamed. "Which?"

"The first."

She frowned at Caelerys, "The sullen one? The one who had to be forced to dance with you?"

Still blushing, she nodded.

"Why would you settle for that one? You seemed to get along so much better with the other."

"Things... things happened. And a lot has changed. I know why he was so... stoic?" she suggested.

“Stuffy, you mean? He is my younger brother without the arrogance and boasting.”

Cae took exception to the comparison. “He is nothing like that stuffed peacock you are unfortunately related to,” she snapped.

Will looked sharply at her. “Cae!”

Semi laughed. “She’s right. I’m not overly fond of Cyran myself. Good, you have made a choice you will defend. With steel if needs must. This pleases me. And you have shed your mousy nature to show your fine claws.”

Cae blushed again. “Well, turns out there was a reason for my... shy nature. We may or may not discuss it later. By the way, I thought you had forbidden your brothers to offer for me?”

Semi’s smile became predatory. “Yes, well, Kyleth is absolutely besotted with what he’s seen from afar and Cyran was just not to be outdone. Especially after word reached us of your adventure in home defence,” she beamed.

Thankfully, they were riding into the courtyard and there was no time for a response.

The duke was waiting for them in the grand hall, seated in his chair but back from the table. He smiled as she entered, made an attempt to stand but was forced easily back down by Rosemary’s hand on his shoulder. He grunted, but yielded. Cae caught him rubbing the side of his thigh when he thought no one would notice.

Other seats were brought out and drinks passed around. Cae chose to stand beside her father, her hand close enough to touch him, trying to glean some of his emotional state. It was not as easy as reading the prince, but she could tell that he was not in any real pain unless he tried to stand, though there was a cold ache. He was also pleased with himself.

“Everything is in order, as requested, Elyas,” Semi said, lounging back in her chair and luxuriating in the heat from the brazier that had been brought nearer for her. Her men were clustered around the others at the opposite end of the room.

“And your first cargo is most likely being loaded as we speak except for one last item.”

She arched her brow at him, amused. “And that would be?”

“My daughter.”

Cae looked down at him. Semi just chuckled.

He set his hand upon hers, looking up into her eyes. “I have sent official word that you are going overland and are expected in the usual four days. So of course, you must return by ship.”

“And how did you send this word? Are they going to believe it the truth when I slipped past them under a similar ruse on the way out? They claimed I was ship-bound then.”

He nodded. “I made sure it was a ‘secure’ messenger,” he chuckled. “And if that does not work, I am sending a ship loaded with armed men to the Capitol tonight. Some are to strengthen Stag’s Hall, the rest to work their way back by the roads. They’ll fortify the way stations, and some of them will filter out to the coastal towns and villages to homestead, helping to protect those areas.” He looked over at Semi. “That is, of course, if you agree, princess?”

She snorted. “Getting formal now, are we? This is beginning to smack of a gift. Am I going to have to refuse you thrice?”

He gave her his fiercest smile, “If that were the case, you’d be getting to keep her, and I think there is more than one prince who might object.”

“And violently,” Cae added softly.

“Would you object, my beauty?” Semi asked, looking over at her.

She began to blush again. “I will always object to being ‘kept’. I am not prize, or trophy or pet.”

Semi nodded. “If you will include an extra cord of incense wood and a single bundle of furs, we shall call her passage paid. And Will’s too, as I assume he is going?”

“And Larch,” Cae added. “I came all this way with one of the prince’s guards. I need to return him.”

Semi smiled. “We’ll call him part of your entourage.”

“Done,” the duke said, holding out his arm.

Semi took it with joy. “And well done at that. It think I shall enjoy the next two days.”

The duke looked up at her. “Looks like you’ll get to ride on a ship after all.”

“It’s not a salvage, and I am still curious about the practice, but I’ll take it,” she smiled, kissing her father’s cheek.



That night, Mace said his farewells to Caelerys. “I am wasted at Stag’s Hall,” he said. “My main reason for going to DragonsPoint was to guard you. And since you are no longer staying at Stag’s Hall, Hollen is more than capable of handling things.”

“I will miss you,” she said.

“And I, you, little bird. Mayhap I will see you again the day you light your candle, but I have trained you well, and you have no more need for me.”

She gave him a hug. “I will always have need of you,” she whispered.

The three of them boarded the ship at dawn the next morning. Caelerys was set up to share the one cabin with the princess. Will and Larch were bunked with the rest of the guards and crew. Semi apologized with a smile for the accommodations, but these vessels were designed to be fast not comfortable.

None of them complained and Cae stood at the prow with Semi, experiencing her first trip by sea. She could not get the dreams of drowning out of her head, but she swallowed her fear and made herself stand there, trying to become accustomed to the swaying of the deck. She was surprised when the crew unshipped oars, and began to row the ship out of the harbour against the tide and into the open sea. Once beyond the headland, they opened sail and leapt forward like a dolphin.

Cae found the view of Taluscliff from the sea a far more impressive thing than she ever had on land. The basalt rose in staggered columns from the ocean to the sky, with the balconies and terraces carved into the natural rock. Though she knew the actual living area extended nearly halfway down the cliff in some places, the cliff did not begin to look like a castle until about thirty feet from the top, and even then, the architecture blended seamlessly. Her heart sang at the sight of the silver stag on the midnight blue pennants that hung from the highest towers, just above where she knew their father had to be watching. She raised her arm in a wave, not certain if he could see her or not, but not caring either way. She thought she saw movement in response and smiled.

Out on the open waves was very different from the waters of the river and its harbour. She found herself unable to stay on the prow and moved to the safety of the deck. Tempest took up roost on the top of the mast to the amusement of the crew.

Caelerys, of course, was determined not to waste the trip, spending as much time as she could with the princess and the sailors, learning as much of their language as she could absorb in two days. This was a constant source of entertainment to the ship’s crew, who made a game of it.

The first evening, she sat with Larch and her brother, and the princess to supper. Semi preferred to stay on the deck with most of the crew, using the sun to help warm her, and stay near the braziers which were only allowed on the deck. The meal was flavourful, served all on a single, deeply curved pan called a ‘cook’s shield’. It consisted of a soft, white grain tossed with a great deal of spices, a pepper called a

'thief's nose' because of its shape, a mix of vegetables Cae had never experienced, and shredded fowl that had been previously cooked in a rich wine sauce. It was a little hot, but very delicious and Cae ate her fill the same way the princess and the crew did, by scooping it directly from the shield with her fingers or a thin piece of unleavened bread.

It was nice to sit around the brazier where the food had been cooked and listen to the laughing sailors, even though they mostly spoke their flow and hitch tongue. As things settled down, and Semi passed around a skin of Northern wine, Cae took the opportunity to ask her things that had been eating at her all day.

"So, clearly you are arranging trade with my father," she said. Semi nodded, watching her with anticipation. "What are you trading?"

She smiled. "Many things. We need furs and warm fabrics if we are to trade to the frigid South, and our nights can be cold. Not this cold," she admitted with a shiver, drinking deep of the wine as it came to her. "There are certain types of fish that my people have developed a taste for that do not swim in warmer waters. You have here a tree which grows swiftly and cures strong. We do not have these things in the North, and what trees we have we cannot afford to cut. We come for your marvellous comfort root that serves panacea to many ailments. In this we trade whole plants, in exchange for the theriac bush your father needs."

Cae was silent a long while, digesting this. Semi just let her think. Will wasn't really paying attention, knowing all this already. He and Larch were having a private conversation over a different skin of wine.

"And what are you trading for these things?"

"Gold?" Semi suggested with a testing smile.

Cae shook her head. "No. Father does not trade commodities for something so base as gold. We are not House Griff. We pay in kind, need for need. ...Outside of small markets, of course," she amended. "But large matters such as this? No. We are providing a good or service."

Semi nodded, pleased. "Wine, of course. Your father liked it. A trade of breeding stock, we have swift, delicate horses that will improve your lines, and you have cattle and game which are hardy and provide sweet meat. Spices," she continued, "exotic fruits and an ore which we find in abundance," she smiled. "Also, soldiers. Your father produces the some of the best trained and most feared fighting men in Elanthus. We would have some of ours trained in these ways, even as we will teach our methods."



“Aren’t our fighting styles best suited to our own terrains?” she asked, glancing at her brother for confirmation but he wasn’t listening.

Semi nodded, squeezing out the last of the wine skin and holding it up to a nearby sailor and requesting a second. “But,” she continued, opening the new skin, sniffing it before taking a long pull from it. Satisfied with its flavour, she passed it to Cae who took a much smaller sip. “There will be times when one needs to fight out of one’s element, and when it is best to strike an enemy who is familiar with you in a way he does not expect. We mean an alliance of more than trade. Alumat has Northern enemies, and mountains as well as grasslands and deserts. To have a group of fighters capable of such ferocity that no man dares stand before it...?” she said, suggestively.

Cae’s eyes widened. “You seek the bearsarkers!”

She nodded. “Though it is being said now that, if an untrained girl can best one, what use are they?” she said narrowly, teasingly blaming her for lessening the value of such things.

Cae passed her the skin back. “First of all, he hadn’t completely gone battle mad. If he had, he would have torn me to pieces long after I had killed him.”

She watched Semi’s confusion, trying to make sure she translated that correctly. “Wait, you mean he would have been dead before he killed you? Or do I have the Elanthian wrong?”

She nodded. “One of the traits of the bearsarker is that they will fight long after their bodies have taken too much damage to survive. You can take off their head and they will still make two more swings before their body realizes they’re dead. They feel nothing. Thus they often die long before their body gets the message.”

Semi blinked. Clearly this bit of knowledge had not been known. “And you killed one?”

“Again, he wasn’t in a full rage, and he’d been stabbed twice already. I had to have pierced a lung or gotten close to his heart with one of those arrows. If he hadn’t tripped and driven that one through his spine.... My plan had been to get him to charge me, then dodge and hope he went out the window I was standing in front of.”

“Risky,” she whistled.

Cae nodded, “I didn’t have much choice though. I didn’t find out he was a batterager until I had no escape.”

They sat in companionable silence for a long while until Cae thought of another question. “So is that why you were helping me? To sweeten the deal for father?”

She shrugged. “For many reasons. Some of which I told you already. If I didn’t think you had steel or were worth my trouble, I’d have let one of my brothers offer for you. You married to the Onkelan line in any capacity would have accomplished the same.”

“All right, I’ll give you that,” Caelerys conceded. “And I can see how our training can help you, but how can your training help us? We have no deserts.”

She smiled. “Well, other than teaching you how to fight against warriors trained in our ways? We have two styles,” she explained. “My brother’s. And mine.”

“Yours?” she asked.

Semi tipped her head in concession. “All right, they do not stem from or belong to us, by this I mean the one he knows and the one I know. Your prince’s twin knows my style.”

“Do they not have names?” she asked, pulling Tempest back from the remains of the communal meal and feeding her more appropriate titbits from her pouch.

Semi thought about it. “I think it would translate best in Vermian.”

Cae tipped her own head in a very bird-like gesture. “You speak Vermian?”

Semi laughed. “Of course I speak the language of changes. All of our royal house do. Any noble worth his salt does.”

This caught Cae’s attention. “Why do you call it the language of changes?”

“You do not?” she frowned.

“No, it is merely Old Vermian, or the old tongue. Why would you call it this?”

“Because it is. There is no other explanation. The highborn and the in-tune speak it freely, but it is at the base of everything,” she shrugged. “Everything changes. Vermian does not, nor does it need to do so. It remains, always clear, always relevant.”

“I can see that. But the styles?” she prompted, still needing and explanation.

“*Fire and Water*,” she said in Vermian. While the words were simple in the extreme, the Vermian words carried so much more meaning than the mere Elanthian ones. It implied combustion and consumption and passion; ebb and flow and grace. “In short, Aket, is an aggressive style, very in your face, as you probably saw at the melee.” She stood, pantomiming a demonstration. “It relies on a shield and a weapon wielded from behind the shield. There are strikes with the shield, pushing

the opponent back, and sword or spear. It calls for a heavy stance, to resist being moved or to plough forward.”

“Wouldn’t that be more ‘*earth*?’”

“Ah, but it also has flurries of ground-eating destruction. Like fire, it does not care what is in the way.”

“Not too unlike our own,” she observed. “Maral especially, if they’ve the strength and weight.”

“Exactly. That is why Aket is usually considered a man’s style; Valea, a woman’s.” She began to demonstrate loose flowing movements that looked more like a dance than a combat style. Cae could see why it was called water. “It is more suited to movement and avoidance, with well placed jabs and slices, the occasional kick to low targets, like knees or breaking spear shafts that miss us. It can be used with either sword, dagger or spear, but is its own shield.”

“Beautiful. I think I would like to learn this style.”

The princess smiled, folding herself back to the deck. “It can be taught. Balaran can teach you if he likes. If his brother lets him close enough to you,” she laughed. “But it is best taught by a woman. We hold our weight differently than a man, and he has blended his style. It is no longer pure. I should send you a teacher, both for language and skill,” she smiled.

Cae blushed. “Oh, that is wholly unnecessary. I am sure I can find someone. There is no need for you to go out of your way.”

Semi smiled, watching Cae carefully. “Oh, but there is no guarantee that an expatriate will know both or be a skilled teacher. And one not born to Alumet is not going to be able to teach you the nuances. It is no trouble.”

Cae clued in on what was going on. “But you would have to find someone, and get them to agree to live so far South. As you have pointed out, it is cold, and getting colder.”

“I insist. In fact, I think you need a skilled handmaiden. It would help her to know the ways of Southern courts, learn something she can teach Northern women.”

“That really is too much,” Cae said, meaning it this time.

Semi shook her head, laughing. “Thrice offered and thrice refused. Done. And I have just the teacher for you.”

Cae narrowed her eyes at the princess, not trusting the look on her face at all.

She would say no more on the subject and eventually, the princess rose and stretched, sauntering down to the cold cabin. She paused at the doorway. "It will be warmer with two," she suggested.

Cae hesitated, and Semi put her dark hands up, "I promise to keep them to myself."

This made Cae laugh, though it brought a few questions to her mind that she could never had brought herself to ask. She rose, passing the remains of the wine-skin to a nearby sailor and followed Semi to the cabin. The pair of them curled up under a mountain of furs, some of which Cae suspected were actually cargo, and kept each other warm until dawn.



The next morning, Semiana handed Cae a pair of the tied, blousy trousers that she had seen the Telmar mercari wearing at the wedding, though the colours were more browns, golds and reds. She was also handed a wrap-around top that tied at the sleeves and waist. Semi helped her put them on, tying them so that they would not interfere with her freedom of movement, then proceeded to braid her hair much as she wore her own, though Cae's mane was not nearly as impressive.

Cae sat through these ministrations, enjoying the time with her. The two women chatted about various things, mostly cultural differences, with little language lessons thrown in. Finally, Cae stood, facing the princess who looked her over critically. "Except that you are so pale, you look a proper Alumet woman!"

Cae blushed. "I have not skin like fine, dark wood, no." She set her hand beside Semi's comparing the colour. "You are polished darkwood whereas I am merely waterwood."

The princess snorted at that. "Not so white as all that. You are more the tawny tones of a leolan cub."

Cae frowned at her, "Leolan?"

"A cat much like the ca'thernyn," she explained. "But larger and no spots, and a great mane about the head and neck," she added, fluffing her own. "They are not tameable. Their young are about that colour, to blend in with the sand and the grasses. Come, let us go up and watch your brother and your prince's guard trip over themselves," she said with a grin, grabbing her coat. "You be warm enough? Or do you need a coat? I may have a lighter wool.."

Cae shook her head. "I should be fine, at least for a little while. You'll lose the effect."

“Yes, you will,” she said with a mysterious tone to her voice and led the way up top.

She was not wrong in her expectations. Will dropped the cup of warmed cider he had been holding and fumbled trying to grab it. Larch had looked up, then turned to look at Will, then turned back to look at Cae so quickly he lost his balance when the ship crested a wave and struck the mast.

Cae laughed, thought Will might end up having an apoplectic fit. She gave a little turn, showing off. “You like?” she asked.

Tempest, perched on a barrel, chirruped her approval.

Will got himself under control, did not say what he had wanted to say. “If you intend to disguise yourself as the princess’s handmaiden, you will have to do something about your tone. And I do not recommend it.”

“That’s not a bad idea, really,” she smiled, crossing to Tempest to say her good mornings.

“That is not the reason that I dressed her this way,” the princess said. “Caelerys, are you warm enough?” she asked.

Cae looked towards the distant shoreline, her face turned into the breeze. It was a little cutting and chill for the fabric she was wearing. But she could probably handle it for about an hour. The hairstyle kept her head from getting either too cold or too hot. “I can tolerate it for a little while,” she said without turning. “But the wind is making it colder than not.”

“Oh, you’ll warm up quickly enough.”

Something in her voice made her turn. The princess had shucked her own coat and had begun a series of slow, long stretches and watched her with a determined eye.

“Are you...” Cae began.

“Mirror me,” Semi answered.

Delighted, Cae crossed to face her, copying her moves as best she could. The better part of the morning was spent teaching her the rudimentary basics of the style.

There was a good deal of time spent trying to keep her footing, as the motion of the ship made things difficult for her. “Is this really the best place to learn this?” she asked, picking herself up for the fourth time with the same move.

Semi’s grin was feral. “You learn how to do this here, and you can do it anywhere, even on a rail. It is how I learned. Now, pay attention. Men grab,” Semi told her, demonstrating. “With a twist and a push, you can use that against him. Keep

him from getting hold. In a bedroom, this will drive a man to madness, heightening his ardour for when you finally allow him to catch his prey," she grinned.

"Princess!" Will exclaimed.

Cae laughed through her blush.

Semi paused to turn to Willam. "It is a matter she will need to know. What, do you not teach your young women what to expect or how to manage a man before she is wed? And you call us barbarians!"

Caelerys took advantage of her distraction to practice a kick to the back of the knee, causing the leg to buckle. But the princess spun in the process of that fall and hooked her other leg around Cae and threw her to the deck. She followed with an elbow that stopped just inches above her breastbone.

Cae blinked from the deck. "Teach me that!" she exclaimed.

Semi laughed and helped her up, showed her again. She threw a bundle of furs on the deck to cushion Cae's knee against the repeated falls, but eventually she was able to get the motion down enough that Semi stepped in as a target. That took a few more tries, working against resistance. Cae ended up sitting on the deck, tired. She looked up. "Are you sure that will work on a man? Most men are going to outweigh me. I can barely pull *you* down."

Semi laughed. "That is because I know what is to come and how to counter it." She backed up just a little, bringing her nearer an unsuspecting crewman. Others, who saw what she was about, backed up to watch and have a little fun. One of them called out the sailor's name as he bent to coil a rope on the deck. He stood, looking towards the voice, and that is when Semi snared him. She spun, lowering her torso as her leg snaked out and grabbed him, slamming him to the deck.

What surprised Cae was that he did not take it meekly, but rolled with the fall and countered the oncoming elbow. The fight became a lightning series of grapples and aborted strikes, until Semi ended it by stepping back, laughing. She held out her arm to him. Wide-eyed, the sailor accepted. They exchanged words in Alumat, and Cae understood the gist of what was said if not the whole of it. Most of it she got from their body language. It was an exchange of explanation and admiration of style. Cae also got the feeling that the princess would not be sleeping alone after Cae disembarked.

When the princess came back to her, she blushed. "Alright, but he is of a size and weight to you. Will it work on a larger man?"

Still breathing a little heavy, she turned to Willam. "Indulge me?" she asked. "Or do you fear hitting the deck?"

He stood, cracking his neck. “I fear you pulling a muscle trying to move me.”

She just laughed at that, and positioned him in front of the fur pile. Cae immediately rolled out of the way. “You sure you want to do this, Will?” she teased. “She’s stronger than she looks.”

Semi was facing Caelerys. “And you will be too, if you work at it. Your legs are strong from riding. It is not much different. Riding a horse, riding a man, putting him on his ass,” she said.

Cae was not the only one to flush at the mention of riding a man, and in that instant, she had Will pinned to the deck with a crack, in spite of the furs, blushing and stunned.

Larch just laughed.

Before anything else could be said, Tempest began making an abrupt kakkakkak noise. Cae’s head came up, looking first up to the mast where the bird was then east to where she was looking. Sailors had already seen the sails, and called the princess’s attention.

Cae joined her at the rail as Semi let Will up and accepted the glass from her captain. “It looks to be a dolphin on the flag,” the princess said.

Will was beside Cae, rubbing the back of his head. “What colour?”

Semi refocused, trying to discern the colours in the bright sun. “The field is... a light blue, I think, the device grey.”

“Dolphin proper on pale blue?” Larch translated, looking at Willam.

Will nodded. “That’d be Delphinus.”

“There’s a red pennant, long and narrow below it,” she added. “What does that mean?”

Willam relaxed. “House Delphinus divided years ago. One son had lands in Alvermian territory, thus owing his allegiance to the Alvermian Duke. They fly the black pennant. Their shields bear a black stripe across the top to claim them the younger son’s. The elder remained with House Maral and flies a red pennant. They’re friendly.”

Cae wasn’t so sure. She had had no dreams of late, nothing worth remembering at any rate, but that did not mean anything. For all she knew, the more her powers grew the less she would dream.

“Jelma, love, fly over there and take a look,” she asked.

The bird took off, and Cae closed her eyes, focusing on Tempest and what surrounded her. She could almost feel the air currents beneath her wings, and felt a little light-headed as the motion of the ship beneath her feet countered the sensa-

tion. When she felt Tempest was near enough, she tried to get a feel for the emotions around her, hoping she might sense something that would warn or calm. She felt nothing but joy.

She was aware when Tempest headed back. She opened her eyes and stroked the bird as she landed on the rail in front of her. She felt rather than saw Will's eyes on her, asking. She lightly shook her head. "She's not stressed about what she saw, and I felt no negative emotions over there... if I've done it right," she added softly. "They should be who they claim."

Semi closed the glass and handed it back. "They seemed happy to see the bird. And we shall know soon enough. They are turning, heading this way." She called out to the crew to be ready but not appear to be, in case they were not who they claimed.

Larch tried to get Cae to go below for safety. Cae acquiesced only so far as to fetch her bow.

"My lady, that is not what I meant," he exclaimed on her return.

"Too bad," she quipped, headed to the slightly raised back deck where the ship's wheel was.

Will shook his head, resting the head of his hammer on the deck next to him as he stood in front of the steps to the command deck. "You're not going to win that fight," he replied. "She's doing what she was trained to do."

He took up a position next to him, looking at him, incredulous. "You trained her to active battle? Not just self-defence?"

"A lot of our non-fighters are trained to man the battlements," he shrugged. "Frees up the fighters and provides valuable support."

Semi took up position at the prow of the ship, facing the on-coming vessel, her spear in hand and two of her guards flanking her.

They waited in silence until the ship came within hailing distance. The name on the prow was the *Caper*, and its crew waved to them with broad smiles and empty hands.

The Captain came to the rail and yelled across. "That Lord Willam I see at the aft-deck?"

Will stepped forward. "Aye!"

The man smiled, gave a bow. "My lord!" he called. "The *Caper* and her crew are at your disposal."

Will pointed to Semi at the prow. "Best talk to her about that. This is the ship of the Princess Semiana Onkelan of Alümet."



The man turned towards Semi, flushed with embarrassment. He bowed again, more deeply. “Forgive me, Your Highness. We did not know. All we knew was that the lord and his sister would be on a foreign looking vessel. We are to provide escort to the Desiter.”

“Has there been trouble?” she asked.

“Aye, Your Highness. My brother is finishing off with a small pack of seawolves a few miles up the coast. We thought we’d head on and warn you. There’s been a mild upswing in pirate predations.”

Will shouldered his hammer and stepped to the rail. “How’d you find out we were coming this route? No one was supposed to know.”

“We passed a ship full of stags,” he grinned. “When we reported the activity, the Captain thought it best to have some of us looking out for you. All the salvage crews are hunting pirates this season!”

“And how is the fishing?” Cae called.

He looked over at her, then did a double take. “Abundant, unfortunately... my lady?” he asked.

She just laughed at him. “My first lessons in Valea!” she called back.

Semi called the captain’s attention back. “Please feel free to lead the way, Captain.”

The man nodded and called his crew to turn the ship again, setting her to ride the waves a little ahead and to the east of them.

Semi stalked back across the deck, sweeping her coat up from the planks. She glanced up at Cae, noting the way the wind bit into the fabric of her clothes. “You might want to get that coat.”



The next morning saw them gathering at the head of the *Desiter*, waiting for the turn of the tide. They left a channel open for those who were catching the last of the outgoing current, and set anchor to wait out the hour long changeover.

Semi crossed the deck to where Caelerys and her brother were eating breakfast with the crew and Mester Larch. “Can you send that bird to anyone?” she asked, nodding her head towards *Tempest*.

Cae fed the bird a scrap of meat. “Anyone she knows. I’m the only one she can find no matter where I am, but I’m sure she can go to a known place, and if that person is there, find them.”

Semi looked disappointed. “It will have to do. Can she carry a message? I know she is no *toomi*, but we have no more husbands aboard.”

“She can. Sometimes quite proudly,” she grinned, scratching the bird’s throat. “What do you need sent and to whom?”

“We need someone to meet us at the docks with horses. I do not relish walking you back to the citadel. Or even to your *Stag’s Hall*. And your prince will not thank me for doing so, I think.”

Larch nodded his head in acknowledgement of that fact. “We could send to His Highness himself,” he suggested.

Semi shook her head. “Too risky.” She began pacing the deck. “We need someone that can be found without too much wandering around the Citadel. Too many people see the bird they’re going to know you are entering the city one way or another. Another reason I want the bird far away from us. And if the prince is not in the Citadel it will not help.”

“Janem,” Willam said quietly.

“The smith?” she asked, frowning. “Why him?”

“Because Tempest knows where to find him and he can go to Stag’s Hall to get horses without making anyone wonder what he is about,” Will explained. “He comes and goes at all hours even though he does not live there. He has all the advantages of being one of the second estate and of the first, though he does not bank upon the latter often. He’ll carry any message we ask. And, his coming to the docks with horses and maybe a wagon will not be out of character for him.”

“Send then. Have him come to the docks with horses and a wagon. If we have to hide her in the wagon, we will.”

Cae frowned. “Do I really need to hide in the wagon?”

“It would be wise,” she said, turning to Will. “I will give you paper and pen.”

Will nodded, rose and went with her down to the cabin. When he returned with the message, he handed the scrap of paper to his sister. “Here. You send her. And no detours.”

She took the paper with a glare. “If it’s important, she won’t.” She carried the message and the bird to the prow of the ship, setting her on the rail. She took the ribbon confining her braids from her hair and tied up the message into a compact roll. Tempest held out her leg for it, spreading her wings for balance. Once it was on, Cae looked the bird in the eye, using Vermian as always, but understanding more now why. “Take this to Janem. Wake him if you must. You remember the forge, yes?” Tempest chirped positively. “After that... well, your time is your own.”

She gave a second chirp, curtsayed and then launched herself, flying at an angle to the winds to make better time.

Cae was surprised that she felt the tide turn. It was a noticeable shift in the currents, and the winds picked up. Suddenly, the ship was straining to be away and the Captain had to take a firm hand to keep her from over-running the other ships. Cae had been a little nervous at first, as this was where the Harvest ship had been taken and sunk. But there were a great deal more ships riding with them, gathered, she

guessed, for safety. She was also a little surprised when the *Caper* did not follow them to the port. Her captain merely waved them off and headed back out to sea hunting pirates.

It was an exhilarating feeling, racing in under a strong headwind and a determined current. The city's harbour grew swiftly ahead of them and it did not take an entire hour before they were unshipping a few of the oars to help guide her into the nearest empty pier.

Cae smiled, seeing Janem waiting on the dock for them.

As soon as the ship was securely tied and the short gangplank extended, she ran across and threw herself into his arms. He laughed, sweeping her off her feet. "Sister, I swear you cause almost as much trouble by your absence that you do present!"

She leaned back in his arms and frowned. "What do you mean?"

"He's been haunting my forge wondering if there has been any word," he said softly.

"He's asked?" she looked, surprised.

"No. But you can tell he's waiting. Been in a bad temper, too," he said, setting her down. "At least one young lady left his presence in tears."

"I need to get back then," she said seriously, though she was secretly thrilled. "Has there been any news on the robbers?"

"Not really, but there have been leads into the bull."

"Oh?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Not here. Let's get you to the house first."

"House?" she exclaimed, even as she allowed him to lead her out of the path of the cargo being off-loaded.

Will joined her and threw a cloak over her head. While she tried to untangle herself, she heard the two brothers clapping wrists and backs. Finally she got the cloak around her shoulders and the hood properly on her head. Larch crossed to stand at her left, clearly a bodyguard once more.

"What is going on?" she growled at the two brothers who were obviously colluding.

"We're going to the Hall, and from there to the Citadel by carriage."

"Carriage?!" she protested.

"You have to pick up Fern, remember?"

"Well, yes, but... can't we ride?" she complained.

Will was firm. “No. Too risky. It will be risk enough getting you from the docks to the Hall,” he sighed, began looking around them. “Come on, we stand out too much here.” He gestured for Janem to get her to the horses and the wagon. He turned to Semi as she strode up, offered her his arm as he would any companion of arms. She accepted with a grin.

Cae did not hear what they said, as she was being pulled towards the end of the dock by both Larch and Jan. But she noticed a young woman in a midnight blue cloak standing beside the princess whom she had not seen before. She lost sight of them as people began crowding the length of the dock trying to get their goods or meet the passengers.

Jan led them over to where Rob stood holding the reins of two rough-looking, shaggy horses and one placid mule pulling a narrow wagon. “These came from Stag’s Hall?” she exclaimed. One of them looked like he might be half blind.

Jan grinned, dropping the tailgate of the wagon and began directing the dock-workers where to put his siblings’ belongings and the two other crates he had come to collect. “No, they didn’t. Had a friend who owed a favour. They don’t look like much, but... they’re mean when they need to be. They also don’t attract attention.”

“I beg to differ,” she mused, pausing to inspect the half blind one’s eye.

Will caught up with them. The strange woman was with him, standing demurely at his side. Cae could only see a little beneath the hood, and nothing at all of the rest of her body beyond that she was of a height to her. She was wrapped in the cloak against the cold, so that even her hands were hidden. She looked back at her brother for explanation.

He grinned, saying nothing. Instead, he led the woman to the seat of the wagon and helped her up. Cae watched, confused, her hand still resting on the horse’s muzzle. When he came back to her, she asked, “So who’s walking? There are three of us and only two horses.”

His eyes danced with mischief as he took her wrist and led her to the back of the wagon, grabbed her waist and lifted her into it.

“What are you..!” she began, but the sudden look on his face silenced her. Now she knew what was going on. She was to play the servant, forced to ride in the wagon with the apprentice whilst whoever the woman was, sat up front and played decoy. She wasn’t happy about it, but she bundled herself up with a fur rug she found in the back, and invited Rob to share it. He didn’t wait for a second invitation.

Will and Larch mounted the horses and Will rode in front, with Larch taking the rear.

Once they were comfortably wedged in place and the last cargo box secured, they turned from the docks and headed into the city proper. Rob pulled a pair of apple tarts from somewhere on his person and offered Cae one.

She smiled, accepting it.

The city was a little more daunting travelling through it like this, and the distraction of the boy and the tart helped. There were so many strange sensations and emotions battering her it was hard to pay attention to anything in particular. She didn't remember it being this bad before, but she chalked that up to her growing abilities. The deeper into the heart of the city they went, the worse it got.

It was starting to give her a head-ache, and that was beginning to make her feel both angry and desperate. It wasn't until Rob asked her if she was all right that she realized she was breathing heavily.

Larch was beginning to give her a funny look when his attention was drawn elsewhere, and his expression became more worried.

People were streaming past them in both directions, mostly going the way they were going, and someone yelled that someone was throwing money to the crowd. Jan pulled the mule to a halt, glanced back to the cart at his sister. "Well, you finally did it," he playfully growled.

"What?" she snapped.

"Stopped traffic."

Her answer was to reach back and swat him, which only made him laugh. "Well, boys, miss," he said loud enough to be heard, "we're not reaching the Alley that way." He slowly began to turn the beast's head against the tide of people. They made torturous progress, trying to get down a side street and go around the crowd that was growing rapidly into a riot.

Someone yelled, "There's another one! Alms! Alms!" and Cae ducked into the furs, but the call was farther away, nearer the thick of things, and then all she felt was terror.

"Rabbit," she breathed, "Rabbit. Run, rabbit, run!" she chanted. Her heart was hammering in her chest. And then there was a weight on her knee and a questing beak trying to pull the hood away from her face. She looked up into Tempest's questing eye and heard Larch's curse.

"Send her away!" he hissed.

But it was too late. An arrow whizzed through the air towards the decoy, but she twisted and snatched the arrow out of the air. Cae turned, caught a glimpse of milky-brown skin and what appeared to be a delicate hand, and then it vanished into the cloak again. Her voice called a direction, towards which Willam turned.

A second arrow came from the roof of the next building from the opposite direction and bit into the pile of furs between her and Rob. She felt the shaft graze her and heard a grunt from the boy. With a word, she sent Tempest into the air, flying low through the narrow street, to keep herself from being a direct target. She shoved Robin further down between the boxes, began trying to pull out the narrow box that held her bow, struggling to unwedge it.

Another arrow hit the crate she had just been sitting in front of and she was thrown flat as Jan slapped the mule to go as fast as he could in the thinning crowd. She managed to get the box free and pulled her bow out, trying to string it while keeping her head low.

Something hit the side of the wagon and she looked up in time to see the man who was trying to climb in lose his head. There was a screech not unlike that of a ca'theryn as the strange woman threw off the cloak and stood on the wagon seat. She ran across the boxes in the back, leapt towards Larch and with barely a toe striking the saddle behind him, she vaulted to his shoulder and from there to the nearest roof and was off chasing the archer. She was screaming like a mad thing and waving a curved knife that did not flash in the sunlight.

Cae finally managed to string her bow and pulled an arrow from the box. She rose to her knees and looked around, threatening anyone who even looked like they were thinking about attacking.

Then she was hit from behind by an egg thrown by someone in tatters who did not speak like the rustic he appeared to be. "Maral bitch," he yelled. "Go back to the Reach! We don't want you here!"

He was silenced by a well thrown apple striking him on the temple.

Cae looked over her shoulder at Janem in surprise, but he was once more concentrating on keeping the panicked mule steady and headed out of danger as swiftly as they could. She returned to looking out for enemies and saw a man in a ragged poncho raising a rusty sword as he ran towards Larch's back. Larch was too busy dealing with two other men trying to pull him from his horse. She loosed the arrow on her string and took the man in the chest.

She felt something at her hip and looked down, saw an arrow tapping her. Her eyes followed the shaft downwards and saw Rob's hand holding it just above the ar-

rowhead. She took it, nodding her thanks as she nocked and drew again. She had plenty of targets.

Jan turned down another street, fleeing what looked to be the thick of the riot. This one narrowed quickly, and was blocked off by four other men with heavy cudgels. There was a turn off, but there was no way they were getting the cart down it.

Will and Larch rode around the front of the wagon and charged the men. Will's horse, the half blind one, was biting and kicking at anything he could reach. Will's hammer flattened two of them easily and Larch's horse trampled a third whilst his sword cut down the last of them.

From the narrow alley another one ran, leaping up and over the side of the wagon in spite of taking Cae's arrow to the gut. He slashed at her, and Cae twisted from the hip as Semi had been showing her, only catching the knife on her sleeve. She felt the thin, shallow cut, but only barely. She had more to worry about in her face than a mild tingling in her arm.

Janem yelled back at her, "Drop!"

Cae realized what he was about to do. She let go of her bow and dropped onto her back on the furs, her knees brought up to her chest. He slapped the mule into a run and the cart lurched forward, throwing the man off balance. As he fell towards Cae, she kicked up and over, redirecting his fall to the back of the cart where he landed on his back half on, half off her trunk with a crack. She rolled to her knees, snatching up the bow and the next arrow Rob handed her.

Tempest dropped back out of the sky, clawing at the eyes of another man trying to jump to the wagon from the other side. Hoof beats followed her. Cae turned towards the sound, ready to aim, then, on instinct, raised her bow higher, aiming at another assailant on a roof. The man fell into the street at the feet of a silvery black horse that leapt over him as if he had been merely a log in his path.

Cae's heart soared like a bird in full flight as she stood, nocking yet another arrow. Following something unspoken in the prince's gaze, she twisted, firing down the next side-street, catching a man in the shoulder as he made a grab for Janem. Jan's arm snaked out in the same instance and hit him in the side of the head with a blacksmith's hammer.

Cae turned back, saw Valan followed by about twenty men, including Sir Wren and a handful of the City Watch. The assailants fled and the prince pulled up close beside the wagon, reaching for her. She dropped the bow onto the furs and let him pull her onto the front of his saddle. She breathed deeply of his warmth, looking



up into his face. He did not take the time to meet her gaze, as he was looking for other enemy and a way out of danger. She dimly heard her brother's voice claiming a friendly hall was just a few streets over.

She felt them turning, the movement of the world around her, rapid, churning air, earth and sky together into a muddy mess. Tempest flew past them, followed by a flock of Tempests shrinking away until they were toomi, then down to a swarm of black insects with human faces. She looked back up at Valan, saw his jaw beginning to elongate and grow scales. "Ketava," she said in a low voice, "I think... I think I've been poisoned."

Panic rose then, made her heart race when all it wanted to do was sink away into the muddy earth and germinate, maybe one day sprout into a beautiful flower, not this crude fleshy substance she currently was. Whatever this was, she wanted free of it, to just drift away, but the panic would not let her. Something wrapped itself around her tightly and roared, shaking her, refusing to let her either sink or float away.

Time distorted, running both abnormally fast and slower than tree sap in Fallow. She saw her mother, smiling at her as she walked past wearing a gown of beeslippers, which Cae found hilarious because they should not have fit. Eventually her mother faded out of sight and all Cae could see was a room full of frightened animals. Beyond them, rose a giant asp with eyes that glowed like copper and spat a stream of venom at her that burned her eyes and throat and left her thrashing and screaming even as it wrapped her in its coils and crushed her.



Cae felt like her entire body was made of lead, and her head was being used as an anvil. A cool hand fluttered across her brow, its touch unfamiliar. The smells that surrounded her were likewise unfamiliar: musky, earthy, like fresh furs. She blinked, couldn't see anything at first. She could see movement nearby in the room and hear dim whispers. A feathered head pressed against her cheek. Eventually her eyes grew accustomed to the low light and she began to make out the things around her.

She was in a small room with no windows. The narrow bed had no canopy, though it was reasonably soft in spite of the rushes it was stuffed with. There was a woman seated beside her on what was likely the only chair. She was a handsome, older woman, with a friendly face. She seemed somewhat familiar.

“Where?” she asked, was shocked to find her voice raspy. She tried to sit up and the lady helped her. “Oh, my chest hurts,” she said weakly.

“I should say so, my lady,” said the sweet, cultured voice. “We’ve had to fight to keep your heart beating. I’ve been feeding you beeslipper in small doses all day and most of the night.”

“Bee...” she began. The woman silenced her by pressing a cup to her lips.

“Drink this first, my dear. Then we can talk. Though I daresay we won’t have much time once my boys find your prince. The man’s been in a right rage. I hesitate to think what he would have done if you’d died.”

“Beeslipper makes the heart race,” Caelerys said when she had drunk enough for her throat to cooperate.

“Aye. Your heart kept wanting to go to sleep on us. It was all we could do to keep it awake. You scared us to death.”

“What happened? It was the knife, wasn’t it?” she asked, feeling a bandage on her arm where she remembered being cut. “I didn’t think it felt right. It didn’t hurt enough, but I thought maybe it was just really shallow and I had too much else to worry about.”

“Aye, my lady, it was. Someone got word that you had returned to the city. They’ve no doubt been watching for you. They didn’t know what route you would be taking, so they cast money into the streets at the intersections you would have to take to the Citadel no matter which entrance you took and some fool yelled that there were nobles coming that would throw more. They were hoping, I am guessing, that they would either catch you in the resulting mob or see you avoid it. It was quite clever, really. Too bad they caught all the wrong prey in their pretty little trap.”

“Wrong prey?” she frowned. “But they found me.”

“Don’t you worry about that part yet, my dear. You are resting here for the time being, even though it means I am saddled with a royal guest. Thankfully, he means his presence not to be known, so we do not have to wine and dine as I would have, had he been a guest at Mallowen.”

That was familiar. She looked at the woman again, beginning to see more details and remember where she had seen them before. Of course, she realized, the last time she had seen them, there had not been so many creases nor so much grey crowning her head. “Lady Marrok. Forgive me, I..”

She shook her head, fussing with the covers around her charge. “No mind, my lady. You were all of eleven, was it, last you saw me, if that. Now, is there anything I

can get you? Or your feathered guard dog? She hasn't left your side since they brought you in."

She looked down at the bird who gave her a stubborn chirp and tucked herself closer to her side. She stroked her back tenderly. "Jelma," she chided. "Go, take care of yourself. I am in good hands." Reluctantly, the bird walked to the edge of the bed and hopped off.

The lady rose and opened the door for her and watched her walk to the nearest window with amused surprise. "What shall I set out for her, my lady?"

"A cup of water and about a mouse's worth of meat, if it is not too much trouble."

"For such a well-behaved and well-trained house guest? I would be delighted to pamper her. You should see the wild beasts my sons have brought home over the years," she chuckled. "Some of them have even had fur."

Cae laughed softly. "My brothers think I spoil her."

"Nonsense. You may not have trained a lethal hunting bird that any may fly, but you have raised a fiercely loyal companion who can do things for you. She brought the prince to you. He'd have never found you otherwise. And if too much time had passed, who's to say if we could have saved you?"

She sighed, leaning back into the pillows, pressing a hand lightly to her chest. "When Stag's Hall was attacked, she's the one who woke me, then the house by ringing the fire bell."

"We'd heard about that. I was outraged that someone would dare. As far as we knew, the House does not have any current, active enemies beyond Kaladen. And we've heard he's trying to marry you to his son," she snorted with derision.

"I think it more his son wants something he'll never have. Do you have any heart's ease?" she asked.

Lady Marrok shook her head. "I do, but not yet. We need you a little stronger before we risk it. I understand that it hurts. I'll bring up a salve in a little while, it may take a little longer, but it will eventually work."

Cae nodded. This woman had tended more cuts, bruises and wounds than she ever dreamed of, raising her twins. Never mind her four other boys, all of various ages.

"My brother's apprentice..." she began, remembering something. "Was he hurt?"

She shook her head. "Grazed, no more."

There was a light knock at the door and Lucelle poked her head in. "Mother Marrok, is she..." Her face lit up seeing Cae sitting up in the bed, and she slipped into the room. "Caelerys! Oh, you look so pale! I'm sorry, I saw Tempest take a sparrow in the courtyard and thought you might be awake at last."

Cae smiled, waved her over weakly. Lucelle needed no second urging, coming over to take her hand and squeeze it. She looked over at her shoulder at Lady Marrok and smiled. "I can sit with her for a little while, mother. If you want to go down and check up on things?"

The lady nodded, gesturing to a tray on a table beside her. "Make sure she drinks a little of that every now and again. Not too much at once or she'll get sick."

"Yes, mother," she answered, bobbing a curtsy.

With a smile, Lady Marrok left.

"Mother?" Cae asked pointedly. "I didn't miss..."

Lucelle shook her head, blushing, she was grinning so hard. "It's practically done. And she is just so relieved to have a girl in the house," she added with a laugh. "I don't mind calling her mother. She's so much nicer than my own. I bet," she said, leaning in close, "that she even raised every one of her children on her own, no wet nurse, no nanny."

Cae smiled, happy to see her friend so happy. "She had to. No one else could handle them."

"She's so sweet. It's hard to imagine her the scary woman Edler and Reled keep talking about."

"She can shift in a heartbeat. I've seen it. I've seen mother bears that weren't so scary," Cae chuckled softly. "She's a Halbourne, so it makes sense."

Lucelle gave a look of surprise. "Really? That does make sense. Their lands aren't too far from the Alders and the houses are friends, so I've met my share. Their sigil is well chosen. Bears, the lot of them. And the men are so hairy," she giggled.

"So when do you light the candle?"

"As soon as the Eastern Lady shows enough of her face to bless us."

"How much is enough?" Cae asked.

Lucelle sighed. "Well, Mother Marrok wants to wait until she's full, but neither Edler or I want to wait that long, so we may end up settling for half or quarter. I'm to stay with the family until then anyway. She wants to make sure I'm ready. Says she's got a lot of training to do."

Cae smiled. “Well, you will be taking her place eventually. She can teach you a lot.”

“I’ve got a minor cousin staying with me to make sure nothing.. happens too early,” she giggled suggestively. “But the contracts are agreed upon, so everything else is just formality.”

“Where will you light?”

Lucelle set her elbows on the bed and rest her chin on her hands. “Not sure yet. Traditionally it’d have been at Unicorn Hill, but I’d have been living with my parents at that point. But staying here as I am, complicates things. We’ve talked about doing it at Taluscliff, having your father or Lord Willem stand for us, but father feels that will insult Duke Cygent as our liege. If we do it at Down’s End, it might appease some people, but it’s a long way to either place for either family. We’re halfway across the kingdom from each other.”

“Will you be sad living so far from your family?”

She shook her head. “Nope. I’ll actually be kinda glad to escape them. I’ll miss the Feywood, but Edler promises me that they have woods aplenty.”

Cae nodded. “They do. And they often hunt the Mistwood with us.”

“That could be fun. I’ll have to learn how to shoot.”

There was a noise in the hall and both women turned to look to the door. Cae was almost surprised that there was a knock. “Come,” she called, croaking just a little.

Belatedly, Lucelle remembered she was supposed to be drinking and passed her the cup. Cae almost spilled it when Valan walked in with Tempest on his shoulder.

Lucelle rose, curtsying. Cae did not even try. Lucelle backed away from the bed to let the prince have access and Cae set her cup aside.

Tempest launched herself to the bed, walking up to her mistress with her chest puffed out with pride. Cae gave her a loving caress and wiped a streak of blood from her beak. “Thank you, my sweet.”

Valan just stood there for a long moment, staring down at her, both he and the other drinking in the sight of her, assessing her condition.

“I will live, my prince,” she said, finally unable to take his silence and distance any longer.

He sat in the chair, taking up her hand and pressing it to his forehead. He took several slow, deep breaths, calming himself.

She raked the fingers of her free hand through his hair, smiling softly. “Is there blood to be wiped from you too?” she asked softly.

He looked up at that, glanced at the bird, then back at her. "Oh," he said with a little shake, realizing what she was asking. "No. But I do have a question for you."

"Ask me anything."

"Did you send word to the ladies of your chamber?"

She looked over at Tempest. "Jelma, did you go to the Citadel?"

The bird shook her head. She stretched her neck towards Valan with a small cry.

"No. I did not send her and she did not go. She delivered the message to my brother and then went to find you. Why?"

He sighed. "Well, that's her saved, at least."

"Who saved? What is going on?"

"We found the spy in your household."

She felt cold. "Who was it?"

"Maid named Pansy."

Cae's hand went to her mouth. "No! Why? She seemed so..."

"Naive?" he offered. He shook his head. "If you had sent a message to your ladies, then her pleas would have been for naught. But as it is..."

She shifted herself on the bed, to sit up more fully. "Valan, you are not making any sense."

He explained. "She shares a bed on the servant's floor with another maid, one whom we have discovered to be feeding information outside of Greenstone to an unknown source. Pansy was apparently very loose lipped at night. Some things she said she told freely, not thinking anything of it, some things that have gotten out, she swears she never told."

"There are herbs that can make one talk in one's sleep," she replied. "If a question is asked, you will answer without realizing or remembering. It's called veracity, though it is also known as slip-tongue. They say women who want to know if their men are faithful use it to find out."

"When anyone can take a paramour or mistress?" he frowned.

"Well, when love is involved... whether the heart has strayed matters," she said. She ran a finger along his jaw. "How would you feel if I were to take a paramour? Or even a lover?"

She didn't need to be a sympath to feel the surge of uncontrolled rage at that. She could feel the sudden tension in his jaw. She laughed softly. "See? You cannot even bear the thought of it. And the lower estates usually marry for love. It matters to them."

He forced himself to calm down, nodded. "I understand. Can you get some of this herb? I think I would like to try it on our precious few captives before they mysteriously die in their sleep."

"You have prisoners?" she asked. "Who did you catch?"

He shook his head. "Sadly, no one of significance. The people in the street throwing things and yelling slurs directed at you were paid to do so. We got that much. Your brother has feelers all throughout the lowest estate in the city. Apparently, he is closer to them than we thought, and they are damned useful. That's how we learned of the pay-offs. The ones who attacked directly were another matter. The only one we have won't talk, even under torture. Your new bodyguard got a good description of the rooftop assassin, but was unable to catch him."

"New bodyguard?" she frowned.

He scowled immediately, "Your brother assured me the woman was who and what she claimed."

She put her hand to her head, trying to clear it. "My prince, I am very lost and things are happening just a mite too fast. Which brother? The first, that's Jan. I know he has his fingers all over the city. He's the one who found us trustworthy house guards. The one who arranges things and conveniently forgets to inform me, that would be Will?"

He gave a laugh, kissed her hand. "Aye. What do you wish to know?"

"This woman. What did Will tell you?"

"That she was a gift from Princess Semiana, a handmaiden who is also a bodyguard and a teacher. She was the decoy on the way from the docks, but the pest gave your identity away," he said pointing at Tempest who had the wherewithal to look indignant. "You made up for it," he added, softening. "What she is a teacher of, he did not say."

"Likely neither did she," Cae smiled. "The princess and I had a talk, and since I wish to learn Alumet... and Valea," she added quickly, "and she had a maid whom she needed to learn the ways of Southern courts, she would make me a gift. I guess she was it. I don't know how she got her to the docks to meet us so quickly, though."

"Larch said she snatched an arrow out of the air."

"I saw," Cae nodded. "Then she vaulted to the rooftops using him as a step ladder and gave chase. He got away?"

Valan nodded. "Slipped into the riot. She got a very good look at him, though, and a piece of him, but we're still trying to see what we can do with it. The others..."

most ran. We killed several. You killed several,” he added proudly. “They were mostly folk or poor second estate.”

She shook her head at that. “Second estate more likely. They did not talk like folk, and while their outer garments may have marked them scraps at first glance, they weren’t. Rusty or not, one of them had a short sword, and I could have sworn I saw other fabric under the rags.”

“Good eye,” he nodded. “The bodies we have were wearing shoes too good to be dregs. The man who cut you had nothing on him to identify him, and we are trying to find someone who might know him, but no luck so far. I’ve only just begun to investigate.”

“What was on that knife?” she asked.

“Nightbane.”

She breathed a sigh of relief, leaning her head back against the pillows that had been propped behind her. “Thank the Mother he didn’t know how to use it.”

He cocked his head.

“Nightbane is lethal ingested. Induces a deep sleep which comes with intense nightmares, followed by difficulty breathing, a sluggish heart and eventually a rigour like state from which you do not wake. Rumour has it that victims are often buried alive, because it is impossible to tell if they still live or not.”

“Sounds a lot like what you went through,” he frowned.

She shook her head. “I woke up. You were able to counter it with beeslipper, keep my heart racing. If I had swallowed it, no one would have been the wiser until I didn’t wake. Oh, I’d have gotten a little sleepy over the next few hours, but it’s a slow, insidious poison. Because he put it on his blade,... I actually had a chance.”

“Because it acted faster?”

“In a way. Through wounds, it causes hallucinations almost immediately, and can cause you to pass out, slowing your heart, weakening the muscles. If you can keep the heart rate up, and the victim awake at least until the spasms pass, you can survive it because it burns through the system faster.”

“How is it you know all this? I knew you were an herbalist, but poisons are an altogether different study,” he said with a light frown.

“Not really. It grows wild in the Mistwood and other parts of the Reach,” she shrugged. “It has small thorns which can catch the unwary. We treat at least four cases a season of scratches. The larger animals don’t seem as affected by it, only going through a short period of mania followed by dozing. But they usually survive. Rabbits, on the other hand, eat the stuff to no ill effect. Besides, if distilled right



and mixed with the right ingredients, it can make a very effective sedative. But you have to know what you are doing. Many things that are helpful are harmful if mis-handled. And you have to know poisons to counter them. I know how *not* to make them.”

He shook his head, “Do not fret, my doe,” he smiled. “I am not upset. Though it is best to have such a ready explanation if ever questions are asked. But it would stand you well in a royal household, because one never knows.”

She nodded. “Jealousy and ambition surround you. I have started to keep a small vial of ground charcoal in my pocket.”

He frowned at that. “Dare I ask?”

She smiled. “In case of ingested poison. It can help. Soaks up the poison and then allows you to throw it up. It’s not a perfect solution, but it’s more reliable than a bezoar.”

“What’s a bezoar?”

She shook her head. “You do not want to know. My grandfather kept one in his pocket for two decades. Disgusting, ineffective things.” She took his hand, “So what have I missed? You got my message?”

He smiled. “Clever that,” he said. “Puzzled Bal for a moment, but he figured it out. Now it’s just my father.”

“Well, your father and my brother. Will has already been sequestered with father for days on the subjects of both myself and Vyncet. He’ll be the one to negotiate.”

“How is your father?”

“Dying,” she sighed. “We don’t know when, but... he has less than a year, they think. They’re keeping whatever it is at bay, but not completely. Did you find anything?”

He shook his head. “I fear I did not have the head for research the past fortnight. Ask Bal. I put in the request, as you asked, but he’s been looking for me.”

She nodded. She felt herself weakening a little and leaned back against the pillows. He just sat there, idly stroking her finger with his thumb. She smiled dreamily. “I would love nothing more than to lie here and gaze at you, my prince.”

“I sense a but,” he frowned.

“I think Lady Marrok had best come in and see to me. I am feeling tired again and a little weak and I want to make certain it is safe to give in.”

“Thoughtful of you to ask,” he mused.

“I was trained to be in her shoes one day.”

He nodded, let go of her hand reluctantly and crossed to the door, said something to the person outside it and then returned. "Do you need anything?" he asked, sitting down again. "Something to drink?"

That reminded her. She looked over at the cup on the side table. "I was supposed to be drinking that."

He reached over and picked it up, sniffing it before helping her to sip some.

Lady Marrok entered the room, coming around to the other side of the bed. She checked Cae's forehead, pupils and hand strength before rendering her verdict. "Sleep will do you no harm right now and a world of good."

Between the lady and the prince, she was slid further down in the bed so that she could lie back and be tucked comfortably in. Tempest sat on the headboard watching them and chiming in her advice. Cae was drifting quickly, but heard the conversation between the two of them.

"She'll be fine, Your Highness. I've treated worse cases of nightbane scratches than hers."

"Ever lose any?" he asked darkly.

"A few," she admitted. "But you got her to us in time. Now rest is all she needs."

"I want to take her back to the Citadel. This house is hardly fortified."

She clucked at him. "And currently filled to the brim with royal soldiers. No one is going to get to her. This is an inner room, only the one way in. With this chamber and the outer one guarded, and this magnificent creature sleeping with her, there is no way they can make a second attempt. You might be able to take her tomorrow, but she will be weak for a few days. Some sun will do her good."

"She is to have someone watching her at all times," he warned.

She gave the sigh of a mother comforting an overly worried child as their voices grew slightly more distant. "Have that dark skinned young woman in to watch for a while. She seems to know her way around a sickbed and a battlefield."

That was the last thing Cae heard before sleep fully claimed her. Her dreams were fleeting and evasive and had no substance; full of fog beyond which she knew were wolves on the prowl, watching.



**C**aelerys was out of bed and walking without help by dinner the next day. She was still weak, and tired quickly, but was infinitely better than the day before. She was placed at a sunny window in the spacious town house and had her midday meal at a small table with only Will and Valan.

The prince reached out and fingered the mane of tiny braids, some of which had lost their gold tips and were beginning to unravel. Her hair was tightly crimped where they had come undone.

She smiled shyly. “Not sure you like it?”

“It is... odd. Though you wear it that way to court and soon enough there will be others,” he mused. “You know I like yours best loose.”

Will looked from one to the other, as if trying to decide if something highly improper had just been spoken of so casually.

She shook her head. “More like they’d make fun of me.”

“Have you not noticed that the court styles are not quite so... towering and outlandish lately?” Will answered, going back to his food, deciding it was best to leave whatever he thought was going on alone.

“There hasn’t been a formal court in a while. Likely won’t be until mid-Fallow,”

she said, shaking her head. She was more pushing her food around her plate than eating it.

“Bonfire Night,” was all he said.

She looked from him to the prince, who merely nodded, smiling at her consternation. “So they denigrate me on the one hand and emulate me on the other?” she asked, incredulous.

“They are jealous,” Valan answered. “They want you out of the way, so they try to make you unpopular. Meanwhile, they try to be you, hoping to attract whatever it is you have that they want.”

She sighed, resting her cheek on her hand. “I hate court.”

Valan merely laughed at her. “Well, you shall have to deal with it, if I have my way.”

She glared up at him. “I’ll deal, don’t think otherwise. I might even get as vicious as the rest of them if they push me too hard. But I still resent it.”

“I don’t fault you for that,” he said. “But, you shall be back in it soon enough. I have a carriage coming shortly. Providing the mother wolf allows my doe to leave her den,” he added with a chuckle.

“If she doesn’t think she’s ready, good luck with that,” Will quipped. “I’m not going to get caught in between that. I’d just as soon she come back to Stag Hall.”

The two men eyed each other. “We’ve discussed this, Willam.”

“Aye, we have. And I don’t like it, but I’ve agreed. Partly because the precedent has already been set, partly because I realize you can provide better security, and mostly because the queen thinks it is for the best. But don’t think I am not aware that her access to dangers are greater in your house than in mine. My house holds only the trusted and loyal. Yours...”

Valan nodded ruefully, “Holds every dangling relative and left over servant of the previous reign. Some of whom have already proven disloyal. Case in point: the Treasury Key. Father is still trying to untangle that mess,” he sighed. “I am aware.”

“I want your word, dragon,” Will said, not taking his eyes from the prince’s. All pretence at courtly manners and differences of rank had vanished. This was a family matter, and not that long ago, these two men had been equals.

Valan’s darker blue eyes bored into Will’s deeper sapphire. “You have it, stag,” he answered. “I will keep her safe.”

Cae wanted to tell them both to stop it, but knew the futility of it. She pushed her plate away and glared at both of them. “Feel better? Everything properly measured?”

They turned to look at her. “Yes, actually,” the prince began until all she had said sank in. He blinked, trying to figure out if she meant it the way he had inferred it.

Caclerys was saved by Tempest, sitting in the window, chirping that something had arrived.

She looked outside to see the carriage stopping in the small, enclosed yard and the soldiers step out to inspect it. One of the Marrok twins entered the room, bowed to all three of them. “Your Highness, my lord, my lady, the carriage has arrived.” He turned to Cae, “Mother says she will release you reluctantly into the care of the Citadel, but that you know what you need to do. Use only trusted sources.”

She smiled, nodded as she thanked him. “I have a source I trust.”

Valan glanced between them and Cae took pity on him. “A tea to help with my recovery. I know where I can get the herbs and know without a doubt I have been given the right ones.” She turned back to her host. “I will be in good hands, Lord Edler. Please, thank your lady mother for me.”

He looked disappointed for a moment, that she had guessed his identity, but shrugged it off quickly. “It was our honour, my lady. And regardless of where we end up lighting, I sincerely hope that you will be there, in one way or another.”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” she smiled.

He stepped forward to clasp Will’s arm. “My best to Vynce, eh? Tell him not to be a stranger now he’s ambulatory.”

Valan offered Cae his arm and she leaned heavily on him. She felt sluggish and still a little weak. He helped her down to the carriage which was now surrounded by armed soldiers in royal livery. As she climbed inside and got herself situated, Lady Marrok stepped in with a large fur rug, tucking her in and fussing like a mother hen. “Stay warm. The cold will tend to make you sluggish for a little while. Best avoid that. Don’t overdo it. Conserve your strength for a few days at least.”

She smiled tiredly, kissed the lady’s cheek. “I know what to do, thank you. For everything.”

Lady Marrok tried to hide the welling tears, pressed a small bag into her hand. “Keep it on you, so there’s no question of tampering. It’s fresh enough to be potent, so be sparing.”

Cae nodded and the woman left the carriage to be replaced by Valan. When he sat beside her, she looked at him in surprise. “Not riding?”

He pulled her close. “Wouldn’t be fair, would it?”

She gave him a soft smile then frowned as Willam climbed into the carriage and glared at their closeness. She looked at him in askance.

“To keep the two of you honest,” he grumbled.

Valan only smiled, meeting his gaze, but kept his arm around Caelerys.

“Where is this new bodyguard?” she asked. “Why isn’t she in here with us? I still have yet to meet her.”

“Since things were well handled here,” Valan said, “she went ahead to see to the security of your quarters.”

“And you allowed it? Isn’t that going to cause issues with Citadel security and the Captain of the Guard?” she asked.

“They dare not question me.”

“Your father might.”

That seemed to sober him a little. Tempest darted in the window to land on her lap just before the carriage lurched into motion. Cae grabbed hold of her, to keep her from falling and leaned into the prince. Resting her head on his shoulder, she dozed.



When Cae was finally brought up to her quarters, she was exhausted, but she insisted on being set up in her receiving room and not being bundled off to bed like an invalid. She was set up in a comfortable, wing-backed chair with the fur bundled around her and Tempest perched on the back. Valan settled her in, then kissed her hand.

“My lady, I fear I must leave you for a little while. I have neglected a few things in the last... fortnight that I really should attend.”

She gave him a long look, “*You* neglect a duty?”

His possession of her hand was fierce, “My lady, I am afraid that you have become one of those duties,” he said with all seriousness. “Now I must see to it that certain others also understand this.”

She smiled as he pressed another kiss and reluctantly took his leave.

“Will my lady be receiving visitors this afternoon?”

Cae looked up, saw her ladies arrayed before her with Coral in the middle. Fern’s face was a mix of worry and joy, and Pansy was painfully absent. It was Coral who had asked the question.

“I will, but not just yet. I wish your company for the moment. I have... so many questions.”

At a nod from Coral, Rosie immediately began bringing over chairs. Fern sank into the one closest to Cae and took her hand. “Oh, you are so...”

“Weak?” she suggested with a faint smile.

“Cold,” Fern flushed. “I would never...”

“I would. And you are right,” she said a little more firmly. “But that will be changing over the next few days. I should be myself again by the other side of Fourth Day.”

“Oh good,” Fern sighed.

“What must we do to ensure this?” Coral asked, seating herself primly on the edge of her chair.

Cae told her what she knew from experience and what Lady Marrok had insisted upon. She pulled the pouch of herbs out of her pocket. “I’m to drink a cup of this twice a day in addition to that.”

“Will this last?” Fern asked, picking up the small bag and sniffing it.

“If it does not, you will get more from Liliwyn. She is the closest source I trust. Now, what has been happening?”

Fern gave her a brief summary of her stay at Stag’s Hall, highlighting her worry for her mistress and the chaffing at being confined to the house and not being seen. Vyncet taught her to play castle, and Janem stopped by at least twice a week for meals. Yes, they were still being delivered, and yes, Lord Vyncet was doing much better, hardly limping at all though he still carried the cane just in case.

Rosie and Sorrel filled her in on the gossip situation in her absence as far as they had been exposed to it. They had no compunctions against telling her what a nightmare it was to be around Prince Valan while she was gone. “He was almost a madman,” Sorrel whispered.

Cae looked concerned and Coral snapped the woman’s name in reprimand.

“I said ‘almost,’” she complained, but going quiet.

“And Pansy?” Cae asked.

Coral heaved a deep sigh. “Alas, the girl was part fool part victim. I assure you, that none of your women are now bunking with anyone else. Sorrel is with Rosie on the ladies hall below, and Fern is in with me in the anteroom.”

Cae looked over at Fern. “Is this all right with you?”

She nodded. “For now. Coral doesn’t snore or toss and turn like some I’ve shared a bed with,” she smiled, winking at the older woman.

“She is an acceptable bedmate,” Coral said in her stately way.

Rosie groaned, “Lucky you. Sorrel puts off way too much heat to be comfortable in Planting. At least right now we don’t need a brazier in the room,” she added with a sigh. Sorrel had the presence of mind to blush.

“But what has happened to Pansy?” Cae asked.

“She’s... been dismissed from royal service,” Coral said. “Do not worry, I gave her a reference to some friends of mine with a letter. She will find meaningful work within her skill set in a place where she can do no harm and actually mature a little. She might eventually find herself no longer a member of the Second Estate before long, but I promise you, she will not mind it. She really was not cut out to be left to her own devices,” she added with a shake of her head.

Cae nodded, pleased that nothing more was going to happen to her. “So, there is a new member of the household?” she said it as a question.

Coral’s expression tightened. “We have been informed. She has already been here, did a full inspection and given us an explanation of her... services.”

“You disapprove?”

Coral took a deep breath, exhaled slowly before speaking. “Not in so many words. Her ways are foreign, but I am given to understand that we are to help with this. There are certain of our tasks that she is to completely take from us, some of which I am sure will be a relief to some,” she gave a sidelong glance at Sorrel. “Others...” She took another breath. “She has asked to be the one to inform you herself.”

“Oh. Where is she?”

“Kitchen,” Sorrel answered, with unashamed relief at not being the one to go down to fetch whatever it was.

“Ah.” Now Caelerys asked the question she really wanted the answer to. “Has there been any friction? Will there be?”

Coral answered carefully. “Not yet, but perhaps. I am mostly concerned about her taking over duties Fern traditionally served for you.”

Fern hurried to reassure her. “I’ll be fine, my lady. If she is to be trusted, then it is important she do these things.”

“Like what?” Cae asked, beginning to be concerned.

It was at this point that the door was opened. Cae looked up and saw the woman in question enter carrying a tray. She also noticed there were guards outside the door. She looked over at Coral, “I will want a list of everyone those two are allowed to permit within my rooms as soon as possible. I want to make sure certain people are on it.”



Coral nodded, rising from her chair and moving it back, gesturing for the others to do the same as the woman set her tray upon the table and rearranged the things upon it. Rosie and Sorrel got up at once and made themselves scarce but Fern paused long enough to kiss Cae's cheek and whisper, "It is so good to be back with you, my lady. I didn't know what to do with myself."

Cae gave her a smile and watched her disappear into the bedchamber. Only then did she turn to observe the dark skinned woman in a dark blue, wool dress. The first thing she noted was that the gown she wore was a newer version of Fern's mid-fallow gown, proclaiming her not one of the Citadel's ladies, but Cae's own. Her skin was not as dark as lord Tume's, nor quite the same as Princess Semiana's. She had a more honey undertone that was beautiful in a very different way. Her eyes were almost black, and her hair was worn in a coil of braids that looked almost like a scarf wrap. She also wore very small golden earrings.

Done with the tea service, she simply stood there while Cae observed her. Finally, she bowed, bending at the waist though not quite like a man. It was a stiffer and more formal action than any movement she had yet to make. She straightened and just stood there until Cae finally spoke.

"I suppose introductions are in order," she said. "And explanations."

She only tipped her head slightly in acknowledgement. "I am Ikembe. Princess Semiana has asked that I serve you as your itoma." Her voice had a nice timbre to it, warm, though more flow and less hitch than she had experienced with Tume, with longer vowels.

"Itoma? What does this entail?"

"An itoma is part handmaiden, part body slave, part companion, part body-guard."

"Body slave?" she frowned.

She gave a half bow. "Not slave as the word is meant here. There is an agreement in the Northern word," she explained. "I serve as a slave would, for the time agreed upon."

"Ah. Still don't like it, but I think I understand how you mean it."

"You will," she said, bowing again. "That is part of my agreement: to teach you Northern ways and language, even as you and your women will teach me Southern ones."

"You have the language," Cae smiled.

"I do not have the accent, and there is an under-tongue I wish to learn as well."

“Ah, Rustic,” she nodded. “I know a maid on the lower floors named Rue who will help you if I ask. And my brother Janem speaks it fluently though he may not have time. I, however, have a question.”

“Yes, my lady?”

“You wear my livery, but you are a gift from Semi. Are you loyal to her over me?”

There was that smile again. “At the moment, yes. However, once I have been accepted, I am *your* itoma and no one else’s until our agreement ends. If she were to attack you after that time, I would kill her myself.”

Cae felt no deception from her at this. The woman’s commitment was absolute.

The woman gave another nodding bow. “Am I accepted?” she asked.

Cae studied her another long moment. “I feel there is more here to be explained.” She gestured to where her ladies had vanished, “Handmaiden I understand. Body slave I am beginning to. Companion, self-explanatory. Bodyguard?”

“You do not understand what a bodyguard does?” she asked with the ghost of a smile.

“I do, but I have been told you are taking up certain chores that some of my maids often did, and there is just something in the way you say it that warns me it is not what I might expect were Prince Valan to assign me one.”

The smile was no longer a ghost. “I am personally responsible for your welfare. I go where you go. You go nowhere alone, not even to bed.”

“The privy?” she asked, with a raised brow.

Her smile twisted. “If I have inspected it, you may have the privacy of which the word speaks. I will also be the only one to fetch any food brought to you. Nothing passes your lips I have not provided or tasted.”

“Shared food and drink?” Cae asked.

The woman considered it. “Perhaps. But you will not be the first, nor will you use utensils I have not checked. I am expert in almost all poisons and have a palate that can identify most Southern herbs. I also know which cannot or should not be mixed. Once you have married, I can identify those which might seek to keep you from conceiving or carrying to term.”

Cae seemed horrified at that thought.

“Northern courts are far more lethal, my lady. I am well versed in all methods of eliminating or weakening a rival. And once the offer for your hand is known, there will be many attempted. I am well aware of my lady’s training and desire to be capable of protecting herself. I will allow and facilitate that should the need arise.

However, if I give you an instruction, however odd, I will need you to obey without question or hesitation. And that goes as well for the bird.”

Cae studied her. “If I were your Princess Semiana, would you expect the same of her?” she asked carefully.

Her smile was predatory. “My lady, I would expect the same of her own father were he to accept me as his itoma.”

“Fair enough. And would he obey?”

“If he wished to keep his life and his itoma?” she said, her eyes flashing. “Yes.”

“Then I accept under those terms.”

She bowed, making a gesture with her hand, touching her heart, her lips and then her forehead. When she stood, her manner had subtly changed. “My first instruction is that never again will you watch the familiar when the unfamiliar stands near.”

Cae frowned.

She gestured to the bedchamber and then the tea tray. “You did not know me or my purpose. Yet you watched your childhood maid leaving the room when you should never have taken your eyes from me.”

The childhood maid remark shocked Cae for a moment, but she realized it must have been obvious to a trained observer.

“I will watch for you. But you must never assume I will see everything. Unless it is a rare situation where it would not be meet for you to do so, and for this I will teach you how to see without watching.”

Cae nodded. “Point taken.”

“Now,” she said, holding out her hand. “You have been given a medicine, I understand?”

Cae handed her the pouch, “No more than a pinch twice a day. It can be put in nearly any herbal or tea except for berry teas, because it fouls the taste, or anything with comfort root or others with anti-inflammatory properties, as it interferes.”

She watched the woman smell the herbs first. “This is for nightbane poisoning aftercare?” she asked.

“It is. To help with the weakness and to strengthen the blood.”

Ikembe nodded, tasted the raw herb before adding it to a cup. She poured tea into it and added just the right amount of honey. She stirred, letting it steep a few minutes before tasting it herself. Then she turned the cup around and handed it to Cae on the flat of her hand with a small bow.

Cae smiled, sipping it. The blend was perfect. “You’ve spoken with Fern already,” she observed.

Ikembe only smiled and picked up a cookie sized puff pastry, taking a tiny bite before placing it on a plate at Cae’s hand. She gave a small frown. “It will not go well with the tea, I fear, but I understand it is to help you with your strength. You must eat. It is one of those things I will insist upon for the next few days. It will be small things like this, as you will not wish a large meal, but it will be often.”

Cae nodded, realizing that the very thought of food made her uncomfortable. She also realized that this was one of the side-effects of nightbane. She obediently took a bite. It was good, but Ikembe was right, it was not going to go well with the tea. She ate it anyway.

Ikembe moved to stand at her elbow.

It was not long before the guards admitted Liliwyn. Their reunion was joyous. They filled each other in on the past fortnight and talked about Cae’s treatment and recovery. Cae also introduced Ikembe before asking her to go and fetch some refreshments for the coming guests. While she was gone, Liliwyn asked about her. “Are you sure she’s trustworthy?”

“I have accepted her as my itoma. Apparently that is absolute.”

“I meant the princess,” she amended, shaking her head when she recovered from her shock. “If you cannot trust her, you cannot trust her gift.”

She took a deep breath. “I believe so. She seeks an alliance with my House and it is not in her best interests to betray me. Also, I don’t get that impression from her. She has already proven herself invaluable.”

Lili still seemed a little sceptical. “If you are sure.” She changed the subject, gesturing that Cae should eat another bite and drink more of the tea. “So what do you feel up to doing today?”

She smiled. “I have the best surprise for you.”

Her eyes flashed. “Oh?”

“She’s also an Alümet tutor.”

Lili’s smile lit up the room.



It was when it was time for bed that Cae noticed the greatest changes in the dynamics of her household. No longer did the taster come to the room. All of that was handled by Ikembe who disappeared a little before supper, when Fern took her

place, and then returned with the meal. She tasted everything, taking small, but long and concentrated bites, testing the flavours for anything suspect, used every utensil and cup before allowing Cae to consume any of it. She also taught her a surreptitious way of observing the tasting without seeming to notice it.

Even her bath was tested. Every stitch of clothing that was to go upon her body was thoroughly checked against Ikembe's bare arm and run through her hands long before it was allowed to be placed upon Cae's body. She explained that it was to search for needles, thorns and toxins in the talc used to clean them. Before the talc could be used, Ikembe drew a line of it along her inner wrist and waited, checking for redness or other signs of tampering. She also praised Cae's choice of not scenting it, as it made the job of assassins much more difficult. She still allowed Fern to dress her and do her hair, but every pin and clip and comb was checked by Ikembe before it was used. Even the ribbon used to tie off her nightbraid was run across the tender skin below her lip before it was passed to Fern.

Cae sat up for a little while after the other women had gone to bed, and only Fern and Ikembe stayed up with her: Fern quietly mending across the room by candle so that the light would not interfere with the moonlight, and Ikembe performing some flowing exercise that Cae found interesting enough to be a distraction.

Ikembe smiled, realizing what Cae was doing. "My lady will join me in these soon enough. She should take advantage of the moon while she can."

Cae tipped her head, watching her. "You know about the moonscript?"

"No, my lady, but it is easy enough to deduce there is a reason you read alone by moonlight and send the others away before you do so. I have seen a great many wonders. One more does not startle me."

Cae smiled, and returned to her reading, or what she could by only one moon.

When she was ready to go to bed, Ikembe preceded her, checking the pillows and covers for foreign things. Finding them clean, she slipped into the side opposite where Cae usually slept, and left the 'tucking in' to Fern.

Before Fern closed the curtains, Cae took up her hand. "Are you certain you are all right with this?"

Fern smiled. "I am learning so much. I will learn more. And I like her as I love you. Besides, we have not slept in the same bed for six years, my lady. You need to grow used to sharing again," she smiled mischievously.

Cae blushed as she closed the curtains and settled back into the pillows. Tempest sat on the edge of the bed, contemplating the new arrangement, and trying to

## SHIFT: Dragon's Bride

decide where she wanted to sleep. Eventually, she flew up to the headboard between the two of them and watched Ikembe warily for a while.

Ikembe slept facing Caelerys, and, though she did not move, Cae was certain she was still awake and aware and would remain so until she herself fell asleep.

It did not take Cae long to drift. She was bone tired and her entire body felt heavy. When she finally slept, it was deep, as were her dreams. She was in deep water, pained and restless, cursing children who had been ungrateful and treacherous.



**W**hen Caelerys woke, she was a little startled to see Ikembe beside her, head propped upon her fist and watching her intently. She noticed that the woman had not unwound her hair or changed it beyond binding it with a colourful scarf.

When it was obvious that Cae was awake and aware, Ikembe asked a question. “And what did my lady dream?”

Cae frowned, confused by the question.

“There are ways of telling, my lady,” she said. “Changes in the way the eyes move. You dream late in your sleep, almost to the point of waking. This is unusual.”

Cae sat up, leaning back against the headboard and reached up to stroke Tempest. “Sometimes. They are very unusual of late. I thought I was drowning again for a bit, but I was not. I do not know what I was dreaming of, beyond miles of hurt and anguish. Sometimes I dream of flying or running across fields or deserts, lately they often end with a dragon, but he was not present last night,” she mused as she realized it.

Ikembe frowned, “How is it you fly?”

Cae smiled dreamily. “By being a bird.”

“Oh,” she said quietly, as if it made perfect sense. “Is my lady ready to rise?”

“Your lady,” she said with a rueful smile, “requires the privy.”

Ikembe slid out of the bed and crossed the room to the chamber, disappearing within.

Cae, a little confused, threw back the covers and slowly turned sideways on the bed, letting her feet dangle off the edge. She assessed her strength, almost certain that she had what she needed to make it across the room. Then she remembered that there was a small step that she would require before she could even get out of bed.

She was peering over the edge, looking for it when Ikembe returned, stood there in her night clothes with her hands on her hips. “And what does my lady think she is doing?” she asked.

“Getting up.”

“You should wait for me.”

“I am perfectly capable...”

“Perhaps in a few days you will be. But right now you must take no chances.”

With a groan, Cae allowed Ikembe to help her out of the bed and was suddenly grateful for her assistance. Her legs were less cooperative than she expected them to be. Ikembe assisted her to the privy, though she was left to manage herself there.

She was dressed and seated at her small table, nibbling at a simple breakfast when the queen was announced.

Cae rose and curtsied shallowly, though, knowing the queen’s preferences and her own strength, did not remain bent. The queen fluttered her hand at a chair and Caclerys sank obediently into it, even as lady Caena brought the queen a chair of her own.

“I am pleased to see you well,” the queen began.

Cae smiled, bowing her head. “Thank you, Y... Thank you. I am glad to see you again. Have you been well?” Even as her words sounded limping to her, the queen merely smiled dreamily, reached out and patted her hand as she would a child.

“Oh, we aren’t here about me, my dear. I am to have a daughter again!” Her expression hardened for half a second, “I mean to have a daughter again.” She became her normal, cheery self in the next instant. “I heard about your adventures, and your new lady. I am very interested in hearing more.”

In between nibbling at her breakfast, which both the queen and Ikembe made certain she did, she told the queen everything that had happened since she had left. While she seemed highly interested, and even asked questions, she also seemed



more distracted and distraught than usual. The longer the conversation went on, the more fretful Cae became. She felt powerless.

When she had told the queen about Lady Marrok, she stopped, reaching out and setting a hand on hers. “Your Majesty, please. What ails you?”

The queen sighed, squeezing her hand gently. “Nothing, my sweet. It is my curse as well as my blessing, to know terrible things are coming and that I am powerless to stop them. Indeed, I must not. I might even have my hand in them.”

“Why would She warn you if you are not to interfere?”

“So I won’t,” she sighed. “She sometimes shows me the consequences of interfering,” she added with a shudder.

“Sounds cruel.”

She gave her a weary smile. “Mothers sometimes have to be, to ensure their offspring are strong. I will survive it. Ask no more.”

“But I worry.”

The queen immediately put on a brave face. “You have far more to worry about. Waiting out the negotiations? Such a stressful, tedious procedure. And we shall need to make certain you are gowned appropriately. The midnight undergown and a cloth-of-silver over,” she mused, envisioning it.

Cae could only think of the cost of such a gown. “Oh, I do not think I need go so far as cloth-of-silver.”

“Nonsense,” said the queen. “It is to be a royal wedding.”

Cae turned to Fern, asked her to bring her the underdress to the sueded silk. “My mother had a gown made of this silk. It was like cloth-of-silver, but not.” When Fern brought the dress, Cae held it out to the queen. “This. If the overdress were made of this?”

The queen fingered the fabric, admiring the quality. “I will see if I can find this. It is beautiful.”

Cae was stunned. “My queen, I meant merely to ask if it would be acceptable. I expect my House to provide my gown.”

She gave her a sly smile. “Oh, things will have a way of working out.” She rose, pausing to stretch her back. “You, my dear, need some sun. Out to the gardens with you.” She glanced over the two ladies behind Cae. “Bring them both. One of you must remain at her side every moment.”

Ikembe bowed, and Fern curtseyed. Cae bowed her head as the queen took her leave, getting the feeling that to rise would have earned her a frown.



By the time Cae had gotten as far as the dragon fountain, she had to stop to rest. She sat slightly sideways upon the wide stone rim so that she could at least watch the falling water. She had only been there a few moments when Valan's voice came from behind her.

"I thought my lady did not ride side-saddle"

She smiled, dangling her fingers in the water. "Only stone walls and sickbeds," she commented. As he came up beside her, about to say something rather suggestive, she flicked her fingers at him.

He closed his eyes against the spray, blinked, looking down at her. "Were my lady well, she might regret such actions."

She laughed softly. "If your lady were well, you might well try."

He sat down next to her, took her damp hand in his. "So, you are better?" he asked.

She nodded. "Getting stronger. I made it this far before I had to rest. In a few moments I plan to make it all the way to the terrace."

"Do you? So a walk is out of the question?" he asked with a raised brow.

She blushed a little. "I do believe that a bower detour would be beyond my current strength."

He kissed her hand, his eyes never leaving hers. "Alas. Well, I might at the very least escort you to said terrace. I fear I shall see little of you today. Unless I might take my supper in your receiving rooms?"

She smiled softly. "I would like that."

He stood and drew her to her feet, holding her so closely for a moment that she feared he might say damn propriety and kiss her. Instead, he set her upon his arm in such a way that he might grab her should she weaken.

"So what shall you be doing with your day, my prince?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Reading reports mostly. I need to check on the investigations of the forge theft, the attack on your hall and you, the riots. We've gotten a small lead with the bull: House Tarinus."

"Just a member or officially sanctioned?" she asked.

"Unknown at the moment. One of the things we are investigating. I also intend on sitting in with my father and your brother on the negotiations."

She looked at him in surprise. "Is that normal? Do I need to be there?"

He shook his head. "It is going to be tedious and tiring. I am only going to be there to make certain of a few things."

"Like what?"

“Like my father doesn’t try to sabotage the proceedings by outrageous demands.”

She just stared. “Would he do that?”

“Maybe.”

“Why is he so against this?” she exclaimed softly. “I just do not understand it.”

“Neither do I, really,” Valan sighed. “He seemed amenable the first time mother suggested it. Of course, at that time I was resisting the very idea of marrying. I was too worried about losing control. Not long after the ball, he started to resist.”

“Asparadane,” she growled.

“Likely.”

“Have you investigated the possibility that she is sneaking into the Citadel through those secret passageways?”

It was his turn to stop and stare. “No, I have not.”

She felt intense chagrin. “I meant to ask Coral to find out, and to mention it to you, but with everything that happened it slipped my mind.”

He started them moving again. “Well, that’s one more thing I must add to my list. I have to speak to Bal.”

“How is he doing? I have not seen him yet.”

“Busy courting. And researching, and spying. We shall make a very good team, the two of us. And I have you to thank for that.”

She smiled. “I try.”

The sound of voices reached them, and they rounded a shrub to see the terrace and its pavilion teeming with people. Her grip on his arm tightened as she felt the sudden assault of their presence, wants and needs.

“Do you wish to sit elsewhere?” he asked softly, knowing what must have hit her.

She shook her head. “I shall have to learn to compensate. I will face worse if all goes well. I will never learn if I do not try.”

“You could wait until you are stronger,” he suggested.

She remained firm. “Over there will be fine,” she said, gesturing to a place that was a little off-set with shelter from the wind and partial shade from the direct sun. She glanced back at Ikembe, silently asking her opinion.

The woman looked the area over and nodded, moving around them to secure the seating and make certain there were no hidden dangers.

Valan watched her work, admiring her thoroughness. “I think I like her.”

Cae smiled. "Remember to thank Semi when you next see her."

"Semiana, huh? My brother would love to pick her brain," he mused as he led Cae over to the cushioned seat.

"I am quite certain they both would have a great deal to discuss," she answered, settling herself where she could make the most of the wan fallow sun. "Thank you," she said to both of them.

Valan sat beside her long enough for Ikembe to pour water from a nearby pitcher and sample it. After a few moments, she passed the cup to Cae and placed the pitcher where she could keep her eye upon it.

He leaned over and stole a kiss, causing Cae to blush. "My prince," she exclaimed in a low voice. "What if someone sees?"

"Then they shall know I have staked my claim," he rumbled, rising. Fern and Ikembe bowed as he kissed her hand and slipped away.

Cae pressed her hand to her lips, still feeling his heat. He was in a playful mood, though she had a feeling it would not last.

Tempest landed on the back of her seat, chirruped for water and Cae held up her goblet for her. She glanced over at Ikembe and the large, colourful bag she had slung at her hip. "You wouldn't happen to have my sewing in there, would you?" she asked.

The woman bowed, smiling, reaching in and pulling out a silk shirt and the box with her threads. "Among other things," she said, taking up position behind her whilst Fern sat beside her and helped Cae to sort her threads.

Cae was just finishing a sleeve, cutting the thread with the silver disc tool Janem had given her so long ago, when other women finally dared to come closer. Onelle was alone today, and looking very lost. Both sister and cousin were preoccupied with beaus elsewhere and had no need to be visible in the gardens. Liliwyn had not yet arrived.

"On your own?" Cae asked politely.

She nodded. "I'm... kinda terrified. Now I know how you must have felt when you first got here," she said in her soft voice. "How are you?"

"Growing stronger," she sighed. "So what are they saying?"

"About what?" she asked innocently.

"Oh, about everything. Don't try to tell me I'm not the subject of gossip somewhere. Not if Haira and Salera have their way."

Onelle looked shocked. "You... you haven't heard?"

Cae set her hands down in her lap, the needle unthreaded. "Heard what?"

“Well... Salera has been bundled off home to marry some border lord she loathes. We’ll see how well her Eldest god serves her now,” she added with a huff. “But Haira... Haira was killed in the riots.”

Her sewing was forgotten. “What?”

She nodded vigorously. “Well, it was Fourth Day,” she said with a shrug. “Malyna and her covey went to church, of course, like she does twice a week. They stayed well after service saying prayers for Salera. They had gotten maybe a block from the church hall when someone started dropping money in the streets saying some noble was throwing largesse. Of course, people dove for the money. When they looked around for the ‘noble’, all they saw was Malyna and her ladies. Her guards simply couldn’t hold that many people back. Malyna got her arm broken and her face bruised when someone knocked her down and she nearly got trampled by her own friends. Haira was grabbed and pulled into the crowd.”

“Didn’t the guards do anything to help her?” Cae was aghast.

Onelle shook her head. “Oh, no. They were only there to protect Malyna. Her ladies are protected only so long as they stay with her. Haira got trampled and nearly torn apart. Malyna and her other two friends barely made it back to the church. She was terrified.”

“I can imagine,” Cae breathed. “I know how I felt and I avoided the riot. That’s when I was attacked.”

“We heard,” Onelle said, shaking her head. “What is this kingdom coming to? I did not think things so bad they had to riot in the streets.”

Cae frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, that the second estate was so poor...”

Cae shook her head. “That was... was not the poor rioting for food,” she said, almost sad to rupture Onelle’s innocence in the matter. “That was someone trying to catch out a particular noble by throwing money to the crowd before they got there. They meant for someone to get hurt, they just didn’t care who else fell into their trap.”

Onelle covered her mouth, horrified by the thought. “But who did they want? Everyone of import who’d gone to church would have been well out of the way by then.”

Cae shrugged, noticing that Ikembe’s body had shifted position to one of readiness. “Who knows? Somehow someone found out that I was in the city, but did not know by which path I’d come. And regardless of whether I’d come by Dragon Gate

or Dock, I'd have to pass that throttle point to reach any of my goals, be it Greenstone or Stag's Hall."

Ikembe lunged at something just beyond the hedge, was startled for only half a second to find her blow blocked in the same style. A flurry of five blows were struck and countered in swift succession before Ikembe identified the culprit as a member of the royal family, mostly by Liliwyn standing off behind him giggling. "I told you that would be a very bad idea," she admonished, trying to look stern.

Ikembe took two steps back, remaining ready but willing to stand down.

Balaran looked her over with a startled scowl. Finally he relaxed, keeping an eye on her every move, but executing a bow not unlike her own. Ikembe copied him and then returned to her place behind Cae's seat.

Bal came around the hedge and seemed even more startled to see Caelerys sitting there. He looked from the dark woman to the lady. "You have an itoma?" he stammered. "When... how did you get an itoma?!"

Liliwyn seated herself next to Cae and watched the exchange with delight, helping herself to a drink.

Cae looked up at him calmly, knowing it would only frustrate him even more. "How did you know she was an itoma?"

"Her hair, how else?" he growled, pointing to the twisted halo of braids.

Cae glanced back at Ikembe. "Oh. I thought that was merely a cultural thing for her. Her tribe as it were."

There was a ghost of a smile playing at both Cae and Ikembe's lips.

"It is," he choked. "Her tribe are trained ...from *childhood*... to be the most lethal and complete bodyguards in the known world! The number of gold beads in her," he gestured around his head in a rough indication of the way she wore her hair.

"Hoape," Ikembe supplied. Cae looked up at her, trying to repeat the word. She pronounced it more slowly. "Ho-AH-pey," she said.

Cae repeated it, nodding when she got it, counting, as she did, three beads on the hoape.

"They symbolize her masteries. The red, how many masters she's had."

Cae glanced back and Ikembe turned her head to show her the single red and a blue bead in her crown. "And the blue?" she asked.

Ikembe gave a bow, "Correction, Your Highness, my lady. The red is how many contracts I have fulfilled to term. The blue is for those that have ended by natural

death. Black would be for deaths I could have prevented. Three black beads and all of my braids are cut off, and I am sent into the desert with only my knife.”

“So you have served someone who died of natural cause?” she asked.

Ikembe nodded. “He was already aged when I took the contract. He was my first. I served him three years. My red bead was for five.”

“Contract fulfilled?” Liliwyn asked.

Her smile was predatory, “No, lady. She refused to heed my instructions for her safety, failed to fulfil her end of the contract. It was justly terminated.”

“Did she live much longer than that?” Cae asked, curious.

“No, my lady. She was poisoned by her husband’s paramour, but not before she was stabbed by her own son.”

In the silence that followed, Balaran reclaimed his composure. “I repeat the question, Lady Caelerys. Where did you acquire the services of an itoma?”

“Semi gifted her to me. Though I had no idea how great a gift it would be. I will have to send her something special.”

Liliwyn called for tea. “Perhaps have Janem make her something if he has the time?” she suggested.

“That is an excellent idea. I will ask.”

Balaran finally sat down. Cae leaned towards Liliwyn, grinning. “Wow. I have finally rendered him speechless. And it wasn’t really even me,” she giggled.

“It’s a lot to take in,” he complained.

Ikembe bowed, “Your Highness, may I ask who taught you?”

He gave an embarrassed chuckle. “Two years in South-western Alumet, among the Dowi. Little man named Bin’k. For one who studied a ‘water’ style, he did not know how to swim. I pulled him out. He taught me to fight.”

“You made a good bargain,” she smiled.

He grinned back, “So did you, apparently. Though you should have been warned before you offered the contract that there are a few individuals determined to kill your matama.”

“Matama?” Cae asked.

“That would be you,” he laughed. “The other party in the contract.”

“Oh, but I was, Your Highness,” Ikembe said with a smile. “Thoroughly briefed.”

Liliwyn swatted at the prince with the tail of her wrap. “Oh, leave her alone, Bal. You are being troublesome. I quite like her.”

“You’ve already met her, haven’t you?” he accused.

She nodded serenely. "Yesterday, in fact. Had lessons in Alumet."

"And you never told me?" he asked, looking hurt.

She shrugged, waving the servant approaching with tea to the table in front of them. "You never tell me why you spend long hours every night on the astronomy tower."

They both fell silent, engaging in a battle of expressions that said much more than words would have. Cae watched with amusement even as she observed Ikembe sniffing and tasting the raw tea that had been brought, sipped the plain, hot water before making the tea. Once the pot was made, she sampled the sugar, made Cae's cup, tasted the pouch of herbs in her possession before finally sprinkling it into the steaming liquid.

Caclerys merely nodded her thanks, having learned already that this was the preferred response, if one must be given. If Liliwyn noticed, she said nothing. Onelle just watched, stunned at the changes that were occurring all around her.

"Oh, just everyone is pairing off!" she exclaimed in frustration. "At this rate I'll be an old maid in my sister's court."

Liliwyn broke off her combat, apparently having either won or gained the upper hand. "Nonsense, my dear. You are pretty, well situated and skilled. You will find someone. You are still young."

"Princess Syera was my age and she's wed."

"Sai was also a princess upon whom matters of state rest," Bal said, conceding his defeat with a nod at Lili. "Were that not the case, father would have waited another year. Besides, with multiple children on the table, your father will want to handle them one at a time," he said, making a cup of tea and handing it to Lili.

"What about the pair of you?" Cae asked with a smile. "Do not tell me it is not being discussed."

"Oh, it isn't," Bal said ruefully, making himself a cup. "Won't be until Valan is settled out. Won't be as much an issue though. I've sent the offer and Duke Cygent has agreed to wait to negotiate. Eldest first and all."

Onelle looked from one to the other. "Forgive my ignorance, Your Highness, but... Syera was the youngest of the three of you, but she was wed first."

Balaran smiled. "Ah, but when she was offered for, there were no offers going out for either my twin or myself. That, plus the circumstances of the choice," he added with a tip of his head, "meant she was settled first. Had either of us expressed a wish to offer,... she would have had to wait."

"And how do the two of you feel about it?" Cae asked.



Liliwyn shrugged as she sipped her tea. “It gives me a little more time to get used to the idea,” she said, her eyes meeting Bal’s and laughing at him, though her lips conveyed only the slightest smile.

Cae smiled as she sipped her own tea. “How long do you think before it spreads that your brother in is negotiations?” she asked the prince.

“Immanently,” he said lazily, watching a courtier fluttering over to a small group and gathering in a whisper.

Cae turned her eyes in the direction he watched in the surreptitious way Ikembe had taught her. She seemed to be concentrating on her sewing, but she was fully aware of the little group which broke up and fluttered off to other clusters to share the news. “I never thought I would ever actually see it,” she mused. “They do so look like hens in a farmyard.”

Lili and Onelle giggled.

Balaran leaned back, folding his hands behind his head, watching clouds scudding across the vivid blue sky. “The question is, where is the leak? Who found out first?”

“Oh, I have my guess,” Lili mused, concentrating very hard upon the contents of her cup.

Tempest gave a chirp to let Cae know someone was coming. She looked up as Malyna walked over, dressed sombrely in a black gown trimmed in copper, with her hair arranged in wings so that the bruised side of her face was hidden. Her arm was bound in splinted bandages and hung from a black sling around her neck. She curtsied at the edge of the seating area, her eyes downcast.

“Might I join you, Your Highness, ladies?” she asked in a voice softer than Onelle’s.

Onelle seemed a little reluctant, but looked to Lili and Cae before she said anything. Cae glanced at Balaran before graciously offering her a seat. “Please, have some tea,” Cae said. “I cannot tell you how sorry I am about your lady in waiting.”

She gave a slight, pained shrug of her good shoulder. “It was the will of the Eldest,” she sighed. “Had we been more proper, we’d have been home before it happened, or we been more devout, we’d have remained safe within until it was sorted.”

They just stared at her. Cae was still trying to find words when Balaran sat up and spoke. “Who told you that it was your fault you were caught up in that mess?”

“Pontifex Ulrael. Mother,” she added in the same soft voice.

“Let me guess, one said one, the other the other?” Cae said sharply.

Malyna winced at her tone, but nodded meekly.

“Which?” Lili asked so softly Cae almost did not hear her.

“Mother said I should never have been there. I should have come home immediately after service. But I wanted to pray for Salera,” she protested raising her voice at last, even if it was still below her regular volume. “She’s been married off to that horrid old man from the coast who stinks of fish and has all kinds of... loathsome and impure thoughts,” she shuddered.

“Had she met him before?”

Malyna shook her head. “I have. He’s what the Pontifex calls a letch. I was only ten when he first came to see my mother, but I didn’t like the way he looked at me. He was old even then. He’s also mean.”

“Do you think he will harm her?” Onelle asked, horrified.

Malyna shrugged. “Maybe, if she doesn’t please him, but that’s his right. No, I meant that he is a miser. He won’t part with a single coin but that he has twice its value already in his other palm. And like I said, he smells of fish and... spirits,” she whispered.

Cae swallowed at the mention of the stuff.

Bal merely eyed her with a grin that vanished quickly. He leaned forward. “What coast, what lord and who made the arrangement?”

“Um, somewhere near the Asparadane border? North of here, I know that. He has a small keep at the end of the Tombolo Drift. It’s north of the Sinecar, on the far side of our lands. Lord Lanlan Cuttle.”

“Who initiated the arrangements,” he softly insisted.

“I don’t know, but I know my mother was handling it. She’s done all the negotiations between him and Salera’s father. He’s one of the Asparadane vassals. Mother says I shouldn’t worry for her. It’s a very good match, well above her station, but... though her father’s only a minor knight and Lord Cuttle is a lord in his own right, he’s still a minor.” She seemed to get hold of herself. “I should not complain,” she breathed. “It is not ladylike or proper. It is what the Eldest wills. I am merely a woman. No, a girl, and I have no right to question it.”

“You have every right,” Cae growled. “Your mother doesn’t even hold faithful to this absurd and imprisoning faith, why should you?”

Malyna looked horrified.

“Seriously, Malyna,” Cae said, setting her sewing down. “Why would you bow to a faith that puts you in chains merely because you are female? What role has the Mother in all of this?”

“Well,” she foundered, “she birthed everything.”

“From nothing, aye,” Balaran said. “And asked nothing more than any mother asks of her children.”

“Obedience and loyalty,” Malyna said, nodding.

Liliwyn pressed the fingertips of one hand to her forehead. Cae just groaned. “No. To be all that you can be, the best you can be. To be helpful to others and to love her. You don’t worship your mother, do you?”

“No, but... she expects to be obeyed without question.”

“Mother Chimera has never given an order,” said Lili simply.

This brought her up short. “But...” but even her own arguments seemed hollow.

Cae took pity on her and changed the subject. “How is your arm, dear? What are they treating you with?”

She shrugged with her good shoulder, grateful. “I don’t know. I’m being given something for the pain, and something for when I sleep. I have to sleep bound so I do not move it.”

“Barbarians,” Lili muttered under her breath. “Do they ever unwrap it?”

Malyna shook her head vigorously. “That would unwind the blessing.”

“The Leviathan take the blessing,” Cae snarled. “You need a comfort root compress and arnica. Slip it under or over this ‘blessing’, it matters not which, but I promise you, it will heal faster and feel better much sooner.”

“Really?”

“Why do you think Vyncet is walking about now and not still abed?” she said, picking up her sewing again and beginning to work on the embroidery on the new sleeve. Fern handed over her favourite needle already threaded with a length of emerald silk. “Seriously, why your mother has not consulted a Physician....”

“She has,” she protested. “The church has Physicians. They just do not rely upon spells and...” she stopped, having caught the look in Bal’s eye and realizing the hypocrisy of what she was about to say.

Liliwyn saved her. “It was not your fault you got caught in that mess,” she said. “You were just trying to help a friend. No one has any right to blame you for that misfortune.”

Her voice was meek again, “My brothers say I was stupid to be out there. That I deserved the punishment I received.” No one said what they were thinking, as it was clear on her face that she was processing something important. “But why would Haira have been punished? She was doing her duty, which was to protect my virtue

and stay with me. If I was at fault, then I should have been punished, not her.” She rose, curtseyed. “If you will excuse me, cousin, ladies... I have to go. I need to ...think. ...And take my medicine.”

“I’m telling you,” Liliwyn said, setting a gentle hand upon her unwounded arm. “Comfort root.”

She nodded and started to leave. She turned back, dipping another half curtsey. “Oh, and congratulations, Caelerys. I understand the king is negotiating for your hand for Prince Valan. I wish you both happiness,” she said, and then slipped off into the gardens alone.

Onelle watched her go, shaking her head. “I don’t see how you two could be so charitable, after the things she and her ladies have said about you.”

Cae shrugged, sliding her needle through the taut fabric. “She has suffered a great deal lately and I think most of it is her mother’s fault, not her own. I still cannot trust her, knowing her mother might still be using her, but...” she sighed. “It is no matter. It costs us nothing to be kind.”

“Besides,” mused Lili, finishing her now cold tea. “I think she is beginning to see the flaws in the prison her mother and the church are building around her.”

“You are better than me,” she sighed, reaching over to tickle the sleeping Tempest with a long leaf. When Tempest snapped it from her grasp with lightning reflexes, she giggled and stood. “Well, I need to excuse myself,” she said with a curtsey. “I am supposed to be mingling, not ‘perching,’” she added, making a silly face.

They said their goodbyes and Onelle drifted off in the opposite direction of Malyna to speak with a different group of ladies with more available men surrounding them.

Bal watched her go, his mind still on Malyna and the things she said. “None of that bodes well,” he said. “I really need to talk to Val.”

“Well, you could come to supper in my room, if you have trouble finding him,” Cae offered. “He’ll be dining with me tonight.”

He gave a snort. “He would not thank me for the intrusion,” he grimaced. “No, I’ll wait for him in his room if I can’t find him this afternoon. Safer that way.”

She just smiled, eyeing him over her small, neat stitches. “Suit yourself. I think he said something about a lot of reports. And then an investigation.”

He had started to rise, then stopped, leaning forward over his knees. “Remember what we’ve been talking about?”

Her eyes caught his. “Did he tell you? What he and your mother and I spoke of before I left?” she asked vaguely.

“Aye. Can you do to him what she does to you?” he asked, pointing at Tempest.

Cae closed her eyes and thought about him, letting her hands go still even though they wanted to be moving. She felt something in her fingers not unlike her needle but thicker, and smelled things familiar, ink and paper; felt frustration and barely controlled anger. She opened her eyes and went back to her sewing. “I think the reports are your best clue, Bal. I am sorry.”

He rolled to his feet grinning. “Don’t be. I know where he is.” He headed off towards the Citadel without another word.

“Would you like to explain that?” Liliwyn asked, eyeing her friend.

Cae just smiled enigmatically. “Not here, I don’t. Later would be better.”

Liliwyn refilled her teacup and resigned herself to wait, seeing other courtiers drifting over now that the prince had left, daring themselves to clarify the newest rumours from the subject if not the source.



A private supper with the prince was less private than she had hoped. With him came two guards, plus his taster. Thankfully the rest of his guards remained outside the room. Fern and Coral stayed at the outskirts of the room while Ikembe stood taster for her. The food was brought in by other servants, each person’s portion upon their own plate.

They tried to hold a conversation whilst matters were bustling about them, but finally gave up, settling for longing looks and quiet smiles. Cae was watching some of the bustle out of the corner of her eye, alerted by some shift of emotion in the room. She glanced at Ikembe, obliquely conveying her concern as she searched for the source of her unease.

She closed her eyes, thought about each person in the room, picturing in them in her mind’s eye. She moved from one to the other with nothing feeling amiss. The guards, Larch and Ralen, were on alert but prepared to ignore conversations and stand for the duration of the meal. Cae’s women were a little flustered at royal company and the invasion of others to the privacy of the room, and it wasn’t coming from Valan.

She caught a faint whiff of spice root. When the plates were set in front of each of them, she took a deep breath, and the smell grew stronger.

She opened her eyes, looked at the two identical plates: roast partridge on a bed of sliced vegetables that smelled really good. She could even see shreds of the spice

root on her bird. She looked over Valan's meal, did not see any. She raised her hand to forestall him. He paused, the slice of meat halfway to his mouth.

*"Do you have an aversion to spice root?"* she asked quietly in Alvermian.

He shook his head. *"I actually have a fondness for it. Whenever we had quivering tummies when we were little, mother used to give it to us candied. Why?"* he asked in kind, now suspicious.

*"Then why it is on my meal and not yours?"*

He looked over, saw the faint dusting and set his fork down.

Cae knew Ikembe had noticed and understood the exchange, saw her watching the prince's taster from the corner of her eyes. *"Play along. I promise I'll not take a single bite."* Cae switched back to Elanthian, sniffed the meat on her own fork and frowned, "Oh, I cannot abide spice root," she said with feigned aversion.

The prince looked down at his own food, "Mine seems to be free of it. I adore spice root. They must have switched our plates. Here, my lady, take mine," he said, swapping his plate for hers.

Cae felt the rising panic. Guessing at the source, she was easily able to pinpoint it. She cut herself a morsel and lifted it to her lips. The man bit his lip. In a heartbeat, Ikembe had stepped behind him, and pulled him down and back against her chest, her forefinger and thumb pressed like iron rods to the tender places behind his ears and jawbone. "What does it do?"

Larch and Ralen surged forward just a few seconds too late, drawing their blades but not knowing where to aim them. Larch stepped between the conflict and the diners, whilst Ralen looked to the prince to know which combatant to threaten.

Valan stood. Larch stepped aside, but held a position from which he could defend his charge. He glared down at the taster who's face was beginning to redden.

"It must not be something to kill, as he will be suffering the effects soon enough," Valan said coldly. He gave Ikembe a nod and a look indicating the floor and she let the man go, driving him to his knees. "Did he add anything after he tasted?" he asked the room in general.

Everyone denied seeing it.

The taster shook his head, tears beginning to well in his eyes. He grovelled at the prince's feet. "Please, Your Highness. I had no choice."

"There is always a choice."

"They threatened my family. To feed them worse, if I did not. ...It was not harmful, Your Highness, I swear!"

Valan moved his boot out of the man's reach in distaste. "What was it to do?"

“Merely... mild stomach pains, vomiting, and the like. It will purge itself.”

“And the spice root?” Cae asked.

“It counters the worst of it,” he sobbed. “I was to... to...”

“To poison your prince and have me blamed, is that it?” she snapped. “Both meals are poisoned, Val. Slipwort or one of its sisters, I am guessing.”

The man nodded. “Please, Your Highness. Do whatever you must to me, but do not let them hurt my family.”

“Who are they?”

“My wife and son, my old mother, they live at the end of the cheapside, not far from Iron Alley.”

Valan’s expression was disgusted. “Not your family,” he growled, and Cae could feel the dragon within beginning to stir. “‘They’. The ones you fear more than my wrath. Whose gold is more valuable than your loyalty.”

She set her hand upon him, trying to soothe him back.

The taster shook his head. “I do not know them, Your Highness. I had never seen them before. One was a man with a scar on the back of his left hand who cornered me in a side-street on my way to the Citadel this afternoon.”

Ikembe’s eyes flashed. “Brown hair, the skin of a sailor and eyes like mud?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Maybe. Wore a hood and a cloak against the cold. Eyes were a muddy brown, yeah. Skin was dark, yeah, but not like yours. Like a farmer.”

She met the prince’s gaze. “This is the man what brought your bride low.”

He nodded, the tension in his neck and jaw were clear.

“*Breathe, my prince,*” Cae said softly.

“And by what proof did they hold that they even knew your family?” Valan asked.

“My son’s doll. A poppet my mother made him. He is never without it.”

Valan turned and strode towards the door, stepped out into the hall for several minutes. When he returned, the other two of his guards came with him and picked the taster up from the floor, held him up to the prince. “You will be taken down-stairs to the dungeons until your fate is decided. Had you come to me, your family would have been whisked off to safety and at least half of this could have been avoided. As it is, I will not allow your family to pay for your crime. Guards are even now, taking them to a safe place far from here. It is doubtful you will see them again.”

He stepped aside and the guards carried him away. Half way down the hall they could hear the poison beginning to take effect. Valan closed the door and turned on Cae's women. "You are to begin packing her things immediately. I am having her moved tonight."

Coral curtsied, bowing her head. "Does Your Highness know to which rooms?"

"He does not," he said. He held out his hand to Caelerys, drawing her close to him. "We are going to go and impose upon my brother in hopes that he has not had similar troubles." He turned back to Coral. "Get them started at once. I will speak to the mistress of the upper chambers and someone will be down to help you move and inform you where to go."

Coral bowed deeply and ushered the others into the dressing chamber. "Fern, Ikembe, both of you follow, please," he said, leading Cae out of the room.

Their imposition upon Balaran's meal was not quite the unwelcome event anticipated. Balaran actually laughed as he ordered more food brought up. "Well, you did invite me to sup with you, my lady," he chuckled.

Val glanced at her. "When we were to finally sup alone?"

She gave him a rueful glare, "Well, he needed to speak with you, and I hardly call what we just had 'alone'."

"The lady has a point," Bal laughed, pulling out a chair for her.

Cae glanced briefly around the chamber, finding everything just as she expected it to be, full of books and scattered drawings and writing.

Valan seated her and kissed her hand. "I should be back by the time the food has arrived. I must attend to a small matter."

"No small matter, moving me," she grumbled.

"I promised your brother."

Bal waved for him to sit down. "Eat what's already here. Everything's been tasted, I'm fine. I'll eat when more arrives."

When Valan finally nodded and sat, Ikembe set about immediately tasting everything, before allowing Cae to eat a single bite. To save trouble, Cae sat close enough to Valan to share the plate. She had not realized until food was in front of her just how hungry she was. They were almost finished when a stately woman in a yellow gown entered the room and curtsied to all and sundry. Balaran introduced her as Dame Kettle, Mistress of the Royal Floor.

She bowed again. "I am given to understand this lady is to be moved at once to this floor?"



“You are correct,” Val said, wiping his fingers on a cloth. “An attempt was made to discredit her and I fear others will follow. Security is better up here.”

“It most certainly is, Your Highness.” She turned to Caelerys, “My lady has maids assigned to her?”

“I do. Two of my own, plus three assigned by the Citadel,” she said. “Coral, Rosie and Sorrel.”

“Coral I know,” she said with a nod. “I am not certain the other two are up to the standards of this floor. I can assign...”

Both Valan and Caelerys cut her off.

“I would rather not add new faces to her staff at this point.”

“I would rather not deal with additional strangers...” she devolved into a giggle, realizing they had both spoken at once. She gestured back to Ikembe. “This is my itoma. Before anything is brought up to the rooms chosen, I would like for her to examine it thoroughly.”

When the prince concurred, she curtsied. “As you wish. If you will come with me, then?” she asked Ikembe.

When the two women had left, Cae continued to stare at the door. “Is she unquestionable?”

“She’s a bar of iron, that one,” Bal smirked.

Fern piped up from where she stood near Cae’s chair, having stepped up to Ikembe’s place. “I have heard her spoken of among the servants, my lady,” she began.

“Oh? And what is said?” Cae asked.

“That she is more loyal to her reputation than to any resident upon the floor. She will allow nothing to compromise the security of her charge. She is very strict about the protocols.”

“Sounds like just what we need,” Cae sighed.

Balaran leaned back in his chair, putting his feet up on a footstool nearby. “So I take it we have an even more convoluted plot in motion?”

“That might begin to scratch the surface,” Valan growled.

“It seems that the plot has changed, though,” Cae mused.

“How so?” Bal asked, though from his expression he knew.

“First they were trying to kill me, now to discredit... Though at the riot, they were yelling slurs at me specifically,” she added more softly.

“Could be two different plots,” Bal suggested.

“Or the same one with multiple angles,” Val shook his head. “I’ll not discredit either. We shall take no chances until that candle is lit.”

“There has to be common threads, something connecting things,” Bal grumbled, frustrated that he could not see it. “You said it’s the same guy who started the ambush that bribed the taster?”

“Threatened,” Cae corrected.

He waved his hand at the difference. “You really think moving her is best?”

“What else can I do?” Val complained. “The security up here is tighter. There are guards at practically every door. Who would dare to assassinate her so close to the king’s own chambers?”

“Well, they’ve already proven there are other ways to stop this marriage than killing her.”

Cae let both men rant over head, sat quietly stroking Tempest when she hopped onto her lap and fed her scraps. There was so much going on at once it was hard to think. She despaired of what Will would say when he found out. “He’s going to hit the roof,” she said softly to the bird.

Both princes looked over at her. “What? Who?”

She looked up. “Oh, sorry. Willam.”

Valan groaned, dreading the thought. Balaran glanced at his brother. “She’s starting to act like mother,” he said.

“No, she is far more present,” Val corrected. “Especially lately.”

Caclerys nodded. “Yes, your mother is very disturbed by something. She knows something she cannot and should not stop. It’s tearing her apart.”

They looked at each other.

Valan leaned forward, setting a hand on hers. “Do you think you can feel father? Being on the same floor?”

Cae thought about him, tried to stretch herself in the direction she was certain he had to be. She shook her head. “There is too much in the way, I think. Too many people. Too many emotions. I either do not know him well enough or I am not close enough.”

Valan let out a breath he had not been aware he was holding. “It was a thin hope. I should go speak to him,” he added. “I don’t know if he’s been told yet.”

Balaran nodded. “I’ll stay with the ladies.”

Valan rose, glared at him. “Don’t get too friendly,” he snarled playfully.

“What? ME?” he laughed.

Valan kissed her hand and took his leave, knowing that to linger would make it harder to leave her.

Balaran rose. “No sense wasting the time just waiting,” he said, picking up a book and setting up a chair by the window. He handed her the small tome and began blowing out candles. “Do you need a wrap?”

She shook her head, rising and heading to the window seat. Tempest flew over first, settling on the sill but out of her way. She looked the book over in the thin moonlight. It was one she had seen before on the tribes and clans of man and the formation of the Houses as she knew them. Beneath the golden moon it told a different story. She remembered a chapter on the Leviathan and House Levitau and turned to it. The story told in black ink was everything one would expect of a historian writing in the aftermath of the destruction of the House. The story told in gold spoke of the Leviathan’s great rages and the terrible destruction wrought in its wake, but also of its gentleness and desire to live peacefully.

Black told of a wound pestilence that slowly devoured any who were cut by the blades of the Levitau and listed numbers of casualties in the battle to destroy the House. Cae was not certain, as the golden letters were not all complete, but she suspected that the author doubted that the Levitau were at all responsible, or at least not entirely. There was a secondary list of casualties with actual names and gaps in the sentences in which the significance of those names could be written.

She called Balaran over. “We need the Eastern Lady,” she said, showing him.

“I think you’re right. This looks very important.”

“Do you think we could look up this list of names and see if any of them survived the pestilence? It sounds exactly like what plagues my father.”

“I can look. I’ll ask the Great Worm in the morning. He’ll know if it is in the main stacks or the archive. I haven’t had much luck looking for the symptoms but now that we sort of have a name and origin it might be easier.” He set his hand on her shoulder. “We’ll save your father yet.”

A throat cleared in the darker portion of the room. “Should I be concerned?” Valan asked.

Bal startled, having not heard his brother enter, but Cae felt only amusement from Valan and merely smiled at him. “Only if we cannot find a cure amongst those names.”

He shook his head. “Not what I meant and you know it, my lady.”

She just laughed. "You can play at jealous suspicions with your brother all you like, but I feel your heart, ketava. I will never be fooled when you express what you do not feel."

Valan swore under his breath, crossing to her chair to place a kiss upon her forehead. "Takes all the fun out."

"Hey, at least you are having fun now," Bal complained. "There were a few years there that I was beginning to despair of you."

"I had a few doubts myself," he chuckled. "But someone," he said, running the back of his fingers tenderly down her cheek, "warned me that attending solely to one's duty and not attending also to one's soul makes one no good for anything."

She smiled, blushing and slipped her hand into his.

Larch entered the room, paused at the darkness and began to light lamps from Fern's candle. "The Mistress is coming. I believe they are ready to move her, Your Highness," he said.

Cae looked up at Valan. "You really should knight that man," she said softly.

"I really should," he concurred. He drew her to her feet just as Dame Kettle and Ikembe entered the room.

Dame Kettle curtsayed and straightened. "I have put her in the middle of the hall, in Princess Syera's old room. The basics of her belongings have been moved."

Tempest chirped sleepily from the window sill at Ikembe, waiting patiently behind her.

"Ikembe?" Cae asked.

The woman bowed. "The room is secure, matama."

Cae nodded graciously to Dame Kettle. "Thank you, madam, for all your trouble."

Surprised, the woman curtsayed to her again. "It was my pleasure, my lady. Your maids are waiting to prepare you for bed. Would you like a bath drawn?"

She shook her head. "Perhaps in the morning."

Valan escorted her down the hall to her new chambers. Painfully aware of everyone present, he settled unhappily for a chaste kiss at her door. As he pressed his lips to her cheek, he whispered. "I would not get too comfortable here. I have my way, you'll be moving again before the Lord sees another quarter."

She blushed, feeling the heat rising through the very core of her as he pulled away and headed down the hall to his own room. She noticed that Ralen and one other of Valan's guards took up station at her door.

Slipping into the room, she looked around. It did not look much different from the last time she had been in here with Syera, while she was being fitted for her gown, although it seemed much more empty. There were few personal touches left. Her bow lay unstrung in its box on the sideboard next to her quiver. But beyond some decorative glass and her tea set, nothing here was hers. Her maids stood in a row in the middle of the room, looking a little the worse for the flurry of activity and Sorrel, at least, looked worried that Cae would not be pleased.

Coral curtseyed, her eye upon Dame Kettle standing by the door. “Everything my lady will need for tonight and the morning has been moved, my lady,” she said formally. “What remains will arrive after you have gone to the gardens.”

“Thank you, Coral.”

Dame Kettle stepped forward, sweeping her arms in the directions of various doors as she explained them. “Your bedchamber, your dressing chamber, and your maid’s anteroom. I understand that the two junior maids were residing below in the servant quarter. That has changed. Your senior lady has a secondary chamber within the anteroom, and the others sleep in the main portion. There is a privy in the bedchamber. There is a fire lain in your room already, and a perch for your pet. If there is anything else, Lady Caclerys?” she asked.

Cae nodded graciously, “No, thank you. I believe I may handle my household from here, thank you. If there are any needs or questions, one of my ladies will come to you in the morning.”

“As it pleases,” she said, curtseying again before she took her leave.

The moment the door closed behind her, everyone seemed to deflate and relax. Cae crossed to her maids, placing comforting hands upon the shoulders of the two youngest. “Everything will be fine. I know it will take a little time to put everything to rights. Also, we might not wish to unpack too completely?” she said with a meaningful look.

They smiled and nodded.

“All right, then. Everything back to normal. The three of you may do whatever you wish for the rest of the evening, get yourselves sorted. Fern and Ikembe can handle anything else I may need tonight.”

As this had become the norm, with the exception of the addition of Ikembe, no one had any questions or complaints. Fern pardoned herself for a moment and went with Coral into the anteroom to sort her own sleeping arrangements, so that she could slip into bed later without disturbing the older maid.

Cae went to the bedchamber, remembering the room fondly. The smell of the princess was almost gone, though traces lingered here and there. She had not been here long enough to have become embedded.

Tempest padded into the room behind her, poking her beak into everything.

Ikembe closed the door and crossed to the entrance to the dressing chamber. This she had barricaded with two of Cae's trunks, stacked upon one another. She reached over and tried to open the door, found it nearly impossible without knocking over the top chest and making a great deal of noise. Satisfied, she crossed to Cae.

Caelerys only glanced at the barricade with a questioning look.

"There is an escape passage in the dressing chamber within the wardrobe. Not being something I could seal from the inside, I have done this. The only access is now through this door and that will be locked with a key every night. Only I have the key."

"Well, and Dame Kettle, I am sure," Cae said. "That woman probably has a key to every lock on this floor."

She shook her head. "Only I have the key," she insisted. "The dame and I have agreed upon this. This way, no one can take it from anyone outside."

Cae nodded. "I am surprised she agreed, but very well. I hate that we have to resort to such lengths."

"It is a necessity of life at court. Less so in Southern courts than Northern ones, but still a fact. Now, if you wish, we can end the evening with the stretching exercises you have seen me do. It will help to loosen your muscles, relax the mind to promote sound sleep."

"Do you think I am ready?" she asked.

"I think it will help you regain your strength, and it is safe to do now."

Cae stood in front of her, spreading her arms. "Show me."

The two women were in almost perfect sync in front of the fire when Fern entered the room. "Oh, may I join?" she asked.

Ikembe nodded with a smile, showing her the movements. As they slowly shifted from one pose to another, Ikembe told them how each move could be used for self-defence or offence if done at the right speed.

By the time they were done and had bowed to each other, Cae's muscles felt stretched and ready to curl up and just sleep. Ikembe locked the door and repeated the previous evening's ritual of checking everything from her nightdress to the pillowcases before allowing her to be dressed or climb into the bed. When she did, she

found the linens to smell sweet. Breathing deeply of the pillow, she thought she caught traces of Syera, and drifted off to sleep thinking about her, wondering how married life was treating her.

Tempest flew up onto the bed, hopping across the covers to find a place to sleep herself, not being interested in the perch set up on the far side of the room. Finally, she settled down between the pillows. Cae reached out and wrapped her arm around her, pulling her close.



**C**aelerys woke far colder than when she had gone to sleep. She stirred, feeling stiff and mildly thick-headed. But something was not right. She curled into the pillow and realized that it did not smell as it should. It was slightly musty, and far too coarse to be the pillow of a princess. There was a terrible sense of loneliness and isolation and a sound, at once familiar and at the same time terrifying: the call of seabirds and the crashing of ocean waves.

She sat bolt upright on the bed, felt the creaking of the straps holding up the straw stuffed mattress. The room was still dark, and she waited until her mind grew more accustomed to the blackness. She knew the dimensions were small, because the air was close. The bed was not much wider than the one she had slept in at the hunting lodge in the Mistwood. It was pressed up against the corner of the room and she could reach out and touch the wall beside her. The wall was undressed, grainy stone, nothing like the smooth basalt of her Taluscliff home. There were no windows that she could discern and no relief of the darkness.

She threw back the covers, turning to get up from the bed and stopped. She began checking her body slowly, feeling for bruises or tender places or other signs of abuse. Aside from being a little sore on her back, where she had lain, nothing felt



ill-used. On a whim, she sniffed under her arm, found an odour that told her she had been several days without bathing.

There was nothing on her wrists or ankles, and no bruises or cuts that indicated she had been arrested. Yet she still felt as if she were in a prison. Finally, she rose, began feeling her way slowly through the room. It was as small as she thought it was, barely the height of a man in breadth. And, unless she misjudged her space, the ceiling was low as well.

The wall was thick and bare, but there was no mistaking the sound of the sea beyond it. Pressing her hand to it, she thought she could even feel the faint vibration of waves crashing against it outside.

She identified a small, low table upon which was a candle and row of sulphur lights, and no chair. The wall was rough enough, so she used it for a striking surface and the tiny light flared to life, nearly blinding her. She put it to the half burnt stub of a candle and held it up to examine her room. It looked smaller than it felt, though she knew that was merely the illusion of poor light. The only furnishings were the narrow bed, the oddly low table with a tiny anvil and prayer book beside it. There were two shallow indentations on the stone in front of the table.

She dismissed the religious items and turned to the door. It looked like she thought any cell door would. It was rough hewn from what seemed to have been driftwood, bound in slightly rusty iron, with a lift latch and a small hatch at eye level that could be opened from either side.

She cautiously opened the tiny door within the door and peered out. What little view she had of the hall beyond was of other doors like hers. Seeing they were held closed by padlocks instead of inset locks, she knew that trying to open hers from the inside would be useless. She tried anyway.

Frustrated, she grabbed the anvil and the prayer book and threw them out into the hall with a satisfying thunk and dull ring where the anvil struck the door across from her.

She listened as hard as she could, hearing nothing that told her there was life in the hallway at all. Growling to herself, she set the candle back on the table. There was only, perhaps, three fingers of wax left and seven sulphur lights, lined up in a neat row beside where she had found the candle. She sighed, wishing to save her light, not knowing how long she had been here or how long she would be. She blew it out and climbed back onto the bed. She pulled the blanket and sheets up and wrapped them around her body. Tucking her knees up to her chest, she leaned back

against the bare corner of the wall and buried her face in the blankets, drifting back to sleep as best she could.

This time she dreamed. It was a dream full of pain and anguish and anger and frustration. She could feel sea-wolves surrounding her, and something deep, deep below her angry and hungry and in pain. A dense fog surrounded her, blocking off the roaring bellows of other animals raging at unseen distances. Something very precious to her was so far away she could barely sense it. There was something akin to a thread connecting her and she plucked at it, running her finger along it, making the thread sing. It was thin, but strong, and made a pretty sound even though the fog swallowed it whole.

She pinched the thread where it grew from her body, strummed the line with her finger again and it made a different sound. By moving her fingers closer or farther from her, she found she could change the pitch, and soon was plucking a mournful melody from her well guarded prison.



She heard them before they opened the door, but did not move. They made a great deal of noise fitting the key to the lock, giving her plenty of time to shift a bit of the sheet cloth over her eyes, to lessen the coming, sudden brightness that was no doubt designed to blind her. When the lock was pulled away, there was a brief moment of nothing, and then the door was thrust quickly open. Light flared into the room from their lanterns, but Cae had been prepared. The sheet was so thin, that, with the light coming from without, she could still see enough to make out one man standing at the door, holding up the lamp and a small club, and another figure behind him.

“Another one too frightened of the dark to find her way to the candle,” he sneered, hawked and spat upon her floor.

Another male voice from the hall chuckled. “Really? And is her anvil missing? Or was it some other wench on this empty hall what chucked this out in pique?” A large, beefy hand reached in and slapped the first man across the back of his head. “Put the lantern down and get out, idiot. This one is for the Lord’s son.”

The man obeyed, though he paused to leer at what little he could see of her, perhaps guessing that beneath her bundle of bedding was only her nightdress.

When he left, a woman in a pale grey gown entered, carrying a bundle of cloth.

The second man closed the door behind her and she could hear the lock being put in place.

The woman crossed to the bed and set her bundle down. She was of perhaps middle years, her face lined and worn, and her hair, where it peeked out from beneath the colourless kerchief, was steely and coarse. She said nothing to Cae, but unwrapped the bundle and pulled out a bland gown of faded black and laid it across the bed. She did not speak, but began pulling apart the bundling of blanket and sheet, tugging until Cae yielded. While Cae did not relish the idea of the coarse black fabric, she did not relish remaining in only her nightgown. She fingered the dress, taking note of the style and cut and decided she would rather wear her night-dress under it, rather than risk giving it up altogether. The silk would provide her tender skin some reprieve from the rough spun wool.

It took her a minute of explaining and fending the woman off before she was made to understand. The woman did not like it, but realizing there would be no co-operation without it, gave in and laced her into the dress over her gown. The frock was apparently designed to fit a number of bodies, so it hung loose and a little short in the sleeves, allowing the lace of her gown to peek out. The bodice was laced as tightly as it would go, pressing uncomfortably across the breast and hanging loosely at her waist. On the other hand, it dragged the floor, forcing her to hold onto the skirts to keep from tripping.

The woman handed her a pair of old boots and a thick pair of socks. Cae sat down and put them on. Though the wool of the socks were still a little rough, they were welcome in the coldness of the room. They were not, however, thick enough to make the boots wearable. She left them off and stood, folding her arms across her chest. "Now what?" she demanded.

The woman merely glared at her for several minutes, trying to win a contest of wills she was ill-equipped for. Finally she turned away and pounded on the door. It opened for her and she walked out.

The beefy hand entered again, followed by the rest of the man. He was larger than Willam, though not as tall, and far less graceful in his movements. His fingers were like sausages and she wondered how he could grip his weapon, much less control it. He gestured for her to leave the room.

Cae drew herself up as tall as she could manage, walked past him with her head held high. The other man stood sullenly in the hall, holding a second lantern. The woman was no where to be seen. Beef re-entered the hall carrying the light and locked the door behind him. At a nod from him, the other man turned his back on

her and began walking down the corridor. Cae followed, fully aware of the bulk of the man behind her. She tried to concentrate upon the emotions of these men, and found nothing beyond sullenness and a little fear from Idiot, and plain boredom from Beef. There was oppression and fear all around her, but nothing she could get her mind on or single out.

Caclerys was led through numerous corridors and up a great many stairs. Thankfully, it was all of the rough stone construction, so she had no fear of slipping wearing only stockings. She passed no windows. Finally, at the end of more stairs, she was brought to a large room that actually looked comfortable. The stone was either sanded smooth or covered by rugs or cloth. There were fur rugs upon the floor in front of a large, though unlit, fireplace, and several comfortable chairs. There was a desk, and an embroidery frame and at least three narrow windows, though they were currently tightly shuttered against the bitter cold. Cae immediately crossed to the nearest and threw it open.

The wind that struck her face was frigid and full of salt spray. The sky was a dull grey, heavily overcast, and looked out over an angry sea. What little she could see of the building by leaning out was a keep on a crag of an island. The construction was blocky, with no elegance or attempt to be aesthetic whilst being fortifying. This was a fortress, not a defensible home. She could see next to nothing of the island itself but black rocks assaulted at frequent intervals by large waves.

Though the wind was biting, she forced herself to remain there, staring out to sea until she heard a sound behind her that was not Idiot or Beef. She did not need to look to know who it was. She had felt that oily, arrogant presence before. Now it was shaded by triumph and unwarranted pride. She stiffened her back.

“If you wish this little rock of yours to remain standing, I would highly recommend you find a way to return me to my home forthwith,” she said coldly.

He smirked, chuckling. “Still filled with bravado, my dove? I am afraid it is misplaced. No one will find you until it is too late.”

She snorted, “Too late for what?”

He drew closer. “You cannot be married off to another if you are already wed.”

She turned, leaning back against the window sill, crossing her arms over her chest. “I have already told you that I will never light my candle for you.”

His eyes glittered. “You had the chance to wed by candle. I am not so much the fool as to allow you to curse me through it.”

“You were fool enough to steal me from my prince. From his very doorstep.”

He shrugged, “Once we are wed, there will be nothing he can do. Banish me? I live on the edge of nothing already. And even if it means we sail to warmer waters across the Eastern Sea, my father will still have gained what he needs from our union.”

“Hold over my father?” she sneered. “You have all but declared war on him.”

“He’ll not risk you.”

“I’ve already told him how I feel. He knows I would rather die. He would kill me himself before he allowed you to do so.”

He waved his hand dismissively. “Well, he’ll be dead soon enough. How he’s lasted this long I’ll never know. Will Willam be able to do the same?”

She smiled viciously. “You’ve tangled with the wrong stag there, dog. And I have two others beside him who will fight over your bones.”

He actually laughed. “A cripple and a blacksmith? You think highly of your family, maiden.”

“No, I just think that lowly of yours. You think that is all my House has to call? Let me tell you who will be leading the charge against your father’s House,” she began, too angry to be afraid. She took a single step in his direction and unfolded her arms, getting herself in a loose and ready posture. “First, of course, will be our vassals, most of whom already have cause to curse your name: Brock, Tyre, Echo, Delphinus, not to mention the wolves of Mallowwood. With them will now come Roshan twice over, leading Alder and Haru. And let us not forget House Griff and all it may call to field, brought by rights of standing at candle.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” he growled. “Only the wedded house may call upon that.”

She shrugged. “You are forgetting they are neighbours who seek to keep our good will, and that you are vassal to them. Failure to obey the direct order will result in sanctions from your liege whose heir just married one of my closest friends. Sanctions, I should not need to remind you, they have only needed the excuse for. Now they have no need of proof that your House is behind the recent pirate attacks. But let us not forget the crown. You have taken the intended bride of the crown prince himself, from under the roof of the king and out of his protection. His honour will demand that he retaliate and bring to bear the whole of the kingdom to do so.”

He was shaken, just a little, she could tell, but he was also arrogant and angry. “It will not matter. Once we are wed, there will be little they can do. And by the time they find where you are...” he boasted, letting his sentence trail off.

“You think they don’t know?” she scoffed, sincerely hoping this was the case. “There are two places they will raze first: your castle, and House Asparadane. And don’t think they haven’t the man-power and will to hit both at once.”

He laughed. “And they shall waste weeks doing so. This is not my father’s castle. This is not even *my* castle. This belongs to an outlying cousin who owes me a favour. They will approach my father, who will deny involvement or knowledge. Unable to prove anything, they will do what they always do, sail away with their tails between their legs whilst we enjoy the spoils.” He stepped closer, reaching out to touch her. “And the prime of those spoils will be you,” he rumbled.

Cae twisted out of his reach, seizing the wrist and pulling him to where she had just been, attempting to send him out the window, but merely cracking his head upon the frame. She aimed a kick to the back of his knee and danced out of reach again, her stance remaining loose and ready.

He rose, wiping blood from his chin where he had struck the bottom of the sill when she hit his knee. His anger was white hot, searing the air around him. He struck at her. She turned with the blow, only catching a graze of his knuckles. He saw her fall to her knees and reached to seize her hair in triumph, only to have her twist before he could grab. He found himself on his back with her leg around his middle and her elbow pounding into his chest just below his breast bone.

She rolled immediately off of him as he lay there, trying to catch his breath, aimed a kick just above his hip for good measure. She stood well back from him, glancing around the room for something she might use as a weapon. He had been too smart to walk in with one. “Remember my telling you that I would best you? This is merely a taste. Lay a finger upon me one more time and I will give you this and worse. You will never have me in your bed unless I am bound there and taken by force. And if you are ever fool enough to do so, I promise you that one night I will cut off your manhood, shove it down your throat and choke you with it!”

He rolled to his side, then to his hands and knees, struggling to get up.

She waited the several minutes it took him to regain his breath and stand.

When he spoke again his voice was gravelly and punctuated by wheezes. “You will... stand before... the anvil... and speak your vows... or you... will... rot up here.”

“Never will you cow me with your false religion and turn me into a docile sheep to be led where it pleases you. I shall wed by candle or die a maid. And my

father will never give you my candle.”

“Oh, but you will,” he choked, his flat eyes pinning her. There was something triumphant about him at that moment, and that terrified her more than any physical threat he might have made. “And before you think... to throw yourself... from these windows... I made certain... they were too narrow... for even you.”

With that he turned and left her. Once the door shut behind her, she whirled to the window, checking to see if he was right. Whilst she was able to get her shoulders out with some work, her hips would simply not fit. She forced her body back inside and sank onto a chair, folding her arms to pillow her head on the table. She wanted to cry, to sob her heart out, but could not get far enough past her anger to gain that release. Finally, she gave up and rose, turning to explore her new prison.

There was one other door in the room, next to the main one, which led to a very small bedchamber. The bed was barely wider than her own arm’s reach, though the thick mattress was stuffed with wool instead of rushes or straw. The linens were still coarse, but not as bad as the ones in the cell below. She frowned. Even the servants at Taluscliff slept on better linen than this. There was no place for a fire in this room, not brazier nor hearth. Nor were there any windows. Thankfully, the curtains were old velvet, and the bed covered by thick furs, so cold would not be much of a threat unless the temperatures dropped a great deal further.

There was a basin in the corner of the room with a cloth beside it, and an empty clothes press against one wall. There was a plain dressing table and a single chair. There were no other doors. Looking into the first room, then back into this one, she saw no sign of a privy. Dreading the thought, she crossed to the bed and lifted the edge of the curtain, saw the chipped chamber pot beneath and groaned.

She returned to the main room and opened the other windows. These afforded a slightly different view. The one closest to the door showed more of the keep and the land beyond it. It was craggy, as she expected, with a little greenery clinging stubbornly to the rocks. Leaning out as far as she could, she could just see the curving edge of pebbly sand stretching between the island and the mainland. It was narrow, but she imagined it would either shrink or expand with the tides, depending upon whether they were currently in or out. She tried hard to remember maps of the Elanthian coasts, to figure out where she was. Nothing came to mind. She imagined it was the strain of hunger and thirst that she was only now aware of.

Finally, she pulled herself away from the view, moving to the middle of the room. No fire had yet been lain in the chamber, and, while it was cold, especially with the windows open, it was not nearly as cold as it should have been, were she

where she had originally guessed herself to be. To help loosen her muscles and warm up her body, Caelerys began to put herself through the exercises Ikembe and Semi had taught her. With each pose and movement, she reminded herself what Ikembe had said about how they could be used in combat.

She was about halfway through when she heard movement outside her door. She stopped, stood straight, loose and ready for whatever Aldane had up his sleeve. She was therefore a little surprised to see a woman enter the room carrying a large tray. Beef stood behind her, giving her a long, warning look before he closed the door behind the woman, locking it again. Caelerys watched her as she set the covered tray upon the table and removed the contents.

She was of medium build, and lean, wearing a dress not unlike her own, only better fitting, with a fine woollen shift beneath it. She also wore a veil over her hair, tied back with a leather fillet. Beneath the veil, her hair was coiled at the nape of her neck. When she turned around, standing demurely with her hands clasped before her, Caelerys recognized her and suddenly knew where she was. "Cuttle!" she exclaimed.

The woman curtsied, "Yes, Lady Caelerys, I am Lady Cuttle."

"Salera," Cae began, crossing to her, trying to take her hands, "you have to help me."

Salera stepped back out of reach, seemed to find whatever backbone she had shed before coming in here. "I must do as I have been bidden by my husband and his liege. You would do well to do the same."

Caelerys had known the woman had not liked her, but she was still shocked. "Your liege has started a war that will bring the whole kingdom to bear against him by kidnapping me."

Salera snorted in derision, moving behind the table to uncover a bowl of salted fish stew and some fire baked tubers. "As always, you over-estimate your value. No one is coming for you. You have defied the will of the Eldest and the men who hold authority over you long enough."

Cae put her hands on her hips, trying to ignore the lure of food however bland. "Just what were you told, Salera?"

"I am Lady Cuttle now, and I would be called thus. We are not now and never were intimates, Lady Caelerys."

"How do you think I got here?"

"You had to be drugged with Dream Dust, and carried here by ship."

"And do you know why?"



Salera gave an angry sigh. “Because you refused to yield to your betters and accept the match made for you, because you were aiming out of your reach for a prince. You’ve spent the last few months fawning over one then another of the royal sons, ingratiating yourself with the princess while at the same time consorting with the Free Legions like the loose woman you are. You are not worthy of Lord Aldane and why he desires you so badly I will never know. I can only assume it is because of whatever your father has scraped up for a dowry.”

Cae just stared, stunned for a moment, wondering how she could possibly believe the words that had come out of her mouth. “First of all, Lady Cuttle,” she said, sneering her title, “my uncle happens to be a leader of the Sterling Company, so in that case I was keeping company with family. Second, I am a duke’s daughter. A prince is not ‘out of my reach’. In fact, he is as eager as I for the negotiations to be over and my candle lit.”

Salera scowled in disbelief. “You have quite the imagination. You will be wed next Fourth Day to Lord Aldane and that will be the end of it.”

“Even your twisted, misogynistic religion does not allow a bride to be forced.”

“No, they expect a woman to obey her father’s will and take her vows meekly.”

“Ah,” Cae said, latching on to that point. “But you see, this match is against my father’s will. Even if I were to come meekly to the anvil, and speak those vows, it would be ‘against the will of the men who have authority over me’. Which, if I remember correctly, is one of the greatest sins a woman can commit.”

“That would be infidelity,” she snapped, crossing her arms, though she was beginning to think. “Your father really refused the match?”

Cae groaned. “Why would he accept it? Kaladen has been an enemy to my House for generations, and, while they are a Lordly House, I have had offers from no less than three princes. Why in the name of all that is sacred would he want to ally with his enemy?”

“Because the king commanded it to seal the breach between the houses.”

Cae shook her head. “No, he hasn’t. That was a rumour that Lady Asparadane tried desperately to spread. And that breach is so wide, one marriage wouldn’t do it. Besides, all Kaladen wants out of this marriage is leverage against my father so they can go on raiding with impunity. King Rorlan and my brother entered into negotiations for my hand the day I was kidnapped from the Citadel.”

Salera did not seem to want to believe what she was hearing. “No. Lady Asparadane wouldn’t allow it.”

Cae laughed. "Doesn't matter what she wants. She doesn't wear the crown, for all she wants to. You were there when the queen banished her. The queen has been pushing for this match since the coronation. By the way, do you even know what has happened to your friends since you left?"

"What do you mean?" she asked warily.

"I mean, has anyone told you that Malyna was attacked after church in a riot someone incited? She had her arm broken and Haira... Haira was killed," she added more gently.

"Haira?" she asked, paling. "Malyna is all alone..." She stiffened up, getting a hold on herself. "It is as the Eldest wishes. You should eat, Lady Caelerys. You've been asleep for two days. It takes a toll on the body."

"Especially when one was poisoned not that long before," she quipped, sitting down at the table.

"That doesn't surprise me," Salera glared. "The Pontifex will be up to see you tomorrow."

"The Pontifex is welcome to throw himself from yon battlement. I will not see him," she said firmly, tasting one of the tubers. It had no real flavour and no seasoning whatsoever. The stew was over salty. She settled for breaking up the roots and putting them in the stew to diffuse the salt and add flavour to the tuber.

"Mock my faith all you want, Caelerys, but it will be your only comfort from now on," Salera fumed.

Cae remained calm. "You have no faith. You have a religion that is no comfort at all to women. How much comfort is a religion that tells a woman it is her own fault she was attacked?"

Cae could sense conflict in her. Finally she sneered. "Then best you stay out of the way of the men of this keep. My husband especially. It is his right to any woman under his roof."

Cae glanced up, "Even those married to others?"

She stiffened. "None of his men are married, and even if they were, it would still be his right."

"Best keep him away from me then. If I don't kill him, Valan most certainly will. Not to mention what his own Lord Aldane would do if he were to touch what he is trying to claim before he has a chance."

There was a flash behind her eyes followed by guilt and a fierceness that gave Cae some hope for the woman. "I almost hope my husband does pay you one of his 'visits'. Then I'll be happily widowed and all this will be mine."

Cae was too stunned by the nastiness of her emotions and words to remind her that it was highly unlikely she would be allowed to keep the Tombolo in the event of her husband's death.

Pleased to have silenced her rival at last, Salera turned and strode to the door, knocking for it to be opened. Cae did not move again, or even really breathe until she heard the door lock behind her.



She spent most of the day at the windows, wrapped in furs to ward off the cold. She would watch at one window for an hour or so, then move to another for a different view. She felt weighed down by boredom. There was nothing to read or do, not even needle, cloth and thread for the embroidery frame that sat in a corner. She tried the exercises again, trying to work out combat uses for them, as she did not think she would catch Aldane with that last trick again. And frankly, that was really the only one she knew.

When Salera brought in a mutton stew and took away her dinner bowl, she said nothing to her at all.

As she was walking towards the door, Cae called out, "Is there anything in this keep to read?"

The woman paused, but did not turn. While there was no physical reaction, Cae felt reluctant agreement from her.

As Caelerys ate, she debated sleeping here in the main room, just so she would not be caught in the bed should anyone manage to sneak in as they obviously had at the Citadel. But the biting cold coming in through the windows, even closed, were getting to be too much. Finishing the food, she rose, moving to the north window to close its shutters and she caught movement out of the corner of her eye. Looking down, she could see Aldane striding across the battlement to the tower. He wore a thick furred cloak and had a swagger in his step and a smug, cruel confidence about him that made her want to drop a rock on his head.

She slammed the window shut and turned, throwing her fur onto a chair and looking around for something she might use as a weapon. There was nothing but the embroidery frame and she would have to break that to be able to use the leg as a club. The chairs would have been too unwieldy, and all they had given her was a wooden spoon that would likely break before it was useful. She contemplated using the cup and the bowl as missiles, and, moving the chair out from behind her, chose

to stand behind the table. She waited, striking the pose that carried the most contempt she could manage.

He opened the door himself, standing arrogantly in the frame, posing, much like she was. The fur trimmed cloak made his body look more imposing and larger as he intended, but only served to make his head look smaller and more narrow, as if he were a child pretending to be his father. She could not contain herself and a snort of laughter escaped her. This, more than anything else, caused him to deflate and his anger to flare.

He kicked the door closed behind him and stalked across the room to the table. Cae forced herself to not back away as he wanted her to do. She held her chin higher, daring him to try anything. He stopped on the opposite side and stared at her. She blinked once, slow and languid, then met his angry, flat, intimidating glare with her own, bored, and thoroughly unimpressed one. In the end, he had to blink. He reached into his cloak and pulled out a bottle that fit into his fist, setting it on the table between them without looking away from her.

She refused to look at it, though she noticed that it was of a dark glass. “Is that supposed to impress me? If that is Veracity, you will gain naught but the truth from me. And you will not like it. If that is some poison with which you choose to threaten me, hand it here and I will drink it whole. And if it is an antidote to something you have already slipped me, you may as well toss it out the window, because if my choices are you or death, I will welcome death with open arms, knowing that, if I am dead when they arrive, you will be sent screaming into the Abyss piece by piece over many days.”

Nothing she said affected him until she said antidote, which caused a surge of triumph in him. He actually giggled. “Oh, it’s an antidote, all right. But you’re going to want this...”

“And why would that be?”

“Because it holds your father’s life within its dark glass.”

She looked down at the deep purple bottle. She had never seen glass that colour nor an antidote or potion so thick and black. “For all I know that is more of the poison which brought him low,” she snarled, not believing it even as she said it.

“Marry me and I will send this cure to Taluscliff. Refuse and he will continue to wither and rot. I’ve seen what happens to those cut by this poison. It is not unlike that which happens to the victims of certain spiders.”

She had to stiffen her resolve. She knew what would happen if she were to accept. Her father would never forgive her for putting him in that position, and lose

him or not, she could not bear that disappointment. Besides, she knew the cost of this union to her family was not worth what little it would gain. She had to think of the family as a whole, of the House. Love him fiercely as she did, her father was not House Maral. Willam was not House Maral, and neither was she or Vynce, not as individuals. None of them were. It was only as a whole that their people were safe. At the moment, the House was secure enough with three male heirs, so even without her who could only forge an alliance, House Maral and its vassals would survive. Marrying into Kaladen would be tantamount to selling House Maral to them. She could see far reaching plots, not unlike what Asparadane had planned. If she married Aldane, before long she would be the last heir to the House, placing House Maral and all their vassals in their saw-toothed grip. No, not even for her father was this a worthwhile trade. Her House would mourn him, but they would never forgive her if she sold the House to save him.

She forced herself to speak without emotion, to hold her agony within herself. “Not for my father. Not for Willam. Not for Vyncet, nor even Janem. And most certainly not for myself, will I sell my House into your clutches. My House will survive without me. My House will survive without my father. But the death of either of us will cause the whole of our allies, which at this point also includes the royal house of Alumet, to descend upon you and yours and wipe you from the face of the world more completely than the destruction of Levitau.”

He was shaken and furious, unable to believe that even this would fail to bend her. “One way or another, you will be mine,” he growled.

She smiled thinly. “And one way or another, you shall suffer for your presumption. Learn to accept a simple ‘no’. Your life will go much easier.”

“And yours will continue to grow more difficult until you learn to stop saying it.”

She spread her arms, defying him. “Go ahead, beat me black and blue. It will avail you naught. I will make you the laughing stock of your people. ‘Poor, weak, little Aldane can’t even control his wife’. I will never turn to your false religion, though I suspect you only pay lip service to it, and use it to control your women. I promise that if you put an anvil in this room I will use it against your head.”

He took a deep breath, to control both his rising anger and his growing ardour. “The day you bend to me will be sweet indeed,” he growled.

She laughed. “I didn’t take you for a corpse lover. But I suppose they would be more your speed.”

He reached out to slap her and she merely leaned back out of the way. "It is a good thing you come to see me alone. What is it that you tell your men when you leave here? That I've bent to you? That I've wept? Or do you tell them the truth, that I've reviled you and physically bested you. Oh, the shame! I am surprised your father is continuing to allow you to pursue this." She felt a surge of panic at that and smiled. "Oh, he doesn't know, does he? How badly things have gone? That I have thwarted you time and again and hold out still? And he would demand you leave off if he knew how much of a fight I have put up, the shame I have caused you! Oh, this grows sweeter and sweeter! Does he know of the army about to wipe him out? Could he live with the failure of the son that matches the failure of the father? Or is his failure why you have not tried to force me?"

"My father agrees with me about you."

"Oh, you are such a terrible liar, sea-dog," she laughed. "Puppy," she taunted. As he started to move past the table she snatched up her spoon and held it like a weapon.

He smiled. "A spoon? Really?"

Her grin was feral. "Would you like to see the damage I can do with it?"

He paused, debating. "You have some very unladylike skills, Caelerys."

"You've only just begun to scratch the surface," she snarled.

"You would fit in so well with our daughters," he said, trying to lure her.

"Daughters, not wives?"

He snorted, "Do you think we train our daughters to be the meek mice we prefer in our wives? No, they are as fierce as our men. You've never seen them because we do not allow them on the mainland, but they are fiercely independent and lethal," he grinned.

"They can't be that independent if they allow you to tell them where they cannot go."

"They understand the reasoning."

"I doubt it." She glared at him. "Are you through trying to decide if I can or will hurt you? Or will you go away now?"

He narrowed his flat grey eyes. "The more you resist, the more I desire you."

"Well, I'm not going to give in just to get you to leave me alone. I'd rather gut you. Of course, I might say I'll yield just to lure you in close enough to do some real damage."

He smiled, taking a step back. "Fight all you want. It will only make my conquest all the sweeter. In the end, it will not matter if they *do* rescue you. Your prince will not have you, believing you soiled goods."

"He will not care beyond the excuse for killing you," she sneered.

"Oh, but his royal papa will. I've seen what these high noble fathers are like, casting aside marriages already agreed upon because the woman was spoiled."

She smiled coldly. "I don't think you've really met Valan. You do not take from a dragon what is his."

His smile showed teeth. "And Sea-wolves have been known to tear the subject of their disagreements to pieces in their frenzy."

"Well, when your teeth come in, let me know."

He was about to retaliate, when there came a knock. He growled, crossing to the door and snatching it open. A servant stood there, whispered something to him. He stood, his face darkening. He turned back to Cae, "We will finish this another time."

"I can't wait to pull more of your teeth," she grinned. "I'll have enough to make me a necklace soon."

He slammed the door on her. When she heard the bolt drive home she sank onto the chair, all her confidence and bravado gone as she sat, staring at the bottle that was life or death for her father. Once more she weighed the cost of saving him at Aldane's price, convinced herself that if it would not give Kaladen a hostage to use against her family, if it would not end up compromising her House in the end, she'd have submitted in a heartbeat. If all he wanted was her, it would have been different. But what Aldane wanted and what Remlock wanted were not quite the same. Neither of which were worth either her father's life or her own.

She was startled from her contemplations by the shutters banging in a sudden gust. She jumped, looked over and scrambled to her feet. Looking out the window, she could see a storm brewing up, the wind already stirring the water. The surf was wilder than ever and the wind, biting cold and wet. She closed the shutter, latching it in place and rushed to get the other one. The view out over the sea was brutal. The sky was blacker than night, and churned with strikes of lightning and torrents of rain. She felt something deep stirring in response, relishing the coming destruction and shivered. She closed the window as the door opened again.

She turned, cutting her finger on a splinter of wood shredding from the edge of the badly made shutter. She saw Salera enter and grab her tray hastily and move towards the door without a word. She started to stop her, wanting something in the

way of conversation even if it was hostile, but then she realized that the poor woman would have to cross the battlements in this weather and let her go. Crossing to the table, she felt the weight of depression beginning to blanket her and noticed a small, leather bound book lying next to the bottle. She smiled, opening the limp little tome and discovered the neat, tight handwriting of a woman trying to make the most of her limited paper.

She began to look through it as best she could in the swiftly fading light, discovered that it was a diary written in Old Vermian, though here and there the words were more modern, as if written in the time when Old Vermian was becoming Elanthian. She fervently wished for a candle, and, even more so, for a fire, but she supposed Aldane feared she would set the tower on fire in spite. There wasn't even kindling in the grate.

She sighed, knew it was pointless asking the guards. Even if they were inclined or allowed to provide, they would have to cross the storm battered battlement to do so, and she highly doubted they were that magnanimous.

The shutter began banging again, rattling in its frame, and Cae crossed to make sure it was completely secured. It stopped. Then began again, shaking in a way the storm would not have. She felt panic and desperation at the window and hastily threw it open. Tempest flung herself, partly with windy help, into Cae's arms, shrieking her delight and relief. Cae shushed her desperately, afraid she would alert the guards. Sure enough, she heard the lock rattling and threw her furs over the falcon with a whispered admonition to remain quiet and still. She turned her face from the incoming rain and wind, trying to force the window closed against the gale.

Beefy hands were suddenly there, closing it for her, and even he had some trouble. Once it was barricaded against the weather he looked down at her, frowning. "I heard a strange noise."

She held up her hand, showing him the blood on her fingers. "I cut myself on the shutter trying to close it. Thank you for doing it for me. Do storms always roll up so suddenly around here?"

He nodded. "It's just a squall, though. It will pass in a few hours. This castle has withstood worse. Fallow storms are bad, but Planting storms are nightmares. They can last for days. Get some rest if you can."

He turned and walked back to the door.

"Can I have a candle at least? I doubt you have firewood out there."

"If I had one, I would consider it," he said, stopping in the doorway. "But you should have furs enough to keep you warm."



She sighed. She had tried. He had also not outright said no, which was hopeful for tomorrow.

Once the door was again closed and locked, she pulled the furs off the bird and swept her up into her arms with joy. Recovering quickly, she set Tempest down, gesturing for silence, grabbed the book, the bottle and the furs and led her to the bedchamber. The room was pitch dark, not that much light filtered in from the main chamber. Even here, she could hear the battering of the storm.

She opened the bed-curtains and bade Tempest get in before going back to shut the door. Once she was sitting amidst the furs of the bed, she could not stop touching her, and the bird could not get enough attention. “Oh, you crazy, insane, beautiful beast,” she crooned. “You truly are my toomi half. Do you know where we are?”

The bird chirped, giving her a look of ‘I always know where I am’.

“All right. I am going to ask a lot of you right now. But it is all important. Beef said these squalls only last a few hours, so you’ll have time to rest. But the minute it’s over you have to go back.”

Tempest squawked a complaint.

“Yes. You have to tell them where I am. You have to bring Valan and Will.”

Tempest sighed.

“You also cannot be here come morning. If they see you fly away, they may shoot you. They’ll kill you if they find you. I thought they *had* killed you. Is Ikembe all right?”

A positive chirp.

“Good. I was worried. I still don’t know how they got me.”

She settled back against the headboard, building a nest of the furs to keep herself and Tempest warm and comfortable. Tempest tucked up under her arm, snuggling close and the two of them listened to the storm rage.

Cae had just started to doze when Tempest nibbled at her. She sat up, listening. Silence.

She climbed out of the bed, shivering. Reaching back, she grabbed one of the furs and wrapped it around her. Tempest followed her back into the main room, watched as she tentatively opened the southern window. The storm had blown off south-east and the Southern Lord was beginning to peer around the edges of the thinning clouds. There was fortunately enough light filtering in to see by.

Cae picked up the diary, flipping to the back page. There was only a little bit of text on the front of it, and nothing on the back. Apologizing profusely to the writer,

she tore off the bottom half of the page and peeled the splinter of wood she had cut herself on from the shutter. It was just narrow enough to write with.

As she moved the small table closer to the window to be able to see, she looked at the bottle of antidote. "Tempest," she began slowly. "Can you carry this?"

The bird flew up to the table, looked the bottle over. Taking it in claw, she flapped into the air and landed again, chirping. "All the way home?" Tempest was dismissive about the distance. Cae made sure the bottle would not open in flight, set it aside and sat to write. She only had one source of ink. "You aren't going to like this, Jelma, but... I need a talon."

Tipping her head in question, she reached out her left leg. Cae took her already wounded finger and touched the tip of Tempest's talon. She swiftly jerked her hand back, reopening and slightly enlarging the cut. Tempest fussed at her, only to have Cae shush her, glancing back to the door. Tempest continued to flap her beak at her, but made no noise.

Cae dipped the tip of the splinter into her blood and wrote as neatly and swiftly as she could. Given the nature of her pen and medium, she was unable to write very small, so she minimized her wording: At Tombolo Drift, Cuttle. Bottle cure father.

She carefully wrapped the note around the bottle, tying it with the ribbon from her braid. She offered Tempest her wrist and carried her back to the window. They spent a long moment nuzzling one another. It was clear neither of them wanted her to go, but Cae stressed the need and urgency. "Get this to them and we can go hunting soon. Fly swiftly, ketava." She handed the bird the bottle. Tempest made sure she had the best grip she could before Cae launched her through the window. She watched her fly off after the storm, keeping to the west of it and out of sight of the few watch-fires that were just now being relit in the keep.

Saddened by her departure, Cae sent reassurances after her. She sat at the window with the small book, began reading in the moonlight. It was difficult, as the ink was faded and the handwriting thin, and the light not direct enough to compensate. It seemed to be the diary of a Kaladen bride. As the diary never mentioned the lady's name or her original house, Cae had to infer it through her writing and the comparisons she made from time to time. She thought she might have been from somewhere near the Roshan, near the interior of the country. She had entered into the marriage with high hopes, determined to make the best of things. She had been a little leery of being vassal to Levitau, as even then, rumours had been circulating

of atrocities being committed by them, ships gone missing and pirates rampant in waters they controlled.

Her husband had been attentive and kind at first, though a little rougher around the edges than the men she had been used to. Slowly over time, he began to become more callous and less patient with her. At times, he was an absolute miser, then would shower her with presents, usually jewels or fine clothes. Those were the times when he would drink heavily and make demands of her that she found uncomfortable.

Cae drifted to sleep with her head against the window frame.

When she fell to dreaming, she was again in the bank of fog surrounded by sharks and other aquatic nastiness. This time, she decided she would not remain passive in her dreams. She leapt from the rock she was on and beat the air with wings merely because she expected to, and soared into the fog following the singing line of thread. Part of it, she knew, would lead her to Tempest, but she hoped that another part might bring her back to her dragon.

The fog refused to part or thin, though she began to see shadows in the mist, outlines of beasts, some trying to reach her, others keeping them at bay. Soon she could smell him, the warm, aromatic musk. He was thrashing about in a blind rage, full of pain and anguish. She crooned to him in the dreaming, reaching herself out to soothe him, whispering 'north', 'I am not where you think'. She could feel him coiling around her even though she still could not see him. She felt his breath as he breathed deeply of her, making sure of her identity before he began to calm. Together, they slept peacefully.



Caelerys woke with a start as she heard the lock on the door. She turned, feeling the stiffness of sleeping at a cold window all night. It was only Salera, bringing her breakfast. When the door was locked behind her, she glared at Caelerys as she set the tray on the moved table. “Hide that,” she growled, pointing to the book. “Even if you can’t read it, I could get in trouble...”

“But I can read it,” Cae said. “It’s the diary of a Kaladen bride back in the days before they destroyed House Levitau.”

“Oh,” she said, a little confused. “Is it important then?”

“Could be. But only to those interested in history.”

“You cut your hand,” she said blandly, seeing the dried blood.

Cae looked down at it. “Yes, on the window, trying to close it against the storm.”

“Doesn’t look too bad.”

“It’s not.” Cae reached for the cup of water, but Salera set her hand on top of it and just stared at her. “What?”

“How completely do you believe that he will find you and go to war for you?”

Cae met her gaze steadily. “With every fibre of my being.”

“So he has declared his love?” Cae nodded. “And you believe him?”

Cae laughed softly, “There is no way that I could doubt. If you are concerned that he only said what he needed to in order to have me, you should know that he turned away from a chance. There is a completeness between us when we touch. All my fears fall away and all of his rage tumbles beside it.”

She thought she saw tears in Salera’s eyes. “I would kill to have a man look at me like that. But then, if Lord Aldane were pursuing me as he is you... I would probably take every advantage I could of him, every scrap of control my religion allows. So I don’t think I’d really deserve a love like that, do you?”

Cae smiled, “Love goes both ways, Lady Cuttle. If you loved him... you would do anything not to harm him.”

“Don’t drink the water.”

Cae frowned. She had spoken so softly she wasn’t sure what she had heard. “What?”

“Drink the water from the pitcher in your room. He’s ordered this dosed with fidelity.”

Cae’s voice dropped to a whisper. “What is fidelity?”

“A relative of veracity, but more potent. You needn’t be asleep for it to affect you.”

“Veracity? Why? What questions could he ask that I have not already given him an honest answer to?”

“There is another side to the herb, Caelerys,” she whispered. “It makes you prone to suggestion. That is how it works. It makes it hard for you to resist doing what you’re told. Worse, you think it’s your idea.”

“How do you know this? I thought I knew everything about the most common herbs. I’ve never heard of this.”

She sighed. “Because you think in terms of black and white, Caelerys. Life and death. You are just not devious enough nor unlucky enough to ever have to resort to something like this. Trust me, Lady Asparadane has.”

“What do you know of Lady Asparadane?”

“More than I ever wanted to,” she breathed. “That woman scares me more than my husband does, which is plenty. Trust me, she is up to no good and I am really afraid for Malyna now that it is obvious she’ll never marry one of the princes. You’re certain both are settled? Even Balaran?”

Cae shook her head. “He has eyes only for Liliwyn, and after Malyna’s performance at the royal dinner, I doubt she’d even be considered for Janniston or Ver-

lan, unless she matures a great deal. Whatever poison Lady Asparadane has poured into the king's ears can't cut through that."

"She did that badly?" she asked, making a face.

Cae nodded. "Mostly tried to show herself a good and dutiful wife as your religion prescribes, but that would make for a very poor queen. Only ended up emphasising her dislike of making decisions."

Salera sighed again, a great letting out of breath that used her whole body. "I love her, but I despair of that girl. Her mother will marry her off like she did me without a second's hesitation if she has no more use of her. Or kill her if it would be more to her advantage."

Cae's jaw dropped. "You really think she would kill her own daughter?"

Salera's face was serious. "If she thought for a second she could gain an advantage by blaming it on another. I wouldn't put it past her to have arranged that riot hoping to catch you in it."

"That might explain why she was so angry with Malyna for being caught in it," Cae commented. "She has the poor girl believing it her fault."

"That bitch!" She shut her mouth the moment the word escaped and Cae covered her own with her hand to hide her smile. "You are a bad influence," Salera growled, less seriously than she would have not that long ago. "We are still not friends," she began, "but anything you can tell me of mine I will appreciate."

Cae nodded, but did not get to say anything as the door opened and Idiot stuck his head in.

"What's takin' sa' long?" he snarled.

She stiffened, turning away and heading to the door. "She cut herself last night. I was looking the wound over." She glanced back at Cae before leaving. "I'll bring something to clean and wrap it with when I return with your dinner."

Cae gave her a nod. "Thank you, Lady Cuttle."

She paused for a second at the door frame then left. Idiot stared at her for a long moment, making her uncomfortable until she held up her spoon in a threatening manner. He slammed the door and locked it. She turned back to her breakfast, pulling out the book to read more of it.

She had barely finished eating when she heard the lock turning again. Hastily, she dropped the book between her fur and the wall, sitting up straight in her chair and playing with her spoon in her fingers. To her surprise, it was neither of the people she expected. It was a man she had never seen before in an iron grey robe, a tiny anvil hanging from an iron chain around his neck

He was tall and lean, weathered in the face though she guessed he was barely in his forties. She was a little surprised that he wore a close cropped beard. He stood in the doorway, glowering at her.

“Does the permanent scowl of disapproval come with the title or do you just develop one as you go?” she quipped.

“This is hardly the appropriate response for a bride just days away from her wedding,” he sneered.

“Well, considering that, last I heard, the negotiations for my hand had not been completed nor the contract signed, I think I am more than a ‘few days’ away from my wedding, thank you.”

His eyebrows rose as he stepped into the room and the door was closed behind him. “I see we have quite a bit of work to do.”

“No, we do not. I am not of your religion, nor will I ever be. I am a staunch child of the Mother.”

“We are all children of the Mother,” he said, gently. “We have never denied that. But the Eldest is the father of man and as such, he has demands.”

“The Mother has no such demands, and I do not recognize the Eldest as an authority over my life just because some man in a grey robe tells me so.”

“The teachings...,” he began.

“Are a bunch of lies twisting what little the Mother has told us. You are not going to win this argument. Please leave my chambers.”

He seemed surprised by her attitude. “I am here to council you upon what will be expected of you as a wife.”

She gave a short laugh. “Not being a woman, I cannot begin to see how you can advise me on matters so delicate.”

“Such matters are best left to men,” he replied calmly, “not trusted to the weak minds of women.”

“I think my mind stronger than yours,” she scoffed. “I speak and read two languages and am learning yet a third. I have knowledge of a great many herbs and their uses, and more than basic healing skills. I can balance household accounts, manage a keep as well as Ducal matters, and settle disputes between tenants as well as any man I know, my father included.”

“You should not disrespect your father by claiming superiority to him.”

“He is actually quite proud of that fact. You should have seen him the day I took my first stag.”

He came farther into the room. "I see we have much to discuss. A woman should not engage in the taking of life, only the preservation and creation of it."

"Except for the cook, of course," she challenged.

"Excuse me? The cook?"

"Yes," she said, idly drawing upon the table with the end of her spoon, though she never took her eyes from him. "You know, the woman who has to kill the chicken and pluck it to prepare it for dinner. And butchering the game after it is killed is as much a work of death as taking its life. I should know, I've had to do it. I am quite happy to leave that part to another. It's a delicate art, after all. A bad cut can ruin good meat."

He did not seem to know what to do with her. His emotions were trying to remain stoic and patronizing, but she kept saying things he was not expecting. "When you come before the anvil to say your vows," he began again.

"I will say no vows."

"When you agree to them. If you cannot remember them, they can be read for you," he said, trying to be comforting.

"I will 'agree' to no vows. I am not getting married on Fourth Day," she said simply.

"Reluctance on your part is unbecoming and will not matter in the end. You will be married and that is that," he said, drawing himself up.

"I cannot marry lord Aldane on Fourth Day, and not just because I would wed a dead fish before I agreed to bind myself to his ilk. But because my father will not allow it."

"Your father has..." he choked.

"Have you met my father?" she asked lazily, looking down at the end of her spoon and the glyphs she had not realized she was making.

"I have the letter, detailing your reluctance in the matter. Hence the deception of getting you here."

"And why would my father not come with it? Surely that is at least required, that I have a male relative to give me away."

"Your father is too ill."

"I have brothers. One of whom is designated to complete the negotiations for my marriage. To the crown prince."

He suddenly became smug. "I have been told of this delusion of yours. It is one of the reasons for bringing you here before you embarrassed your family."

"Delusion?" She glanced up at him. "Well, surely that is easily amended. Simply



send a toomi to Greenstone and ask the king if he is not in negotiations with my brother Willam for my marriage to Prince Valan.” She narrowed her eyes. “See if those who sent for you do not balk when you suggest it. I’d be surprised if Aldane didn’t go into a frothing frenzy. Just make sure you send it yourself. I assure you, that any document you have possession of did not come from the hand of any relative of mine.”

He started to say something else, but she rose from her chair and drifted across the room to the other window. “Why don’t we table this discussion until you have personally confirmed my claims or theirs. Granted, I doubt there is a toomi wife here from Taluscliff, but you could send to DragonsPoint easily enough. Go on,” she said, making shooing motions. “I’ll wait. We can’t have you violating the tenants of your religion with something so sacred as a marriage. If the ‘men who have authority over me’ refuse the match, I highly doubt *you* have the authority to override that.”

She turned her back mostly on him, leaning her shoulder against the frame to look down upon the battlements where Aldane paced. She did not take her attention from the priest, keeping him in her peripheral sight until he left. She watched the battlements until he met with Aldane. The conversation began calmly enough, with concern radiating from the Pontifex and growing rage from Aldane. An argument ensued. As the voices began to rise to where she was, Aldane happened to glance up, catching movement in the corner of his eye. He saw her standing there, waving facetiously at him with a mocking smile. He turned and stalked towards the other end of the battlement with the Pontifex all but running after him demanding an explanation.

Cae went back into the room and picked up her cup, started to take a sip of the water when she remembered what Salera had told her. She poured it out the window and went into the bedchamber, wiping it out with the cloth and filling it from the washing pitcher and drank it. At least it was fresh and cold.

She began to realize how easily boredom could drive a person mad. All she had



was the book to read, and nothing else to do, not even sewing. When Salera returned with her dinner, she was more relieved to see her than the food.

She had brought minor medical supplies to clean her wound, telling the guards she might be a little longer than normal and that she would knock when she was done. Cae spent the time telling her about her last exchange with Malyna, what little

she knew of her. "I hope that means the girl's grown a backbone. Or at least begun to realize her mother is dangerous to her. This is why women are not allowed power," she sighed.

Cae smiled. "No, this is what happens when women are not allowed power and find alternative means of taking it. Leadership should never be based on a person's sex, but upon their ability. If we are less intelligent than men or less emotionally stable it is because they do not educate us to be anything else and marry us off when we are still children."

"I suppose we shall just agree to disagree," she said, though with slightly less conviction.

"I've never understood why it is that women are turning to this religion that says they are inferior and unequal."

She shrugged. "It gives us hope for after."

"After what?"

"This life," she said. "If we live righteous lives as god desires of us, we'll live as gods ourselves in the next."

Cae frowned. "That makes no sense. Gods of what? If everyone is a god, what are you gods of?"

Salera straightened up. "It is more than the Mother ever gave us."

Cae sighed. "It is more than any mother can give, even the Mother of all. All a mother can do is prepare you and set you loose in the world to make of life what you can. Anyone who promises you that good things come from good deeds is lying to you."

"How can you say that? You are a good person and have apparently done only good in your life and here you are about to marry the love of your life who just happens to be a prince."

"Oh, right, here I am, kidnapped in order to be forced to betray my House by marrying someone other than the love of my life, the cause of a war that may or may not wipe out an entire House. And I'm not that 'good'. I have flaws, too," she added quietly. "Besides, I know several women who've led good lives, harming none, and bad things happened to them. And I've known some terrible people who've risen to heights they should not if life were equitable and fair and the Eld-est's promises worth the paper they're written on: Lady Asparadane for one, your husband for another. Anything or anyone who tells you that you must not question a thing is hiding something."

Salera rose, gathering her things, but she was thoughtful. Cae pointed to the cup of water. Salera shook her head in warning. Cae tossed its contents out the window.



A few hours later, Aldane paid a visit. Cae had the foresight to stare dreamily out the window and, for the most part, ignore him as he talked to her. Even if Cae had not been aware that he was trying to plant suggestions in her mind to try and bend her will to his way of thinking, she would have been alerted by the awkward way he said things: Placing his emphasis in odd places, saying some things that just made no sense, unless you knew what he was trying to do. As it was, she could just sit in the window and stare out at the water until he left, because no response was required.

When Salera came with her supper, she had a smile she just could not shake once she was in the room. “Well played,” she said.

“How do you mean?”

“He’s rubbing his hands together in anticipation. He honestly thinks he’s succeeding. So whatever you did to convince him, keep doing.”

“Stared out the window and ignored him, mostly,” Cae laughed. “Honestly, I think it is boredom more than isolation that drives men mad.”

Salera took a pious stance with her shoulders back and her hands clasped before her. “We are told that there is never a dearth of work for female hands. And if minds should find themselves idle, they should contemplate the divine.”

“I.e., men?” Cae quipped.

Salera snorted, dropping the ridiculous posture. “So far I have yet to see anything of them worth worshipping.” Her eyes widened in shock. “I swear, I say the most improper things around you!” she exclaimed, frustrated and amused at the same time.

Cae shrugged. “Time will tell,” she smiled, picking up her spoon.

“Maybe,” she sighed, sitting down to Cae’s surprise.

“Aren’t you going to... don’t you have to leave me?” she asked.

Salera smiled, pulling a small prayer book from her pocket and setting it upon the table. “Well, I convinced him that it took away from my regular work, having to leave and come back for the supper things. I mean, breakfast and dinner, I can leave until the next meal, but supper? Don’t want rats for company.”

“At this point, I think the rats preferable company to Aldane,” she chuckled, sampling the stew. It was of mixed meats, some of which really should not have been cooked together.

Salera chuckled. “Sorry about the quality of the food. That more than anything makes me miss DragonsPoint. My husband won’t waste a penny on spices and herbs.”

“I can teach you about certain garden herbs that are cheap and easy to cultivate.”

She shook her head. “He won’t go for it.”

Cae smiled, “Ah, but if you tell him they are good for the health as well? Most of them I can think of healing uses for, and what they grow well with.”

“Tempting,” Salera said.

“But that?” Cae asked, pointed with dread to the prayer book.

Salera smiled. “Well, he was concerned that we would do what we are doing right now. So I told him how much I hated and resented you from court and that I thought I might read prayers with you to help convert you to right thinking,” she said with a twinkle in her eye.

“Meanwhile I think I am converting *you*,” she commented.

Salera gave a tip of her head. “I do not know about that, but... I am beginning to question certain things.”

“Good. Question everything. How else will you understand?” She eyed the book again. “So are you going to?” she asked warily.

Salera shook her head. “One female voice coming through the door is the same as another. So long as you maintain a prayer like tone, I thought you might read to me from the book I brought you?” she asked, hesitant.

Cae smiled. “But, of course. Though I’ll still have to eat in between.”

“Of course.”

Cae fetched the book and wolfed a few bites down before she began reading. It would take her a moment to translate, during which she would steal another mouthful, then read a few sentences until she had to pause to translate again. She understood both with equal ease, but translating for another was something else altogether.

When Cae was done with her meal and they could buy no more time, Salera rose and picked up the tray, setting her prayer book beside the plate. As Beef opened the door for her, Salera curtsied to Caelerys. “I shall read more when I bring your breakfast,” she said sternly, putting on a sour face.

“Don’t bother,” Cae snapped. “I’d like to avoid further indigestion, if you don’t mind.”

Salera turned sharply and stalked out of the room. Beef glared back in at Cae. “She’s been nice to you,” he growled.

“Up until she started reading that drivel while I’m trying to eat,” she said. “I do not worship. Other than that, I have nothing against her.”

Still scowling, he closed the door and dropped the bolt.

Cae returned to the window, trying to commit as much of the next few weeks of the diary to memory as she could, so that she could translate more smoothly. She fell asleep against the window sill again, the book on her lap.

She woke with a start, not certain why or what she had been dreaming. It had felt like she had been poked by something sharp. Remembering the comment about rats, she began to check the area around her and within the fur rug she was wrapped in. Nothing.

She looked out over the turbid sea, the Southern Lord shining fiercely down upon them, well past his third quarter. The Eastern Lady shone weakly still, but her silver crescent hung nearby. Cae sighed. She had not been able to get any news, and so could not judge if there had been more incidents of shifts whilst the Lord shone without the Lady’s calming influence. There was so much for her and Valan to catch up on.

She picked up the book where it had fallen and caught a glimpse of golden scrawl. Swiftly she paged through it, trying to find the beginning of the writing. It was near the end of the diary, still in the same hand, but written in haste and anguish.

‘I have stolen a measure of moonink, and write this, now, under the Eye of Justice, and when I am done, I shall hide this, hoping that somewhere, some night, this is found and justice done. I write this in secret knowing it is only a matter of time before they know how I feel and kill me for it. I am half tempted to dash myself to the rocks below in my shame.

‘We have all been wrong. They have lied to us. It was never the Levitau. Yes, the leviathans can and have lashed out and destroyed ships in anger, but never without some provocation. All their ‘crimes’ were actually committed by their Kaladen vasals. The family has been playing a very long game, working towards this for generations. They have orchestrated this down to the death of the Firstborn herself.

‘The battle has waged for a silver month now, all up and down the coasts. It was finally, here, just a few miles of the shores of my new home that it ended,

where they drew her to the surface and killed her. Even then, believing as I did that we were in the right, I felt pity for her, for her children who were slaughtered down to the last babe. I pray that some escaped, some subsequent child that might bear that seed forward into the future. It was not until I heard my husband gloating with his kin that night that I learned the truth. They aim to take their place, eventu...'

Here was where she had torn off the bottom half of the last page. Cae almost vocalized her frustration. She could only pray that they kept her note. She flipped the page, reading the rest.

'...ngeance? The storms have gotten worse since the battle, sudden squalls that give no warning and tear through the coastline and anything in its path. Perhaps this is part of her vengeance and one day they will carve this spit from the mainland and, I hope, sink it and the entire cursed clan.'

Cae sat back, glancing up at the golden moon. "You lead a long dance, my lord," she sighed. "May it soon see fruit."

Pressing the book to her breast, she rose, closing the window and crossing to the bedroom, tucking the book beneath her pillow. Suddenly tired beyond belief, she curled up in the bed and slept.

Her dreams were a quiet, lazy flight over open water.



**T**he next day was a repeat of the last, with Aldane's attempts to sway her mind through the drug just as weak as the time before. He tried to be subtle, saying things like 'you'll want to be married when my father gets here,' and 'it would be wonderful if it could be this Fourth Day, not the next. Don't you want to see my father happy?' It was all she could do not to laugh in his face. She could hold it together so long as he didn't try to touch her, but apparently that was something he had been warned against.

She had been in the tower and awake nearly ten days when another squall hit. This one seemed more severe than the last, rattling her windows and driving Cae into the safety of the bed, wrapped warmly in her nest of furs. She dozed sitting up. Her dreams were active, filled with the sound of the storm and the death-song of whatever lay sleeping below. Except... she knew what it was now: the Leviathan. She was not as near the castle as she had perhaps thought, but she was near enough. She could feel the weight of her thrashing in her slumber, trapped here in the world rather than the world of spirits wherever her siblings dwelt.

But something was changing in her dreams. The fog was as solid as ever, and the sharks surrounded her little rock thickly. But there were things in the fog, looming closer than before. Cae strained to see what they were, but she could not seem

to get herself in flight to go to them. The best she could do was stand upon her tower roof and watch all sides.

What loomed seaward was large and made strange noises, odd whoooming sounds followed by a rhythmic ringing. It was too distorted to make sense of. From landward, she thought she saw figures marching forward in the fog, but even as the mists swirled past them, obscuring and revealing them once more, they were merely the beasts of the wood.

She almost realized something startling, but the very idea was so shocking it woke her up without completing the realization.

The first thing she noticed upon opening her eyes, was that her tower room was no longer dark. A faint blue light seemed to seep in between the curtain edges. She felt a brief moment of fear, then a sense of caution and calm washed over her. The light grew more intense and then began to enter the curtains. She knew the instant she saw the edge of the muzzle that it was Stag. Not *a* stag, but Stag. The Second Born who watched over her House. She had never heard of anyone seeing a ghost stag before. Glimpses of what looked to be the real thing, yes, but never the raw spirit. It was then that she realized she was still dreaming and that the dream place she had been visiting must be or must at least touch the world of Spirit.

Stag stood in the middle of the bed, the mattress barely brushing his belly and the impossibly branched rack went through the canopy. He was massive, larger than any horse she had ever seen. When he lowered his head to her, sniffing, she saw the whole of his antlers and gave up any idea of counting the points. A thousand came to mind and might still not be high enough. It was beyond counting. She felt his breath on her face like a warm mist, exuding comfort and protection.

She smiled, reaching up a hand. He set his forehead against it, rubbing. Touching her brow with the tip of his antlers. He felt chill and warm all at the same time, as if he were composed of a mass of heat but filled with minute sparks of cold. He took a single breath and then looked to the ceiling, glancing over his shoulder at something only he could see. He reared up over her. She heard no sound, but felt anger and a burst of panic that was intended for her. Instinctively, she rolled out of the bed and under it.

She woke fully when she hit the floor, completing the roll under the bed that she had begun in half sleep. She was just noting that she could still smell Stag when something struck the tower, and something else fell onto the bed, crashing through the canopy.



Thinking quickly, she scrambled out again, snatching up the inferior linen sheet and running into the main chamber. She threw open the east window and gasped at what she saw. The storm had eased back some, but left behind a thick bank of fog. Lurking in that murk were ships. They flew several flags, but the topmost made her heart sing. Every ship there answered to the crown. Valan had come for her.

Before she could react, another ballista came out of the mist and struck the edge of the keep. There were other ships in that haze that did not answer to the prince's command, grey ships full of sharks. Quickly, she fed the sheet out the window, tying it off so that the rough wind would not blow it away.

Sensing something else, she ran to the other window, the one that allowed her a brief glimpse of the keep and the Tombolo strand connecting the island to the mainland. The fog was thick here, too, thicker where the wind blew it towards the keep. But there were things moving within as it had in her dream.

Cae closed her eyes and concentrated, and suddenly she could see Stag again. He only glanced back at her before galloping along the walls and bounding into that fog. He seemed to be bounding in a very irregular manner. It was not until she opened her eyes just as he was about to pounce and a wisp of fog moved to let her see a man, grown very familiar to her over these last moons, wearing a gleaming helm and breastplate. Then the mist swirled, and the antlers she could still see upon the helm grew, and when the wisp cleared again, there stood a mighty stag, with antlers of gleaming silver. His face and chest also seemed plated, but that was all she saw of him before the fog swallowed them whole and the alarms began ringing in the keep.

Her heart soared. She rushed back into the bedchamber, a little startled to see that part of the rafters had collapsed onto the bed. It would have crushed her. She reached under the pillow and grabbed the little book, tucking it into the safety of her bodice, as she wore no pocket and the gown she wore gave her no access to one. She whispered a prayer to the Mother for the safety of those coming to rescue her and for Salera to find a safe place to hide. For all the innocents in this keep, for that matter.

She rushed back into the main chamber, wondering if she should try the door. She went, instead, to the other window, throwing it open just as something struck the side of the tower, shaking it. Debris drifted down from the ceiling. She moved to twist part of her body out the window to see what happened, when it was blocked by something very large and amber scaled. It moved by the window until it

was replaced by a very large, dark blue eye that scintillated like light on water even in the murky light. It blinked.

She felt worry and concern and surprise and pleasure all at once and smiled, her absolute joy rising up from within her like a new spring. “Valan!” she exclaimed with a sigh.

She reached out the window to touch the warm scales. It felt as she expected it to, like a garden lizard’s, soft. The great eye closed for a moment, basking in the warmth of the contact. Then it open and he moved upward. She stepped back from the window, wondering how he was going to get to her. Then she saw a clawed back foot slip into the window slit, anchoring itself against the stone. Another pushed through the eastern window and suddenly she wanted to be out of the way.

She hurriedly dragged her table from the window’s edge and hid under it, covering her head as best she could.

With a loud cracking and screaming of wood, the roof slowly tilted upward, breaking in places and tearing in others. Fragments and debris rained down upon her table. Dust choked the air as the roof finally came free, and fell to the battlements below.

The door opened and Idiot and Beef charged in, weapons drawn. “Lady!” belated Beef.

Cae yelled back in warning, “Get out!”

They looked up, saw the great golden beast clinging to the outer wall, wings spread and the great triangular head rearing back. His body was about two horses high and two and a half long, with his neck that long again, his tail twice that. Idiot stood dumbfounded, but Beef charged across, grabbing Cae up, bulling over the table and pressing her between his body and the wall farthest from the door but beneath where the dragon loomed.

Before she could protest, the head came down and breathed a gout of fire on poor Idiot, igniting the wooden wall that separated the bedchamber and the stairwell.

Beef bravely held up his sword as the dragon’s head snaked around to look at them with narrowed eyes. The mouth began to open even as the lips curled.

She slid out from behind Beef, ignoring his protests. “Relax,” she told him calmly. “He’s here for me. Valan, leave him.”

A single brow arched in question at her.

“He could have saved himself, but instead, he tried to save me, though to do so was certain death,” she said.

He tilted his head a fraction, closing his mouth, protesting but reluctantly considering the matter.

“He’s been... considerate,” she amended. “He is only following his orders, my prince,” she finished, setting her hand on his face.

All this while, Beef stood dumbfounded, unable to react until she said those last words. “Prince?” he choked.

She turned, smiling as she leaned back against the beast’s neck, noticing that the scales were now hard and stiff. “Yes. This is Prince Valan Alvermian.”

It took a moment for the information to sink in. “Shshshift?” he stuttered.

“Obviously.”

Beef fell to his knee. “My prince,” he gasped. “She... she spoke the truth? She is your betrothed?”

The head nodded with a snort and he shifted his head to pull her possessively towards him.

“Forgive me, Your Highness. We were told...” he choked, unable to get the words out completely.

Cae came to his rescue. “Apparently everyone else was told that I was a mad woman defying the marriage my father had agreed to. By the Abyss, there’s even a letter supposedly from my father to that effect. So if you are flying the royal banners, some of them might even stand down.”

There was a noise behind him and Cae looked over his head to see that the fire was getting more and more out of control. “That doesn’t burn?” she asked, seeing a wing laying across the fiery wall.

She got a sensation of comfortable warmth. “Oh, well, I suppose you would be immune. We should leave. Once I am to safety you can recall the army.”

The eyes narrowed and he chuffed. “Well, fine,” she grumbled. “Just remember there are victims here other than me. If they don’t fight, don’t kill them.”

He made a twist of his head that said ‘no promises’ and withdrew most of his body, climbing further up so that his back claws were on the top of the walls. Reaching in, he gingerly grabbed both of them in his front claws and jumped back and up, hanging in the air for a second before beating his wings to climb the sky.

It was exhilarating and terrifying all at the same time. From this height she could see more of the castle and what was passing for a battle. There were figures flying through the air, some white, some tawny and at least one black. They stooped like hawks in the fog. The castle was soon swarming with men and beasts and half beasts.

Valan hovered over the centre of the castle, just out of ballista and catapult range, and roared.

Cae and Beef had to cover their ears, though that did not help Cae much, as the sound vibrated through her body and soul.

The sound of the battle below changed with answering trumpets from unknown throats. She could not see enough of it to know what was going on, and Valan swooped over and around, diving into the fog over the sea. A ship loomed before them and he twisted, avoiding the masts by inches and turning to hover over a second vessel. Very carefully, he set her down upon the deck.

She reached out to set a hand on his face and he nuzzled her, breathing deeply of her. She smiled, placing a kiss upon his nose. "Be careful, my prince. My candle is not yet lit."

Then she was being drawn back by familiar hands. "I have her, brother," Balaran said. "Go put paid."

"One piece!" Cae called after him as Valan launched himself once more into the air, still carrying Beef. Balaran tried to shield her from the spray kicked up from his flight, but she was still trying to watch him go.

Once Valan was clear of the ships, she turned and Balaran let her go, grinning. "Magnificent, isn't it?" he crowed.

"What?" she asked, confused.

"Being right! Here," he said, accepting something handed to him and passing it to her. "You might need these. Battle's not over. Remlock's fleet is in this muck somewhere."

She looked down to find her own bow and quiver passed to her and gleefully slung the quiver over her shoulder.

"Can you fight in that dress?" he asked, eyeing the black sack and the hints of her dirty and fraying nightdress beneath.

"It's not ideal, but won't interfere with my pull or my aim."

"Good, join the other archers, then."

As Balaran turned to go up to the command deck, Cae looked about the vessel she was on. From the tabards around her, this was one of her father's ships, and mixed as far as vassal houses. She could see where the other archers stood waiting on either side of the ship, peering into the fog for sight of an enemy. As she crossed to join them, she heard and felt a strange vibration from the deck below her. She paused, listening.

It sounded familiar.

Another, more familiar voice, laughed from nearby. She looked up in time to move her bow as Mace clapped her in a tight embrace. “Never a doubt in my mind,” he crowed. “And ready to fight, as you should be!”

“Mace,... what... is that noise?”

He grinned, led her over to the portal to the hold, lifted the hatch and waved for her to take a look.

The entire cargo space had been emptied except for a row of thin ropes that ran from one end of the hold to the other, held up by two notched blocks. The strings were tightly stretched and two men stood, one on either side of them, holding a rod between them which they sawed back and forth. The sound echoed and reverberated in the hold like a gigantic fiddle. She closed her eyes for a moment, and remembered a similar sound, both in her dreams and in the first set of cells, where she first heard the mournful cries of the Leviathan.

“Why?”

“You’ll have to ask your brother that,” he grinned.

She looked up at him as he closed the hatch. “Willam is assaulting the keep and surely Vynce is not well enough for battle. Father would not be so foolish as to throw all his heirs into combat at once.”

He laughed. “No, he is not. I will not ask how you know where Lord Will is, but no, Lord Vyncet is not here and is right vexed about it, too. Though he is doing the responsible thing and holding fort at DragonsPoint. You have another brother,” he reminded her.

“Yes, but... why would Jan be here?” she said, standing up and looking around.

“What he does best... singing.”

Then she heard him. She had not been able to over the sound of the deep droning coming from the hold and the creaking of the ship in post-stormy waters. But now that she was listening, it was hard to ignore the light, melodic, rapid ringing of his hammers.

She followed the sound down the companionway to the place where the anchors were stored. She found him there, with Rob, both of them playing rhythms and counter-rhythms upon the thick anchor chain. Each link made a slightly different sound based on where it was, and what it rested against, if anything. They were feeling out the sounds at the moment.

“Jan, what is going on!?” she called over the sounds.

He looked up and smiled. “Your idea, sister.”

“What? I don’t remember anything about playing a ship like a ... a lute or a zither.”

He laughed. “Well, it was part of that note you sent us. Turns out, there was moonink on it. Did you know?”

She shook her head. “Not ‘til after it was sent. It was the only paper I had.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I noticed what you were using for ink. Put several people in a right state, that.”

“Sorry. It was all I had. But what did it say that lead to this?”

“That the Leviathan is here. *Physically* here. Maybe sleeping, but very likely not dead. Whoever wrote the original note could hear her singing, moaning. The way it was described reminded Bal of a sounding box. One thing led to another and this was born.”

“But what is this supposed to do?”

His grin was feral. “Wake her up.”

“Can you?”

He shrugged. “We’ll see. Gonna try. The rhythms are Vermian, the ‘language of changes’ and all,” he grinned. “What we’ll do once we’ve raised her beats the ever living out of me. But that’s not my job.”

She stopped breathing a moment, smelling the faint, lingering scent of Stag. “I saw him, Jan.” He glanced up. “Stag,” she said before he could ask who.

Even Robin stilled his hammers and looked at her.

“In what way?” Janem asked.

“In the spiritual sense. He touched me. I can smell him right now,” she said, closing her eyes and looking, but he wasn’t there. That or she could no longer see him. “I saw him jumping from one person to another, and I saw them shift. I saw him touch Will. Maybe... Maybe he is here... and if he is, so are the others, to... bring her back across to where she belongs.”

“Maybe,” he said softly. “If that is so then we have a chance in the Abyss of pulling this off.”

She hesitated to leave him, wanting to embrace him, but he was behind the chain and what he was doing was important.

“Was there more to it?” he asked suddenly. “To the letter?”

She nodded. “I’ll show it to you... after.”

“Mother protect us all,” Rob breathed.

Janem smiled, hearing shouts above deck. “One piece, sister.”

She smiled. "One piece, brother. You too, Rob," she added as she turned to go. She thought she saw a blush at his neck, but he bent back to his hammers as the two of them began working out their rhythm.

Cae returned to the deck as the ship hove around.

The fog had thinned and the wind was brisk and cold. She ignored it, seeing the approach of several ships. Some bore no flags at all, a few: those of House Kaladen and Cuttle and Moray. Someone with a speaking trumpet bellowed a request for surrender to the will of the king. It was answered by ballista. Some of the outer ships were rammed. Men fell overboard and the waters seethed.

"Sea-wolves," she said. "There are wolves in the waters!" she bellowed.

"Dolphins, too, my lady!" someone else cheered, pointing towards an angry pod swarming in around them.

"I think I see otters!"

Cae took a deep breath, not a hundred percent sure that all of those animals were born beasts. She studied the on-coming vessel. There were ballista being readied and archers taking aim. She looked up to the rigging, trying to follow the tangle of ropes. Aiming for demoralization, she set her sights upon the rope at the top of their flag. It was not unlike the wands Mace had had her practising on. "Mace?" she began as she pulled the string to her cheek and took her aim. "I think I have something else for you to add to our training."

"What, little bird?" he asked as the arrow flew.

A moment later, the top rope severed and the black pennant with the grey sea-wolf slithered off the cords and floated through the air to the water.

"Ropes," she answered.

His eyes were wide for about three seconds before he began issuing orders to change targets. "Men! Let's bring down those sails!"

The air was thick with arrows and eventually, the mainsail was cut free and the ship's forward momentum floundered. Ramming no longer possible, sailors prepared to board as two ships began to close with it.

Cae thought she saw something long and feline leap from one of their ships to the enemy vessel, followed by a dark man that was half cat himself. Screams drifted across the waters and she saw several of the Kaladen sailors jumping overboard rather than face the cats.

Another ship headed for them, rowing this time, fully intending to use the iron sea-wolf ram at its bow. Sharp, jagged teeth loomed. Archers aimed for the rowers, but barely put a dent in the momentum. Another ship tried to tangle with it, and

was shoved aside, unable to even get boarding hooks in place. Cae aimed for the helm, found her arrows blocked by the great wheel as it spun.

Then something large dropped out of the sky and crashed through the forequarter deck. Sailors scrambled, trying to salvage something of their lives as water rushed in from the shattered sides. Amber scales rippled as the dragon hauled himself out of the hole he'd made, snapping at whatever sailors he could reach. He thrashed more than necessary as he climbed from the wreckage, reaching out and grabbing hold of both sides of the vessel and began rocking it back and forth, eventually capsizing it. Pulling himself out of the water onto the upturned hull, he shook the water from his hide and roared.

His roar of triumph ended in a bellow of anger as he brought his tail out of the water with a large sea-wolf attached. He bit the fish in half, ripping it loose and flinging the man's body into another ship's rigging. Angry, he launched from the hull, pushing it further into the depths as he stretched for the sky, flying up and around.

Cae gasped as she saw a second dragon, slightly larger than Valan, with scales of a darker amber, more bronze than gold. This dragon crossed paths with Valan and the two of them descended upon another of the enemy ships, breathing fire upon the outliers.

Below the deck, the bowers sawed away at the ropes, sending up deeper tones as part of a severed mast fell through the hold hatch and landed upon the cords. The notes became more bass, resonating in different places. Cae saw the bowers pause, and rush to remove the debris, but she had felt something else: a response to the deeper tones. "Don't move it!" she shouted.

They looked up, startled, but obeyed. Cae grabbed a severed rope that hung from the mast piece and began to shimmy down into the hold. She bellowed at a nearby sailor. "Cut it off here!" she shouted, pointing to the part just below the edge of the deck.

The sailor looked up to the command deck to where Balaran stood directing the battle. "Do what she tells you! When you're done, follow her down!"

The sailor nodded and drew his boarding axes. Not for the first time, Cae wished that Will were here to wield his massive strength to get the job done faster.

Down in the hold she began to direct the bowers. She stood on the ropes, using the skills Semi and Ikembe had been teaching her, keeping her balance by hanging on to ropes hanging from the ceiling. She began to step on some of the strings, changing the tones as they bowed. She compared the sounds to her memory



of the Leviathan's song, heard not so long ago. It did not take her long to figure out where to apply her weight for what sounds.

Then the mast piece fell behind her, sliding partly onto the floor. The sailor monkeyed himself down after it.

"What next, my lady?" he asked.

"Level it off. I want it lying across the ropes as even as you can," she ordered. "Oh, why didn't I take up a musical instrument?"

When the mast was placed just right, she ordered him to make it secure, then began to direct the bowers in their motions. Slower here, more force, higher on this end, then back and faster, etc. Trying to recreate the sounds she had been hearing in her sleep. She closed her eyes, ignoring the rocking of the ship as another collided. She could almost see the song in the air, sensing the spirits of other Second Born lingering close by, waiting for something.

There was desire to answer, but no drive. There was only her own pain and sorrow and anger. A desire to rise and wreak havoc or raise another storm to wash them all away. But there was something else she was listening to, something that was at the moment confusing her.

"Sailor!" she called, her eyes still closed, taking a page from the queen's book and reacting purely on instinct.

"Aye!"

"Get to the anchor and tell my brother to tell the story of Isildar and Denan, but to alter it to current events."

"What?"

"Tell the man hammering on the anchor chain to alter the story of Isildar and Denan!" she repeated. "Quickly!"

She heard the man run off, and concentrated upon what she was doing. By now the three of them had the pattern down and she did not need to shout off directions. The melody sounded right.

Something fell from the hatch above her, landing half on her back, throwing off her steps. She felt more than heard apologies as the large sea otter struggled to balance himself on her shoulder to reach the ropes above her.

An enormous kite dove after him, snatching him up just as he grabbed the loop of rope and his hind feet left Cae's shoulder. The two fought in the air between the hatches, the kite trying to hold on and peck and claw the otter, and the sea-dog biting and thrashing and generally making it hard for the bird to fly. Something

bumped the ship again, and, between that and the uproar just a few yards from her head, Cae lost her footing and fell, her legs getting caught and tangled in the ropes.

Snarling, she ignored her own position for a moment, beyond anchoring herself. The bowers were rushing to help her, but she pulled her bow from her back and drew an arrow, taking careful aim. She took a deep breath, waiting for the shot, loosed a half second before it came, following the pattern of the aerial catfight. The arrow skimmed just past the otter's thick fur to pierce the kite in the breast.

Both creatures fell, though the otter remained an otter and his grip on the ropes. The kite became a man and landed half off them, limbs tangling in the makeshift strings. She redirected the bowers to remove the dead man and, reslinging her bow on her back, climbed to her own feet. She looked down at the otter, holding one leg out towards him and leaning back as near the open hatch as she could. "Going up?" she asked.

The otter actually grinned, running nimbly along the ropes, which made a very interesting sound, raced up her leg and torso to her arm. Once she felt his belly reach her palm, she launched him upwards through the opening. He caught the edge of the hatch and scrambled back into the fight with a shrill cry of battlelust.

By then, the bowers had thrown aside the corpse and had picked up their bow again. Nodding, they started from the beginning. Cae began to hear a change in the ringing, listened to the patterns and nodded. Everything felt right and in place.

Battle raged overhead. She could tell by the sounds that they had been boarded. She saw by the worried looks of the bowers that they were concerned, too. "Ignore it," she called. "What we are doing is too important." She looked back at the sailor who had been assigned to follow her. "What's your name?"

"Nod, my lady," he answered.

"Nod will protect us from anything that comes down here, is that right?" she said, glancing back at him for confirmation.

He drew a short, slightly curved sword and grinned. "Aye, my lady. Keep at it, lads! I have your backs."

One of the bowers gave a quickly stifled burst of laughter at that.

Nod looked up at the hatch half over Cae's head. "Could my lady maybe move forward a foot or two?"

Cae tested the theory, heard the tone change and shook her head. "Sorry. Can't. I have to be right where I am. I'll be fine."

They continued to play. Cae listened to everything, her eyes closed, trying to feel the leviathan, and anything else that might be around them. She heard the occa-

sional bump of things against the hull, likely sea-wolves trying to mess with the sounds. There was a momentary falter in Janem's rhythms but he picked back up immediately, compensating for whatever had happened. Cae listened to his ringing, beginning to hear the story unfold. Mother knew she had read it to him so many times he knew it by heart. She was even able to catch the differences as he made Kaladen the villain and not Alvermian.

It was not long into the meat of the tale that she felt it, the shift below. The Leviathan had stirred and was rising and she was angry and in pain and seeking vengeance.

"Men, I think we're done here!" she gulped. "And it is going to be close. Go help where you can!"

She pulled herself up by the ceiling ropes, swinging over to the side of the make-shift instrument and let go, landing mostly on her feet. She followed Nod to the companionway and up to the deck. It took all her newly taught skills to avoid the combat waging all around her. She was jostled more than a bit, but managed to avoid most of it. She helped where she could, pulling the enemy off balance using their own momentum, adding a few well-placed kicks where they would do the most good as she headed for the command deck.

When she reached the top of the ladder, she had to pause. Balaran was in full sway, going blade to blade with a large, muscled Kaladen sailor. He was a wonder to watch. The Kaladen was surprisingly quick, but still relied on brute force with his axe. Bal was dancing. His blade was thinner than most she had seen, more elegant, but it was just as lethal. It flew through the air, slicing into tender places as Bal twisted and turned. She could see elements of Valea in his movements, but she could also see some of the wild dance he had taken her through once or twice. She was watching Bal leap to the rail, grab the shrouds, then leap off again, swinging around to kick the man in the face, when an arrow landed in the wood beside her cheek, catching some of her hair.

She ducked, breaking the arrow to slide her hair off of it rather than deal with untangling it, and hurried up to the deck. She found herself behind the man, perilously close to being backed into. "Hey, ugly!" she called, "Get out of the way!"

The man spun, startled. Trying not to trip over her, he tangled his feet and just fell, aided by a kick from Bal.

Bal grinned at her from over the body, tossed her a dagger. "Tell me you know how to use that," he pleaded.

She shrugged. "I'll make do."

The pair of them squared off against the man, slowly moving forward. Faced with two opponents, one whose lethality he already knew, the man scrambled back towards the edge and rolled off the ship between the broken rails.

They rushed to the edge, to see what happened to him. They watched his body twisting in the change, stretching for the water. They felt a moment of anger that he had escaped, then jumped back as something large and black leapt from the depths and snatched the half-changed man from the air and dove again. They looked at each other. "Do you know what that was?" she asked him, breathing heavily.

"I was hoping you did," he answered.

"Damn," she swore.

"Wait, why have they stopped playing?" he asked, suddenly realizing what he wasn't hearing.

"Because she's coming," she said, raising her voice to be heard over the increasing noise of battle. "We have to flee!"

"Why?"

"So she doesn't grab us with them! It'll make it easier for her to differentiate. She's not going to know us from them and at the moment I doubt she's going to care! We have to disengage. Let them think they're winning and we're running. They'll give chase."

Balaran reacted quickly, giving orders to his helmsman, then to Nod who was pulling another enemy from the ladder before climbing it himself. As the helmsman began to turn the ship out of the battle, Nod jumped to the ratlines and ran monkey-like up to the mainmast, changing out the signal flags from a less contested position.

Cae went to the rail, taking advantage of as much cover as she could, and began picking off the enemy still on board. She did not have many arrows left, only a dozen or so, so she tried to make them count. When she ran out, there were still enemy on board, but not so much. She made sure she was well out of the way, but watched everything around her. The crew had the invaders handled, and several ships tried to give chase. She could see battles seething under the water between various aquatics.

Balaran appeared on the rail with her, looking into the waters. "You know, for a House so devoted to the Eldest, they sure have embraced the shift quickly."

She shook her head. "They aren't devoted. They pay lip service. The only thing they've embraced is the devotion of their women. They're using it to subjugate for-

eign wives. They claim not to raise their daughters to the faith, but as we've never seen one..." she shrugged. "They'll bend the teachings to suit them."

"That is just wrong," he commented, moving away from the rail.

Cae turned with him, looking around as other ships broke away from the main fight and began to flee with them. She could feel Her coming, like a singing in her veins.

Cae heard a splash nearby. She half turned, not knowing what she was really expecting. It was most certainly not a large, scarred, shark body twisting in the air, and shift as hands reached out, grabbing the rail. The man launched himself over it and onto the deck. Before Cae could cry out or dodge, a meaty hand reached out and snatched her loose hair, yanking her back against his wet chest. A blackened dagger hovered before her eye.

She froze.

The man was not as large as her father, being more lean and wiry, but there was still the bulk of age and activity about him. He wore a beard, though it was long, straggly about the cheeks but thicker at the chin and hung nearly to his belt. She could feel the beads woven into it pressing against her back. It was dark, neither black nor brown and yellowing where age was beginning to tell. He smelled of wet wool and fish and damp, deep places, and that sweet spirit she had smelled once upon Aldane. Suddenly she knew who he was. "Remlock!" she choked.

He shook her by the hair. "That's Lord Kaladen to you, girlie," he snarled. "My son might not of been able to teach you your place or proper manners, but I will. I've ruined better women than you and paid less for it. But you... yore far more trouble than yore worth."

She grabbed for the hand in her hair, trying to loosen his grip. He tightened it and shook her again, bringing the dagger closer. "I wouldn't do that, boy," he snarled. "Not unless you want your brother's pretty little bird to go the way of her father."

Cae looked up, saw Balaran standing at ready, weapon out. His expression was black as he looked for any opening.

"How... are you still armed?" Bal asked, stalling. "Metal doesn't meld, only fabric."

"Unless it's moonsilver," Remlock grinned. "And this is, for all it don't look it. And you'll find not all fabric too. You see, we've been playing with this for a little while now. Since the bonfires."

Cae looked at the knife, saw why it did not gleam like it should have. The hilt was wrapped, and the blade was coated in what looked like a thin film of black oil or tar, and it smelled pleasantly sweet with a hint of musk. “What is that?” she whispered.

“This?” he rumbled, pulling her closer, pressing his rough cheek against hers and holding it where she could see it better. “This is what killed your father. Or will. Don’t know how he’s survived this long, but only I have the antidote. We took it once from the brains of the whales, from the Leviathan’s children. But you got to take it live. We haven’t much left, hoarded away. But it will be enough. Enough to topple a kingdom and claim it. So unless you want to shrivel away like a spider’s lunch, I do not recommend moving overmuch. Right now, I need yer pretty little prince to order his helmsman to drop anchor.”

Balaran nodded to the nearby sailor.

“And order your men to lay down arms.”

Bal reluctantly gave the order.

There were only three of Kaladen’s men still alive. One of them killed the man he had been fighting out of spite, but the others collected themselves together, awaiting their lord’s orders.

“Now why hasn’t that anchor dropped?” Remlock snarled.

The helmsman shrugged. “Dunno. Order’s given. Mebe the man’s dead. Or an’t nobod there.”

Remlock growled. “Jeno, go check. I want this ship stopped.”

The man named headed below.

Behind them, the other ship began to close, trying to catch up and board.

“What is it you hope to gain from all this, Remlock?” Balaran asked. “She is hardly the best candidate to get you a throne.”

“Seeing as your little sister is already married off, she’ll do as well as any. Plus giving me the satisfaction of bearding her father. Insult to injury and all that. Besides, it is not so easy forcing a princess into a marriage as it is a duke’s daughter. My family has been playing a very long game, Your Highness,” he sneered. “I’m not inclined to lose it now.”

“But you’ve overplayed your hand,” he said.

“I don’t see how. You’ve attacked with no provocation and no call for surrender, no proclamation of who you were and who you represented,” he grinned. “I get her back to my own keep and I’ve a priest who’ll marry them no matter what the bitch says. After that, there is nothing you can do.”

“I think you very much mistake your position.”

“Why hasn’t that bloody anchor dropped!!” he shouted.

Cae felt something move past them in the deeps. “*Great Mother Below,*” she murmured prayerfully in Old Vermian. “*Brace for impact.*” She prepared to go limp.

She felt readiness from Balaran, a willingness to wait for her signal. She was watching his eyes, not that she needed to see his reaction to know. When the Leviathan breached, everyone felt it. It was as if the sea were rising from below them, slow and torturous. The sound was deafening. The helmsman jumped to turn the wheel to ride the swell and keep them from becoming capsized. Cae went limp, causing Remlock’s grip to fail between her sudden dead weight and the increasing shift of the deck angle.

Balaran lunged forward over her and, striking the knife arm upwards with his forearm, slammed his forehead into the man’s nose. Remlock dropped in a gush of blood and Bal fell over Cae, grabbing her and rolling with her. They slid across the deck, coming to a temporary stop against the quarterdeck rail. Bal locked his legs around the balusters to keep them from going over and held onto her for all he was worth.

The helmsman had managed to turn the ship enough to ride the wave as the Leviathan came up beneath the following vessel. Peering upwards, Cae caught a glimpse of what emerged from the water. It seemed as if the ocean floor had risen up, folded in half and clamped down on the following ship. The teeth were numerous and gleaming in the light where the sun was beginning to break the clouds, and the size of half grown children. She heard the sickening crunch and crack of breaking wood, and the screams of the men incapable of the shift trapped between the teeth and the deeps.

The skin was a dark, greyish green, smooth like that of the dolphins, only deeply scarred and scored. There were still bits of rusting metal sticking out of her hide with lengths of chain entangled. The head was enormous, like a rounded and more blunt version of Valan’s dragon head, and the mouth seemed to split the beast in half. Either she had an extremely long neck or no neck at all, as there was no tapering of the body. That or the head was just that large, as it rose a little more than twice the height of the ship out of the water, and the mouth was most of that. When the jaws snapped closed and the body began to fall back down into the water, only two small pieces of the ship, fore and aft, fell to the churning surface, only to be swallowed up in the backwash.

It took several minutes for the ship to level out, reaching a safe distance. Balaran stood, helping her to her feet, and the two of them looked back over the fleets. They had scattered, trying to avoid the wreckage and what had caused it. The Kaladen fleet and the pirates who followed them were breaking off combat or chase and seeking open water. They were being pursued by other things in the waves. The two of them watched as one ship was sunk by a large fluke rising beneath and flipping it.

Dolphins and other aquatics swarmed the enemy ships, effectively marking them with squeals and clicks. One by one those ships fell prey to the beast beneath.

They heard a sound on the side of the ship and ran to the rail to look down. A large sea otter slipped between the balusters to the desk and shifted up to a woman dressed as a sailor. "Permission to come aboard, Commander, Your Highness?" she laughed. She had several cuts on her body, and at least one deep one on her arm as she reached up to slick back her short hair.

"Granted," Balaran nodded. "What news?"

"We're to gather close and head for shore. There's decent anchorage on the south side of the tombolo. The Leviathan..." she paused to express her wonder and awe at what she had seen below the surface. It took her whole body, not just her face. "...she's hunting the vessels we've marked, but it'll be easier if we're not where they are."

"Provisions for surrender?" he asked.

"If they drop anchor, she'll bypass them."

"She's rational then?" Cae asked.

"Frighteningly so," she replied with a whistle from between her teeth. "You can't see the whole all at once. She's also right pissed, pardon my language, my lady."

Cae gave her a smile. "I've heard saltier."

She grinned. "I'll send my son to see you when you beach, Lady Caclerys. House Lutret owes you a debt."

"Thanks are unnecessary, if he was the otter that tangled with the kite in the hold. But I would like very much to meet him out of fur."

She gave a nod and a bow before climbing the rail and making a swan dive off of it.

Balaran turned to give the helmsman directions. "You heard the lady, Captain," he grinned. "Turn us about."

"Aye, aye, Commander," the man answered.



Cae looked at him in surprise. Balaran laughed. “For the time being, anyway,” he said. “It’s not like I was going to be any good in the land fight. And who else do you think he trusted to watch over you?”

She sighed. “I was hoping Ikembe. Tempest told me she was not harmed when they stole me.”

He sobered. “She is on land with the others. She did not take her failure well. In fact, it was Lili who told us what was used. Dream Dust isn’t something we use in the West.”

Janem climbed the ladder to the quarterdeck. “Are we through throwing the crew around?” he quipped.

Cae ran to hug him the moment he was solidly on deck. She was wet, but he did not care, held her tightly. “One piece?” he asked her.

“More or less,” she laughed. “You?”

He shrugged, “Rob’s a little worse for wear. When they started screwing with the anchor, he got his belly pinched, and I think he’s a little more battered than I am from when the ship tried to capsize.”

“That wasn’t capsizing,” Bal commented. “That was apparently the Leviathan eating Lord Kaladen’s flagship.”

“Sooo…” Janem began, drawing the word out in a question.

“See for yourself,” Cae said, nudging him towards the fleeing ships. They watched the Leviathan rise once more out of the water to bite one ship and crush another with the curve of her body as she fell. She was so long that her head was once more beneath the waves almost a whole minute before her fluke appeared. Her body was thick, almost whale-like but a great deal longer and more sinuous. Her forelimbs were almost wings, with the membrane torn and tattered in places.

They stood watching her in silence until she was out of sight again.

“So…” Cae began, once they could find their voices. “What exactly is dream dust and where does it come from?”

“Far East,” Bal said. “Like east of Telmar, east. Apparently it’s the pollen of a flower. You’re supposed to dust your pillow with very little, to help you sleep. Use too much and waking you is difficult, though it wears off eventually. It reacts to the breath.”

“Altessa was the one who brought it over,” Jan commented.

She looked over at him. “Altessa is…?” she asked.

“A Telmarian mercari I met at the wedding,” he answered without a beat. “You want it, she knows the best place to get it. We’ve been haggling.”

“And that is slang for...” she began, grinning.

“For bargaining,” he said firmly, giving her shoulder a light shove with his own. “She could not tell us who ordered it without compromising her business.”

“But she was more than happy to submit her books for royal inspection when demanded,” Bal added. “She is a most persuasive woman, Janem,” he said with a raised eyebrow. “Best watch yourself. I think she might give you a run for your money.”

“My money, definitely,” he laughed. “Everything else...” he shrugged suggestively.

“Your Highness!” shouted the captain.

They turned, saw Remlock staggering to his feet, his face covered in blood and his mouth opening in a snarl, filling with jagged teeth, growing wider.

Janem grabbed Cae and pulled her out of the way. Balaran leapt to intercept him. The two men tangled, rolling on the deck like a pair of cats. Remlock trying to sink his teeth into any portion he could, and Bal trying desperately to stop him.

Cae looked around, trying to find the poisoned dagger. It was nowhere to be seen, and neither was her bow or Bal’s sword. She pulled her quiver from her back, wielding it like a club and began beating Remlock over the head with it as he rolled to the top. He turned to snap at her and Bal made a grab for his throat, digging his fingers into the growing gills.

Remlock reacted in typical shark fashion and rolled, thrashing with his whole body. He rolled them towards the ladder, trying to throw them to the lower deck. Balaran tried to stop the fall, and hang on to his prey, but when Remlock snapped at him, he had to let go. He ignored the blood covering his hands, abraded by the coarse skin of Remlock’s throat. He scrambled to his feet and used the rail to swing down, preventing the man’s escape over the side.

A sailor passed him a sword and he set to with a will, using every technique he ever learned. Remlock hammered his elbow into the head of a sailor who was not able to get out of the way quickly enough and took his weapon. He swung at the prince with intense hatred, grew increasingly irritated as Balaran bent, swayed and dodged to avoid his blows more than he parried. His face became more human. “Stop dancing and fight, you gutless dog!” he roared. “An’t a one of you prancing worms worth your salt!”

“Oh, you wish to dance?” Bal quipped, turning a neat pirouette. “Quite frankly, you aren’t my type, but a prince must be magnanimous. Even to a maiden as hideous as you.”

Remlock roared, using his sword more like an axe and hammering after him. “The only reason your scaly tailed, sword swallowing family hold the crown is because you’re more trouble than you’re worth to kill!”

Balaran pulled himself back, drawing up, incensed. “I have never swallowed a sword in my life!” he exclaimed. “I’ve seen it done. It’s quite impressive,” he added, more facetiously. “I understand the Lord Mendicant employs two of them.”

Remlock snarled, grabbed a sailor and threw him at the prince. Bal neatly turned, propelling the man safely past him and dodging the incoming blow that followed. He twisted, rolling off Remlock’s arm and around to chop at his back. The man turned surprisingly fast and slashed across Bal’s ribs.

Cae surged against Janem’s renewed grip, wanting to help somehow. Jan held her back.

She felt something nearby, familiar and comforting, smelled the deep, warm musk on the wind. She closed her eyes, tracked Stag by the glow. She slipped a little farther into that between place, leaning against her brother. Stag was walking across the water, out to where she could see a larger glow and the glimmers of others clustering about it. A swan flew overhead, drawn to the same place as the others. She saw Bear passing and Unicorn, standing taller than Stag, all of them drawn to the Leviathan.

They were too far away for her to see anything, but there was a great gathering of spirits there. The storm that had passed, bringing the navy and the army, regathered, following that brilliance southward at an unnatural pace. She felt before she saw Dragon joining the exodus, turned to look as the long body skimmed the water over the ship and through it. Cae opened her eyes as the Firstborn flew off to join its siblings and saw Balaran and Remlock on the deck standing in a circle of sailors not at the moment needed to get the ship where she was going.

“Back with us?” Jan quipped.

“What?” she asked, glancing up at him briefly before returning her gaze to the fight.

“I thought I lost you somewhere for a moment.”

She looked up at him. “I faded?”

He shook his head, “Nothing that dramatic. You didn’t faint, but you were... not all here,” he tapped his temple. “You know, ‘the fire was going but there was nothing on the spit?’”

“I was watching the spirits. They’ve gone,” she answered, turning back to the fight as Balaran surged against Remlock.

“Where? Have they abandoned us?” he asked softly.

“No,” she said, wincing as Remlock took another bite at Bal, barely missing. “They are following the Leviathan somewhere. South.”

“Eastern Isles you think?” he asked.

“Maybe. If so, I do not envy them when she gets there. She’s brewing a storm. I think...” she began, unsure even as she said it, “that they might be taking her there to help her cross back.”

“Well, that’s good, ...I guess.”

Below, Balaran seemed to swell a little, drawing himself up, not unlike she had seen Willam do. As she blinked, she caught a glimpse of a stream of spiritual fire blowing over the ship. Closing her eyes and turning her head, she saw Dragon wink as he back-winged, breathing upon the ship. Rolling in the sky, he streaked off again southward.

Opening her eyes, she saw Balaran surge forward, taking two swipes, one that cut Remlock’s leg at the knee, and the other at the throat. His hands tried to stem the blood, to no avail. Balaran stood there in the spray with an expression not that different from his twin.

Cheers went up from the watching sailors and Bal kicked the remnants of the Kaladen lord into the churning waters. What sea-wolves remained, made short work of the body. A group of sailors began hauling buckets of water to the deck, doing what they could to clear it of blood and other disagreeable substances. At Balaran’s request, two of them began to pour the water over him, rinsing away Kaladen’s blood.

Cae looked towards the keep on the tied island. It looked even more lonely and desolate. Her sheet still hung from the window, flapping in the wind as smoke billowed from the top. “Is that how he knew where I was?” she asked.

Jan looked in the direction she was staring. “Yes. Clever of you.”

“I had to do something,” she quipped dryly. “You nearly killed me shooting the tower.”

“We weren’t aiming at the tower,” Bal said, climbing the ladder. “It just happened to be in the way. We were trying to draw their attention seaward, so our land-bound army could sneak up on them.”

“And the aerial,” Jan grinned. “Some of the flyers were supposed to fly in and shift, opening the gates.”

“This is going to change warfare forever,” she sighed.

Balaran began wringing the water out of his braid. "It was bound to happen. We'll likely find compensations in the archives or deep in the library. It will keep me busy for a while. And Val. Though I think he will have other things to occupy him for a bit," he grinned lasciviously.

"Like you won't?" she dead panned, not going to be baited or made to blush. She reached into her bodice and pulled out the book, handing it to Bal. "Here, this will add to it. Put the note I sent you back in and read it by southerly light." She then climbed down the ladder and crossed to the bow of the ship, wanting a more fore view as they rounded the island.

A good bit of the army was arrayed upon the tombolo beach and the ships were directed by dolphins and seals where to anchor. A good portion of the fleet had already come in and sent out the longboats to shore by the time Cae and Balaran joined them.

She was helped ashore by a grinning young man with his fair share of cuts, including one along his jawbone. He bowed once she was safely on the beach. "My lady, my apologies for falling upon you," he said, flashing sharp white teeth.

She smiled, realizing who this must be. "Ah, my gallant otter, slayer of vicious kites!"

"Hanlan Lutret, at your humble service, my lady. And my thanks as well for the boost."

"Well, I was glad to break your fall, and you have hereby repaid the boost."

He laughed, bowing over her hand. He eyed the prince right behind her, gave him a bow as well. "Needs my lady anything from House Lutret and Sunholt will answer."

"Well," she began. "I do need to find my brother Willam."

He made an expansive gesture across the strand to the northern shore. Caelerys saw a group of stags rinsing themselves off in the surf. There were other animals there: a beaver, a pair of badgers and a few bears, but only the stags held her attention. Balaran let her go, keeping an eye on her, but remaining back.

Cae had no trouble picking Will out of the herd. He was the largest, and only he had moonsilver on his breast, face and antlers. He stood chest deep in the surf, keeping an eye on the others bathing in the water. She stood on the edge of the waves, just watching him. Were it not for the moonsilver, she could easily have taken him for one of the kings of the forest. Eventually, he noticed her, looking over his shoulder. He turned, wading out of the water and shaking his coat dry before walking up to her.

He stood over her like that for a long moment, reached out to sniff her, checking her for injuries. Aside from a few minor scratches, she was whole. It was more than she could say for him. He had a long cut on his side, though it was not deep enough to warrant sewing and had already stopped bleeding. There were a number of minor cuts and nicks, but nothing unexpected or life-threatening.

She stared up at him, tilted her head in that birdlike way of hers. "So have you figured out how to turn back? Or are you too big?"

Slowly, he melted down, his ruddy brown coat becoming his usual, fine, black wool tunic under the family breastplate. He pulled the helmet off his head, passing it back to the soldier who'd come to stand not far behind him. She threw her arms around him and he fairly crushed her. She did not care that his breastplate was cold and hard against her. He was whole and here.

When he finally set her down, he looked her over. "You're wet."

She laughed. "Whereas you who were just in the water, are merely damp."

He shrugged. "The advantage of being able to shake dry. That is why we are bathing as beasts."

She nodded. "So how do you like it?"

"It has its advantages," he grinned. "What did the finned toad do to you?"

Her smile faded. "Bored me. Where is he?"

"Dead."

She just stared at him until he told her more. "I didn't get to him. That was Valan. He came up over the battlements behind where he stood screaming at his archers and the soldiers dropping things on us in the outer bailey, and just snapped him in half. He waited until he turned around though. I can only imagine the look of terror on his face."

"What was the price?"

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "More than it should have been but less than it could have thanks to Wellen. Once the prince brought him down from the tower, he was able to convince a large number of people to surrender. But there were some, mostly die-hard Kaladen, who either did not care or did not believe."

"Wellen?" she asked. "Wait, he came from the tower?"

He nodded. "Prince brought him back to the castle after taking you to the ship. He was one of your guards, I understand. He convinced a good number of people that Aldane was actually acting against the Crown."

"And Lord Cuttle?" she asked.

His grin was feral. "Unrepentant. His blood was sweet."

She nodded, "Good. Salera will be relieved."

"Salera?" he asked.

"Lady Cuttle."

"Ah. Few of the ladies of the castle were harmed."

"Few?" she frowned. "Why were any?"

He shrugged. "There were a couple who were determined to defend the honour of their ladies or masters. It was unclear what they were protesting. I think one or two committed suicide rather than 'be taken'," he scowled.

"There was no pillaging, was there?"

He shook his head. "We made that clear. Anyone who surrendered was to be taken captive and treated well until we could sort everything else out."

She sighed, relieved.

"Your Lady Cuttle has taken charge of the non-combatants and the Folk. Wel-len is watching over them."

"How did you march an army this far, this fast?" she asked.

He shrugged. "We only marched a few miles. The ships dropped us off down the coast yesterday evening. We marched the rest of the way by night to take advantage of the darkness."

There was something he was avoiding. She could sense it. There was a question she had not yet voiced. "What did I cost us?" she asked again. "There is something you are not telling me."

"We've lost a few," he said, evading still.

"Willam."

He took a deep breath. "I do not know the whole toll. I only know my own men. We've lost Lord Brock, and lady Kitler. She was a fierce vixen," he commented, proudly. "She was one of those who slipped through the bars to open the gates of the inner bailey. Took three men down with her."

She felt the sadness well up at the losses, let them flow through her. "Who else?"

"Reled was hurt pretty badly, but I think he'll live. You thought those two were formidable as men?" he said, shaking his head. "I would not want to face them now that they know how to shift."

"Who else?"

"That you know?" he asked.

She looked up at him at that, her eyes narrowing. "Yes. You can give me lists and numbers later. I want to know what you don't want to say."

He looked down to where her hand was still on his chest and stepped back, glaring down at her in frustration. "You know, you were bad enough when you were just you and observant, but this sympathy business is just damned unfair."

She felt a knot growing, looked around suddenly, trying to see the one person she had yet to see that she wanted to above all others.

"Not him," Willam growled. "I'd have told you first off, if he had been a casualty."

She rounded on him. "Then who? Not Elder? Cygent?"

"Griff."

She just stared. "Lord Rorik?" she gaped.

He nodded solemnly.

Her hands went to her mouth. "Poor Syera," she breathed, tears welling in her eyes. "That is a great loss to their House."

"He has grown sons, one of which is here. They already know."

"Did he buy his life dearly?" she asked.

She could feel his pain sharply. "I only know what Selgan told us. Rorik flew in and opened the drawbridge, dealing with what men resisted. He was magnificent to see," he added, remembering. "But it was too much for him."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, some of us were a little worried about shifting back after seeing what happened to him, until we saw others doing it with ease. Selgan said he was breathing oddly after the shift, but he did what was needed. Then he just collapsed. When he shifted back there wasn't a mark on him."

"His heart gave out?" she gasped.

He shrugged. "He really was too old for this," he sighed.

They heard her name being called, turned to look down the strand, saw Balaran waving for her to come to him. She turned, reaching up to kiss her brother's cheek before moving to join the prince.

"What is it?" she asked as she approached.

"The dragons are coming in."

She looked up into the sky, saw the pair of them winging this way. "Who is the other one?" she asked, shielding her eyes from the sun.

"Uncle Olen. Who knew? Apparently he had a very good clue. Helped Valan through it the first time."

She looked at him in surprise. "You think he shifted before?"



He shrugged. “Enigmatic as ever, he won’t say. Living where he does, it is entirely possible. Watch out,” he warned, turning his back and shielding her from the spray of sand kicked up by the back winging of the landing dragons.

When she looked back, both were men again and Valan was running towards her. She slipped from Balaran’s grasp and ran to meet him.

He swept her up in a fierce embrace, tighter than Will had, and she could still feel the greater heat of his body from the dragon within. He kissed her passionately whilst Balaran watched, smirking.

When they finally took a breath, they stood there, foreheads together, half laughing, half weeping for joy. He held her face in his hands, unwilling to release her. “Did anything happen that will make things more difficult?” he asked softly.

“He didn’t touch me. Well,” she amended, “he tried to backhand me once. But he was about as effective at that as he was at courting.”

She could feel as well as hear the rumbling in his chest at that. “I am beginning to regret killing him so quickly.”

She pulled back to get a better look at him. “Did you really bite him in half?”

He gave her a rueful smile. “Thirds. I missed the top of his head. I’d have eaten him but I was afraid he’d not sit well later. I spat him into the sea.”

“He’s with his father then,” she nodded. “Fitting.”

“Did you kill Remlock?” he asked, with a gleam of pride.

She shook her head. “No, that was your brother.”

“Ah.”

“Don’t let her fool you,” Bal called, apparently being close enough to overhear them. “She gave him hell. You should have seen her beating him over the head with her quiver whilst we rolled on the deck trying to bite or strangle each other,” he laughed.

Valan pulled her to his side, keeping his arm tightly around her. “He may not have touched you, but there will be a devil of a time proving it. The other reason I regret killing him so quickly,” Val sighed.

“Wait,” Cae said, remembering. “Wellen. The guard from the tower. He’ll vouch.”

Valan looked up at his brother. “Where is he?”

Bal shrugged, “Like I know? I was in charge of the navy, not the army. Lord Willam!” he bellowed.

Willam approached, bowing to the two princes. “Your Highnesses, how may I serve?”

“Oh, leave off, Will,” Cae growled. “It’s just the four of us.”

“But the army watches,” he said with a smirk.

“Where is the guardsman Wallin?” Val asked, looking back to Cae for confirmation.

“Wellen,” Will and Cae both answered.

“He should be with Lady Cuttle and the prisoners. I can take you to them,” Will offered. “They’re gathered in the inner bailey.”

Will led the way back up the tombolo to the entrance of the keep. Cae had never seen it from this angle. From here, the island looked lush below the battlements. The keep took up most of it, but there were craggy cliffs all the way around and no place to dock at all. The crags were green with stubborn vegetation that she was certain had to serve some purpose. That or they had no feasible means of cutting it back. In spite of it, there was no way to approach the keep without being seen. The fog had apparently served her prince well.

The castle was actually not bad, once you got past the air of oppression and the meanness of its Lord. Cuttle had spent plenty on defence, just not on luxuries, and his definition of luxuries was broad. But, looking past the rubble and the blood stains and battle damage, Cae thought this might once have been a very pretty little castle, now that she was not imprisoned in its tower.

The wind cut through the outer bailey, and the passage between the gates were freezing. Cae snuggled a little closer to Valan’s warmth.

Once they entered the inner courtyard, it seemed that every soul still alive in the keep had been gathered there. Some were soldiers, sitting on the ground, disarmed and awaiting their fate, some were the folk of the castle, who either huddled or moved about following the orders of Lady Cuttle. Salera was seeing to the comforts of her people, as a good lady would. Folk were bustling out of the kitchens with bread and whatever food was able to be brought to hand.

When she became aware of their presence, she turned and curtsied. “Your Highnesses, Lady Caelerys, Lord Willam.”

“Lady Cuttle,” Valan said formally, nodding. “You seem to have everything in hand here.”

She gave a nod of thanks.

“Where is your Lord?” he asked.

Several people pointed across the bailey to a pile of rags.

Will had the grace to blush. "Forgive me, Your Highness. The man was most set upon his treason, knowing it to be so. ...He also said some ...unsavoury things about my sister." he added sheepishly.

Valan glanced at him, the hint of a grin on his face. "Cannot say as I would have done any less." He turned back to see the lady watching him soberly. He bowed. "Forgive me for making light of your loss, my lady. Or speaking of his death in such a manner."

She shrugged. "However this plays out, you have done me a favour. And this House as well. My husband had no precedent children, and I have no idea of his extended relations."

Will cocked his head, "He did not speak to you of his family?"

She snorted. "He hardly spoke to me at all but to give orders and make demands. I am only a woman, my lord."

"A woman is never 'only' anything," he grunted.

She eyed him. "Were you the stag who gored him into the wall and then trampled what remained?"

Will stiffened. "I am," he answered, with neither pride nor shame.

She curtsied to him. "Then you have my thanks, my lord."

Will did not know what to make of this. He had never before been thanked for making someone a widow. He nodded, not knowing what else to do.

Salera turned back to the prince. "What demands has Your Highness upon this House in our defeat?"

Valan arched an eyebrow. "Were you actually in defiance of the crown?"

She looked about at the people around her. "I do not think any of us that remain had any intentions of rebellion. We kept the woman as a favour to my husband's liege lord and remote cousin. It was one of the few relations he did boast of," she added. "We were told the arrangements were at the behest of her father who despaired of controlling her."

Will had to suppress a laugh at that and Cae elbowed him for his trouble, having difficulty not grinning herself.

"If he was wrong in this, then take the lady with our apologies."

"Oh, I intend to. Wellen, was it?" Valan asked, looking over at 'Beef' who stood a few steps behind Lady Cuttle and looked ready to defend her.

The man in question bowed. "Aye, Your Highness."

"Were you the only guard ever assigned to the tower?"

“Nay, Your Highness. Petri stood guard with me, but, alas, he is... dead,” he said delicately.

Cae remembered suddenly what had happened to the man she had thought of as ‘Idiot’.

“I was, however, in charge. Whatever punishment you wish dealt, I ask it fall only on me.”

“No punishment, unless...” he left the sentence hanging. “In all the time you guarded her, to your knowledge, did anyone lay a hand upon my betrothed?”

Wellen drew himself up, as if insulted by the suggestion. “No, Your Highness.” He glanced at her. “Has she claimed someone has?”

“Do not be so hasty to think ill of me, Wellen,” Caelerys said gently. “He simply needs an affidavit that I was not molested.”

This seemed to mollify him a little. “No, Your Highness. Lord Cuttle was forbidden by Lord Aldane to go near the tower and he himself never stayed long enough. I believe the one time he tried anything, she trounced him soundly.”

Valan looked down at her in surprise and pride.

“We heard yelling, noises, a few bumps and when he emerged, he was angry and had a bloody nose. There was no other indications of ...interference,” he said pointedly, looking at Valan in a way meant to convey things only men were supposed to understand. “No one else visited her but Lady Cuttle and the Pontifex.”

Valan nodded, thanking him. He started to turn when Lady Cuttle spoke up again.

“Begging your pardon, Your Highness, but... what is to become of us?”

He looked over the populace, all listening eagerly, awaiting their fate. “Lady Cuttle, you will return with us to DragonsPoint to plead your case before the Court. If there are any subsequent children, there may be investigations and assessments to decide inheritance.”

“Oh, there are subsequent children, Your Highness,” she said. “Many, in fact. He claimed none of them.”

“Then a search shall be made to see if there are any worthies amongst extended relations. You may bring five men to see to your protection and whatever ladies you require.”

She curtsied deeply. “Thank you, Your Highness. I shall pack at once and assign someone to stand steward here until I return, with your permission.”

He nodded. “Very well. Bal, will you see to it she is given a berth? And find someone suitable to perform an assessment of the keep and its denizens and stores.

I want whoever takes lordship here to know what they are getting and what they have to work with.”

Balaran nodded. “I have just the man.”

Caclerys pulled herself from Val’s grasp and stepped up to Salera, looking at her for a long moment before holding out her hands to her.

It took Salera another tense moment to take them. “We are still not friends,” the lady said stiffly. “But I do owe you and your family a debt.”

“If you say so,” Cae smiled, giving her hands a companionable squeeze.

“I do.” She looked down at their clasped hands. “Your hands are like ice!” She reached out and felt the cloth of her sleeve. “You’re wet! Someone fetch the Lady a cloak!” she ordered.

One of the men sitting on the ground rose and pulled off his own coat. It was a homespun wool thing with mismatched rabbit fur lining the inside edges. “Here, my lady, be takin’ mine. It’s still warm.”

She looked at his threadbare knees and the boots that had to be tied on to make them fit and realized this coat was probably the finest thing he owned. “I cannot take this. You’ll freeze yourself!”

Salera laid her hand upon Cae’s. “Please accept his gift. I promise you, I shall make provision for him before I leave.”

Only then did Cae accept, touched by his generosity. It was not until Valan was helping her into the warm garment that she realized she had been shivering and could barely feel her toes. She thanked him, promising herself that she would send the coat back to him with more fallow-worthy clothing and boots that might actually fit him.

Valan then reclaimed her waist and led them back down to the beach. They stopped when they reached the longboats, where the army was slowly being ferried back to the remaining ships.

Standing on the outskirts of the group currently trying to board, was a figure in woollen clothes of foreign cut. Cae recognized the twisted crown of micro-braids, though she had a length of black silk woven into them, holding them together. As Cae took note of her, she bowed and held the position.

“Ikembe!” she cried and hurried to her. Ikembe did not straighten, which made the hug Cae had intended impossible. “Are you all right? I was worried about you. They told me you survived but... not much else.” Then Cae saw the black bead nestled next to the red one. “I am not dead, Ikembe.”

“But you were taken from my charge. I have failed. I can only hope to redeem myself if you will allow it. If you accept me back, I am yours until I have done so.”

“There is no need for that.”

Ikembe lifted her eyes if not her body, met Cae’s sapphires. “For my people there is. We live by a strict code. A code I agreed to when I accepted the hoape.”

“Have you ever been exposed to dream dust?” she asked.

“I had never even heard of it until several days after you were taken. It took us time to discover how it was done.”

“Then you could not have known.”

“I should have questioned the smell. But I foolishly believed it to be simply a luxury for the princess whose room it once was. It had no immediate effect and I did not ask. Also, there was a secret door in that room which I missed.”

Cae sighed. “All right, I can fault you for that last one. But it was a hurried move, no time for a thorough inspection. You took every precaution that could have been taken. Without prior knowledge of the dream dust and its smell, there was no way to have stopped what happened. Will you allow me to remain your matama?”

She looked up at that. “Great Lady, I ask you to allow me to remain your itoma.”

“Only if you promise that you will not be wearing black the entire time,” she grinned. “I have gotten used to your bright colours.”

“But I do not...” she began, saw the grin and relented. She bowed again. “I accept, lady.”

“I’ll paint the white stripes on your bead myself when we get back,” said Balaran.

She bowed to him. “I would be honoured.”

As Ikembe took up her place beside Cae, Val turned to his brother. “How many ships did we lose?”

“Only two, surprisingly. Trip home will be a little more crowded, but we’ll manage. ‘Tis only three days back.”

Val clapped his brother on the back. “Good. We’ll see you there.”

“Wait, you’re not flying are you?” he glared. His brother’s expression said everything. “Fine, leave me to take the long way home! Do you know how boring it is at sea?”

“Well, you have some new reading material,” Cae said pointedly. “I promise you it will be enlightening.”

“I have a few matters to discuss with father that just won’t wait,” Val explained. Cae rose on her toes to kiss him farewell. “I will see you when we arrive then,” she smiled.

He pulled her close in a tight grip, his grin feral. “Oh, I am not letting you out of my sight, my lady. You are coming with me.”

She leaned back. “Fly?” she asked, eyes wide. “I don’t know. It was exhilarating when we were going from the castle to the ship but all the way to DragonsPoint?”

“Is my lady afraid?”

“A little,” she admitted.

“You’ve flown in your dreams, yes?” he asked.

“Well, that’s different. I know it’s a dream. And in my dreams I’m the one with wings. I’m just not so keen on being held in your claws for... however long it’s going to take.”

“And my lady should not go alone,” Ikembe said.

“She won’t be alone, she’ll be with me,” Val grumbled.

“My lady should not be alone with you especially,” she added. She caught his expression. “You have worked this hard to protect her reputation. It would be a shame to throw all that away so close to achieving your goals.”

He growled, but accepted her argument.

“We could rig up straps for them to hold on to, let them ride on your back instead of carrying them like dolls,” Bal suggested.

Willam piped up, “I think I saw something that might work back at the castle. It looked like cargo straps for pulling things up the cliffs. We use them at home on rare occasions.”

Valan nodded, and Will walked back towards the castle to fetch the straps. Val turned back to his brother. “You think Uncle could figure out how to rig them?”

Balaran shrugged. “If anyone could, it’d be him. I’ll go find him.”

This left Valan and Cae standing alone on the strand but for Ikembe who stood discreetly back, giving them the illusion of privacy.

There was so much they wanted to say and no idea where to start. They just stood there for several minutes, breathing each other in.

“So what is it like breathing fire?” she asked.

He turned his head, pounding his chest lightly with the side of his fist and belched. There was a faint aroma of sulphur. “Kind of like that,” he grimaced, rubbing his chest.

She smiled, “Will it linger, do you think?”

He shrugged. "I'll find out. Worth it though," he said, pulling her close again.

"Do you think your father will say no?" she asked timidly.

"After all we went just through?" he replied, incredulous.

She shook her head. "That is different. That was a defiance of the crown, stealing the prince's intended. Actions had to be taken. Even if I were not your intended, the kidnapping of a duke's daughter, and from under his own roof, would call for some response. If what Asparadane has been feeding him is still tumbling about in his head..." She stopped, catching the look in his eye. She felt his whole body tense.

"What do you mean by that? You don't mean just sweet words in a lover's ear."

"I mean, I think she's been feeding him fidelity. It's a sister herb of veracity, only you don't have to be asleep for it to work. It makes you prone to suggestion. His behaviour lately fits. Aldane tried to dose me with it and spent the better part of the last week trying to sweeten me up."

There was a low rumbling in his chest and she could feel the dragon wanting to just grab her and launch. "There will be a reckoning upon my return."

She set her hands upon his shoulders. "You cannot eat her, Val."

He was startled by both the suggestion and how good it sounded at the moment. "No, I intend for her to go through the indignity of a formal trial. Bring her whole house down with her if I can."

"I have no doubt in my mind that Mambyn has been helping her get to the king," she commented. "He'd be her point of access."

Luckily, Willam was returning with the ropes and strapping then. Cae was not certain she could have kept him on the ground much longer. Her uncle Jehan was with him, helping him carry the equipage. "All I'm saying is that Master Olen was the bigger of them cause he's older," Jehan was saying.

"You're just miffed that I was bigger than you at something," Will grinned.

Jehan cursed under his breath, then waved one hand like an antler from the side of his head, fingers spread. "Yeah, but I had more points. That's what matters."

Will dropped his burden on the sand, laughing. "Yeah, yeah, old man. You keep telling yourself that."

"You'll be there eventually, boy," he chuckled. "So what are we doing with all this?" he asked, then realized who he was addressing and hastily bowed. "Your Highness," he added.

"We're strapping him up to carry passengers," said Olen, coming from another direction with Balaran. "Well, if you're set on this and don't want to be reaching the



‘Point too far after dark, you’ll want to scale up,’ he chastised, gesturing for him to move away from people and get it over with.

Valan stole a kiss first, knowing it would be a while before he could take another. When he let her go and walked out to the middle of the strand, he left Cae a little off balance.

The change was quick, but not quite as quick as Will shifting back had been. At first he seemed to swell and grow like the bull had, his skin and muscles rippling as they stretched and rearranged. His skin grew tawny and his clothing seemed to melt into him, until he stood, shining golden in the sunlight. He stretched his wings out with a ripping sound and grunted, shaking himself.

‘That... that was not how I pictured it,’ she said softly.

‘How did you picture it?’ Will asked from beside her.

‘More like you described King Ranlan. I thought perhaps he would have to rip through his own skin.’

Will shook his head. ‘I believe your theory of his fighting it was the right one. It’s easy and smooth if you want it, allow it. There were a few who resisted, followers of the Eldest, ironically. They found the change harder and more painful. It’s really weird the first time. My head itched like crazy at first. I can only imagine what it’s like to sprout feathers or extra limbs.’ His voice grew quiet. ‘I think that might have been Rorik’s downfall.’

‘You think he resisted?’ she asked softly.

‘I think growing the wings on top of everything else was harder on his body than he could handle. I really think his heart gave out. Those who change to smaller beasts are faster and find it easier. Doing a partial shift is difficult, though. I’ve seen it done today, and I intend to learn how.’

‘Armed with antlers and a maul?’ she quipped. ‘You’re terrifying enough.’

He grinned. ‘Don’t forget the increased mass.’

‘Oh, of course not,’ she said with mock solemnity, watching Master Olen and Balaran arranging the harness on Valan whilst he watched with concerned interest. She laughed as the master of the hunt shoved his head away when he loomed in too close.

She turned to her own uncle, eyeing him. He seemed to be favouring a hip but otherwise whole. ‘So, did someone try to take a bite out of you or did you ram someone too hard?’ she asked him.

He scooped her up into a great bear hug. ‘Neither. It’s called gettin’ old. That and over doing it. I’m coming on too old for this game.’

“Never,” she exclaimed.

“Oh, war is a younger man’s game all right,” he said, putting her down. “I clipped an archway trying to race younger bucks into the fray,” he added, eyeing Will. “I think I might see about settling somewhere. Maybe manage the Company from the sidelines instead of the front.”

“If you think they’ll let you. Or you won’t get too bored.”

He laughed. “Oh, I pick the right woman and ‘bored’ will be the last adjective I’ll ever use. You see that you keep yon young man on his toes, my spike-headed little doe,” he said, brushing aside a strand of her hair that had whipped across her face in the changing winds.

She grinned much as she had when a child, blushing. “You should have seen me, Uncle. I taught the fungus ridden sack bandit what it means to tangle with a Maral woman.”

The look of pride in his eyes at her choice of invective was only matched by his pride in her skill and spirit. He wiped a tear from his eye. He pulled her close. “You’ll have to tell me all about it when I get to the Capitol.”

He let her go as Balaran crossed to collect her.

It was a little awkward climbing up onto Valan’s back, and even more so to straddle him as she had to do. Apparently, similar thoughts were running through his head as he watched her with a very aroused and amused look in his great blue eyes. She swatted him between his wings. “Behave!” she admonished, blushing furiously.

Ikembe climbed up behind her and helped Cae to loop her ankles through the secondary straps. Cae slipped her hands under the top portion of the strap and felt Ikembe doing the same behind her. When she was seated firmly, she nodded to him.

He walked away from the others, as much to accustom himself and his passengers to the harness as to keep from blowing sand on people. Cae needed no warning when he launched, having felt his muscles bunch and ripple beneath her legs. His scales were once again soft and she had to marvel at the ability to harden them into a form of armour. Then she could think of nothing else but the wind in her face and the distance between her and the ground.

Once she got over the initial fear, she rather enjoyed it. She looked back over her shoulder at Ikembe, saw her crouching much as she was to protect their faces from the rushing wind. “I don’t suppose this is what they mean when they speak of riding one’s husband,” she called back.

“No, my lady, it is not. I will be happy to explain in depth over the next few days if you like.”

Cae blushed more furiously, even though she was smiling.

They both felt Valan’s laughter between their legs. Then he was banking and it was all they could do to hang on. He tipped his wings so that they might see the ocean speeding past them, hovered low enough that he raked his wing-tip through the surf. Dolphins and seals leapt in the wake he had created, squealing in delight. Apparently they were not the only ones who decided to use new forms to get home more swiftly.

He levelled out and climbed a little higher in the sky, saw Master Olen’s larger, darker form passing into a cloud higher up. Valan decided not to give chase, though he initially wanted to. He realized it would be colder higher up, and experience had told him that clouds were wet. While he could shrug it off, his passengers would not. He concentrated upon the flight home.



Sunset came as they reached the headland north of the Desiter and Valan found a current that let him just hover in the sky to watch it. Cae sat up from her crouch, looking out over his levelled wing to view a sky turning gold and red and indigo. It was breathtaking and they both felt it. Even Ikembe was taken in by the beauty of an unobstructed view.

Then the sun was gone and Valan returned his focus to flying. The light was just beginning to fade from the sky as he skimmed over the city, headed for the dark green spires of the Citadel. There were some exclamations of fright as he spiralled down over the courtyard, giving them the chance to get the few horses that were still out in the open into the stables. Even so, Cae could still hear their shrills of fright as they smelled him.

As Valan landed, the doors of the Citadel were opened and the queen stood at the top of the steps with young Janniston at her side.

Ikembe hastily freed her feet and then Cae’s, then slid from his back and turned to help her matama.

Valan started to fold his wings and shift and realized there would be a problem. He brought his head around, signalling with a nod and a look to ask Cae to help. Before she and Ikembe had gotten more than a single knot loose, other men had approached and begun to assist. Once the straps and ropes were no longer across his back, he folded his wings and began shrinking, returning to himself.

He staggered for a moment, rubbing his shoulders. Cae grabbed for him, felt an intense hunger at the touch. She turned to the nearest person. "His Highness needs food, maybe a lot of it."

The man nodded and raced for the kitchens.

Valan pulled Cae close, as much to support himself as to keep her against him. They began to walk towards the door where the queen waited. As they neared, they heard Janniston ask his mother, "Is brother alright?"

"He will be, son," she smiled. "And only the Mother knows if you will change too when you are older."

Valan smiled down at him, chucked his chin with a couple of fingers. "You'll start to feel it in a few years if you're going to. Just promise me that you'll come to me or Uncle Olen if you even think you might."

He nodded, his eyes bright. "You stole your princess back?" he asked.

Valan knelt to Janniston's level. "I did."

"Did you kill the man who took her?"

"I don't know. We don't know yet who actually did the deed, but I ate the man who ordered it."

The boy's eyes grew wide.

"Don't worry, I spit him back out again. He tasted like kale flavoured kippers," he said, naming the boy's two most hated foods. They both made a face, and Valan laughed as the boy hugged him. "Now, I think you should be off to bed. I am monstrously hungry and I think you smell a little like..." he paused, sniffing. "Is that fairy bread I smell?"

The boy glanced up at his mother, then at his brother in mock fright, then ran inside screaming with laughter. His nursemaid met him half way to the stairs and had to chase him the rest of the way to his room.

Valan stood. "He's been sneaking into the kitchens before bed again," he grinned.

The queen smiled at him with an arch of her brow. "I don't know where he gets it. It's not as if his father and both older brothers weren't prone to the same act."

"Oh, I never snuck into the kitchens, mother. I always left that to Bal."

"You still enjoyed the spoils," she said as she kissed his cheek and pulled him into a hug. "I have a meal being sent to your room, though I dare say it will not be enough."

Once she released him, she turned to Cae, taking her hands and looking her over before pulling her into a hug as well. “Oh, I am so glad you are back and unharmed,” she said. Then bent to her ear, “I am truly sorry, my dear. But if you were to be safe at all, it had to happen.”

It was then that Cae realized that this was what the queen had known and had been forced to let happen. Rather than feel anger towards her for not at least giving her a warning, she felt pity, understanding that this was no more than she had to do with her own daughter. “Did you know that Lord Rorik would die?”

She seemed surprised, pulled back. “He is dead already?”

“Aye, mother,” Valan said. “We think his heart could not handle the shift. He made his death count though.”

“Oh, my poor joy. I knew, but I did not think it would be so soon.” She turned, saw the king coming down the stairs and looked back at her son. “Why don’t you go deal with your father? But take him to your room and feed yourself before you faint. I will deal with your maiden.”

She did not give him time to argue, but drew Cae away from him and headed up the stairs with her. The queen only gave the king a nod as she passed him, though Cae did her best to curtsy while in motion. The king only gave her a sheepish nod of acknowledgement and Cae got the clear sensation that he was a little embarrassed by the whole situation and his own conflicting feelings.

The queen brought her to the royal floor, but not to the room she had previously occupied. This one was richly appointed, and boasted a tapestry of Isildar and Denan. She smiled at it and was about to comment when she smelled steam. She looked up at the queen who did not say a word, but gestured towards an open door.

Cae entered the side chamber to discover a steaming bath waiting for her. She could not get out of her dress and nightdress fast enough. The queen laughed lightly as she sank gratefully into the water that was only just below too hot. “I thought you might need one,” she said, holding up and examining the nightdress. “I do not know if we can save this,” she mused, despairing over the lace and hems.

Cae opened her eyes and glanced up. “I think the bulk of the fabric might still be salvageable. I wasn’t able to do much, but I wore it for ...what? over a week straight? And through a sea battle. I might be able to make gowns for children from it.”

“What a lovely idea.” She handed it to a maid who appeared at her side. “We’ll save it for you then. Have this taken apart and the fabric saved for the lady. Salvage

what you can of the lace though,” she ordered. She picked up the black dress with two fingers. “As for this... just get it out of my sight.”

The maid took them both and curtsied, vanishing as quickly as she had come.

The queen looked at the tangles of Cae’s hair hanging from the back of the tub. “It shall take us hours to get that tamed,” she sighed. She pulled a maid’s stool up beside the tub and sat, smiling at Cae. “So, tell me everything.”

Cae luxuriated in being truly warm for the first time in a week, and filled the queen in on everything. From waking up in the cells to Salera and the book, to all of the suppositions that she had made and the realizations that had occurred to her. She even told her of seeing Stag and hearing the Leviathan.

The queen listened quietly throughout all, helping Cae with her bathing and washing her hair as she did so.

“I see now why things had to unfold as they did,” she sighed. “I just wish it did not have to hurt so many. You are right about Semelle being smuggled in to the king. I watched from the shadows of the passages one night.”

“Have you done anything about that?” Cae asked, letting the queen and Ikembe fold her into a warm drying sheet.

“Not yet. Though I have arrested her daughter.”

Cae’s head shot up. “What?!” she exclaimed. “But she had nothing to do...”

The queen’s fingertips pressed against her lips. “Shhh. It was her request, oddly. She slipped a note in a book she bought at a vendor and ordered the book delivered to me as a gift. She said that she was not safe in her mother’s house and that she had information I would want. She asked that she be arrested and brought to the castle in protective custody, but that no one but I know where she was being kept. Well, a few more know, but they are sworn to me and will keep her safe. I have to thank you and my son for making the old astronomy tower so comfortable,” she smiled.

“I thought we had the only keys.”

“Oh, there is always a spare.” She gave her shoulder a light pat, “Don’t worry. I have them all. Your Fern has been most helpful. And it helped her to have something to do to distract her from her worry.”

“With everything going on, I’ve not had the chance to ask. Where is Tempest? I was surprised she didn’t come with the army.”

“Likely with your father,” Ikembe said. “She was sent immediately with the antidote.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “So I was right not to worry. I was beginning to feel a little guilty that I hadn’t thought of her before this. I am so used to her being my shadow. And then she wasn’t there... It broke my heart to send her away.”

“You did what you needed to,” the queen consoled, drawing her into the dressing room where a fire blazed.

Cae was immediately distracted by the presence of Rosie and Sorrel who curtsied deeply before swarming her with hugs and tears of relief. This was allowed for a few moments before Coral cleared her throat. They immediately backed off and curtsied again.

“Would my lady desire her nightdress or will you be up for a few hours more?” Coral asked formally.

Cae looked at the queen in askance.

“It is up to you, dear. Though I would think you have had a very full day. If you are wondering about Valan, well,... His father will keep him up quite a few hours yet, so I do not believe you will have any visitors tonight.”

“Nightdress then,” she said, aware that her body was beyond tired, but also hungry.

“I dare say you will want to be up early though. You have at least one brother still in town who will wish to see you. And no doubt you will be inundated by well-wishers.” She drifted over and kissed Cae’s forehead. “Now if you will excuse me, I have to go and inform my daughter of her change of affairs.”

“Syera is here?”

The queen smiled. “Where else would she go when her husband is off to war to rescue her best friend?”

Cae curtsied as the queen left the room. As she rose, she smelled honey and turned. Fern was standing there holding the bag of honey dust.

Cae accepted the bag and set it down, preferring to hug her first. The two of them were crying before too long.

Again, Coral waited a bit before she gently reminded Fern of her duty. Cae reluctantly broke off and lightly dusted herself with the fur wand, allowing them to help her into a clean silk gown. They set to work on her hair. It did not look quite as bad as it actually turned out to be, though they nearly broke a comb trying to run through it.

“Did they not give you even the basics for hygiene?” Fern despaired.

“Oh, there was a brush in the bedchamber, but no light and no windows. This wasn’t actually from my captivity,” Cae told them. “This comes from flying with unbound hair a dragon-back.”

It was Ikembe who came up with a solution. She brought in an oil which she used on her own hair, and gently worked it into her tresses. “We will have to wash it again tomorrow night, but we can braid her up nicely in the morning. It will do your hair good. The salt air has done it no favours.”

Once well oiled, it was easier to tease out the tangles and comb it smooth. Ikembe ran a towel over it to pull out as much of the oil as she could, then swiftly braided it up and tied it off.

Cae was then led into the main chamber where a light supper waited for her. She sat down with relish, smelling spices for the first time in a week. She picked up her spoon to attack the small bowl of fragrant soup and paused, glancing at Ikembe. The woman smiled and nodded, and Cae immediately began to eat.

It was twice as good as it smelled. And the lightly sweetened roll was the perfect complement. The small ale was refreshing and a nice change from increasingly more flat wash-water. By the time she was done, she felt back to her normal self, though a bit tired.

She headed for the bedchamber, beyond ready for sleep. The dark velvet curtains were tied open and the clean linens looked very inviting. She hesitated though, looking at it. Ikembe gave her a rueful smile. “It is clean, my lady. I know this smell now. And, with the aid of Lady Liliwyn, we know where every entrance, secret and otherwise are.” She pointed to where a large bookcase stood. “It is behind there and opens inward. You can escape through it, if there is need, but no one can get in. If they try, we shall hear.”

“Liliwyn knows the secret passages?”

“Apparently she spent a great many years in the castle when she was younger,” she smiled.

Fern drew back the covers and helped Cae into the bed. Ikembe climbed in on the other side. Cae was pleased to note that she had once more wrapped her hoape in the colourful scarf she had previously worn to bed. As Fern closed the curtains and carried out the light, Cae turned to Ikembe in the darkness. “How is it Tempest survived? She would have been overdosed, wouldn’t she?”

Ikembe thought about that for a moment. “I have been told it is activated by the breath, so she might only have gotten just enough for her body. But we shall



never know, as when they drew you from the bed, she fell out of it. They found her on the floor, tangled in the curtains.”

Cae sighed, her body being lulled to sleep by the feeling of soft bedding and fine weaves. “I hope she gets here soon. I miss her.”

Ikembe chuckled in the dark. “After a few days, you may well wish some time away from her. She was most... distraught in your absence. She was inconsolable the first few days. Then suddenly she just flew off. When she returned with your message and the bottle, we were overjoyed.”

“As was I when she arrived. She came during a storm.”

“You can sleep, my lady. No one is going to get you again.”

Cae smiled, realizing that she was, indeed stalling. She took two deep breaths and was unconscious.



She knew where she was immediately. There was a certain feel to this dreaming place that lay in between that she recognized now. She also knew that Valan was not yet asleep. The fog remained around her, but far less menacing. She leapt into the sky on her own wings and flew into the fog, seeking... she'd know it when she encountered it.

She flew out over what she knew to be the city, most of which lay dreaming, and she could see small, glowing things that either had no shape yet or were curled up or otherwise obscured. These watched in certain places, waiting for whatever it was they needed. They did not interest her half as much as the larger stag she could see looming in the fog. She went to him, landing upon one tine of his massive rack. He turned and carried her into the mists, letting her see the sleeping forms of her kin. Vyncet asleep in his bed, her father in the room down the hall.

Looking down at the sleeping form of her father she could see the lines of black radiating down his leg, more virulent than before. She started to fly to him, but Stag backed away and the fog swallowed them. Tears welling in her eyes, Stag carried her to the queen of the forest.

The tree was alive with the brilliant blue light that the spirits seemed to be made of. She watched her sorrow being drawn off of her, feeding the tree and everything it fed. She could see the threads of comfort returning to her in the very air around her. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply, letting her sorrow mellow and feed the tree. She could feel Stag's nose reach up to touch her, felt his tongue ruffle her feathers.



**B**y the time it occurred to her to wonder how he could have licked her whilst she sat upon his antlers, she was opening her eyes in her bed-chamber, hearing stealthy sounds crossing the floor, saw the curtain waver.

Ikembe was crouching on the bed with a knife in her hands in an instant. From her angle, she could see a little more than Cae, and so let her hands fall to her bent knees to dangle there from the wrists. A white head appeared over the edge of the mattress covers, clawing its way up by beak and talon. Ikembe reached out and tapped the startled beak with the tip of her dagger. “You should learn to make some noise, feather-brain.”

Tempest gave a hesitant squawk, hanging there off the edge of the bed.

When Ikembe sat back, she finished her climb and hopped over to Caelerys fussing and nuzzling. Ikembe peeked out of the bed, saw light coming in through the open window. “I would not linger overmuch on this particular reunion,” she advised. “Dawn comes. You will have visitors shortly. ...If you do not have company for breakfast,” she said with a tilt of her head.

Cae nodded and Ikembe rose, going first to the privy to inspect it, then leaving the room to attend to whatever matters she did in the morning. She imagined they had as much to do with checking Cae's clothing for the day as dressing herself.

As advised, she made her reunion brief, but well felt. Tempest did not mind. She was not going to be leaving her side again. When Cae put her feet over the side of the bed, Fern was coming in.

"I recommend dressing first, my lady," she said, tying back the curtains. "Word has already spread in the castle that you are back and it will not be long before you have guests."

"So I have been warned," she smiled, and followed Fern into the dressing room after a brief visit to the privy.

She was swiftly dressed and preparing to sit down to breakfast when the first two visitors were announced: Liliwyn and Princess Syera. She had them both admitted and enough food for the three of them sent for.

After the usual tearful reunions, and the questions about what happened and had she been harmed, they sat to a meal that kept Cae distracted with every bite.

"You aren't listening," Syera complained.

"I am sorry. You have no idea how good this is when you've been fed unseasoned food for over a week. I'm almost positive some of the stews they fed me were just everything left over thrown in one pot," she apologized.

Liliwyn looked like she might gag. "Seriously? You think it was deliberate or was his cook just that bad?"

She shook her head. "I think he was that mean. Lili, the servants back home sleep on better linens than were on that bed. The stable boys here sleep on better mattresses. He apparently refused to spend a single penny on anything unnecessary. I doubt he even had ale, much less wine."

"The horror," Syera exclaimed. "Eat, we can talk after."

When the meal was over and they sat sipping their tea, Cae looked over at Syera. "Your mother talked to you last night?" she asked warily.

She nodded, trying to put on a brave face. "I did not know him long, but I was coming to love him in a way. He was so kind and considerate."

Liliwyn looked between the two of them. "What happened? What'd I miss?"

Syera took a deep breath and explained. "My husband suffered a heart attack in the battle."

Liliwyn gasped, covering her mouth.

“He fought well, helped the battle immensely, I was told,” Cae said, setting a hand on hers. “When Lord Selgan arrives with our brothers and the rest of the army, you can ask him. He was there. All I have is second hand information. I really am so sorry.”

“What will you do?” Lili asked softly.

Syera shrugged. “Remain here for the time being. Wait for his body to come home.” She looked up suddenly. “They *are* bringing him home, yes?”

“I think so,” Cae nodded.

“Then I’ll wait until my step-sons arrive, maybe my father-in-law. See what they want. I may have to go back with them until we know if I am pregnant or not. If not,... I expect I’ll be sent home. I’m pretty certain they’ll not want me around. After that,” she shrugged, then drew her shoulders back, sitting up straight. “After that, I am my own woman. I can do what I want with whom I want. I think there is a settlement in the contract for this eventuality. I don’t remember, I wasn’t really paying attention to all the details.”

Cae looked her friend over, realizing that she had grown, and not just emotionally. She was a little taller than she remembered, her body filling out.

They fell quiet for several minutes until Syera slammed her cup down. “I will not have this!”

Caclerys and Liliwyn looked up, startled, and even Tempest squawked a protest.

“There will be time enough for sorrow and mourning when he arrives. Right now we are celebrating the return of our friend.”

“What have I missed?” Cae asked, though she was almost afraid to.

“Well,” Liliwyn began. “First off, Prince Valan almost shifted right there in the hallway when your absence was revealed. I was afraid, for a moment, that he was going to kill Ikembe right then and there.”

“He would have been justified,” Ikembe said flatly. “And for that moment, I wished that he would.”

Cae reached back and grabbed her hand. “I am glad that he did not.”

“Then he and Will nearly got into a fight,” Lili added.

Both Syera and Cae turned at that. “What?”

“Oh, yes,” Lili nodded solemnly. “Will was roaring that he’d sworn to keep you safe; Val swearing he’d done everything humanly possible and what he’d do to those responsible when he found them. It was all very dramatic. We thought there was going to be a rebellion right there. But Bal stepped in.”

“Balaran?” Cae repeated.

Lili nodded again. “And Janem, though he was just as angry as Will. Between the two of them, they got the pair to come to reason. Then the king stepped up and gave each of them orders that would keep them away from each other for a while. Will was to rouse an army and get them to the Capitol and prepared to march or sail, and Valan to find out what he could of how you were taken and where, by whom, etc.”

“How did you find out about the dream dust?”

Liliwyn shrugged. “I knew about the secret passages. I used to play in them with the current princes and the old ones when we were children. Some of them are marked to be avoided because of us,” she blushed. “Princess Kitlana was nearly maimed down one of them. Anyway, I thought there might have been one into that room, so I was in the passages looking. When I found the way into the bedchamber, they were tearing the room apart trying to find out how they managed to get you out without waking either the bird or your itoma. The smell was lingering where they’d thrown the pillows. Once I’d smelled it, I knew.”

“But how?” Cae asked. “No one here has ever heard of it.”

“I have. My father has trouble sleeping some times. One of my uncles married an Eastern woman, I forget from where, I just know it is not Telmar. She’s the one who suggested it. We have two plants in our greenhouse back home. You’re supposed to use it sparingly. What was still on your pillow would have kept you out for nearly a day if it didn’t kill you, likely more because of your weakened state. They either did not know what they were doing or were taking no chances.”

Cae swallowed. “Salera told me I slept for nearly two days.”

“You were lucky,” Lili said.

“Salera?” Syera asked. “Wasn’t that one of Malyna’s obnoxious friends?”

Cae nodded with a slight smile. “She’s not quite so obnoxious these days. And probably not quite as devout as she once was.

“They broke in through the dressing room when no one answered that morning,” Lili continued. “As it was, it took a great deal to get Ikembe to wake up. Once we knew what it was, it wasn’t hard to find out the source. Traced it back to a mercari friend of Master Janem. I do not know yet who ordered it from her, but it is a known thing. As far as I have been able to tell, the information has not yet been acted upon.”

“That’s only a matter of time, knowing my brother,” Syera said.

Cae tipped her head in thought as she sipped her tea. “He may be waiting for Balaran to arrive with the navy. Should be about two more days.”

“Not a lot of time,” Syera breathed.

Rosie answered a knock at the door, listened then bowed and held the door open. Vyncet entered, pushing a wheeled chair in which sat her father. Rosemary was close behind them, and curtsied upon entering, seemed a little uncomfortable in such opulent surroundings. She was dressed better than she had been in the past, not as opulently as a duke’s wife or mistress ordinarily would be, but well above the station of her birth.

Vyncet had to put his hand on their father’s shoulder to keep him in the chair. Cae crossed to him and bent for a hug. She was pleased that his upper arm strength had not lessened in the slightest. “You were not harmed?” he asked, holding her at arm’s length to look at her.

She shook her head. “He tried to pet me once, then to hit me once, but he paid for both dearly. In fact, something Semi and Ikembe taught me came in very handy.”

“Ikembe?” he asked, looking around until he saw the dark skinned woman who bowed.

“Semi provided me with an itoma. I hope we are both equally pleased with the arrangement.”

Her father glanced back at Vyncet, saying volumes of ‘I told you so’ in just a look. Vynce rolled his eyes. “All right, fine. I will concede she might be good for the House.”

She scowled at the two of them, her fists on her hips. “I am pretty sure I saw some of her people in the sea battle, so yes. Was there any doubt?”

Her father jerked his thumb back at his youngest son with a scowl. His expression softened as he bade her sit and talk to him.

Syera and Lili both rose, kissing her cheeks, curtsying to the duke before whisking themselves off to the gardens with a wave.

“We’ve heard nothing yet,” her father said as she sat and Vynce appropriated Lili and Sai’s chairs for himself and Rosemary. “Tell me of the battle. Your brother and uncle, they alright?”

She nodded. “Uncle was limping a little, but claims it old age. Talks of retiring, sort of,” she laughed. “Will was magnificent!” she exclaimed, and began to tell him what of the battle she had seen and heard of. She told him about the deaths of Lord Brock and Lady Kitler, as well as that of Lord Rorik Griff.

Vynce looked towards the door Syera had gone through not long before. “Does the princess know?”

She nodded. “She’s... putting on a brave face. She’ll likely break when they return with the body.”

She spent a good hour speaking with her family before her father brought the subject back around to the negotiations.

“You still wish to go through with this?” he asked.

“With all my heart. The sooner the better.”

“And the prince?”

“It took his mother to pry him off of me last night,” she laughed. “He was loathe to let me out of his sight.”

“Good. Is there anything you want in particular out of the union? Anything I should make mention of in the contract?”

She shook her head. “Nothing I can think of. All I really want is him. Though I would like to sit in on the negotiations if I could?”

“That’s hardly necessary,” he protested. “You shouldn’t have to witness the tawdry wheeling and dealing side of these things. Just enjoy the romance of it all while you can.”

“But I want to. I have a feeling I might need to. There will be questions and I’ll want to answer them myself. I don’t have to stay for all of it. Just for a little while. Please?”

He sighed, and Vyncet groaned. “There it is,” he moaned. “She bats her eyes and gets her way.”

To Cae’s surprise, it was Rosemary who swatted him.

“Thank you, pet,” her father said to her without turning. “Yes, I suppose you can, but you’re going to be bored.”

She laughed at that. “I don’t think I’ll ever be bored again, so long as there is even one other person in the room or a scrap of written word.”

Another knock on her door and Rosie admitted the petitioner.

Cae looked up, frowning at the interruption but when Larch entered the room and bowed, she smiled. “Mester Larch! It is good to see you. I was surprised you did not join your prince on the battlefield.”

He grinned. “Oh, he had me at very important work here. And it has borne a great deal of fruit, which shall be served when it is ripest. At the moment, I have been sent to summon your father to see the king.”

“Why you? Aren’t you Prince Valan’s man?”

“He is with his father and I could be spared. Will Your Grace require assistance traversing the stairs to the Royal Study?”

Her father groaned at the need, but reluctantly admitted that he might.

The group of them headed down to the royal study, with her father's chair being lifted down the stairs by two burly servants and Ikembe trailing, almost invisible, behind them with Tempest on her wrist. The room was much as she remembered it from the signing of Syera's contract, though with only a handful of people this time, it loomed so much larger. The large table that had been against the wall back then was now in the centre of the room and covered with figurines of men and ships and papers pertaining to the recent military excursion.

They were brought to the great desk behind which the king sat alone, no guards behind him. Larch went to stand behind his prince who rose at their entry to bow first to her father and his mistress, then to Vyncet and finally to take Cae's hand and curl it up for a kiss. Rosemary blushed at even being included, performed an awkward curtsy and concentrated on Elyas's comfort. Though she spared a shy smile at Valan's reaction to her lord's daughter.

There was a man that Cae had never seen before, standing at the end of the desk, setting down scrolls and writing supplies. From the large golden key which hung from an ostentatious chain around his neck, she assumed he was one of the Keys of the Kingdom, an administrator of some office or another. The man smiled at Cae and bowed to all present. He said nothing, but she decided she liked his eyes.

The king took note of Cae beside her father, once Valan was no longer blocking his view and sighed. "Good, your presence saves me the trouble of summoning you."

She curtsied. "What does my king require of me?" she asked politely, though she knew. She could feel the conflict in his emotions from here and when Valan had touched her hand, she had sensed the withdrawing of the prince's anger and frustration. It was clear there had been an argument again.

"Well,..." he hesitated. "It is a very delicate matter, which must be resolved one way or another before we waste time on negotiations."

She gave him her sweetest smile, the one which made Vyncet wince, knowing what it covered. "Please, Your Majesty. I am a Maral, after all. While I can play at subtleties better than most of my kin, I prefer plain speaking. Let us be blunt that we may avoid any... misunderstandings," she said delicately.

The king sighed and came out with it. "You were held captive for more than a week at the hands of a man who desired you, the son of a man who was accused at least once of ...forcing a woman of noble birth, and in the keeping of a man who I am being told is well known for claiming the favours of every female in his ...reach."



“Yes,” she replied.

He hesitated again.

“You are wanting to know if I have been raped.” She felt the emotional reactions in the room instantly: her father and brother’s anger, Valan’s simmering rage, Rosemary’s horror, Larch and the Key’s embarrassment at the necessity and bluntness. She continued before her brother could say something. “Because you believe that if I have been so sullied that this marriage cannot take place.”

“Well... it can’t,” the king sputtered. “We cannot have a future queen coming to the candle having known another...”

“Can’t we?” she asked calmly. “This sounds very much to me like teachings of the Eldest. Yet you speak of candles. Have you begun thinking of converting, Your Majesty? Only the Eldest is concerned with the purity of new brides, since they are not allowed to know any other man for the entirety of their lives.”

“I answer to no one, least of all a poncey pontifex,” he blustered.

Cae felt amusement from Larch and the unnamed Key, shock from Vynce and Rosemary and pride from her father and prince. “Forgive me. This must be something spilling from the lips of that serpent tongued cow.”

She felt his instant anger at that. “How dare you speak so of your betters!” he snapped.

She drew herself up, taking strength from Valan’s nearness. “Easily, Your Majesty, as I outrank the woman in question. You have been told, I assume, of her attempts to control you using the extract of fidelity?” The tightening of his jaw and the reddening around his neck told her he had. She nodded. “This sort of reaction is definitely evidence that she has been working on you for a good while now. You didn’t even think. It will fade eventually, I hope. I’d have to research it more, though I might leave that to your second son.”

“And how is it you know of it yourself?” he demanded, eyeing her suspiciously.

She smiled sweetly. “I was informed about it by Lady Cuttle, who was kind enough to warn me that the late Aldane Kaladen had ordered my water dosed with it.” The king settled down. “The man in charge of my security there is on his way here with the army and your son. He will speak to the sanctity of my virtue if you deem him trustworthy enough to silence the wags. Besides, as I have told Your Majesty before, what you say is the truth is the Truth, whether it is or not. I tell you that no one touched me in a compromising manner.”

“But you were kept asleep for two days with this dream dust,” he protested, though more gently. “How would you know if anything happened whilst you were unconscious?”

She nodded. “You are right. I do not know. But I do know that Aldane went to great lengths to keep me pure, as he wanted me bound to him by Eldest Rites. If any of his men had violated that, he would have castrated them and fed the offending members to the sharks before lowering the fool into the pool by inches. He made absolutely sure that the late and lecherous Lord Cuttle never came near where I was being kept.”

She could feel the king wavering, warring between his conditioning and his own instincts. “If it will ease your mind about my bearing a subsequent child before I have borne an heir to the throne, you can add it to the contract that I will consume contraceptive herbs for the first three gold months of the marriage. That should ease your mind and silence the wags.”

Valan’s emotional state surged at that, and his hands tightened upon the arms of the chair as if he were about to launch himself out of it.

The king pulled back, offended by the thought. “No, there will be witnesses to the contract and if it is there...” he spread his hands helplessly. “I supposed the only option is delay...”

“For three months!?” Valan finally exploded.

“Son...” the king began, but the Key spoke up.

“Your Majesties,” he said, and waited until he had both of their attentions. “If the intent is to preserve the Lady’s reputation, then any delay beyond what is expected for difficult negotiations and the time required to prepare a royal wedding would serve to damage it. There are enough trying to stop this wedding for their own devious ends. We shouldn’t give them more fuel or opportunity. And for the wedding not to take place at all after such lengths to reclaim her...” he added with a shake of his head.

He sighed. “You are right, lord Alandyr. I hate it, but you are right.”

“I am still willing to take the contraceptives, Your Majesty,” she said calmly. “To ease your mind.”

“I do not agree to that,” Valan growled.

Cae drifted over to him, ran the back of her fingers tenderly down the side of his face from temple to jaw. “Wouldn’t you rather have me all to yourself for a while?” she asked with a soft purr. “Instead of swelling unattractively within

months with a small, squalling thing that will demand most of my attentions and keep me from your... arms,” she said suggestively, “for even more time?”

“That is what nursemaids are for,” he protested, but she could tell he was considering it.

“That I will not allow. I will nurse my own children,” she said firmly.

He sighed. “Will you at least consider help?”

“Some,” she said simply.

The king swore quietly, “Damn it, Elyas, but you raise some manipulative women in the Reach.”

“No, we’re just that easy to manipulate,” the duke laughed, reaching up to cover Rosemary’s hand fondly.

He groaned. “Lately I am finding that a little hard to deny. She reminds me more and more these days of Sigrun.”

“Well, father,” Valan spoke up, still not taking his eyes off of Cae, “she is equally touched by Mother Chimera, just not in the same way.” At that he broke eye contact, drawing Cae around to his side to look at his father. “What has mother said about all of this?”

The king took a deep breath. “She hasn’t really been speaking to me,” he confessed. He glanced around the room, assessing the trustworthiness of each person here. “I have been informed that this is to preserve certain illusions,” he said tightly. He eyed his son carefully. “Do you still stand by what you said to me before?” he asked meaningfully.

Valan grinned, but it was not a friendly expression. “I’ll drop it on your desk right now.”

He scowled. “And what am I supposed to do then?”

He shrugged. “Give it to Bal. I doubt anyone would even notice.”

Cae smirked. “Bal would,” she commented quietly. “And he wouldn’t thank you for it, either.”

His arm around her waist squeezed tighter.

The king sighed. “Fine. You are certain this man of yours will swear to your virtue?”

“He will,” Caelerys answered. “He was most distraught to discover that he and everyone else had been lied to about my purpose there.”

“Then we’ll ask it in open court and have done with the matter. For appearances at least. Well, Elyas, shall we get this over with?” he asked, waving an open hand.

Cae's father chuckled. "If you insist. Caelerys, my hind, do you have any requests?"

She leaned against Valan, smiling. "I do actually." She looked down at him. "How do you feel about lighting our candle beneath the queen?"

He did not take long to think it over. "I believe that is a wonderful idea. A true blessing."

"And no one can act against it. I would like to feed the tree on joy instead of her constant diet of negativity. Plus, it brings us close to Her."

He grinned. "Want no trace of Eldest Rites?"

"Exactly."

Laughing, he stood, turning to his father. "I agree if you have no objections, father."

The king gave him a half grin, half scowl. "It won't matter if I have them or not, will it? Now that you are in the habit of defying me."

He shrugged. "You wanted me to be my own man. If you will pardon us, I am going to take my intended to the gardens for a walk."

Lord Alandyr smiled benignly. "Be warned, a great many of the 'wags', as the lady called them, are gathered amid the flora hoping for information. Privacy is neither feasible nor advised, Your Highness."

He nodded. "I have seen, lord Alandyr. Thank you."

Cae stopped beside her father and kissed his cheek. "Behave, you two," she warned.

"I could say the same to you, but we all know you are better behaved than all of us," he chuckled.

Valan bade Larch remain with the king, claiming Ikembe more than sufficient for the both of them.

Lord Alandyr had been right. The gardens were packed with courtiers and nobility of all walks, even those that did not ordinarily visit the royal gardens. They watched from every seating area, however discreet, though none approached. The sight of the pair of them walking arm in arm so closely together, followed only by a handmaiden said volumes more than any conversation would have.

"So what must we do for the next two days?" she asked him as they approached the terrace from the long way around.

"Three. Father wants at least a day before he holds court. Give Syera time to ...well, you know."

She sighed. "I feel so bad for her. She's not even talking about it."

He shrugged. "It's not real yet. Not until she sees his body."

"I can understand that," she nodded. "We'll take care of matters before or after the funeral?"

He smiled at her oblique reference to the wedding. "Before. Syera will want to be present for all of it and it will take too long if she goes west first."

They reached the terrace and found too many people offering to give up their seating for them. Caelerys nodded towards the half circle where Lili and all of the Roshan girls were waiting. They curtsied first, then swarmed Cae, hugging her and welcoming her back. Once that was over, they sat down again, and Valan sat beside her, keeping her against his side, with part of his cloak draped over her shoulders to keep her warm. The sun helped.

"So how are you?" Balyra asked.

"Warm, finally," she exclaimed. "They kept me in a freezing tower hanging over the sea with no fire. Not even a candle."

There were the expected gasps. "Why not?" Onelle cried. "Did he want you to freeze?"

Cae laughed. "He was afraid I'd set the tower on fire. That and, he would have some comforts to lure me with."

"Like that was going to work," snorted Balyra. "It's like he didn't bother to get to know you at all."

Valan laughed at that. "Where is Sai?" he asked. "I half expected her to be here with you."

Liliwyn answered softly. "She is with her oldest step-son this morning. Lord Redrick came to find her just after we left Cae's chambers this morning."

"Ah."

They spent the afternoon in pleasantries, none of them asking the questions they really wanted to ask, having been warned by Lili not to. They were occasionally approached by others of the nobility with well-wishes and innocent-seeming questions, but they mostly had to suffice themselves with suppositions based on the way the pair in question sat together.

They remained in the gardens until well after dinner, until a shift in the wind brought clouds that made the open terrace less comfortable. Cae shivered once and Valan immediately engulfed her in his cloak, pulling her close and rising. He made their excuses and took her back to her chambers.

Regretfully, he left her at her door as Larch approached, summoning him for something else. He kissed her farewell and reluctantly went to attend his duties.

Entering her room, she found her family awaiting her, finishing up the remains of a dinner. A covered plate sat on the table in front of an empty chair.

"I figured you would come in from the cold once the sun was gone," her father commented, kissing her and only half eyeing Ikembe as she tasted the waiting meal.

Vyncet rose, giving her a kiss and excusing himself. "I'm going to go see if I can find Balyra," he said.

"She was down in the gardens a little while ago. She was with her cousin and sister."

Tempest flew to the back of Cae's chair and fussed until she was granted a bite of meat. Cae sat down and began to eat as she quizzed her father on matters.

"So, is it done?" she asked.

"Mostly. There are a few minor details to iron out, one or two things we just need to reword, but all will be ready when the time comes to sign."

She nodded, pausing to relish the taste of the wine. "Good. Why didn't you say anything while I was confronting the king?" she asked. "That could have ended badly."

"You had it handled," he chuckled. "Have you been giving some thought to who should stand for you?" She nodded. "Excellent. Please tell me you've considered all the political angles," he added.

"Of course. It's still a bit unorthodox."

His eyes narrowed.

"All right," she sighed, breaking it down so he knew exactly what she had and had not considered. "There are very few choices for us, really. Syera had some wiggle room because she was the third child. Valan being the crown prince and thus, this the wedding of a future queen," she shuddered as she let that sink in, "we have very few choices. Unless I wish to present as lesser in this union, I have to have no less than a duke. With Griff currently mourning their loss, it would be inconsiderate of me to request Duke Griff to stand for a wedding when he should be preparing for his heir's funeral. That leaves only Cygent, as the groom is of the only other House," she shrugged. "This means Valan has this dilemma too."

"Sooo?" he prompted when she fell silent, pausing to eat a few bites.

"So,... I'm going to let Valan have Cygent and I'm going to ask Princess Semi-ana."

You could have heard a kerchief land on the floor at that. Even Coral had looked up from her mending with shock. Cae watched her father as he mulled this over. Rosemary was a little lost, not understanding everything about noble politics.

Then he laughed, so hard it took him several minutes to catch his breath. He raised his glass once he'd taken a gulp of the ale to calm him. "Well done, my hind. Tell your beloved, by all means, so he knows he is free to consult the old cobb," he said fondly of Duke Cygent. "Just no one else. I want to enjoy the looks on people's faces when they see not only foreign royalty standing for you, but a woman at that!"

He laughed until his side hurt and Rosemary had to get up and give him medicine for the pain. Cae saw his hand rubbing his thigh. "Father, did you take the antidote?" she asked, suddenly remembering what Stag had shown her last night. Her stomach felt cold and she pushed her plate away, unable to eat another bite.

He sobered immediately. He took a deep breath and let it out. "Yes, I took it. It took us a while to figure out *how* I was supposed to take it."

"Not to mention to find out if it was not really more poison," Rosemary commented. "Though it did not smell sweet."

"It seemed to work for a little while," he continued. "But they're telling me it might have been too late. Your brother's mercari friend found us an alchemist. He assured us that this is the way of some poisons," he shrugged. "If you get the antidote soon enough, it works completely. But this... it's been eating at me for months. It is entirely possible it has only bought me some time."

She sat silent for long minutes, stunned. "I... I was sure it would help. He said..." Tears of anger welled in her eyes. "It would have been just like that timber rotted son of a bottom feeding shock eel to lie to get his way. I am sorry father. I could have killed you." The tears began to fall. "I only wanted..." she choked. "I had to make the choice. If I had agreed, maybe he would have sent enough, but... I couldn't risk... our House... I wouldn't..." Then her father's arms were around her, pulling her onto his lap to cradle her against him.

"I would not have wanted it at that price. No single one of us is worth the House," he murmured into her hair.

That was how Fern found them when she returned from bringing Malyna her dinner and keeping her company. She slipped over to Ikembe to ask in a whisper, covering her mouth and silencing her own tears as she learned what was going on.

"There, there, my hind. What would Stag think of you, blubbering like this?" he asked her when her sobs began to subside.

She sniffled, feeding her emotions off of his, realizing that he was resigned to this. "He showed me last night. I saw... the state of things. It runs deep. Remlock also told me the source of the poison and what it will do. It will eat you up. Slowly.

They used it as part of their war against the Levitau. It comes from the living brain of the Leviathan's children. Remlock claimed to have the only antidote."

There was a spark of hope that died just as quickly. "What?" she asked him.

"If there were more of the cure on the Eastern Isles, it is gone now," he said quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"Reports have come in from ships that were near enough. The Eastern Isles were drowned under a tidal wave."

She went white. "That's where they were going... to bring her home."

"Who?" he frowned.

Cae told him what she had seen in the battle, at the end: the spirits leading the injured leviathan away. "I am certain that the queens are the passageways between our world and theirs. Or at least a conduit for the energies. I can sometimes see the flow, especially when I dream."

"Dreams are just fancies of the mind, Cae," he said gently.

She shook her head. "Only some are, and I still have those. I can feel the difference. It's like I'm in a place where everything is understood and you can see the connections. Well, ...now. Something's been unlocked recently." A thought occurred to her. "How did people take the shifts?"

He chuckled. "Well, they didn't exactly shift in the middle of the city. The princes took certain people out to the training fields and closed it off to everyone else. Then Valan just gave in. At least that's how Willam described it. And then there was a dragon in front of everyone looking down at a broken necklace in confusion."

"I told him," Cae giggled. "The bull that attacked the Hall was trying to break through the gauntlets, though I don't remember his clothes becoming a problem."

"Maybe he's been wearing it so long he forgot he had it on?" he suggested.

She shrugged. "But tell me the rest. That news spread like wildfire through the city, I am sure."

"There was the expected outcry," he sighed, nodding. "Shouts of sorcery and blasphemy and calls to kill the shifts before they could run rampant. Apparently Will took a group of them, shifted, and marched all the way from the palace to the main market with a few royal guards to keep the crowds from being stupid. Because they moved without the madness of previous shifts, it helped to calm most people down. Especially with some shifts being so... innocuous."

"You mean cute and fluffy," Rosemary blushed.



Her father grinned. "She's a bunny."

Cae looked up at her with a smile. "Rosemary, you're a shift?"

She fidgeted. "Yes," she said in a small voice. "A little brown rabbit."

"I'm kind of jealous," she admitted. "So many advantages, even being small and 'innocuous'. ...Wait, is Janem?"

Rosemary shook her head. "Not that we know. He says he feels nothing... crawling inside."

"Is that how it feels?"

She shook her head. "Well, not for me. I mean... I am shy and I do love certain greens. But it weren't until the Alumet princess turned into a great spotted cat in front of me that it happened. It is better with the moonsilver, though."

Cae perked up even more. "Moonsilver?" That was when she noticed the thin band of silver around her little finger.

She nodded. "My Jan figured it out. The moonsilver makes the shift easier and helps keep your people thoughts... people-like. He didn't have enough made yet to make weapons or armour pieces for everyone who would need it, so he made rings."

"Duke Cygent will have to wait longer yet for his armour to be replaced," Cae mused.

"So it seems," her father said. He indicated for her to get up, and she could feel the pain in him. She slid from his lap and set a hand on his thigh just above the knee, feeling the pain like a heat there. She tried to draw it off, like she had tried to draw Syera's sorrow, but pain was not an emotion but a physical state, and there was nothing she could do.

Her father set a hand on hers, lifting it up to wrap it with his. "Do not fret for me. I have seen near seven decades in this world. And I can feel your mother so near these days. I will have time to see you settled, and even your brother, maybe. So, no thinking thoughts of death so close to wedded bliss," he said, chucking her under the chin. "You think *I* had a great love story to tell? I only fought a duel for your mother. Your swain started a war!"

She smiled, blushing, her eye having caught the tapestry. "An Isildar level tale, though this time the dragon is the hero."

"Filthy pirates," he snapped.

"Ragged sea-dogs," she growled.

"Whimpering, saw-toothed, slug diddlers," swore Rosemary.

## SHIFT: Dragon's Bride

Both the duke and his daughter turned slowly to look up at her. The duke beamed with shocked pride and Cae just in shock. “Why, my dear Rosemary,” Elyas began. “I never knew you had it in you!”

Rosemary pretended she had no idea what he was talking about. “If you wish to attend to certain matters before supper tonight, we had best leave now.”

He just laughed, nodding. He turned back to Cae. “Remember who your enemies are, child. And speak not of certain matters unless the king brings it up himself. Follow any lead given, even if it is not the truth.”

“I will, father. Please take care of yourself.”

He grinned. “One way or another I will see your firstborn child into this world.”

She blushed as he was wheeled out of the room. She noticed, as they left, that there were once again guards outside her door.



**I**t was late afternoon three days later by the time the ships arrived. Cae and Valan were walking by the lower seawall in the gardens watching them. It occurred to both of them at the same time the problem shifts suddenly presented to the safety of the Citadel. With the existence of shifts who could swim, the rocky outcroppings below them and the unpredictable nature of the Desiter were no longer obstacles. For that matter, the occasional ship which missed the fork and ended up down the left branch were no longer so much in danger, when one could just send a few dolphins and seals overboard to tug it around or guide it through.

Once they saw the first ship disappear around the edge of the city where the docks were, the pair of them made their slow way back through the gardens towards the atrium, where they would greet the returning heroes. Tempest left her shoulder at her request, to fly to Stag's Hall to inform her father, then to meet her brother.

They collected Liliwyn from the terrace where she had been sketching a new section of the gardens she was planning. They stalled by sending messages to the king and queen and initiating preparations with the servants for the returning prince and the guests that would be at supper that night. Even so, they were waiting for nearly half an hour before Tempest soared in and landed on Cae's shoulder, chirp-

ing with pride in having done her job well. Duke Maral and Vyncet arrived a little before the procession, and Valan himself bent to help Vynce carry the duke's chair up the steps to the top to wait just off to the side of the Royal Family.

Cae smiled back at him, and he beamed with pride. Rosemary was clearly trying to look like a servant, standing behind his chair, uncomfortable with all the attention, even as she eagerly watched for some sign of her own son.

Cae glanced over their own party. She had been stationed between Valan and Syera. Larch and Ikembe stood just behind them, as the other royal guards did for their charges. Cae noted that lord Mambyn was still amongst the king's retinue and stepped back to have a brief word with Ikembe under the cover of having her adjust Tempest's shoulder pad. "*Keep an eye on the king and queen's guards. If anyone moves to threaten the queen, stop them,*" she instructed quietly in Alümet. "*I would not put it past her to sacrifice a man to eliminate a rival.*"

Ikembe smiled. "Your accent is improving, my lady," she said.

They knew they were almost here by the sounds of cheering in the streets. There was a momentary shuffling as they settled themselves to receive those returning from war. Valan reluctantly offered her his arm, when it was clear he would much rather hold her by the waist. She smiled at him, whispering in Old Vermian, "*We are going to be quite the scandal once matters are settled.*"

"*More like we shall set new standards and expectations.*"

Cae tried hard not to giggle. But then Prince Balaran rode in through the gate at the head of a good portion of the army and its prisoners and she grew still, looking for her brother.

Balaran and his commanders dismounted and walked up the steps to bow before the king. "Your Majesties," he said formally. "We have returned victorious."

"Welcome home, my son," the king said magnanimously, opening his arms to embrace him.

It all seemed so formal and stiff. Cae reached out to sense the king's emotions. They were hard to pick out, with all the gathered soldiers and prisoners and 'guests' and their strong emotions, but she managed. He was in turmoil, ranging from love to embarrassment, quite possibly still struggling with the effects of the suggestions of a certain woman, perhaps even that of her son.

"There are certain individuals with us that seek audience with you concerning their current state of affairs, and others whose fates must be determined for their actions in the conflict," Balaran said.

“We shall speak with the stewards as to their quartering. I will hold formal court tomorrow morning to assess matters and rule upon them.”

Balaran bowed again. “May I send the men home?” he asked.

The king nodded and waved his hand. Cheers went up.

Balaran turned to the throng and issued orders for the commanders to see to their men and return as soon as prudent for debriefing. It was not until then that he turned to hug the rest of his family, Cae included. As a treat, he handed young Jan-niston, who had been fidgety the whole wait, a large shark’s tooth. With a grin, he whispered loudly, “Just don’t ask what I pulled that out of.”

The boy made a face, imagining all kinds of gross things, but pocketed it all the same.

Then Cae was distracted by the approach of Willam and Janem. Their little family drew off to the side of the wide step to have their own reunion, though Ikembe hung back a little, keeping herself within distance to protect the queen as she had been asked.

There was a great deal of hugging and exclamations of joy, and whispers of everything going to plan, assurances that the marriage had been agreed upon in spite of any rumours to the contrary.

As they were making plans on what they were going to do now, the queen approached and everyone bowed.

“The king and I would like very much for your family to join us for supper this evening.”

“We would be honoured, Your Majesty,” said the duke, accepting for all of them.

She levelled her eyes upon Janem. “That means you as well, Smith, and your lady mother.”

Rosemary blushed and curtsied deeply. “Oh, I am no lady, Your Majesty.”

“Nonsense. You are the formal mistress of a duke and the mother of one of his sons. How can you be anything less?” she said pointedly, though she was smiling.

“Th-thank you, Your Majesty,” she stammered.

She turned back to Cae. “I need to speak with you, Lady Caelerys, if you can spare me the time?”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” she curtsied, turning to kiss her father and hug her brothers. “Come early so we can talk,” she told them.

They nodded as she turned to walk with the queen back into the citadel, Ikembe at her heels and Tempest on her shoulder. The queen said nothing the

whole way inside, taking her down a passage she was not familiar with and out a door that opened onto something akin to a kitchen garden. She led her down a twisting path through a patch of roses which only had a few remaining blooms, relishing the cold. Hips were ripening on other stems. The beds below them were bursting with cold-hardy flowers. There was a curved stone bench at the base of them with a velvet cushion laid out upon it. The queen sat and gestured for Cae join her.

Once they were settled, she began by turning to Ikembe and granting her a deep nod of her head. "I wish to thank you for your attendance back there." She turned to Cae, ignoring the shocked looks, "And you for being thoughtful enough to ask her."

"It ...it was only my duty, Your Majesty," Ikembe stammered, though she bowed deeply.

The queen reached out and cupped Cae's chin in her hand. "No, your duty is to keep this precious creature alive for my son. You would have been within your rights as an itoma to refuse. You didn't."

"Had my lady been in danger, I would have," she said, straightening. "At the moment, any danger to you is a danger to her. And, if it would not be impertinent to say so, Your Majesty, you should take more care yourself."

She smiled tolerantly, looking over at Ikembe. "I am. What guards I have, I trust. It is my husband's guards that I do not. And it is part of what I wish to speak with you about."

"Anything, Your Majesty," Cae said, beginning to sense a little bit of worry from the queen.

"What is going to happen tomorrow is not going to be easy for anyone. Least of all the pair of you. Even our enemies are aware of this. They are likely to move tonight, to make certain of their position."

"Upon whom, Your Majesty?" Ikembe asked. "My matama or yourself?"

"All of us, actually."

Cae gave a small gasp and Tempest began to fret over her. She put up a hand to still the worried bird. "Do you really think they would revolt? Or attempt a slaughter?"

The queen laughed lightly. "Nothing so dire. One of my spies has told me that there has been a large quantity of fidelity imported and purchased recently. Delivered through various agents by none other than the viper matron herself. I fear

she will use it at tonight's supper and send individuals to whisper in our sleeping ears. Or by some other method."

"How can we stop it?"

The queen turned to look at Ikembe. "By loaning me your itoma once more. Though in fact, she will still be guarding you by doing so."

Ikembe looked at Cae, her eyes telling her that she thought the risk probably worth it. Cae nodded. "Of course. What have you in mind?"

The queen smiled. "Well, she will need to make certain the food you consume this evening has not been tampered with. And she cannot serve as taster in front of everyone, therefore, it is best if she supervises the preparations. Check the ingredients to be certain they are what they proclaim to be, and be certain that nothing is added. Check everything. I trust your superiorly trained palate. If you discover anything amiss, be discreet. I do not wish our enemies to know they have been thwarted. After supper, retire to your rooms and unblock the secret passage. I shall send Lady Caena to fetch you and bring you by the passages to my own chambers. There you may tell me what has transpired."

Ikembe bowed. "A most excellent plan, Your Majesty. I have been in the kitchens often enough doing the same for my lady's own meals that this should not go amiss. I have an understanding with the head cook in the matter. She will likely be thankful if I do so for an entire meal."

"Thank you. Now," the queen said, turning to Cae. "How have you been?"

"Impatient?" she laughed softly. "I just want the secrecy over with. I can't even work on my trousseau without giving anything away."

"I know how you feel," the queen sighed. "But you are well otherwise?"

"I am, Your Majesty."

"Good, then I have one more request of you. An assignment really."

Cae tilted her head. When Tempest cocked her head the same way, the queen actually laughed. "Have you gained control of your dreams yet?"

This question startled her. "I think I have. A small measure any ways."

"I need you to try and look in upon our enemies."

Cae's expression fell. "They have to be asleep, I think, before I can spy upon them. And if things are afoot tonight, I highly doubt the major players will be."

"This is unfortunate," the queen frowned. "It is most certain that she will come to him tonight, trying to find out what is to happen tomorrow and influence it if she can."

"I will try my best. She will have to sleep some time."

The queen patted her hand gently. "Good. You do what you can, send word if you discover anything. Send Fern. Speaking of which, I must pay a visit to her other charge." She smiled with clear delight. "Oh, but that woman has been sending my husband to distraction trying to find where her daughter has been taken and by whom! And he can honestly tell her that he hasn't a clue, nor has he been able to find her."

"I do sort of feel sorry for him," Cae sighed, though she smiled a little, thinking of Semelle's panic, not at worry for her daughter's welfare, but worry what it could mean for herself.

"For the king?" the queen asked as she stood. "Oh, it is sweet of you, but he got himself into this. If he had turned her away from the first he would not now be in this predicament." She began to walk down the garden path and paused, glancing back. "Feel free to putter about if you like for a little while. Liliwyn has been tending it for me, but I dare say she is going to be occupied most of the day."

Caelerys looked around, recognizing some of Lili's touch here and there. This must be the queen's private gardens, she thought. Odd that they would be attached to the kitchen gardens. Following the queen's advice, she began to wander through the greenery, taking note of the various plants both useful and decorative. Before long, she found herself doing a little weeding and pruning herself. After about an hour, she came to the kitchens with her kerchief full of ripe rose hips. She handed them to the cook.

"Do with these whatever the queen usually requests done with them."

The cook thanked her and emptied the kerchief into a small basket now overflowing, which she stared at in despair. "I have no idea. She never really asked for anything. I've gotem piling and no clue."

Cae smiled. "The cook back at Stag's Hall has a recipe for Roseberry Tarts that is nothing short of spiritual. I am sure she would be happy to provide the recipe for tonight."

The cook looked both delighted and upset at the prospect. "I haven't the manpower to spare for a new recipe at this late hour. Could she maybe ...no, can't have 'em made and brought up. There's too much for risking."

"She might be willing to come and bake them here. I can only ask."

"Would you? A table an' an oven I kin spare."

She nodded. "Something to write with and on?" she requested.



The cook managed to scrounge up a scrap of paper and a wrapped coal stick. Cae scribbled a quick request to Fennel and handed the note up to Tempest. "Take this to Fennel, love?" she asked.

The bird chirped a question. Cae laughed. "Yes, I'm sure she'll find something for you. Now go."

The bird snapped up the note, making sure it was secure in her beak and flew off, back out the open door to the gardens.

The cook snapped at those who had stopped to watch the bird to get back to work. "Thank you. I'll send word she's to be admitted the moment she arrives. Now, if you ladies would kindly vacate my kitchens so's I kin be gettin' back to it?"

Cae nodded with a smile. "Of course."

"Ike," the cook added, nodding to Ikembe. "You comin' back for the tasting?"

Ikembe nodded. "Shortly, Brandy. I must see to something first. You'll never notice me."

"Never do."

Ikembe then led Cae back up to her rooms and left her in the hands of Fern and the others to prepare for supper before returning to the kitchens.

Cae was more than a little surprised to find Lady Petra in her rooms waiting for her. She rose when Cae arrived and Coral stepped forth to curtsy to her. "This lady claims to have your acquaintance, my lady."

Cae tried to hide her smile at the older woman's expression at having been doubted. "She does. She helped get me here," she reluctantly admitted.

Lady Petra came forward, placing her hands upon her shoulders. "Oh, my lamb! Let me get a good look at you! Oh, you are a sight. You do not seem the worse for your ordeal."

"I am actually the better for it, if you must know," Cae said, gesturing for the lady to join them in her dressing chamber. "I must prepare now as I am expecting my family soon. We can talk in here."

Rosie looked up from the clothes press as they came in, curtsied, though she looked upon the strange woman with her lady with caution. "Which dress would my lady like for the Royal Supper tonight? Perhaps the plum? You have not worn in it a while."

"Actually, I think the green one. The one Sai gave me," she instructed as she stood to have her current gown unlaced.

Lady Petra frowned slightly as the dress was brought out. "I must say you have started a trend for understatement and simplicity. You say the princess herself gave you this one?"

Cae nodded. "The day I was brought here after the attack. Which I have not seen you since just before," she added pointedly.

"Oh, my dear. Once you were brought into the palace you were a little out of my reach and quite honestly, no longer in need of me. I could do you so much more good outside the Citadel walls. And you are hardly my only client, you know. I've been busy as a bee in Planting. I am currently working with a particularly shy young maid I was introduced to at Feywood Manor here in town. I was there to attend to a small negotiation for your father, and saw this poor maid. She is going to be so much work!" she exclaimed with delight.

Cae glanced over her shoulder at lady Petra. "Feywood? Wouldn't happen to be young Onelle Roshan, would it?"

The old woman beamed. "The very maid. Do you know her?"

"I do. You have your work cut out for you. And no filling her head with Eldest nonsense. She has enough troubles without that."

Lady Petra placed a shocked hand to her breast. "Would I steer the poor dear wrong?"

"If you steer her towards the church, yes," she said, eyeing her in the mirror as they pulled the pale green gown over her head. "I've seen first hand what damage that religion can do."

"It never did me a..."

Cae sighed. "Lady Petra. You were lucky. If your husband followed, he was kind. Too many husbands abuse this. I've seen how it can go wrong. I'd rather avoid that fate all together. Besides, I don't think her family would thank you."

She sighed, simpering. "A matter, I suppose, to speak with her father about, when I see him. I hear he is travelling here as a middle ground for his eldest daughter's wedding."

"He is. And it was no small feat to accomplish, either," Cae sighed, sitting down to have her hair done once she was laced into the gown. "With Balyra being his heir, I can understand wanting the wedding to take place amongst his own people. But he's since learned of father's... condition, and has decided to spare him the long, painful journey inland."

Sorrel helped Fern twist Cae's hair up into a high set crown braid and pin the rest into intricately woven patterns within the frame, pinning pearls in various places.

Lady Petra observed the style and gave a small frown. "This is much more complex than you have been wearing," she commented.

Cae smiled, a little pleased that, even though the lady had not been present in her life, she had still been keeping tabs on her. "I figure if I keep changing my style with no rhyme or reason, simple one day, complex without warning, eventually women will give up trying to 'follow the fashion' and just wear their hair however they like it."

"It'll never happen," she said airily. "Besides, if I can still manage things, you will one day be queen. You will have to be more aware of these thi..."

Cae turned on her so suddenly that she lost track of her own sentence. "Exactly what have you heard and what do you know? What are you doing?"

There was an unprecedented urgency to her voice and an anger buried under the panic that, for a moment, lady Petra did not know what to say. "I... I thought you were working on a betrothal with the crown prince. Has anything changed?"

Cae just stared.

"I had heard there were some difficulties," she began hesitantly as the silence and the glare made her nervous. Even the handmaidens were watching her in terror of what she had said.

"What kind?" Cae asked softly.

"That... well, there were concerns since your return that you might have been made untenable for a prince in your captivity. But I have been sure to inform those spreading such nonsense that you were more than capable of defending your virtue in such cases. Your father made certain of that," she added more firmly, with more confidence than she actually felt.

"So you have no knowledge of the state of the negotiations?"

"No, child! Would I be trying so hard if I did?" she protested. "I know you had your heart set upon him, but," she began, more softly, "you might have to consider the lesser son, or another option entirely. Prevailing winds..."

"Are what?" she prompted when she hesitated.

She whimpered, "Oh why are you interrogating me like this? I am only trying to help you!"

Cae sighed, pulling back her own anger and desperation. "Better me than Prince Valan," she commented. "What are the prevailing winds? It is important."

“Well, the lower estates are mostly pleased with the thought of you as a couple. That he fought a war for you feeds the romance in them. Though there are some, swayed no doubt by their betters, who doubt your... worthiness?” she said delicately. “The nobles are of two camps, well, three really,” she added. “Those for, those against and those who refuse to comment. Those against all hold the same argument: that you are impure, reckless, and unfit to be queen.”

Cae relaxed. She stood, smoothing her bodice in the mirror. “You must despair of this union until you hear otherwise from royal lips.” She felt a glimmer of hope rising in the woman’s breast and hated to crush it. “Lady Petra, I have asked very little of you. But if you wish the best for me, do not hold out any hope of the king accepting anything my father has to offer. He likes Lady Liliwyn much more than he likes me and her marriage into this family is almost a certainty. To which prince remains to be seen,” she lied. She reached out to take the older lady’s hands in hers. “If you are still friends with anyone in Lady Asparadane’s household or House, you must make sure there is doubt. If the king hears even a whisper that negotiations are bending my way, he will do the exact opposite and there will be no changing his mind.”

“But he’s the one negotiating. Won’t he know...?”

Coral entered the room. “Forgive me, my lady, but your family have arrived.”

She nodded. “See them settled. I’ll be out in a moment. Rosie, the pearls, I think.”

The girl nodded and fetched the strand.

“Please, lady Petra?”

The old woman sighed, nodding. “For you, my dear.”

“Keep your ear to whatever you can. I will send for you perhaps tomorrow night or the day after. You can tell me everything then.”

She beamed with pride. “Oh, my dear little lamb. The woman you have become!” she exclaimed. “You would have made a marvellous queen.” She paused to wipe a tear from her eye and turned to leave.

Cae bent to let Rosie fasten the double strand of pale golden pearls around her neck, giving lady Petra a little time to speak with her father and brothers before she went out there.

When she did, the lady was taking her leave, threatening Vyncet with a game of castle when next she saw him.

Tempest was sitting on her perch by the window. She flew over to the nearest chair back, complaining.

Cae crossed to her, stroking her breast. "You will have to stay here, Jelma," she said. She clamped her fingers on her beak when she started to protest. "No. This is a state dinner. No pets." Tempest puffed out her chest, trying to look as tough as she could. Cae laughed. "No guards, either. Not even Ikembe will be with me. She is in the kitchens guarding from there. I need you up here, making certain no one sneaks in while I am out. This is too important." Reluctantly, Tempest agreed.

"I've never regretted letting you keep that bird," said her father proudly.

"I have," Will growled half-heartedly. Tempest squawked angrily at him, narrowing her eyes. "I was getting over it," he snarled at her. "Don't make me rethink that."

Cae giggled as Tempest huffed and began cleaning one claw. "All right, you two, stop it. What do I need to know?"

"You?" Will asked. "You asked us, remember?"

"So you could fill me in on what I needed to know," she explained. He groaned.

Her father laughed. "I've filled them in on what's to happen tonight. What topics to avoid, etc. They know the ruse. The contract is all but signed."

"We've put a false candle in place of yours," Vyncet said with a grin.

"And where is mine?" she asked, her fist on her hip.

"Gave it to Balaran to hide," Will said.

Her father grimaced. "He said something about worms."

"Ah," she smiled. "No better place to lose something. It is safe and close, then."

"If you say so, sweetling," her father said. "You know what to do?"

She nodded. "I think. I've even set lady Petra on a counter mission," she chuckled. "Not that she knows it. The king is set for tonight and protected?"

The duke nodded. "There is no known antidote for the drug, but we have a small bit on hand for the queen to use to counter her orders if he does not manage to avoid consumption. There will be watchers hiding as witness."

"Does he know how many and where they will be?" she asked.

"He knows of one, but the queen has made certain there are a few others he does not know of," her father said.

She nodded. "She would think of that," she mused, then turned to actually survey her brothers.

They were all dressed their best, even Janem, though he looked decidedly uncomfortable even being here. She laughed, fussing with his lapel. "You look quite sharp, Master Smith," she teased.

Her father shifted in his chair, beaming with pride. "All my boys together again at last," he crowed, though Cae felt the briefest twinge as they all remembered there was one missing, and the shame that he had to suffer the madness. "And looking as young stags ought!" he finished. "All my children," he amended, looking Cae over. "Mustn't forget our lodestone."

Cae blushed and promptly punched Vyncet in the shoulder. "You told him?!"

The duke laughed as Vynce grabbed his arm in pain and moved farther away from her. "Who do you think told him?" he asked, jerking his thumb in his direction. He grabbed her hands and pulled her close before she could protest. "Your aunt, may her rest be peaceful, was ours, Jehan's and I. We were kind of lost without her for a while. One of the reasons he went off to the Iron Legions. I met your mother and she was mine. You... you are theirs, ours. I don't worry for my family or this House as long as you live."

"But father," she protested, trying to hold back tears. "I won't be of this House much longer. I'll be away from it, possibly the rest of my life."

He smiled. "You will always be a Maral, my hind. Even if you never sprout antlers. And even if you never come home again, which I highly doubt, you'll always be their lodestone. This may be the last time I have all of my children in one place until they scatter me at the tree. You may be scattered to the four winds, but you'll always be connected because of you."

She wiped her tears away as they fell. "I shall try."

He laughed, chucking her chin. "You will succeed because you can't help it."

She drew away, pulling a kerchief from her sleeve and drying her eyes. She made herself calm down, ignoring the grins of her brothers. Even Rosemary was smiling slightly, feeling the same pride. Cae looked over what the woman was wearing. It was a beautiful, dusty blue gown that accentuated her ample chest and hips without seeming tawdry. Her hair was simply dressed and pinned with a jewelled comb but her neck was bare. Cae drew her out from behind her father's chair and looked her over, leaned towards Fern. "What do you think, Fern? Simple chain or pearls?"

Fern stood back, assessing the whole picture. Rosemary suddenly understood what they were contemplating and began to protest.

“Neither, my lady,” Fern said. “I know just the thing, if you’ll trust me to the choice?”

“Absolutely.”

Fern disappeared, both women ignoring Rosemary’s adamant arguments that it just wouldn’t do.

Janem came up behind her and set his hands on her shoulders. “Mother, she won’t listen to *me* when she gets like this. What makes you think she’ll listen to you?” She turned in his grip to complain more, but he laughed. “Besides, I happen to agree with her. And if I have to dress the part, so do you.”

She blew a half angry half resigned sigh at that.

“Why are you upset?” Cae asked, confused.

Rosemary seemed surprised that she had known what she was feeling even when she wasn’t completely sure. “I... I don’t...” she stammered.

Jan laughed. “She resents having her own argument used against her.”

Cae laughed. “Used it to get you to dress up, didn’t she?”

He was saved from answering as Fern returned with a strand of pale blue, chalcedony beads graced only by a silver rose for a clasp that was intended to hang in the front. Rosemary was silenced.

Cae smiled. “Perfect. They are not expensive, so not ‘above your station,’” she said, taking the strand and fastening them around her neck herself. “And they look so much better on you than they ever did on me.”

Will chuckled. “Aren’t those the beads I sent you for your eleventh birthday?”

She smiled. “I think they are. And, like most of the things you brought me in those days, completely unsuitable.” She patted him on the shoulder. “It’s quite all right. I’m sure you’ll get better at it,” she grinned.

“Oh, speaking of gifts,” he said, reaching to the floor and picking up a long object in an oiled silk bag. “One of the seals found this floating in the water and thought it might belong to you.”

He handed her the object and she slid the bag from it with a gasp. It was her bow, only slightly the worse for battle wear. She hugged him with a squeal. “I thought it lost forever!”

Coral cleared her throat. “My lady, my lords, forgive the interruption, but they are ready to seat for supper.”

Swiftly stringing the bow, she handed it to Coral. “Would you see to having this placed appropriately?”

The woman gave a brief curtsy as she accepted the weapon. "Of course, my lady. Enjoy your meal."

Together, the family headed down to the dining room, with Will pushing the duke's chair.

The long table was set to its fullest and light was everywhere, reflected from a hundred candles by numerous mirrors. The royal family had not yet arrived, but the other guests were brought to stand at their places. The places of the king and queen's chairs were clearly set for the royal family, as everything there was decorated in green with gold trims. Across from them came House Griff, and the duke himself was there. He was not dressed as quite the peacock he had been at the coronation, though his black coat was still richly accented. Cae was not surprised to see Syera standing with them, between the duke and his grandson, Lord Redrick, his new heir. Syera saw her and gave a weak smile as she eyed the red and gold goblet before her plate, tied with a black ribbon out of respect. The Marals were arrayed beside them and the Cygents across the table from that. The Maral tableware were silver and blue enamelled and the Cygent pale blue and gold.

Cae was seated between Vyncet and Janem, in order of age and precedence. Looking around the table, she leaned to whisper to Jan, "I never noticed before that Maral is the only Great House in silver."

He grinned. "Don't worry. It won't be long before that's moonsilver," he chuckled.

She elbowed him discreetly. "You are not wasting moonsilver on tableware," she hissed.

She was saved from a response by the entrance of the royal family. She did not need to be a sympath to know that Valan was grossly unhappy with the seating arrangements.

Once the royals were seated, everyone else followed suit and the meal began.

Cae held most of her conversations with the Cygents across the way, including Liliwyn who was seated across and a little down from her. But the meal was largely boring. She was limited by position who she could speak with and by necessity what she could discuss, and by distance what she could hear. She could feel Valan's eyes upon her and offered him the occasional shy smile. It could only do the gossips good to see his current mood. It would fuel the rumours that things might not go Maral's way.



It was not until the dessert that things got even remotely interesting. The moment the servants entered the room bearing the trays, Jan's head came up, eyes wide as he sniffed the air. "You didn't!" he hissed at Cae.

She only smiled.

When the fat, fragrant tart was laid upon his plate, Janem breathed deeply. "So that's where Fennel went off to this afternoon!" He elbowed her. "You could have told me."

She shrugged, taking a forkful. "And spoil the surprise?"

"I take it this is a more rustic concoction of the Reach?" asked Duchess Cygent.

Cae looked up to the graceful, long-necked beauty that was Liliwyn's mother. "Yes, Your Grace. It is a favourite at Stag's Hall. Our cook, Fennel, makes the most delicate and flavourful tarts of rose hips."

Liliwyn took a bite and closed her eyes in bliss. "What does she call this?" she asked.

Cae smiled. "Well, she doesn't, but Jan calls them 'roseberry tarts'."

He would have blushed at the attention, but he was too busy savouring each bite as if it were to be his last.

"I am sure she saved you a few," she whispered.

"I don't care," he said slowly.

All down the table, the tarts seemed to be getting a stunning reception and the queen herself smiled down at her, raising her goblet in praise. Cae blushed, returning the gesture.

The rest of the meal disappeared into obscurity.



Ikembe was already waiting in Cae's room when she arrived, having said her farewells to her family and convinced Rosemary to keep the necklace. They did not have to wait long before there was a knock upon the wall in the bedchamber. Cae pulled it open whilst Ikembe stood in the doorway, ready should the knocker be hostile. It was lady Caena as expected.

The pair of them followed her down the passage using only a hooded lantern, entering a door with a complex opening mechanism into the queen's apartments.

The room was neither the queen's bedchamber, dressing chamber nor her normal receiving rooms. It seemed to be some private inner chamber. It had several

comfortable chairs, and both her sons were lounging in them. The queen was seated beside them, musing over a castle board with Valan.

Cae groaned with a smile, "Please do not tell me you play, Valan."

When the queen looked up with a smile of her own, Cae started to curtsy. A look in the queen's eye stopped her. Cae suddenly noticed that, other than Lady Caena and Ikembe, there were no servants in the room, and no guards.

Valan laughed at her. "No, I have heard you have neither the skill nor the love of the game. I will not subject you to that."

"I have no skill because I have no love, thanks to Vyncet," she said, sinking into a chair beside him.

He chuckled, making a complicated move. "Mother cheats."

"I do not," she retorted.

"If you can see the outcome, it's cheating."

"Who says I can see the outcome? And there are plenty of times that I followed my instincts and lost," she grumbled, concentrating on her move and indicated for both lady Caena and Ikembe to sit in the remaining chairs. "So tell me what happened below," asked the queen.

Ikembe did not even try to hide her smile. "The woman called Winnow was very discreet and quite good. She let me taste the wine from the tun brought up, then poured it into the jugs for serving. Thought I had not seen her pour something into the jars just after they were rinsed at the sinks, while they were being set up. There was not much in them, just what might have been left from improper drying. I rewashed them whilst she went to select the wine. She was none the wiser."

"Excellent," the queen smiled.

"Did she really need to dose everyone?" Balaran frowned, clearly thinking of the waste and excess.

"Easier most likely," the queen mused. "But it means she may not try to re-dose your father tonight."

Lady Caena spoke up. "I have seen the signs in the passageways that she will most certainly be paying a visit. I have also sent loyal servants to watch the residences of tonight's guests and one to follow each that we will know if they are met on the way. We should have reports by morning."

The queen smiled as she made her move. "Good. Please ensure that I rise early."

"Of course, my queen."

“What if she does try to re-dose him?” Valan asked, frowning as he watched the board.

“He is supposed to try and divert her, switch the glasses maybe,” she sighed, seeing her move being made ineffective by her son’s counter. “If all else fails, he’ll just become ardent and drive all thoughts of anything from her mind. I have suborned one of his servants to make certain that everything in the room is free of it. The poor man,” she frowned. “Mambyn has been forcing him to slip small doses into his drink. He has some threat to hold over him... a family debt, I think. I had him switch the vial with one of plain water.”

“Father knows there is one servant who will be hiding in a chest in the room,” Balaran said, paring an apple. “What he does not know is that I and three others will also be hiding. I from a certain peep-hole in the passages,” he grimaced. “Truthfully, I do not wish to watch in the least, but I plan to listen to every word. I am sure I will be well traumatized by morning.” He offered Ikembe a slice of the fruit before holding out a second to Cae.

Ikembe gave him a wry grin and bit into it, nodding after a moment to her mistress.

Caelerys gave both of them a look of ‘this is hardly necessary here’.

The queen paid them a brief glance, “Tomorrow morning, you will breakfast and see none but family. There will be a bell on the floor when it is time to head to the throne room for court. Caelerys, you will wish to wear something fitting for events, but not too ostentatious. Though that is never a problem for you, my dear. Ikembe, you may wish to look like an ordinary handmaiden, if you can. Do not leave her side for any reason.” She turned back to study Caelerys. “I am tempted to hide you away in another room somewhere, but... I think you shall be fine where you are.”

Valan eyed her sharply. “Are you absolutely sure? Last time...” he left the sentence hanging. “This time I cannot promise I will not shift right here inside the Citadel.”

She patted his arm. “No, son, this isn’t one of *those* times.” She looked down, made a move on the board. “There, that’s you breached and conquered. I am off to bed to get what sleep I can,” she said, rising. She bent to kiss the top of Cae’s head, stopping her from rising. “You may stay for a little while longer in relative privacy, but I recommend bed soon. It is going to be an exhausting day,” she warned, bending to kiss Balaran.

She paused behind Valan, smiling as he scowled over the board trying to figure out how she had defeated him. She kissed the top of his head and drifted out of the room with Lady Caena right behind her.

Bal just grinned, pleased with his brother's consternation. He held out a small, familiar book to Cae. "Here. You might want to read this all of a piece. Southern Lord is enough and I believe your window is well positioned for him."

Cae took the book, opening it to the last page. The piece she had torn by necessity was settled against its mate. "One of these days we are going to have to re-discover how to make this ink," she sighed.

"If any one can, it's Bal," Valan commented, pulling himself away from his game.

"Janem might be able to offer some insight, working with moonsilver itself," she added.

Balaran nodded. "I plan on consulting him. If he can spare the time."

Cae rose. "Well, I've got some reading I want to do and then I am off to bed."

Valan stood, pulling her close. "Must you?" he growled pleasantly, insinuating all sorts of things.

She smiled, "With you in this mood?" she asked innocently, then kissed him quickly, "definitely."

As she pulled away and headed towards the secret doorway, he pulled her back for a real kiss that left her breathless. He gave her time to breathe only long enough to suggest that Ikembe might want to check to see if the passage was safe to use. The woman only smiled and slipped out.

Cae took the opportunity to swat Balaran.

"What was that for?" he protested, even though he was laughing.

"You know why," she glared.

"The curse of your brother marrying a sympath," Valan chuckled.

Bal perked up, "Hey, I've seen her with her family. That just means I've been firmly placed in the 'brother camp'."

She narrowed her eyes at him even though she was smiling. "You might wish to consult with the other people in that camp as to how much trouble that means you're in," she warned.

Before Balaran could comment or Valan could kiss her again, Ikembe returned. She bowed. "The recommendation is that we move now. The female in question has just entered the king's chambers."

"You sure?" Bal asked, getting up.

She nodded. "I saw the light at the crossway and crept close enough to listen. It is her."

Valan reluctantly gave her up. "I will see you when we sleep, my lady," he said, possessively.

She paused at the doorway. "Alas, I have been requested by your mother to spy while I can. Until tomorrow."

"After tomorrow, they will need a pry bar to separate me from you," he promised.

Bal grinned. "As opposed to now?" he asked, shoving Valan out of his way playfully. "I need to get in position. If you ladies will excuse me."

Cae watched him slip down the hall like a silent footed cat until he vanished into the darkness. Sighing, she followed Ikembe back to her own room and let the two of them get her ready for bed.

Fern informed her that Lord and Lady Araan had attempted to visit, but had been turned away by Coral saying that Cae had already retired for the evening.

"The lady was perfectly fine being turned away, seemed a little embarrassed by her husband's insistence on coming," Fern explained.

"And Lord Araan?" she asked.

"Irritated at best, though he would not stop smiling," she shuddered. "He gave Sorrel the heebies."

"The heebies?" asked Ikembe.

Fern nodded. "You know, that feeling you get like someone is watching you and up to no good, where your skin crawls and you get the shivers for no reason?"

"Ah," she replied. "Heebies," she repeated slowly. "The word fits."

Cae chuckled as Fern did up her nightbraid. "What do you call that in Alümet?"

"A warning," she replied flatly.

Wrapped in her dressing gown and all her maids but Ikembe in their own rooms, Cae sat at the window with Tempest to read the moonink writing. The gold lettering was as she remembered it, the hand hurried and desperate.

I have stolen a measure of moonink, and write this, now, under the Eye of Justice, and when I am done, I shall hide this, hoping that somewhere, some night, this is found and justice done. I write this in secret knowing it is only a matter of time before they know how I feel and kill me for it. I am half tempted to dash myself to the rocks below in my shame.

We have all been wrong. They have lied to us all. It was never the Levitau. Yes, the leviathans can and have lashed out and destroyed ships in anger, but never

without some provocation. All their 'crimes' were actually committed by their Kaladen vassals. The family has been playing a very long game, working towards this for generations. They have orchestrated this down to the death of the Firstborn herself.

"The battle has waged for a silver month now, all up and down the coasts. It was finally, here, just a few miles off the shores of my new home that it ended, where they drew her to the surface and killed her. Even then, believing as I did that we were in the right, I felt pity for her, for her children who were slaughtered down to the last babe. I pray that some escaped, some subsequent child that might bear that seed forward into the future. It was not until I heard my husband gloating with his kin that night that I learned the truth. They aim to take their place, eventually to stand as a Great House, then the crown. There is no end to their ambition, and no depth to which they will not sink to achieve it.

"Late at night now and then, I can still hear her singing her death song. I drift to the lowest point of the tower and I hear her best there. The very walls reverberating with it. I find myself weeping with her. I pray to her that I may bear no children to these monsters. Dare I hope the leviathan still lives, one day to rise, healed, and take her vengeance? The storms have gotten worse since the battle, sudden squalls that give no warning and tear through the coastline and anything in its path. Perhaps this is part of her revenge and one day they will carve this spit from the mainland and, I hope, sink it and the entire cursed clan."

Cae closed the book carefully, making certain the loose piece remained inside. Tempest hopped to the floor and followed her back to the bedchamber, flying up to the headboard and tucking herself in. As Cae eased back against the covers, she noticed Ikembe had neither changed into a nightdress, nor climbed into the bed. "Aren't you...?" she began, then noted that she was wearing a costume similar to the one Semi had loaned Cae on the boat.

Ikembe shook her head. "I will watch for a little while, then sleep where anyone entering will wake me. For tonight only," she added as Cae protested. "One or two nights without full sleep will not impair my abilities, my lady. Now, sleep. You have your work and I have mine."

Reluctantly, Cae agreed and curled up against the pillows.



Once she was unconscious, she found herself in the dream state. She immediately chose the most mobile form, the bird she was so fond of, and set about trying

to do as the queen asked her. It was not unlike when she had been escorted through the fog by Stag, though neither he nor any of the First or Second put in an appearance. She saw small lights where she knew people were, some were even vaguely animal shaped.

A visit to Stag Hall showed her a stag in her brother's bed, and the rabbit she had not noticed before in her father's. She had been so focused upon what Stag had shown her regarding his condition she had missed it.

She drifted to the small manor that the Marrok kept in town. She was not surprised to see several spirits here, where a great many fully embodied their Second. She was also not surprised to find a large bear sleeping curled around one. But of enemies she could find none.

It occurred to her that she could not find someone or something of which she had no knowledge. She could follow the spirits, but unless she knew who they belonged to, she was helpless to know more. She was about to give up and head back to the Citadel when she was approached by a small bear no larger than a colt. It got her attention and tried to lead her somewhere. She landed upon its back and let it take her where it wanted her to go.

Once she was on it, she could see the real paths traversed, possibly because it wanted her to understand where she was, so she paid attention. It carried her to a small building at the end of a blind court with a broken fountain in its midst. It went inside and up a flight of stairs to a small apartment, past a room where traces of the Eldest lingered. In the back room was a large boy, a young man she realized, but his dreaming self was that of a child. He tossed and turned upon the bed between several smaller, faceless kids, whimpering in his sleep. The bear licked him and he calmed a little, then the bear looked back at her, pleading.

One of the other children violently elbowed him and the bear's head snapped around and growled. Cae shifted to herself and immediately reached for the boy's brow to soothe him, whispering words of calm and sleep. She turned to the bear. "*He's going to shift, isn't he?*" she asked, instinctively using the language of changes.

She got the distinct feeling it was both what the bear wanted and feared. The bear led her into the other room where a large man slept with a woman. Her dream-self was small and obscure, and hard worked. His was large, powerful and brutal. The bear showed her the small anvil by the bed.

Cae sighed, walking with the bear to the outer room. She set her hand on the side of his broad face. "Keep him calm as you can and try not to get too angry. Do

not let him shift yet. I am going to send someone to him or for him. Once he is free of here, then you can be one with him. Will that suffice?" she asked.

The bear rose on its hind legs and wrapped her in a hug before trotting back to its charge.

Cae smiled, leaping up into the air and flying above the house. More of the city lay bared by the fog for a moment, until she saw the Singing Forge shining in the night and ringing. She found the market square easily and was sure she could find it again. She headed to the wood where she was fairly certain the Master of the Hunt lived.

She found the dragon curled up near a small cottage. She reached out her hand and touched him gently. "Master Olen, someone needs you."

One golden eye opened.

She set a hand upon his brow and shared her understanding in a way she knew she could only do here.

Olen settled deeper into sleep, but Cae knew he would be paying a visit very early.

She could feel her own dragon calling for her. It gave her a warm feeling, and she flew to him, as nothing else really caught her eye. She felt frustrated that she could not do as the queen had asked. It would have been very useful. Though, thinking about it, she felt it wouldn't really have been right if she could.

She paused, realizing there was at least one enemy she knew of and who's location was certain. She concentrated upon the king and soon found herself in his chamber, standing at the foot of his bed. He lay alone. Semelle had already left. She studied him, finding nothing untoward, so she did not think he had been harmed.

Her dragon had apparently gotten tired of waiting for her and found her, poking his nose in the chamber. When he touched her, he was surprised to see where he was. She waited a half moment more, so that Valan could see for himself that his father slept peacefully.

Out of curiosity, she passed through to the queen's chamber. She had to look away. There was such light and warmth and vibrancy about her. Nothing was clear or constant, and many somethings came and went from her. Her dragon hurried her out, finally grabbing her and gliding to his room, curling up around her and drawing her down with him into real sleep.





Fern woke Cae early, well before dawn, and hurried her into a simple shift and her dressing gown. Ikembe then led the pair of them back to the queen's private chamber through the secret passages. The queen had apparently just risen herself, still in nightbraid, nightdress and a thick velvet dressing gown of a dusty rose.

"We haven't much time, my dear," she began the moment she entered the room and Cae started to curtsy. "What have you learned?"

"That my abilities apparently do not work as you wished them to, my queen," Cae said with regret.

She lifted her brow. "So it was a waste of time?" she frowned, confused.

Cae shook her head. "Oh, no, Your Majesty, far from it! I learned a great deal, though little that will be of use to us today. I have also learned part of my purpose." The queen gestured for her to go on. "I can see spirits watching individuals, or their own shift-ness?" she frowned, not sure if there even was a word for what she meant, "waiting to form. I am still not sure what I'm seeing, but I can probably predict if a given person is or will be a shift and what kind. I certainly can tell if they already are. And if I touch someone's dreaming self, I can impart some understanding if I have any of my own. For example, there is a young man in a bad situation

that is about to become a bear shift. With his situation, it could go very badly if he shifts under those conditions, so I went to Master Olen and shared what I was shown with him. I think he can help, and in this case particularly, be willing to.”

The queen seemed relieved. “Well, I am glad there was a reason I asked.”

“You are very interesting,” she added suddenly. The queen stopped and looked at her. “There is so much going on with you that... it’s no wonder you are sometimes lost in your own head. You’re beautiful. She’s all around you.”

The queen blushed slightly, smiled shyly. “Why... thank you, I think. I... I’ve never really given it a thought. Perhaps if we knew what you look like we could find more of you. They should be popping up here and there in the very near future, if they haven’t already. But we can talk more on this later.” She turned to Fern. “Any news?”

Fern curtsied. “Aye, Your Majesty. I spoke with Coral before waking my lady. Several of her contacts spoke of visitors to key people by individuals in Lady Asparadane’s employ. Even we had a most unusual visit from Lord Araan and his lady wife. She seemed embarrassed by the visit, though he was a little irritated that my lady was unavailable.”

The queen nodded, turned to Lady Caena.

The woman gave her report. “I have been informed that agents of the asp have indeed paid social visits last evening to those who attended the dinner. Some of the things spoken of seemed confusing and slightly odd unless you know what is being attempted. I have full reports for you to read while we dress your hair, my queen.”

“Very good. And our bedchamber spies?”

“Highly embarrassed,” she giggled. “Though you have nothing to worry about. While she attempted to dose him, he seduced her most insistently.” The queen rolled her eyes at that, getting her jealousy under control. “One of the servants slipped in and removed the dosed drink, replacing it with an undoctored one. The lady slept for a short while after... exertions, which she over exaggerated from what they’ve said,” she smirked. “When her son woke her, she whispered some interesting things to the king before she left.”

“Is there a written report?”

“Yes, my queen. A copy for you and one which is likely being given to the king as we speak.”

“Oh, that should make for an interesting scene,” the queen smiled. She turned back to Cae. “Off with you, ladies. You must break your fasts and make haste. The

danger is not yet over, but it looks as if I shan't have to counter-dose my own husband, at least."

Cae and Ikembe returned to her own chambers, leaving Fern behind to receive any last instructions regarding her secret charge. Cae did not expect to see her until court.

Entering her dressing room, Sorrel already had her gown lain out. Cae smiled to note that it was the heavy blue silk that she had worn coming into the city what seemed like forever ago. Her jewellery was lain out, simple pearls for her throat along with her pretty little thread-cutter on its chain, her mother's opal and the moonsilver comb.

She was swiftly dressed and her hair done, swept up from her face and pinned in a waterfall cascade of dark waves from the crown of her head. Spirals of thin silver ribbons were pinned amongst her own curls and the comb capped the whole.

Her breakfast was ready for her, and Ikembe bade her eat. She fed a fair bit to Tempest.

She was actually quite surprised that she received no visitors that morning, not even her family, but she realized belatedly that they would all be scrambling themselves. She penned a short note to Master Olen, explaining about the young man in case he did not remember his dream, though she was certain he would. In it, she apologized for the presumption of asking him to take a hand, but she felt intrinsically that he was the right person for the job and that it was highly unlikely that she would have any opportunity to do something herself. She begged to be kept apprised of matters. When she finished the note, she asked Rosie to have it delivered through trusted channels.

Then she heard the bell being rung at the end of the hall and rose, preparing to leave. Tempest trotted up, dragging the shoulder harness. She bent to take it. "No, Jelma, I cannot take you to court with me."

The bird complained loudly.

"Actually, my lady," Ikembe said. "It might be best if you did. She will see much and warn of more."

Cae rose, turning and stopped, seeing the woman dressed like any other handmaiden in her service. She had even disguised her hoape by pinning a veil to it. She was further surprised when the woman executed a perfect curtsy. Only experience with the woman and her skills told her that the gown was cut differently to allow her full freedom of movement.

Ikembe smiled at her reaction. “The queen did say to look like an ordinary handmaiden,” she said, with only the barest hint of her accent.

Cae smiled, remembering. “You were supposed to be learning to blend into our courts. I have been neglecting your education. Please forgive me.”

Ikembe dismissed the thought, taking the harness and helping Cae into it. “You have had much on your mind, my lady. Besides, you have been teaching. I have been very observant.”

Cae blushed, calling Tempest to her shoulder once the harness was secured.

Coral stood at the door, recalling Cae’s attention to what she was supposed to be doing. Coral made a minor adjustment to Cae’s necklace, adjusting the hang of her ‘pendant’. “There, my lady. You are perfect. Good luck this morning. May all go well with the Mother’s blessing.”

Cae thanked her with a rueful smile. “It will all go as She wills. Chimera knows She has moved enough pieces into place.”

Taking a deep breath, she stepped out into the hall with Ikembe at her heel.

Ikembe guided Caelys to her place near the front of the growing crowds



where her House stood. Her entire family was there, even Janem and Rosemary. House Griff had elected to stand behind them, to allow her chair-bound father to see what was going on. The two dukes were holding a conversation when Cae arrived, so she greeted her brothers first. The air was full of anticipation.

Syera was standing with the Griffs and gave Cae a sad smile. The gown she wore was a red so dark it was almost black. Which made Cae notice that all the Griffs were in similar colours. She hugged Syera who whispered, “We’ll talk later.”

Lili was across the aisle with her parents and brothers, and smiled. She was radiant in pale blue silk and looked happier than she had in a long while. The current Duke Alvermian was there with his small family, a cousin of the king if she remembered rightly. Everyone else was arrayed by precedence and House beyond that.

Lili looked as if she was about to cross over and speak to her, but another bell pealed and people began to form up and pay attention.

The herald announced the king and queen and the assembly bowed as they entered. Though they were not announced, the twin princes followed behind them and took their places to the side of the monarchs’ thrones, Balaran beside the queen

and Valan beside the king. Once the king and queen were seated, the herald bade the crowd rise and pay heed.

Cae glanced around, taking note of who was where and who was absent. Both of the youngest princes were notably missing, the infant being too young for such proceedings though she could only guess that Janniston might have quickly gotten bored with it. The king's guards were standing at the front of the dais, just off the sides of the aisle. And Cae noted there were four of them, not the usual two. Mambyn was on the Cygent side, thankfully. The prince's guards were on the back wall and by the side doors. She smiled as Mester Larch winked at her when he caught her eye.

The herald began the usual announcements of the beginning of the royal court, listing off what the proceedings were for: to make announcements, proclamations, give rewards and bequests and to hear grievances and issue any necessary judgements.

Cae closed her eyes briefly, trying to filter out the emotions of the crowd to concentrate on particular individuals. She felt Janem and Willam leaning into her from either side to bolster her. The king was angry and strangely calm about it, yet also slightly embarrassed. The queen was the very epitome of serenity. Balaran was naturally amused and feeling unusually vindictive. Valan was rigid and cold, trying his best not to react to Cae's nearness. She sent calming thoughts his way, trying to soothe him, though she understood why he might resist.

She was oddly surprised to find lord Mambyn somewhat blank. He was alert, yes, but only just. Flitting across the crowd, she could pick out pockets of smug anticipation amidst the general atmosphere of curiosity and hopeful expectation from the reward point of things. Finding Semelle in that mess was easy. She was a white-hot bundle of anger and frustration married to a firm conviction that everything was going to go her way. There was also a great deal of hatred towards the queen.

Cae opened her eyes, a little confused. It was clear she had missed something. Something about Kaladen. She felt a sudden tension in Valan and realized it had been about her. Then her name was called and she stepped to the carpet that marked the aisle, Ikembe three steps behind her. She made herself walk slowly to the foot of the steps, fully aware of the nearness of lord Mambyn, and sank into a curtsy until told to rise. The light laughter from the crowd behind her, told her that Tempest had also bowed. She stood when told to, and awaited the king.

"Lady Caelerys Maral," he began. "There is nothing I can do, say or grant you at this time that can make up for what you have suffered since I offered you my

hospitality and the security of my house. What you have done for my daughter alone warranted better compensation. But in the midst of your captivity, you managed to find and bring to light information that may, hopefully, right an injustice that has waited nearly nine hundred years to be addressed.” Here he turned to the assembly. “Records are still coming to light that lead us to the conclusion that everything House Levitau was accused of were in actuality perpetrated by its vassal House, Kaladen. They have played a long game, seeking nothing less than the very seat upon which I rest.” Cae felt surges of disbelief and anger. One pocket in particular was of interest to her. Tempest tugged a curl discreetly to keep her from losing her focus on the moment.

“As of this moment, all survivors of said house must present themselves before the royal court to offer evidence of innocence, if they have any. Personal properties will be judged at that time upon an individual basis. But they are no longer to be considered a lordly house. If there are any who can trace their lineage, by whatever means, to House Levitau, they are also to present themselves, first to their lords who are hereby required to see to it that they are brought forth with their proof, no matter how lowly they might be.”

When there was a lull, Cae curtsied to regain the king’s attention, looking up at him expectantly.

“Yes, young lady?” he asked, curious.

“Begging your pardon, Your Majesty. But, while I did discover other references, and found the writing within the journal that provided the confession of Kaladen guilt, I was not the one who found the diary itself.”

“And who would that be?”

“If it please Your Majesty, that would be Lady Cuttle, who saw to my needs whilst I was captive in her husband’s house and brought it to me to alleviate my boredom.”

He looked over the crowd. “Where is this woman?”

At the back of the hall, Lady Cuttle stepped to the carpet, flanked by Wellen. She approached when waved forward and curtsied beside Cae. The king eyed her. “I believe you have some business before this court yourself.”

Balaran bent and whispered in his father’s ear. The king looked up at Wellen. “And I with your companion.”

“I await Your Majesty’s pleasure,” she said firmly.

The king appeared to think, then waved Lady Cuttle aside and gestured for Wellen to stand forward. "I shall attend to you momentarily, Lady Cuttle. You, come forth and name yourself."

Cae and Salera drew off to the side of the carpet and Wellen strode forward and bowed. "I am Wellen, Your Majesty. Guardsman of Tombolo Drift formerly beholden to the late Lord Cuttle."

"Wellen is not a third estate name," the king commented.

"It is not, Your Majesty," he admitted. "My family descend from a subsequent of House Tarinus. We came to serve House Cuttle a generation back, following a marriage."

The king nodded as if this were significant. Cae got the feeling that it was, slightly. "I understand you were in charge of the guards who held Duke Maral's daughter captive."

He coloured, but bowed. "I was, Your Majesty."

"Why?"

He was brought up short by the abruptness of the question. "Because I was ordered to by my lord. We were not told we were in violation of any laws. Lord Cuttle's liege and cousin, lord Aldane Kaladen bade him hold his future bride captive against her recalcitrance."

"And this did not strike you as odd?" the king asked, his brows narrowed.

"Your Majesty, we were merely guards. It was our duty to do as asked. But we were told that she was fighting a justly arranged match and that what we were doing was her father's will." He seemed embarrassed suddenly. "Lord Cuttle had some very different ideas about the duties of his vassals."

The king nodded. "In all the time you guarded her, was she at any time compromised?"

Cae had seen this reaction before, and it was no less genuine now even though she knew he had been prepared for the question to be asked.

"Your Majesty," he said stiffly, his outrage at the implication plain to anyone, "I was set to guard a *bride*. Her purity was one of those things we were charged with protecting. Not even her bridegroom violated that."

The king nodded, pleased. "Thank you for your testimony, Wellen." He waved him back and gestured again to Lady Cuttle. "Now, my lady. What was it you wished to ask of me? It has been made clear to the crown by witnesses, which include the victim and my own sons, that you were innocent of your husband's evils."

She curtsied. “My husband had no legitimate heirs and claimed no subsequents.” Cae noticed she did not mention that it was certain there were numerous. She still held to her principals, hate her husband though she had, and refused to bring to light just how reprehensible a man he had been. “I request, formally, to be granted dominion over his properties and lands, to tend them as they should be, in obedience to the crown.”

“As his wife, that is your right,” the king said.

“Inheritance was in doubt, Your Majesty, with the House being in apparent, though unwitting, rebellion.”

“Your husband knew what he was doing,” the king said sagely.

She nodded, bobbing a scant curtesy as she did. “Admittedly. But he deceived the rest of us who supported his actions until we learned the truth. There is every likelihood the lands will be confiscated.”

The king sat back. “You are right. I do believe they will be.” He turned to address Duke Griff. “With all due respect, Avondyl, they are really too far from your own lands for you to control or to be of much use to you. I understand they were granted to your House as an extension of Kaladen which was placed under your keeping for Caelyrima only knows what reason, but I am going to have to reassess the whole Kaladen/Levitau situation over the next year.”

The duke bowed. “I find I must agree with you, Your Majesty. They have been a great drain upon my resources and I have been unable to tend them as I should. I will have all records and relevant papers prepared for delivery to whomever you grant them.”

The king nodded, turning to the Alvermian duke. “I am sorry to stick you with it, cousin, and on such a temporary basis. But as it lies within Alvermian lands, House Cuttle and all that pertains to it will fall to you for the time being.” The cousin nodded. “Lady Cuttle, I hereby grant you title and domain over your husband’s lands. You will, for now, answer directly to the duke until your state is fully settled and your final liege has been decided upon. If it is your desire, barring approval, you have permission to change the house name and standard, to erase any ill marks upon the house itself, seeing as the family is officially extinct at this point. We will await your decision.”

Both Salera and Wellen bowed deeply at this point, thanking the king, and heading back to their places in the crowd.

At the subtle signal from the queen, Cae melted back into the fold of her family.



The herald stepped forth again. “The crown calls forth Mester Larch.”

The prince’s guard strode forth and knelt.

The king rose and Valan handed him a sword. The king approached, stopping on the step above the floor. “Mester Larch. For fierce loyalty, intense cleverness and selfless attention to duty, I hereby raise thee to the position of knight, allowing you to choose a surname and a standard bestowable upon your heirs, and allow you to join the ranks of the houses minor under the Alvermian banner. Do you solemnly swear to continue to fulfil your duty with honour and grace, beholden to your just lord and loyal to the crown of this land?”

“I do.”

The king lifted the sword. “Let these be the last blows visited upon you without recourse.” The sword dropped to strike each pauldron with a loud ring. “Rise, Sir Larch, and return to your post.”

The man rose to the cheers and applause of the gathering and returned to his post by the door, beaming. Cae could feel his joy from where she stood and smiled.

The king returned the sword to his son and took his seat, gesturing to the herald to continue.

“The crown calls forth Lady Semelle Asparadane who has a complaint to bring before the crown.”

Lady Asparadane was resplendent in a gown of black velvet with copper threading. She all but floated to the dais and sank into a deep curtsy. Cae noticed the queen pointedly ignoring her. She rose when bade and the king smiled upon her. Cae felt something decidedly unpleasant buried in that smile.

Semelle was oblivious. She rose when bade and presented her case. “It has been a week since my daughter, Malyna, was arrested, Your Majesty, and I have heard nothing. Not the charges, nor where she is being kept. As Your Majesty has denied any knowledge of this, and the Captain of the City Watch has no record or knowledge of this, I can only assume that she was taken under pretence for some nefarious purpose.” She now raised her hand towards Cae. “As Your Majesty made war upon a previously loyal House to recover the duke’s daughter when she was kidnapped I cannot help but ask you do the same for a royal relative.”

“I would not bank too heavily upon that relation, Lady Asparadane,” said the queen. “After all, it is a spurious connection at best. One by marriage alone with no remaining blood to hold the connection.”

Her lips tightened, but Semelle curtsied to the queen. “As you say, Your Majesty. Still, my daughter remains missing.”

Cae saw the signal from the queen only because she was looking for it. One of the side doors opened and Malyna walked through it, head held high and looking like a proper young lady, in spite of her arm being in a sling. Her gown was not black or grey, but a rosy pink, though it had a high collar, and her hair was piled artfully on the top of her head. She did not have the look of a woman held prisoner.

Cae felt the Lady's emotions rage between happy and angry but surprised overall. She rushed to her daughter's side and embraced her, a gesture which Malyna tolerated. When Semelle finally let her go and held her at arm's length to look her over, Malyna gave her a half curtsy. "Good morning, mother," she said.

Semelle frowned. "Where have you been? They told me you'd been arrested."

"Please excuse me, mother, but I must make my obeisances."

Lady Asparadane had no choice but to allow her to pass. She glared at Fern, who followed Malyna into the room. Both women turned before the thrones and curtsied. A nod from the queen sent Fern to join her household. She slipped into the crowd to stand with Ikembe.

"Lady Malyna," said the king, as surprised as everyone else by her appearance, "your mother has been hounding me day and night for over a week to release you." Semelle flushed a little at the way he put that. "Where have you been?"

Malyna curtsied again. "Safe, Your Majesty. I made a request to the queen to send soldiers to collect me, as I feared for my life."

"Malyna, why didn't you tell me you'd been threatened?!" her mother exclaimed without thinking.

Her daughter ignored her.

"From whom came this threat?" asked the king.

Malyna did not hesitate. "From within my own House because of something I learned."

Cae put her hand to chest without thinking, feeling a sharp, stabbing pain of hate and anger from, she guessed, Semelle.

The king waved his hand and the four guards, including her brother, moved to stand around her in a precise square, a sword length from Malyna who stood in the centre. Semelle, still off to the side in front of the Cygent crowd, was horrified. The side door suddenly closed and she spun to see the Master of the Hunt standing there with a smile on his face and his arms crossed.

"My dear girl," the king said, comfortingly, "you are in no danger here. Please, if you have testimony to offer, give it."

“I am ashamed of my House, Your Majesty, because they have sought to better themselves at the expense of others. They have sought to harm their betters and those that outrank them. They seek nothing less than Kaladen sought, and indeed conspired with them to achieve it.”

“Malyna!” Semelle shouted. “What lies have you been told? I brought you up better than this!”

Malyna turned to her finally. “Yes, mother, you taught me to submit passively to the needs of the family and to never mind my own. You taught me that anything is acceptable so long as you do not get caught and the family profits.” She cast a glance up at her brother who stood impassively at attention. “You’ve used all of us. You taught my twin that he can do no wrong and that he is entitled to anything he wants, even if it is unholy affections from his own sister.”

Semelle gasped, “Did he...”

Malyna shook her head. “No, but it has been on his mind for some time. He is inappropriately possessive and I have heard rumours that we have been carnal, for all they are base lies. You sent Mambyn into the king’s service to try and exert your influence in King Ranlan’s House, still bitter that your sister’s marriage to him cost you the man you desired. And now that they are dead, you seek to unseat the rightful queen and take her place.”

Semelle started forward, angry and ready to strike her daughter, but she was stopped by the two guards facing her, including her own son. Selgan and Galen Cygent stepped up behind her, ready to grab her if she should try anything. Instead, she turned to the thrones, drawing herself up to her fullest height. “I do not know who has been feeding her these base lies, Your Majesties. Her mind has been poisoned by whomever she has spent the last week with.”

“Your daughter came to me, Semelle,” said the queen calmly. “And the tales she told me were spoken with no prompting and before witnesses. So whomever told her these things dwelt under your own roof.”

Cae watched Semelle’s throat working convulsively, her jaw tight as she bit back what she wished to say.

Undaunted, the king waved for Malyna to continue. “Tell me, child, how did she seek to ‘gain influence’ over the king?”

Malyna took a deep breath to calm herself and turned away from her mother, ignoring her. “I saw her with lady Poppy Robyne receiving a delivery. They spoke of two herbs. One, a pollen called dream dust, and the other a tincture of an herb called fidelity. Fidelity, I have learned, is far more insidious than its name, or its sis-

ter plant, veracity. It makes you highly prone to suggestion. Both items were expensive, though the pollen more so, as it came from a foreign country. Lady Poppy claimed she uses the tincture regularly on some of her clients to gain information and favours, though never anything so outrageous as to call attention to its use. On the afternoon in question, lady Poppy asked my mother how the dream dust had worked out for her. She said it ‘worked like a dream’, whisking her problem away in the night. She also said, ‘if the girl never wakes because of it, it would solve the problem far more completely’ and that she would just offer me in ‘the girl’s’ place. I did not realize until later of whom they were speaking.”

“Offer you to whom?” the king asked.

Malyna bowed her head in apology. “I do not know, Your Majesty. But I can only assume she meant Lord Kaladen if he was successful and your son if he were not.”

“What else did they speak of? What made you fear for your life?”

“When I heard them speaking of fidelity and what she was doing with it. She began by having my brother slip some into your nightly wine, Your Majesty, then casually comment on how my mother longed to see you again.” She gave a fearful glance up at Mambyn, but he did not react. “Then, once you agreed and she was slipped into your rooms, she fed you more and dropped hints with decreasing subtlety. Lady Poppy was giving her advice on the most effective ways of influencing someone who had been dosed with the drug. And yes, Your Majesty, lady Poppy knew to whom my mother was feeding it. They discussed dosage.”

“Did she say what she intended to influence me to do?” he asked coldly.

“At first, it was to put aside Lady Caelerys as a prospective bride for your sons and accept me instead. Then she began to get it into her head that she would make a more suitable queen than...” she hesitated, glancing at the queen.

Queen Sigrun gave her a gentle smile. “Go on, my dear. You will not offend me. They are not your words.”

She swallowed, nodding. “A more suitable queen than the scatter-brained lump of guano in a dress that currently sat beside the king. I do not know how she planned to do it, but my father was mentioned and not in a fond way.”

“Why you ungrateful, hateful child!” Semelle raged. The sound of steel sliding from leather could be heard in the room.

Malyna stood straighter. “She also spoke of the riot in the square the week after the princess’s wedding. It was all her idea. She planted her men in the crowd dressed as beggars to drop and hold up money and shout that some noble woman

was throwing alms down the street and would be coming that way to throw more. Others waited and watched with intent of killing the Lady Caelerys if they could, and to besmirch her character if they could not. If they could get the people against her, she would be made unsuitable as a future queen.” She paused to glare at her mother. “And when her own daughter was caught by the trap she had lain for another... she had the gall to blame me for getting hurt and my lady in waiting killed.”

“If you had come home when you were supposed to,” Semelle growled.

“If you had not sold one of my few friends to serve your ambitions,” she snapped back, “I would not have had the need to remain in church.”

Semelle waved her hand towards the back of the gallery where Lady Cuttle stood. “I did your friend a favour! She’s a lady in her own right now! Oh, wait, you weren’t here to see that. You were still curled up in whatever lap of luxury you’ve been in whilst I worried myself sick over you.”

“You were more worried about what I’d say!” she said. “About what I knew, because you did not think I had the strength to resist interrogation. Well, guess what, mother? I had the backbone to report your treason!”

Semelle pulled back, letting her mask fall back into place, this time of the wounded mother. She turned back to the thrones. “Your Majesties, I stand accused by my own daughter, for whom I have sacrificed a great deal, and all because she did not like the husbands I was choosing from. I humbly request, where is the proof? A weak child who will follow the strongest influence and has been, clearly, in the company of my enemies who have fed her all sorts of unladylike nonsense? It is not enough.”

Balaran stepped forward. “I stand witness to the treachery of Lady Semelle Asparadane.”

There were gasps and murmurs from the gathered. Semelle went white. The word of a prince, truth or lie, was nigh unassailable.

The king, surprised, waved his hand for Balaran to step forward. He glanced at his queen who did not react.

Balaran stood in front of the throne, half turned so that he partly faced his father and yet could still be clearly heard by the assembly. “Last night we suspected treachery. We had been warned of a plot by the lady to slip fidelity to all who sat at table with the royal family last night. A kitchen servant had been suborned to put fidelity in the drinks. She was thwarted by a better spy. That night, everyone who had been at that dinner were paid a visit by individuals who were bound to House Asparadane either by loyalty or by debt.

“My father was also paid a visit by the lady herself, secreted into my father’s chambers by her son, his ‘loyal’ guardsman. There she once again attempted to dose him with the drug, and then tried to use it to influence him. These attempts and words were witnessed by no less than four hidden observers.”

“You saw nothing!” she hissed.

“I saw more than I ever wanted to, madam,” he snarled. “Shall I repeat the words of ‘sweet nothings’ you spoke to my father whilst you were in the throes of your badly acted passion? Or what you said when he lay sleeping and you sought to take your leave?” The woman in question was as still and cold as a statue. “Or shall I just ask your son?” He then turned to the guards. “Lord Mambyn, speak now, before this court, what you have done to your king at your mother’s behest.”

Semelle gasped as he began to speak.

“She gave me the vial of fidelity and told me to slip it into his wine whenever I could, and to mention how much she missed him and wanted to see him again,” he said without emotion. “To tell him how clever she was and how beautiful still, more so than the queen. That she was younger and still fertile, and far more intelligent. That he should heed her words. I was to undermine anything the queen said, and once he agreed, to slip her into the king’s bedchamber and out again without anyone seeing her.”

Balaran smiled. “And what did she say to the king before she left him this morning?”

“That he was to pawn the Maral bitch off on some lesser house or even Galen Cygent if he deemed it more political, but that she was by no means to marry Prince Valan. That he was to view anything the queen said with suspicion as she was seeking to influence him with sorcery and make him little more than a puppet for her empty-headed whims. She told me in the passages as she left, that if this failed to stop the negotiations with Maral, she would have to arrange an accident for the youngest prince to buy her more time to work on the king. Perhaps find a way to frame the queen for the death.”

Balaran nodded, glanced back at his father. The king’s anger was clear upon his face. He had expected something untoward, but this was more heinous than he had imagined. “Father, I concur with everything he just said. And my three fellow witnesses will say also.”

The king glared at Mambyn. “Why is he telling me this so calmly? There is something wrong with him.”

Bal shrugged, “I might have over dosed him.”

Semelle latched onto that immediately. “They have dosed my son with fidelity and forced him to tell lies against me!”

Balaran laughed. “Oh, I only slipped him his own poison, madam. Tricked him into drinking what you had planned to give the king. Mambyn, tell your king exactly what I told you in the king’s chambers this morning.”

“Good morning, Mambyn. How are we feeling?” he recited. “Odd, Your Highness. Oh? How odd? Never mind. Stand on one foot.” Mambyn then demonstrated to the amusement of the crowd. “Put your foot down. Yes, Your Highness. You will fulfil your duties today as you are requested by your king. You will not react to the words of your mother or your sister. You will do as you are told. When you are asked what you have done, you will answer, truthfully and fully. Yes, Your Highness. Now go and attend to my father’s safety. Yes, Your Highness.”

“Has anyone else spoken to you since that exchange?” Balaran asked him.

“Only the Commander of the Guard, changing formation and placement of the guards for court, Your Highness.”

Bal turned back to the king. “Are you satisfied that I have not influenced what he was to say in anyway other than to ensure he answered with haste and veracity,” he said pointedly, casting a look at Semelle.

“I am more than satisfied. Mambyn, why would you turn against your sworn king in this way?” the king demanded.

“Because my mother asked me to, Your Majesty. She may be a woman, but she raised us to be devoted to the House and the ambition of one day becoming a Great House, or even see our House upon the throne.”

The king narrowed his eyes. “The night my brother died. Tell me.”

Beside her, Cae felt Willam’s muscles tighten. She reached over and took his hand, trying to lend him calm and support.

“He was raving. Claimed my aunt had been the paramour of Jynn Halbourne. That all her children were his. He slipped away from us. I gave chase. I found Lord Willam trying to batter down the door to the nursery, heard the screams of the children and the nursemaids. He told me to stop the king and save the others. When I found him, he had stabbed lady Caena and the queen. Prince Naeden had tried to stop him, only to have his throat ripped out. The king had ripped off half his skin and there were scales beneath. The crown seemed almost embedded in his flesh. His hands were larger than they should have been and tipped with long black talons. He turned on me. I had no choice but to kill him.”

“Had she been unfaithful?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

The king leaned back, waved his hand in dismissal. “I have heard enough. Lady Semelle Asparadane, you and your son are hereby convicted of treason. You shall be imprisoned in the dungeons below the castle and your family given time to say their farewells. You will be taken from there and executed at sunrise, the day after tomorrow. Your House and vassals will be interrogated and investigated to ascertain their part in your crimes, and what will become of what remains will be determined at that time.”

Before the order could be given to seize her, she covered her face and seemed to shrivel up. The two Cygent brothers made to grab her, but only caught air and each other. There was the sound of metal hitting the floor and then Galen cried out, falling to the ground clutching his leg. In the confusion, Selgan nearly fell when he stepped on a gold chain lying on the floor where Lady Asparadane had been.

Lili rushed to Galen’s side looking at his leg. “SERPENT!” she cried and began working to save her brother’s life.

The crowd began to panic, looking about for the snake and moving back, as most people had not seen what happened. Cae, being on the outskirts of her family, saw the black asp with copper markings slithering towards Malyna intent on murder. She yelled her name, and reached for her.

Ikembe pulled Cae back and stepped in front of her, slipping between the guards before they could act and pushed Malyna into the group of Maral who drew her in and surrounded her with drawn steel. The guards, now alerted to the danger, backed them up, all but Mambyn who moved to stand before the throne.

Hissing, Semelle turned and raced for the unguarded queen.

Irritated by the sudden press of people, Tempest launched herself into the air. “Jelma, na reyn!” Cae cried, unable to do anything except fall over her father’s chair if she was not careful. Syera had been pressed into their group along with the duchess and the other Griff wife present, and the men had joined the protective barricade.

Cae could not see what was going on but could hear Tempest’s hunting cry and the sounds of a struggle. She was terrified that Tempest would get bitten, terrified she would get bitten, that she would get trampled, that she would... She felt arms grab her from behind and pull her down, found herself on her father’s lap being soothed and comforted. She latched onto those emotions, trying to drown out the fear of the room and grab hold of the anger and ...surprise.



Her head came up. Tempest was screaming in anger and shock, cussing up a storm, and there were murmurs of confusion and astonishment. She got up, trying to move past the wall of armed men hemming her in with the women. None of them would move. Finally, she punched Will in the back. "Move, you great, horned lummo!"

He flinched, glanced back and thought it better to move.

Cae moved past the guards to the steps of the dais where Semelle lay sprawled, the throat of her gown as shredded as the flesh beneath. Tempest stood on the step above her, wings half open, beak, talons and belly bloody, fuming at the body. Cae tried to soothe her, while trying not to laugh. "Sensen. I know, ketava, I know. How dare that snake be a person?"

She heard Balaran choke on a laugh and looked up, saw him moving to his mother with his hand over his mouth. It enabled her to get a better grip on her own sudden, inappropriate mirth. She held out her hand towards the bird only to be stopped by Master Olen.

"Please allow me, my lady," he said. "It would be a great shame to bloody such a gown."

She relented, gesturing for Tempest to go with him. Reluctantly, she stepped up onto the exposed arm, seemed surprised to realize that it was scaled. Cae was a little startled herself. Master Olen smiled at her and began to draw the bird away. "I will clean her up and bring her back to you."

"Thank you."

He shrugged. "I've been wanting to work with her again. She has excellent form."

He paused in front of the thrones, as if suddenly remembering where he was and with whom, and bowed to his brother and the queen. Tempest followed suit, performing a pretty bow even if it was covered in blood. With an unrepentant laugh, the Master of the Hunt left the throne room with the bird.

Cae suddenly realized where she was and turned to curtsy herself, backing away from the body. She glanced over to where Malyna stood with her family, warring with her emotions, felt sorrow and regret and hatred and gladness and fear. Rosemary and Fern were comforting her. Mambyn remained standing in front of the king, waiting for orders to stand down.

It seemed the king was just noticing the odd behaviour of his guard as well and looked over at his second son. "How long is he going to be like this?"

He scratched his head beneath his circlet for a moment, thinking. “Based on what I told him to do whilst the drug was in full effect? Until the end of the day?”

The king nodded. “Lord Mambyn,” he said.

The man turned and bowed. “Yes, Your Majesty?”

The king pointed to one of the guards at the foot of the dais and two others from the walls of the throne room, calling them over. “Go with these men to the dungeons and give them all your weapons and your armour. Then allow them to lock you in a cell.”

“At once, Your Majesty.” Mambyn turned to the nearest one and handed over his sword, then followed the rather stunned guards out.

The king then turned to the cluster on the other side of the aisle. A stretcher had been brought and a Physician was doing something to the leg with Liliwyn’s help. “Will the boy live?” he asked.

The Physician looked up. “It is too soon to tell for certain, but the Mother willing, yes. If She grant he is strong enough to survive the night, he will live. With your permission, I would like to move him now.”

The king called for a steward, ordered him to find a suitable room. As the family gathered to follow their son, the king called to the duke. “Shall I wait?”

Duke Cygent looked to his daughter who shook her head, still holding Galen’s hand. “It will not be necessary, Your Majesty. We know what is to be said and shall leave a page to relay any pertinent news. Thank you for the consideration. Your Majesties,” he said, bowing again and following his family out the side door.

This exchange caused a great deal of murmuring in the room and Cae took the chance to look over at Valan. He was once more behind his father’s throne watching the crowd with a tight jaw. She knew he was fighting the scales beneath, trying to ease it back without suffering post-battle fatigue, which Cae knew could be worse when there had been no physical struggle. He caught her eye and gave her the briefest nod. He seemed to calm a little more after that.

The herald called the gathering back to order as servants came in with an oiled cloth and gathered up the body.

The king raised his voice to be heard even over the faint mumbles that still rippled across the room. “From this day forth, the drug known as fidelity and the plant from which it is derived is hereby outlawed. Possession and use of the drug, especially with the intent to gain control of another individual will be punishable by imprisonment. Once the law is drawn up and the penalties outlined, heralds will an-

nounce it throughout the city.” He glared out across the crowd. “You have until then to safely dispose of any in your possession.”

Cae glanced back through the lower nobles, wondering if lady Robyne was there and how she felt about being called out in open court, likely where a great deal of her best and most victimized customers came from.

The king stood. “I am your king. For better or for worse. It was a tragedy that brought me here, against both desire and expectation; but I know my duty, and that is to all of you, not just certain select people, from the first estate to the last and all those trapped outside. I will answer to no god, nor allow that god to interfere with the laws of this land,” he boomed, glaring pointedly at the Pontifex and his crowd towards the middle of the assembly. “There will be no persecution of shifts in this kingdom whilst my line rules. And if any of you start to get the idea you can eliminate that... remember both my son, your future king, and my own subsequent brother are dragons.”

Most eyes fell on Valan at that, and even to Cae he seemed to loom larger as he grinned pointedly at the crowd. He did not shift, though.

“If a shift is suspected, bring them to the attention of the authorities which I will soon establish, that they might find the help they’ll need understanding what is happening to them. If one spontaneously appears and seems dangerous, get out of their way and summon the guard who will have new orders on how to deal with matters. They are likely as terrified as you are and any animal is dangerous when cornered. Defend yourself if you have to, but there will be no unnecessary butchery and such cases will be treated as murder. And if I learn that any of my lords are letting such things skate without full and fair investigations... they will answer to me.”

There was a low grade murmuring at that.

“There are going to be a lot of changes because of the re-emergence of shifts and I am endowing research into the subject, which will be spearheaded by my son Balaran. If any House holds texts or information that might pertain to the subject, I humbly request that copies...”

Balaran piped up. “The originals, father.”

He paused, looked up, confused. “What?”

“Remember, we spoke of the importance of this?”

“Oh, right. The originals are requested to be presented for examination. Anything relevant will be copied for our records and returned. If there are too many in your possession, a researcher can be sent to you. It is very important that information such as this be both spread out as much as possible and gathered in one con-

venient location. Access to the Great Library will be granted by application through the Master Librarian.

“Most of you with castles and other fortifications might want to pay particular attention to that last bit. Shifts were once very prevalent in this world, and defensive strategies took that into account. Take a lesson from Tombolo Drift and start looking for old references to those defences. Because now you will have to defend yourselves from both the skies, the waters and smaller creatures. Perhaps in all of this we may discover some way of telling if an animal is actually a person or merely an animal.

“Now,” he said, sitting back down. “I had a few, more pleasant announcements to make before all of this... insanity. For the safety and security of the crown and this realm, the line of succession must itself be secure. And to that end, my sons must marry. And so, we get to that matter that many of you have been both eagerly awaiting and dreading. As the family in question have already been informed and are not currently present due to this travesty,” he said, waving a hand at the bloody steps, “I will announce it for the sake of the rest of you, with their permission. My son Balaran is hereby betrothed to the Lady Liliwyn Cygent. Contracts to be signed as soon as ...well, it is prudent.

“It is customary to grant Dallen Hall in the Northern Warren of Alvermian territories to the second son upon his marriage, and confer the dukedom there, but my son has graciously agreed to leave that to his younger brother Janniston upon his marriage. Balaran will be remaining within the Citadel to serve as his brother’s right hand. The Administrative Key will answer to him.”

There was a mixed reaction to this, mostly of surprise and confusion, though Cae felt resignation from the Alvermian duke. She guessed he had known his stint as duke was limited.

The king turned to him. “Cousin, I ask that you move your family to this residence and take temporary possession, managing these currently vacant lands in his name. In two years, when he reaches the age of ten, I will ask that you foster him and teach him those things that he will need to know to administer his lands properly.”

The duke bowed. “Of course, cousin. With pride and pleasure.”

The king smiled. “And once he takes the dukedom for himself, I will have lands suitable for you and your family at that time. I will not leave you and your sons with a questionable future. We will speak on this later.”

The duke bowed again, this time with more gratitude and sincerity. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

The king turned back, clapping his hands and grinning. “Now, for the settlement of my eldest and heir. I know there has been a great deal of controversy in the matter, but as we have all seen, this was manufactured by the hands of enemies of the crown and kingdom. I have tested this maiden in all ways I could devise for her suitability to be your next queen. Your current queen,” he reached over and took her hand, bringing it to his lips and kissing it. “Forgive me for doubting you, my love,” he said softly. She merely smiled at him. “Has long made her choice known and given many sound reasons to support it. That I ever questioned them speaks to vile influences we will not speak of again. I, myself, was agreeable in the beginning, though I did not understand her insistence. She has been tested by the Mother herself and survived every trial with grace and concern for others. She has been a friend of...”

Sigrun smiled at him, leaning over. “Stop. You are embarrassing the girl,” she admonished softly.

“Oh,” he glanced at Cae, flushed a little, seeing her uncomfortable expression and full blush, “right. Sorry, dear,” though who he was saying that to, no one could tell.

Before his father could announce her name, Valan lost what little patience had remained and left the dais to fetch her. He drew her to him and led her back to his place beside the throne without taking his eyes from her.

The crowd exclaimed its approval, with only small pockets of disappointment and disapproval.

“Well,... I suppose everyone suspected anyway,” the king said sullenly. “The contract between House Alvermian and House Maral for the marriage between Crown Prince Valan and Lady Caelerys has been drawn up. The wedding will be...” he drew a blank and looked to his wife.

She closed her eyes a moment and thought. “Three days after the next Fourth Day,” she said.

The assembly reacted in surprise and shock at such a short amount of time to prepare.

Even Cae gasped slightly. “Less than a week? Can it even be done?”

The queen smiled knowingly. “There will be a few hitches, but... that is the right day. Besides, any wedding without at least one hitch is inauspicious. Nothing is perfect.”

The king chuckled at that, perhaps remembering his own wedding. Sigrun gave him a sidelong glance that confirmed Cae's suspicion.

Valan held Cae closer. "I would think we've had enough hitches so far."

Cae shrugged, "Mere hiccoughs."

She felt his playful growl and laughed quietly.

"Now," the king said, once the crowd began to quiet. "Since I have all of you here, is there any other business with the crown before the court?"

Apparently there was, as the herald stepped up and began calling off people on his list. As they were called, they approached the dais and bowed, and very few failed to cast a glance at the blood still staining the steps.

Cae only half listened as noble after noble approached with their concerns or requests or complaints, followed by another hour of those who were not on the docket and/or were simply of the second estate. She watched her family with Malyna, Rosemary fussing over her like the lost lamb she was. Her brothers were more wary of her because of her roots and associations, and truthfully, she had not made friends among them. Malyna seemed uncertain how to take where she was standing and how she was being treated. It was vastly at odds with her upbringing. As court dragged on, she saw Janem trying to encourage her to do something.

Finally, as the last petitioner bowed and left the aisle, the herald called for anyone else, and was about to call an end to things, when Malyna stepped forward. Cae could see her trembling from here as she sank into a curtsy.

"Yes, lady Malyna?" the king asked, a little surprised.

Malyna could not bring herself to look up fully, settled for staring at a point a little above the king's shoes. "I... I understand that the matter of my House and its... mastery? is still in question. But... whichever of my kin, be it a cousin or my twin brother, who take it over, I fear that I shall not be treated kindly as authorship of Asparadane's downfall."

She was silent for so long, the queen spoke up. "Are you asking to be a ward of the court? Or to be fostered elsewhere?" she asked gently.

Malyna looked up at the queen, unshed tears in her eyes. "I ...I do not know, Your Majesty. I have never been allowed to make decisions for myself, but I fear remaining in my family's control. I am willing to abide by Your Majesties' decision, even if it were to mean I return to the room wherein I have spent the last week of your gracious hospitality."

The queen scoffed. "As if I would consign you back to that dingy little tower room!"

Prompted by Rosemary, Caelerys's father had his chair rolled forward, bowed. "If Your Majesties will allow, I am willing to foster her into my House and see to it that she is sufficiently educated, cared for and see to her marriage settlement."

The king shook his head. "That last I will not hear of. You may foster her if the maid is willing. But as to her settlement... we can both work towards her arrangement, but the crown will provide her dower. After all, her testimony has saved this kingdom a great deal of pain and suffering."

Malyna blushed furiously, sank again to the floor. "I... I accept the guardianship of House Maral, Your Majesty. I can only hope I do not disappoint. I am hardly worth all the fuss..."

"Nonsense, child," Rosemary snapped to everyone's surprise. "But don't worry, this House grows strong women. When you leave it, you will know you are worth something."

"Here here!" shouted Vyncet, even as Janem drew his mother in for a hug, beaming like a madman.

Rosemary covered her mouth in shock, suddenly realising what she had said and where. There were titters of laughter rippling through the crowd and even the queen covered her smile with a hand.

The king grinned. "Well, that's settled. Herald!" he said with a wave of his hand.

The herald stepped forward and made the closing announcements, dismissing the assembly.

As people began to file out, the king leaned back on the throne, letting his head fall back against the cushion. "Thank the Mother that's all over with!" He glanced over at Valan. "Happy now?"

Valan's grin was almost feral. "Intensely."

The king rolled his head to look at Caelerys. "And that little thing you threatened, offered, whatever, during the negotiations?"

Cae remembered the mention of contraceptives. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"One silver month, no more."

Cae thought about it, shook her head. "Two minimum. The quickening takes three gold or so. If I quicken within three months of the ...questionable event, there will be whispers. This makes sure to silence that."

He sighed and nodded. "Agreed, but gold, not silver. You will have to forgive any reservations and hesitations on my part for a while," he said, eyeing her. "I cannot be sure which of my feelings and doubts are planted thoughts."

“I will take that in to consideration, Your Majesty,” she smiled, bobbing a curtsey.

Balaran appeared over his brother's shoulder between them. “Meanwhile,” he grinned, “get your fill of being called merely ‘Lady Caelerys.’”

She looked at him, frowning. “What? Why?”

Valan answered. “Because in less than a week from now you shall go from being ‘my lady’ to ‘my princess.’” The look on his face and the tone of his words told her that he meant them possessively and not merely formally.

She flushed, realizing what that meant. She groaned. “Can I leave now?”

The brothers laughed at her.

The queen rose and walked over, ignoring the blood mere feet away. She paused to kiss Cae's cheeks in congratulations. “I am so pleased, my dear. We'll talk in the morning. Right now you need to go see the Master of the Hunt. He would like to speak with you.”

At that, she turned and descended to where the Maral contingent stood waiting, talking amongst themselves. They bowed as she approached, which she acknowledged, then drew Rosemary aside and led her off. Cae's brothers looked from one to another and then up at their sister who could only shrug in response.

Cae reached up to kiss Valan's cheek before slipping off to find Master Olen with Ikembe at her heel. He wanted to stop her and take more, but his brother tugged at him, reminding him of some earlier plans. He sighed and nodded, though he watched her as she left.

Caelerys found Master Olen near the fountain in the gardens. Tempest was sitting on the nostrils of the stone dragon holding first one foot then the other in the spray. Master Olen was not alone. There was a young man with him. He was thick of build and only a little taller than Cae. He had lots of dark curly hair that had been unevenly chopped some time ago, and the shadow of hair on his chin. His eyes were a warm brown and his face very round and plump. He smiled easily and actually blushed when Cae approached them.

“Pretty bird won't come down, lady,” he grinned, pointing up at Tempest.

Master Olen grinned. “Perhaps the pretty lady will ask the pretty bird to come down?”

“Thicket would like that!” he grinned. He bowed, miming removing his hat and crushing it. “Will pretty lady ask?”

Cae smiled. “Is she clean?” she asked, shading her eyes to look up at her.

Master Olen chuckled. “Well past. Were she a child she'd be a prune.”



Cae laughed softly. "Jelma! Tyet valea. Kyen!"

Tempest looked down, gave an excited shrill, shook herself dry and dropped from the statue, landing neatly on the shoulder pad. She turned around and began rubbing her head against Cae's jaw. Cae laughed and the man-boy clapped happily.

Master Olen called his attention sharply. "Thicket, we have talked about that. You startle the birds."

He stopped immediately. "Thick sorry," he mumbled, hunching his shoulders and hanging his head.

Master Olen set his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Your name is Thicket, not Thick. I don't care what they called you at home. And don't be sorry: remember. It's important. One of many things you'll have to remember before I can let you help with the birds."

Thicket nodded. "Yes, Master O. Remember," he said solemnly, rapping his head with his knuckles.

Master Olen sighed and pulled a sweet roll out of his pouch and handed it to the boy. "Here, go sit on the bench there and eat this. Look at the pretty plants. Make sure you keep me in sight. You understand?"

He reached out to take the bun almost reverently. "Thick... Thicket," he corrected slowly, "understands. Thank you, Master O." And he gleefully rushed off with his prize as if afraid it might be taken from him.

"Eat it slowly!" Olen called after him.

Cae just smiled as she watched the exchange, scratching the demanding bird. "New apprentice?"

He glared at her. "No thanks to you," he growled, but light-heartedly.

She grinned, "No thanks to Bear. Well, I don't know which Bear, but it was a little one."

He sighed, sitting on the edge of the fountain where he could watch the boy and gesturing for her to join him. "He will be the exception, please. I do not need my cottage filled with budding shifts."

She shrugged. "That you'll need to take up with the spirits or your brother. I came to you because I could not rescue him."

He nodded. "He needed it. Because he is a simpleton they treated him badly and used him for slave labour. But because they abused him, he was a risk, especially if he is a bear."

"I saw him sleeping with children," she nodded. "So, is he as slow as he thinks he is?"

“Remains to be seen. I still have to learn him before I can teach him. I just hope I have the patience.”

She smiled, leaning her shoulder against his and nudging as she would have with her brothers. “You do. You work with animals. He’s just a different type. He’ll respond just the same.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and watched the boy watching an insect crawling along a leaf. “So you shall soon be my niece, I understand.”

She blushed. “And one day I will be allowed to hunt with you. Soon, I am hoping. Between Ikembe and the capture or suppression of those that meant me harm, the danger to me should not be so high. And yes, I am willing to go as one of your hunters. It’s not like I haven’t done it before.”

He grinned. “So I’ve heard. Had the proprietress of the Mist’s End hitting on you,” he chuckled.

Her blush deepened. “Only a little.”

“You are good for my nephew, for all the trouble you’ve been the cause of, and for that alone: welcome to the family.”

“It was not my intention to...” she began.

He nudged her back. “You’ve done a lot of good, too, with all this trouble you’ve caused. Mother only knows how us shifts would have been received had the circumstances been different, and it was coming.”

Cae blushed.

Master Olen rose, stretching. “Well, I should get him out of here and start working with him. He should be easy to train compared to some of those self-certain louts I had to school before fetching you,” he chuckled. He reached over and gave Tempest a scratch, “And I would very much like you to pay me a visit,” he told the bird. “With or without your lady. I may or may not have located a gauvan male you might be interested in.”

“Really?” Cae asked, surprised. “I shall have to make sure she does.”

“Thank you,” he said with a half bow. He nodded to Ikembe before fetching Thicket and leading him away.

“He is most unusual for a man of the royal line,” Ikembe commented.

Cae shrugged. “I wouldn’t say that. Some subsequents have been known to resent their place at the bottom of succession lines, especially if they are the eldest and expect more than others feel is their due. But sometimes they accept the fact that they’ll never inherit titles and, after seeing what it requires, prefer a life they

choose for themselves. Though considering my own subsequent, my perceptions may be skewed.”

Caelerys stood and wandered into the gardens. It was not as cold a day as it had been, but neither was it unseasonably warm. Though after a week in that cold tower, temperatures that once would have chilled her felt almost warm.

She had not gone far when she heard Malyna’s voice raised in protest and anger. The voice she was arguing with was very similar to her own, only a note or two deeper and certainly more vicious. She looked around, was confounded to discover she was in the small maze and that the voices were on the other side of the tall hedge.

“Jelma, which way?” she cried, sending the bird up.

Tempest went up and over, shrieking as she tried to break up whatever was going on. Cae heard the sound of steel being drawn and called her back. Reluctantly, Tempest obeyed and Cae began running, praying they were headed in the right direction. The bird flew over head, following. When they hit a juncture and Cae was going to turn down the path that felt like it would go straight to Malyna, Ikembe pulled her forward. They went another eight yards before taking a right at the next fork. A few twists and turns later and they could see Malyna trying to get away from her twin brother.

Tempest went higher in the air and Ikembe moved in front of Cae.

“Leave her alone, Malyn,” Cae ordered. “She is no longer your concern.”

He turned, keeping his sister behind him and not letting go of his hold on her cloak. He still had his small sword in his hand. “That’s lord Malyn to you, woman.”

Cae gave him a withering look. “Considering that I outrank you, no, it isn’t. You don’t deserve the honorific at the moment.”

“No woman outranks me!” he spat.

“Malyn!” his sister pleaded, tugging at her cloak.

“Even your queen?” Ikembe asked.

“Tell your black bitch to stay out of the business of her betters or I’ll teach her a lesson she’ll remember the rest of her life,” he growled.

Cae actually laughed. “I almost want to see you try. I do love watching her in action. I might even learn something new. Now be a good boy and let your sister go before you accidentally hurt her further.”

He gave her a shake which made her whimper. “I’ll do as I like with my own sister. She betrayed her House and her family and she deserves what she is going to get.”

“Your House and family betrayed the kingdom,” Cae said coldly. “Betrayed your rightful king.”

“Rightful king?” he squeaked.

Cae heard the clatter of hooves coming from behind the twins and took a half step forward, raised her voice to cover the sound. “Yes, your rightful king, you spoiled brat! Your mother did you no service feeding you Eldest lies. You think just because you are male you have the right to anything you desire and you are wrong.”

Malyna glanced back, seeing the stag coming towards them and tried to move out of the way.

“The rights of man are divinely granted!” Malyn raged. “All the Mother ever did was whelp and abandon her offspring!”

“She is all around you and in everything, if you just pay attention,” Cae retorted. “You certainly never looked at your own mother that way. Never treated her as lesser because she was female.”

“My mother...” he began, all but frothing at the mouth. He was cut off by a set of antlers slipping around his body and ramming him against the hedge, pinning him. In shock, he let the cloak slip from his fingers and Malyna nearly fell into Janem’s arms as he finally caught up. Vyncet was not far behind.

Ikembe moved swiftly and seized Malyn’s wrist with two fingers, made him drop the sword with a yelp.

Suddenly there was a dragon’s head looking over the hedge, his breath steaming. Tempest landed on one of his horns chirping proudly.

Cae looked up at her. “I think you overdid it, pet.” She realized something then and shifted her glance to Valan’s whirling blue eyes. “Lili’s going to scale you if you’ve ruined the hedge behind you.”

He looked over his shoulder worriedly at that, shifting his body. Looking back down at the group and realizing things were mostly handled, he reached one claw over, setting it on the ground behind Cae and flowed forward, shifting almost smoothly back to man with a rolling tumble and rose to his feet on their side of the wall.

“That’s cheating,” Cae quipped. Tempest, having lost her perch, landed on her shoulder.

Bal’s voice came from the other side. “You’re lucky he didn’t burn the damned thing down.”

Valan stood, brushing his clothes off. He then stepped forward, putting her behind him as he came to stand where he could see everything. “Now would someone like to explain?”

“We heard Malyna arguing with someone, then struggling,” Cae said.

Malyna stepped forward and curtsied. “My brother lured me off, wanting to talk. Then he tried to get me to come home with him. He was sweet at first, sharing misery. Then he became his usual cruel self when I refused. Accused me of turning my back on faith and family and began hurting me.”

“Apparently kidnapping runs in the family,” Bal quipped from the other side of the hedge.

“Will you go find a way around,” Valan growled.

“I was hoping for a shortcut to appear. But I suppose I should go find some guards.”

“That might be a good idea,” Cae sighed. “Though you may wish to hurry. The boy is not known for keeping a civil tongue and my brother has him in his antlers.”

“Right!” The sound of his boots hurrying away reached them.

All attention returned to Malyn who was looking, wild-eyed, from one to the other of them.

“He’s not a shift, is he?” Vyncet asked, suddenly worried.

Cae leaned against Will’s side and gave the prisoner a very pointed look. “If he is, he is likely the same as his mother. And if not careful, will go the same way. Tempest has a very swift and instinctual reaction to snakes.”

He swallowed and seemed to be trying to become one with the hedge.

Cae crossed to Malyna and her other brothers. “Are you all right?” she asked.

She nodded. “My arm hurts though. He jerked it more than once,” she said, tenderly cradling the broken limb.

Cae looked up at Vyncet. “Might want to get a Physician to look it over. Where did you leave father?”

“Over by these trellis vines,” he answered.

She sighed. “The wisteria. Take her back to him and let him know what’s going on, then get her to the Physician. She really doesn’t need to be here for this.”

He nodded and led her gently back the way he had come.

Cae turned to stand with Janem, let him drape an arm around her shoulders. “You all didn’t need to come running.”

He chuckled. “When that bird starts shrilling like that, there’s trouble. And where there’s trouble, there’s Caelerys.”

She elbowed him, which only made him laugh.

They watched as Will lifted a hoof, placing it upon Malyn's chest as he slowly shifted. Malyn remained pinned against the hedge, but now it was by a large, callused fist rather than a cage of horn. Willam remained pressed close to him, his face inches away as he lifted the young man off the ground.

"Your sister has been placed under the accounting of my House. That means that any thing done to her falls to my honour to answer," he growled.

Malyn swallowed, suddenly a little boy lost in the face of such a large and angry lord, who, just a breath ago, had been a large and angry stag. Cae reminded herself that he was only sixteen, and then noticed that she did not feel the terror the boy was showing.

She walked closer. Jan did not try to stop her. She stopped at Will's elbow, looking up into the face beneath the shock of white-blond hair. What flashed in his brown eyes was at odds with the expression of his face. "You would do well to do away with these childish fits," she warned. "They do not become you, nor do they your House any service. These tantrums and shows of false fear might have fooled your mother, but they will not fool me. There are certain lessons I am most certain your mother taught you that you would do well to heed, particularly those that pertain to politics."

"Sorceress!" he hissed, tried kicking at her.

Will's hand released the cloth of his tunic and caught him by the throat as he slipped down.

Valan's voice raised just enough, the tone tight and guarded. "Best you remember to whom you speak, child, lest I forget you are a child and call you out for insulting your future queen."

"I am not a child," he choked, struggling in Will's grasp.

"If your twin is not old enough to marry, you are not old enough to be considered a man," Will snarled. He felt his hands growing harder and less sensitive and tried to draw himself back.

Cae sensed what was happening and set her hand on her brother, trying to soothe him as she did Valan.

"Malyn," Cae said quietly. "You might wish to seek out some of the former Lord Cuttle's men and ask them what happened to Aldane Kaladen when he tangled with me. You will not find me a woman as easily bullied as your sister."

At that point, Balaran arrived with a trio of guards who rescued Malyn from Will's grip and lead him away. Ikembe handed the boy's small sword to the guard

and returned to her own post. Valan pulled Cae close to him. "I think a few days in the dungeons might cool his head," he said. "I will speak with father."

"Might want to consider asking for a week or more," Bal commented. "By that point you'll be married and he won't be able to cause trouble."

Willam growled. "By that point, I'll likely be out of the city and returning to the Reach with my family and not likely to wring his scaleless neck."

Valan glared at him, about to give some retort, but Cae put up her hand. "Enough, both of you. You both want a piece of him. I get it. What you need to not forget, is that if it is over me, I get my piece first."

Janem laughed at that, causing them to look over their shoulders at him. Thinking about it made them laugh too, though their mirth was not long lived.

"I should go check up on Liliwyn," Cae said.

Valan sighed, "I need to speak to father about this." He looked possessively down at her. "I had been hoping to get you alone for a walk."

She kissed him tenderly. "There will be time enough for long walks, my prince."

She turned and walked back down the path following the guards with Ikembe at her side and Tempest on her shoulder.

Behind her, she heard Will talking to Janem. "I think I may need to order one of those moonsilver rings you've been making, brother. I almost lost it there."

"Good thing I have some stock on hand. They've been very popular. Though whether or not I have it in your size is the question."



The next morning Cae was surprised by a visit from Vyncet with Malyna in tow. She had just finished her breakfast when they arrived. When she offered them something, they both refused politely. Vyncet chuckled. “You know how Fennel feeds people.”

Malyna looked a little sheepish. “I ...I can’t say I’ve ever eaten as well except at the king’s table,” she said quietly.

“Are you all right?” Cae asked, finishing her tea and nodding for Sorrel to take everything away. “I mean really?”

Malyna shrugged. “I suppose. Well, ...as all right as can be expected, with my mother killed in front of me after trying to kill me, nearly murdering the queen, and possibly killing a duke’s son... and then one brother arrested for treason and the other... for stupidity, I suppose.” She sighed, “I guess I’m not as all right as I would like to be.”

Cae covered her hand with hers and gave it a squeeze. “You’ll get there. It is to be expected. No one will think less of you for feeling grief for your family.”

“That’s just the problem,” she sobbed. “I don’t. I feel grief for myself, a little, for what they were supposed to be and weren’t, what they put me through, how little I meant to them. But I feel more shame and guilt at what they’ve done. I don’t



even want to go down to see Mambyn. And Malyn... I know all that he will do is rail at me, but I'm terrified of what Mambyn will say. I feel guilty about betraying them, but I know it was the right thing to do. Caelerys," she said, gripping her hand fiercely, "I didn't want to say it in open court, but... I think, no, I'm sure, King Ranlan's madness was my mother's fault. She always resented that her twin got the king and she was stuck with her cousin."

Vyncet frowned. "Queen Feranda was Semelle's twin?"

Malyna nodded. "Twins run in my family. There were always questions as to which was older, which is why my mother was so bitter. It would have been just like her to have done to King Ranlan what she did to King Rorlan. And if she set the idea in his head that she had been unfaithful..."

"Then his killing of them falls on her head," Vyncet finished.

Cae sat back, mildly wishing she had something a little stronger than tea at hand.

She shook her head, "That is water beneath the docks right now. She has paid the price for her treachery. It may yet be seen if your brother was a willing partner."

Malyna wiped at her eye. "No, he wasn't dosed or duped," she admitted. "She didn't have to. He all but worshipped her. I mean, Malyn practically worshipped her, but Mambyn... he had ideas of his own, and took great delight in them. He knew that if she was successful, he would be no less than a duke, and perhaps king if he was careful."

Cae sighed. "I was hoping for your sake that it wasn't so, but... we shall know soon enough what is going to happen."

Malyna nodded, twisting her kerchief in her hands. "All will be as the... Mother," she corrected, "wills."

Cae gave a half smile. "Not invoking the Eldest?"

She shrugged shyly. "Well, it... doesn't seem prudent at this moment. What with the church condemning shifts, and the future king and significant members of my new foster family being one. Also, I am learning some uncomfortable truths at the moment and I'm not entirely certain what I believe any more."

"Have you had the chance to speak with Salera?"

She nodded, showing the first signs of happiness she had seen on her in a long while. "Oh, yes. She came to the Hall after court. She is very happy now that she's a widow. We spent hours talking. I've been meaning to thank you, both for her and for myself."

"I don't know why," Cae began.

Malyna took her hand in both of hers, looked deep into Cae's eyes. "I do. There is no knowing what would have become of me if you had not... done what you did in there. And I really must thank you for the use of your handmaiden. I like Fern, and she was ...good to me."

"She merely repaid what Salera did for me," Cae insisted.

"But... after everything she said and we said... about you. The cruel things we believed true..." she blushed. "I know it was all my mother, trying to use me to manipulate you out of my way, but... even knowing that, knowing I said unkindness shames me."

Cae smiled tightly. "I think she kept you deliberately naïve. Filling your head with what she needed to keep you complacent to her desires. I won't hear any more of it. Rosemary will take very good care of you, and I think she's already taken a liking to you." Vyncet nodded vigorously. "My father would not have made the offer if he did not see that we could do you some good."

"I hope so."

They were interrupted by a messenger from the queen, calling Cae to her chambers. Caelerys rose, bent to kiss her brother. "If you two will excuse me? I would like to talk more later. Maybe in the gardens?"

The messenger stood in the doorway and fidgeted, clearing his throat. "Um, the lady is welcome to come with you, my lady," he said.

Cae looked up at him, took note of his discomfit and smiled. "I take it she said to bring the lady I was with and did not explain more?"

He nodded.

She turned back to Malyna. "Would you like to come with me?"

"To see the queen?" she gasped.

"Obviously she wants to see you as well," Cae cajoled. "Vynce, you can entertain yourself I trust?"

He stood, laughing. "Oh, I only came to bring her. Make sure she has an escort home when she is ready," he said. "An armed one."

Malyna blushed at the fuss, but followed Cae and Ikembe out of the room.

The queen was standing with Lady Caena and one of her other ladies when Cae was escorted in. Cae found this odd, but said nothing as she and her party curtsied. The queen was fairly glowing with excitement.

"You wished to see me, Your Majesty?" Cae asked as she rose.

The queen said nothing, merely stepping out of the way to reveal a gown upon a dressmaker's form. Malyna gasped. Caelerys was merely speechless. She approached the dress in shock.

It was a lush, midnight velvet, embroidered in silver bullion with artfully twist-ing vines of roses the barest hint of pink and lavender, which wound around vari-ous animals cavorting along the edges, all embellished tastefully with crystal beads and seed pearls. Cae thought she glimpsed birds on the sleeves, and a bat on edge of the tall, swan neck collar. Walking around the back, she saw a sinuous dragon offer-ing a single rose to a doe. The eyes of both were actual sapphires.

Coming around again to the front, she stroked the sleeves, which were slit from the shoulder to reveal the heavy, silver silk underdress. The overgown was like a coat, fastened from the hollow of her throat to her waist with sterling roses, and gently curved away in the front to display more of the silver silk, which seemed a little too long for the gown.

She turned back to the queen, tears gleaming in her eyes. She was unable to say anything, so hugged the woman instead. She heard Malyna's gasp of shock at the breach of etiquette, but neither she nor the queen minded. The queen's hugs were warm and soft and comforting, filled with not just a mother's love, but the Mother's love.

When she finally released the woman, she whispered both thank yous and apo-logies.

The queen laughed. "Actually, hugs are one of those things I miss being queen. I only really ever get to embrace my children. And maybe my ladies on special occa-sions."

Cae chuckled, choking it out as she regained control of her emotions. "Well, I promise you, from now on, you may hug me at will. Unlike sons, I will never grow too old for them."

"I shall hold you to that. And speaking of hugs," she turned to Malyna and drew her into an embrace without asking.

The girl was startled and stiff at first, uncertain of proprieties, but broke down quickly and was sobbing in the queen's arms in short order.

Caelerys politely turned away, further examining the gown with Ikembe.

It was a little while before the sound of tears faded and Lady Caena handed the girl a kerchief. To Cae's surprise, Malyna didn't break down into fits of apologies. She glanced over and saw the two of them sitting on a small divan, and the queen

was speaking quietly to her. Malyna nodded tearfully, wiping her face with the kerchief.

Finally, the queen rose, turning to Cae and gestured to her ladies. "Well, get in it. We must have it fitted."

Caelerys didn't have much choice but to let the women undress her, sliding the heavy silver under-gown over her head and cinching the back laces. There was a great deal of fluffing and adjusting in the back to make certain that the cloth fell artfully from beneath the laces. Cae looked down at the puddle of silver around her feet. She barely stopped herself from beginning her sentence with 'your majesty'. "It's far too long. I hate wasting any of this beautiful fabric."

The queen played with some of the length while something that sounded like furniture being moved went on behind Cae's back. "Oh, I assure you, not a single scrap will be wasted. Up you go," she directed, gathering up the cloth carefully and nodding for Ikembe to help her up onto the low hemming table that had been brought in. She let the fabric fall again as four seamstresses came in with pins.

Cae ran her hands down the front of the silk. It felt like water against her skin. "I cannot believe you found this fabric. It is just like the stuff my mother had."

The queen smiled. "It is more than just 'the stuff your mother had'. It is your mother's underdress."

Her breath caught in her throat. "How?" she choked.

"You may thank Rosemary for finding it. It was in some chest, stored away amongst your mother's things. I asked her to look for it just after we spoke of wedding dresses. Now, no weeping," she admonished. "You'll spot the silk. The overdress is my gift to you. Well, the crown's gift. Mine is a little more practical and personal."

"But..." she began, glancing over to where the blue velvet was being fastened back onto the dummy.

"You only told me no cloth-of-silver," the queen said simply, sitting back down beside Malyna and looking up at Ikembe who stood behind the couch. "What do you think?"

"I believe my lady will steal the breath of her admirers, and stun the minds of her enemies," she grinned.

The queen looked back at Caelerys, where they were carefully pinning the excess length up in a series of artful drapes. "I rather like that expression."

There was a knock at the door and Lady Caena went to admit whoever it was.

“Do make certain that it will not drag the ground at any point,” the queen instructed the seamstresses. “And perhaps line the back of the velvet at the bottom. The candle will be lit beneath the queen of the forest and we do not wish to ruin the fabric.” She tipped her head thoughtfully. “We will have to think about the shoes, though. Our queen is ...well, rough treading at the best of times.”

There was a silvery laugh from the doorway as Liliwyn and Syera were admitted. “Oh, that is quite easy, Your Majesty. Let her go barefoot.”

Malyna was horrified at the thought. Cae just glared playfully at her, unable to do anything but stand there and be pinned.

“I sense a story,” the queen intoned.

“It’s not a bad idea at all,” Lili continued, finding a seat for herself and Syera, nodding a greeting to Malyna. “I know Valan will go for it.”

Desperate to change the subject, Cae asked, “How is Galen?”

She did not need to see Liliwyn’s smile to know her brother would live. She had sensed no grief or worry when she came in. “Much better. And complaining about being an invalid. But you wouldn’t know anything about that,” she teased.

Cae smiled. “Not in the least.”

“He’ll be in bed a few days, and, barring any infection, he’ll be on his feet by the wedding.”

“I am glad to hear it,” said the queen. “We were worried. Now, the story?” the queen prompted again.

Liliwyn laughed, and told the whole story, artistically embellished, to Cae’s chagrin, Malyna’s horror and the queen and princess’s whole hearted amusement.

By the time the fitting was complete, Liliwyn had told everyone not only the shoe story, but of their little adventure sneaking Cae out of the city to safely visit her father. The queen had requested a dinner served and, when Cae was once again in her own clothing, they sat to eat.

Liliwyn was eager to divert the subject from the embarrassing stories she had just told and asked, “So, have you decided who’s walking and who’s standing?”

Caclerys looked to the queen at that. “Do I have a limit on how many attendants?”

She shook her head. “Not really, though the tradition is only two or three. Why?”

She sighed. “Well, I would like to ask Ikembe and Fern as well.”

Ikembe spoke up at this, blushing as she bowed. "My lady, we would be deeply honoured to do so, but... it would be highly inappropriate. This is a royal wedding. There are standards to be kept."

Cae turned and reached for Ikembe's hand. "But Fern is my oldest friend, even if she is only a handmaid, and you... I feel we have grown close and I owe you so much and how can you serve a proper itoma if you are not at my side?"

Ikembe laughed, kissing her lady's hand. "Oh, my lady, you are a rare and wonderful bird. I do not fear speaking for both myself and Fern in this. I offer a compromise. We will attend you the day and night before, and walk with you to the end of the aisle, or whatever serves for it. Your other, more noble chosen, shall see you the rest of the way and answer for your willingness."

Cae sighed, glanced back at the queen who had said nothing on the matter, though her eyes said she had known the offer would be refused. "I will accept whatever I can have."

She turned back to the table. "Syera, Liliwyn, you know I intend to ask you. But would you be offended if I asked Malyna to walk as well?"

They seemed surprised, and Syera a hair reluctant, but they shook their heads. Malyna was stunned. "Why...?"

Caelerys smiled. "Because what else will still wagging tongues but that I include you so completely?"

"What... what do I have to do?" she asked, blushing.

Liliwyn laughed. "Oh, nothing much. We just spend the night with her, make sure she's ready and dressed, do her hair... basically be ladies in waiting."

"Play handmaiden," Syera smirked.

"Before we go to sleep, we have to ask her if she's willing. Then, when we walk to where the candle waits, we swear that she comes willing to the best of our knowledge," she shrugged. "That's really it."

"Sounds... kinda fun," Malyna said timidly.

"Well, we also have to prepare her for the bridal chamber when it's time," Syera added, taking the last roll from the basket.

"Oh."

Cae blushed. "It's nothing onerous. I promise."

Lili nudged her. "So, who's standing for you? Valan's already asked my father, so you have to find someone else. Are you going to ask Duke Griff?"

Cae shook her head, grinning, deciding to keep it a secret. "You'll find out."

The three of them tried to cajole and tease it out of her. She just laughed. “Nearly from the moment I arrived in the capitol, I have been the talk of court for one reason or another and all against my desire and intent. For once, I’m going to do it deliberately.”

“Oh, that’s mean,” Syera growled. “Now I have to know!”

Cae laughed again and would say no more. The queen gracefully changed the subject.



The gardens that afternoon were a riot of gossip and well-wishers. As they sat in a sunny corner, drinking in the warmth of the weak fallow sun, people were continually drifting over to offer congratulations and collect a few more threads for their tapestry of gossip. Cae could easily tell who were genuine and who were merely trying to gain favour. She took note of those who were not merely insincere, but outright resentful. Tempest sat upon her shoulder, drinking in the sun and sleeping, though once in a while she’d open her eye and close it again.

Malyna was delighted when Salera joined them and Cae invited her to stay.

Salera hugged her friend as tightly as she dared, careful of her arm. “Caelerys told me about the riot back at the Drift. I’m so glad you were not more hurt than you are. It must have been terrifying, and all my fault.”

Malyna shook her head. “No, it was my mother’s fault. And I won’t hear you taking blame. If it had not been for my getting hurt, I might never have found out what my mother was up to. I just wish Haira had not...”

Salera hugged her again, forestalling the threatened tears. “I would have offered to take you in,” she said, once Malyna was better, “but this is more to your advantage. With my own House under a questionable future, Maral can offer you better protection and better prospects. Which I wish to thank you for, Lady Caelerys,” she said more formally, turning.

“No need. My father is a good judge of character.”

“I see where you get it from,” Syera commented.

Cae blushed. “I have help. So, Salera, will it remain Lady Cuttle or will you be choosing else?”

It was Salera’s turn to blush. “Well, I was... hoping to speak with you about that.”

“Me?” Cae asked, startled.

“Yes. I’ve been hearing that you are very in tune with the spirits and essences of the First and Second. That you even saw the Leviathan herself,” she added, watching Cae closely for confirmation.

Cae breathed softly, and Tempest stirred enough to nibble her ear in comfort. “Yes. Though I think a number of people saw her. She was a little hard to miss.”

“But you heard her before she woke up. ...I was wondering if you could tell me if I had any particular spirit watching me?”

“Well, I... I wish I could, but I don’t think it works that way. I only see them around shifts and only when I... dream. I’ve never seen one at the Drift except for the sea wolves.”

Liliwyn spoke up. “Why don’t you consider what animals you are drawn to, or find something to protect those lost lambs of yours.”

“Lost lambs?” Salera asked.

“Well, I expect you will dismiss any man who questions your authority, so you will have a house more full of women than men for a while,” Lili shrugged.

“This... this is true. And I am reassessing my association with... the church. I am not certain it will permit me to... do what I need to.”

Liliwyn set her hand on Salera’s arm. “Any religion that does that, has no place in your life. But that is for you to decide.”

She nodded. “Wellen and I are speaking seriously on the matter.”

“Wellen?” Malyna asked, and Salera blushed immediately.

“Yes,” she answered shyly. “He’s been a great help... and so... attentive?” she asked, glancing at the gathered women. “He... he wants to marry me, doesn’t care that I was another man’s wife. And the church does not allow that, so...” she shrugged.

“Are you certain he is not just trying to gain control of the new House?” Syera asked suspiciously.

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. He doesn’t want to be the lord,” she said. “He’ll gladly leave me as the Head of the House with him supporting me however I want him to. He says I’ve earned it, what with all I’ve suffered.” She blushed. “Besides, I think... I think it excites him to watch me... being in charge.”

Syera and Liliwyn giggled. Cae blushed slightly and smiled. Malyna didn’t understand. Even Ikembe smiled.

“You know, I kind of like the pelicans that nest on the cliffs below the keep,” Salera commented suddenly.

“What brought that to mind?” Syera asked.



She pointed to a small flock gliding down to the river. They were a good ways away, and Mother only knew how they had caught her eye.

“Lady Henet,” Cae mused.

Salera looked at her. “Who’s that?”

“Could be you,” Cae smiled. “It’s the Old Vermian word for Pelican.”

“Henet,” she repeated, trying the word out. “Lady Salera Henet. Lady Henet. I kind of like it. It has a soft beginning and a sharp end, fertile and protective.”

“Just remember you’ll have to live up to it,” Liliwyn reminded her.

She nodded. “I’ll see what Wellen thinks.”

Malyna looked at her friend. “So you are seriously thinking of marrying him?”

She blushed. “Maybe. But either way, he represents at least half my population and his opinion will help me be sure that it will be looked upon favourably. Personally, I think he’s questioning his own judgement right now.”

“It is understandable,” Liliwyn said. “So long as you don’t depend over much on him,” she warned. “If you want to be the Lady of the House, you need to show that you are strong and independent, or your people will start looking to him instead of you.”

She nodded. “Well, for military matters, I’ll want them to go to him.”

“Well, yes, seeing you’ve no experience there,” Cae said. “But I think you’ll be fine. And Lady Henet sounds much better than Lady Cuttle anyway.”

Tempest pulled at a curl to get her attention, even as she felt Valan coming. Looking up, she smiled and nudged Liliwyn. Lili turned to her, then where she was looking and blushed a little. Cae gave her another, teasing nudge which Lili returned with slightly more force as Balaran moved ahead of his twin and whisked her off with only the most cursory excuses.

Valan collected his own bride and escorted her off into the gardens, holding her closer than propriety allowed. Cae did not really mind. Tempest minded, however, and flew off to find another perch. Ikembe followed dutifully behind.

They had not gotten very far when a bell began to peel. Valan stopped, listening. Cae felt a sense of concern and worry begin to wash over her and it was not just coming from Valan. “What is it? What does that mean?” she whispered.

Valan turned her back towards the Citadel. “It is the call to court.”

“Really?” she asked. “It sounds so different from my room.”

“That is a different bell, rung only for the residential floors. This is what everyone else hears.”

“What could it be about? You spoke with your father about Malyn, yes?” She looked around, worriedly, saw the nobles who were in the gardens heading inside with the same confused look.

“I did. Father agreed that a few weeks might do him some good. Either way he was going to have to appoint a guardian. Asparadane has only a few out-lying cousins and only three of which even bear the Asparadane name. I don’t think this has anything to do with that. Father didn’t say anything about calling court over the matter. He was just going to do it and announce it to those involved.”

Balaran met up with them not far past the terrace. “Any clue?” he asked.

Val shook his head. “We’ll know soon enough.”

“Will there be time for the dukes to arrive?” Cae asked. “Most of them are likely at their town homes.”

Liliwyn assured her there was. “In cases like this, messengers go out to those who are in town before the bells are rung. We’ll wait a half hour, no more, then the king will proceed with whoever is here.”

When they came to the throne room, a great number of nobles were already present and milling about. Willam arrived with Vyncet, but Cae did not notice her father at all. She started to go to join them, but Valan drew her up to the dais with him, standing to the back of the throne. Ikembe moved to the wall beside Larch. Liliwyn was also brought to stand beside Balaran, on the other side of the queen’s throne.

Cae tried to ask Will where their father was, but he shook his head, mimed writing. She guessed he was taking care of some House business and could not get here quickly enough. She did note a ring of brilliant white metal on his middle finger. Then the herald was walking in front of them and the crowd were rushing to get into place.

It was a thinner crowd than the day before, as not everyone had been present or been able to arrive in time. Cae also noticed that the room looked much bigger from up here. She felt the scrutiny of the gathering of nobles, some no doubt wondering what trouble she had wrought now, and shuddered. Valan’s hand tightened on her, lending her his strength even as she normally lent him calm.

The herald announced the king and queen who entered the room and sat upon the thrones. He then stepped forth and drew back his shoulders. Cae didn’t need to be a sympath to read his discomfort. “The condemned prisoner Mambyn Asparadane has requested a public audience to answer the charges against him before a

company of his peers. King Rorlan has graciously agreed.” He took a deep breath and raised his voice to be heard outside of the hall. “Bring the prisoner forth!”

The rear doors opened and six guards walked in, surrounding Mambyn who still wore chains on his wrists. Even though he had spent a night in the dungeons, he looked every inch the haughty lord Cae remembered from the few times she had encountered him; although he was in better control of his temper than the day of the race when he had accused her of cheating.

Nobles who had arrived late, hurried into the throne room in their wake.

The guards stopped before the throne, swords at rest but in hand, and made an opening for the prisoner to step forth and address the crown.

Mambyn spared only a glare at Caelerys standing beside the prince. He raised his voice and spoke clearly. “I have been accused of treason and convicted in the absence of my wits. As a psion of a Lordly House, I claim the right to face the accusations and provide answer.”

“You answered the accusations in front of all your peers, without coercion or prevarication,” said the king, maintaining marvellous control over the emotions Cae could feel raging inside. “You, sir, confessed.”

“I confessed under sorcerous coercion,” he claimed.

Valan was livid, but kept his cool. Balaran stepped forward but waited for his father’s nod to speak. “You, sir, drank the very potion your mother had intended for the king.”

“We have only a scrap’s word on that,” he countered.

“We have a prince’s word,” Bal answered tightly. “I, myself watched her pour the potion into the cup and hand it to my father. He set it down without drinking and I watched the servant collect it and set it out of the way. No one came near it until I poured its contents into another vessel and offered it to you the next morning. You confessed, repeating word for word the exchange between us after that moment, proving I put no words in your mouth, only bade you answer any questions put to you truthfully and to fulfil your duty to your king as he required. I have signed witnesses to the exchange. One of which was no less than the Administrative Key himself.”

Mambyn stiffened. “I have read the ‘confession’ and the questions asked of me. At no time was I asked if my mother had likewise dosed me.”

Balaran snorted in derision. “Would you even have known if you were?”

“I was never asked if at any point in my life would I have been unwilling to do these things,” he countered.

"If she dosed you early," the king said, "you would never have been unwilling to do anything she asked."

Balaran countered. "If she were predisposed to dosing her children, would not Malyna have also been so dosed and thereby never have rebelled against her House?"

"My mother clearly never thought her worth the bother," Mambyn countered. "The fact remains, Your Majesty," he continued, turning back to the king, "that whether I did these things of my own free will or not comes down to the accusation of a sister who has been notoriously unreliable. The fact that she discovered that mother was even considering marrying her into House Kaladen instead of continuing to try for a more palatable match stands against her reliability. She had motive to accuse us of all sorts of evil in an attempt to escape that fate."

"You freely speak such things of your own sister?" the king asked.

He gave a snort, "She has been taken from the accounting of our House, as well as speaking worse of us. I am no longer bound to protect her honour. Of which, I claim, she has none."

Cae saw Willam's fist tightening then. That a man would denigrate his own sister in public grated upon him, whether or not he had charge of that honour or cared one whit for the sister. Suddenly, she knew this was going to end badly.

Tempest pressed her head to the underside of her ear, making soft, soothing noises to calm her. Valan's hand merely tightened on hers.

"The accusations stand," said the king. "You have presented no proof to your innocence or to her guilt of false witness. The girl has been traumatized, harmed repeatedly by her own family. In fact, your younger brother, her twin, was arrested yesterday in the gardens for trying to forcibly take her with the express intent of punishing her for what he deemed her crimes against the family."

"My brother is a sixteen year old boy, spoiled by his mother's pretensions."

"Your brother," Balaran said, "rants even now in the dungeons that his sister is an ungrateful..." he choked on the word he had been about to say, aware he was in not only mixed company, but formal court as well, "something vile and rude," he substituted, "who spilled the family secrets. Whom he, and I quote: 'should have just taken to bed and properly disciplined long ago'."

There was a gasp of shock and horror from the otherwise silent crowd.

"I am given to understand Lady Asparadane was the only reason he did not," the prince added.

Mambyn's lips were tight as he rapidly tried to think of another way out of this. "Your Majesty knows full well, there is no proof I can present, as, if such a thing did occur, it happened in private chambers where I spent many an hour with my mother, sharing wine and plans for the family. She could have dosed me at any time."

"It remains," said the king with a sigh, "that you have shown no remorse for these actions, only anger at being caught. The conversations with your family these last hours were not private."

This angered Mambyn even more.

"Then I request the right to trial by combat as a member of this peerage and the eldest psion of a Lordly House."

"But you are no longer a Lordly House," the king said, almost gently. "I removed that in light of your mother's treason."

"Be that as it may, at the time of my judgement, and the performance of the actions of which I stand accused, I was. Thereby, I may still claim that right."

The king glanced at Balaran in question.

The prince sighed. "I believe he is correct, father. Though I would ask the Judiciary Key for confirmation."

"Find him," he sighed.

To everyone's surprise, the man appeared from the crowd along the wall. He was a small man, bent and gnarled from years with books and ledgers. "I am here, Your Majesty."

He was gestured forth and he cast a reluctant look back into the crowd before walking up beside the wall and crossing nearer to the thrones. He avoided the guards and the prisoner. "Forgive me, Your Majesty, but I have already been requested to look up the laws regarding the arrest and trial of the nobility."

"By whom?" the king asked.

The man heaved a sigh. "By the family in question, Your Majesty. Even the third estate has the right to be read the laws on any particular point," he added to justify his actions.

"And the law in question?"

The man bowed his head, unable to meet the king's eye. "The accused has indeed the right to challenge his accuser in such cases whereas neither guilt nor innocence can be conclusively proved. I agree with Your Majesty that his actions were treasonous, however, as no one can prove that his mother did not drug him and thereby coerce him, he has the right to request trial by combat. Even the Houses

Minor may ask, though they may be refused. A Noble or Lordly House may not be. Should Your Majesty wish to change or abolish that rule, we may speak at your convenience, but it will not change the outcome in this matter. Unless he waives the right and desires to be subject to more current laws, he is to be tried by the rules in existence at the time of his crimes.”

The king narrowed his eyes at his former guardsman. “Is this what you wish? To challenge your sister?”

Mambyn sneered. “I challenge her words. I will not fight her, but whatever champion will stand for her, if one can be found. If none come forth, she will be judged to be a liar and her accusations overturned.”

Valan stepped forth at once, before Cae even realized his intent. “I will stand her champion.”

Mambyn grinned and bowed, “With all due respect, Your Highness, but I stand accused of treason. I can hardly acquit myself by killing a member of the royal family.”

Valan fumed, but obeyed his father’s hand to step back.

Several lords stepped forth at that point, including Lord Selgan and Lord Kellen, the late Rorik Griff’s youngest son. Willam stepped forward and bowed. “With all due respect, Your Majesty,” he intoned.

Cae’s heart leapt to her throat even as she felt the surge of intense joy from Mambyn.

The king nodded for Will to go on. “With all due respect,” he repeated, “as the lady being challenged has been placed under the accounting of my House, it falls to my House to answer that challenge. Her honour is now ours.”

The king glanced at his queen who merely stared straight forward, acknowledging nothing. He sighed. “Then I grant the right of trial by combat, and accept the championship of Lord Willam Maral. The combat will take place tomorrow morning upon the tourney grounds.”

Mambyn bowed. “I accept the challenger upon one condition, Your Majesty.”

The king’s eyes narrowed. “You dare to set conditions?”

“In the interest of fairness, I do.”

“What is the request?”

“No moonsilver.” There was a burst of outrage from the crowd. Mambyn raised his voice. “You would agree that his being a shift and I not would be an unfair advantage? He wears no moonsilver.”

“You do realize that moonsilver does not facilitate the change?” Valan asked.

His smile was not friendly in the least. "I do, Your Highness. But I also know that if he wears moonsilver armour that it will shift with him."

Willam nodded. "I agree to not wearing moonsilver armour, not to bear moonsilver weapons, but I humbly put forth that a simple moonsilver ring will help prevent accidental shifting in response to instincts."

Mambyn shrugged. "If the man cannot control himself, of what value is his honour?"

Willam growled, but nodded to the king.

Cae fought the urge to scream or faint.

The king stood. "The combat will be set on the tourney grounds two hours after sunrise. It will not be a spectacle for the masses. Only nobility may be present. The two combatants may choose their seconds and go forth to prepare themselves." The king addressed the six guards around the prisoner. "You six will be assigned to Lord Mambyn from now until he is brought to the tourney grounds. You will be assigned a chamber here in the Citadel, that you may not blame your accommodations for any failing of skill. You will also be afforded a place to practice. If you desire, the chapel will be open to you and a Pontifex brought to comfort you. Should you slip your guards and fail to present yourself for the trial, the remains of your family will be held to account, and one of them will take your place on that field."

He waved his hand and the herald dismissed the court. Cae flew to her brother, ignoring the fact that Vyncet was already chewing him out.

"I am the better fighter, Vynce," he snapped. "And as the eldest it falls to me anyway."

Cae just hugged him, forcing him to stop and embrace her. "You know he's going to cheat," she whispered.

"I know. I will be better guarded than you tonight," he answered.

Seeing others gathering closer to hear what they could, Will drew them away, signalling only three people outside of the family to follow. Cae glanced back at Valan, but he nodded for her to go.

Will led them to a side chamber just off the hall of the throne room. Cae remembered it from the night Syera found out she was to marry Lord Rorik. No one sat down.

The moment the door was closed, Lord Kellen began insisting upon being Will's second. "I have my own bone to pick with the traitorous, two-faced..."

Willam held up his hand. "Kell, there are women in the room."

The young man blushed, but stopped. "You know what I mean."

“Honestly, Selgan has more claim than you at the moment,” Will told him, setting a hand on his shoulder.

Kellen turned to look at the man in question. “How is Galen?” he asked, a little sheepishly.

“Between our sister’s skill and his stubbornness, he’ll live. But it was a close thing.”

“Selgan, will you stand my second?” asked Will.

The man nodded, and Kellen tried to dampen his irritation, knowing Willam was right. “What would you prefer for weapons?”

“My maul, preferably, or a mace. But should he call for sword and shield, I’ll go that route, too.”

Selgan nodded and Will turned back to Kellen. “Now, what I request of you,” he began. The young man looked up at him eagerly. “Is to host me for the night.”

“Certainly, but why?”

“Because it will be expected that he will stay with his family, or with that of his second,” Caelerys said. “But by going with you, assassins seeking to weaken him through drug or other means, will not find him. They will expect him to go to Marrok or one of our other vassal houses.”

Kellen frowned. “Do you really think they’ll try something?”

“I would be highly surprised if they did not,” Cae answered. “I personally know Mambyn to cheat and then attempt to blame his victims for trying to cheat him when he fails to succeed. He has everything to lose right now.”

Kellen nodded. “My father...” he stopped, swallowed. “My grandfather,” he corrected, “will not say no.”

Will gave his shoulder a squeeze. “Thank you. Tell you what, all of you come to Stag’s Hall for supper. Kellen, bring a man about my size, I don’t care if he is servant or kin. Dress him like kin. When you leave, we’ll trade clothing. He’ll remain at the hall in my bed and alert for treachery, and I’ll return with you in his stead.”

Selgan nodded. “It is a sound plan. Shall I come with my own sons to add to the confusion?”

Will nodded. “Thank you. All of you. And may the Mother grant us the right of it.” He glanced over at his sister. He judged her on the verge of tears and drew her in, wrapping her up tightly. “I’ll be at your wedding, little sister,” he said. “I many not be able to dance, but I will be there.”

“If you go back on that promise, I’ll kill you myself. And then kick you for good measure.”



This got the chuckle she had been hoping for, including the rueful laughter of the others. Vyncet frowned at them. "Don't laugh. She's serious." Which only made everyone laugh harder. It was good, but it was that strained laughter that comes when things are just too absurd to comprehend.

Finally, Cae drew back. "I should go. Valan will be looking for me and I want to have a word with the queen. I will see you in the morning at your tent, Will. One piece, damn it."

He gave her a sad smile. "One piece," he promised.

She reluctantly took her leave and went first to find the queen. Asking, she learned she was in her chambers and Cae marched upstairs to request entry. She was only marginally surprised when the guards admitted her without having to ask.

The queen set aside her embroidery as she entered and folded her hands in her lap, waiting. Cae did not stand on ceremony. "This was your 'hitch'?" she cried.

The queen gave her a sad look, spread her hands helplessly. "I knew there would be one, not what it would be. I did not know or even guess until I heard that Mambyn had requested the court."

"This isn't a hitch, this is a disaster!" Cae cried, sinking to the ground at her feet.

The queen drew her closer. "The Mother never gives us more than we can handle."

"Does she have to throw us everything at once?" she sobbed, finally giving in to what had been building up since court. "My father is dying, I'm finally about to be married to the man I love, and now I may lose my brother before that!"

She wept upon the queen's lap for a long while before she could think again. Then she realized that she was not the only person about to lose a great deal. She looked up. "How is Syera taking this?" she asked, accepting the kerchief that Tempest held up to her.

The queen smiled. "Why don't you go speak to her? She is in her room, I believe."

Cae dried her eyes, nodding as she rose. "Thank you. And I am sorry for speaking to you like that, Your Majesty."

"Just because my predecessor would have had a few unkind words to say to you, does not mean that I will. Besides, I highly doubt you would have felt you could speak to her in such a manner."

Cae gave a soft laugh. "You are probably right. Mother knows I didn't feel comfortable speaking like that to Valan for the longest time."

She curtsied and left the room, headed down the hall towards Syera's room. She was a little surprised to find Griff guards at the door instead of Citadel ones. She politely requested audience.

The moment Syera found out who was at the door, she was ushered in, and smothered in a fierce hug. Tempest objected loudly, and found another perch. When Syera finally pulled away, she drew herself up, wiping her eyes and gathering all her determination. "No, I am not going to lose him twice in a season," she insisted. "What can we do?"

Cae drew her to a seat. "There is a plan in place," she told her, outlining what the men had spoken of downstairs. "We will make sure there is no tampering with his body, his mind or his gear."

"Then it will all be down to skill."

Cae nodded. "And Willam is very skilled."

"So is Mambyn."

Cae squeezed her hand. "Will has the right upon his side. He just has to keep from shifting."

"I thought they couldn't in regular armour?"

"They can, but they'll either break themselves or the armour. Either way, it will provide Mambyn an opportunity."

She nodded, "He'll take every advantage he can."

"We will have to control ourselves, too," Cae said firmly. "We can't say anything or scream or make any noise that will distract him."

Syera nodded. "I should probably go to the Roost tonight, stay with the family."

Cae smiled. "Be near Will?"

Syera merely glared at her at first, then relented. "That too. There are some things I want to say to him."

Cae nodded. "You go, do what I cannot. I will see him just before the fight. How's Malyna taking this?"

Syera shook her head. "Not well. She's furious with her brother, and frightened for herself. She's afraid he'll demand she be returned home if he wins, or that he'll insist on her being punished for 'bearing false witness.'"

"Where is she? I didn't see her in the throne room."

"Vyncet fetched her just a little while ago. He took her home. We came in late, after the prisoner was brought in. We stayed in the back and tried to be as anonymous as we could. I thought she was going to faint, but she was actually shaking with

anger. At least for part of it.” Syera shook her head. “I’m kind of glad we stayed at the back. I have no idea what she would have done if we had been closer.”

“Something regrettable, I don’t doubt,” Cae sighed. “I would have if I were in her shoes.”

“I don’t foresee you ever being in her shoes,” Syera said, leaning back in the chair to play with Tempest’s chest feathers. “Your brothers would never do something like that.”

“If he were an unjust king, they would. Though I dare say we wouldn’t go about it quite so underhandedly. What bothers me is that they did it for raw ambition.”

Syera laughed at her. “You just don’t understand ambition. Some people want better than they have,” she shrugged.

“If they have little, I would understand wanting more. But they have more than enough: fertile lands, enough resources of men and material to have been a Lordly House.”

Syera shook her head. “Greed. Pure greed. Like the Eldest, few of us are satisfied with what we have.”

“You’re right. I’ll never understand it,” she sighed, sitting up. “So, Duke Griff came to meet his son only to find out...” she began, changing the subject, even though she knew it was not a more desirable one.

Syera nodded, curling her feet up under her in the chair. “It was an emotional day. I don’t think it was real to me until... I saw the body.” She took a deep breath. “In a lot of ways, it still isn’t.”

“Will the duke stay for the wedding? I mean, I asked you to walk with me without even thinking if you were going to be able to or not,” Cae said, feeling a little ashamed that it had slipped her mind.

“Joy wins out,” she shrugged. “You were so relieved to be rescued and happy that you are getting your love... I understand. A lot has been going on. It’s hard to keep track of it all,” the princess said. “They’ve done something with his body. They wouldn’t tell me the details, beyond the large quantities of salt and vinegar that were involved, but, between that and the cold, it should preserve the body long enough to carry him home. We’ve had a number of people stopping by to pay their respects.”

Cae reached out to take her friend’s hand. “Do you know what you’ll do after the funeral?”

“Not really. I mean, his children have been kind. They don’t seem to be pushing me out of the house, but... it’s going to be really awkward staying. I’m younger than they are, and I was only their father’s wife for a little less a gold month.” She shrugged again. “I’m just going to have to wait and see. I’ll send a bird if I decide to come home. My fate is my own after this, if he left me any provision.”

“I’m sure he would have. He seemed that kind of man. We can always ask lord Alandyr to see the contract.”

They were interrupted by one of Syera’s ladies coming to inform her that she was expected at supper with the rest of the Royal Family.

Cae rose, collecting Tempest. “I’ll leave you to it, then,” she said.

Syera grabbed her wrist and dragged her along. “Oh, you aren’t getting out of it. You can just expect to be at the family table from now on. Unless we don’t sit to table,” she added off-handedly.

“Are you sure?” she objected, not wanting to intrude if she was not wanted.

“You live in the Citadel. You really think Valan is going to let you eat alone in your rooms?”

Cae blushed at that, realizing she was right. She paused at her own door to shoo Tempest inside. “Go on. You can’t come to supper. I don’t think the king will appreciate you playing vulture to his plate.”

Tempest complained, but walked into the room to find a perch.

Syera had been right. Valan had reserved the seat beside him for her. Lili was seated beside Bal and Syera sat next to Janniston, teasing him through the meal about how he had grown. Other than that, the meal was fairly subdued.

Afterwards, Valan escorted Cae back to her room. “Are you going to be all right?” he asked.

She suppressed a shudder. “I won’t know until tomorrow.”

“Are you going to be able to sleep?” he asked, tenderly drawing a lock of hair away from her face.

“I am quite certain that if I poke my head into the dreamscape, you’ll be waiting to pounce and drag me down into real sleep,” she said evasively.

He tipped her chin up to look at him with a finger. “Ah, but I cannot do that if you don’t go to sleep. And I know you are going to want to check in on them.”

“Perhaps I should ask Bal for some of those spirits of his now?” she smiled.

“I’ll have something sent to you,” he grinned, placing a kiss upon her lips. “Something that will taste a great deal better than that rot-gut he hides away.”

Cae nodded, took a step back, intending to enter her room. He pulled her back. “Your brother will survive this. He is strong and stubborn and skilled.”

“But he’s so angry,” she said. “How can he control it if he’s angry?”

“Because he is also a smart fighter. We could have killed each other that day on the field, but he held back, even with an unfamiliar weapon, even angry and heart-sore. He can control this.”

Cae leaned her forehead against his chest, trying to remember what she had seen of Mambyn during the grand melee. She hadn’t really seen much, as she had been concentrating upon her family.

Valan put his arms around her, kissing the top of her head. “I will see you in the morning.”

“I’m going to see Will in the morning.”

Valan stopped. “You do realize that Ikembe cannot come with you tomorrow?”

She looked up sharply. “What?”

He spared a glance to the dark skinned woman waiting by the door. “I am sorry. But father has said that only the nobility may attend. The only guards will be the royal guard.”

Ikembe stepped forward at this. “Your Highness, you know he will already have considered this and set plans in place to get to her. It is what his mother would have done.”

He nodded. “I have already thought of this. But when I explained this to father, he said he had not considered that implication, but that there was no help for it now. He’s given the order. There’s no rescinding it and no exceptions.”

“What shall you do for her safety?” Ikembe asked him boldly.

“Sir Larch. I’ll reassign him to you for the morning. Will he suffice?” he asked Ikembe.

She nodded. “I am satisfied with his skill and attentiveness to detail.”

“Good.” He turned back to Caelerys. “When you are through with your brother, he will bring you to the royal box where I can keep an eye on you. Also, ...I’ll need you to keep my sister calm.”

She smiled softly. “And you. Tell Sir Larch to be here early. I will be on my way to the field by dawn.”

He kissed her one last time before Ikembe opened the door and Cae left him in the hall.

Once inside, she leaned back against the door for support. Inside she feared she was falling apart. Her women swarmed in, trying to comfort her. Only Coral

and Fern were not fawning. Coral because it was beneath her, and Fern because she was also worried and in shock.

Cae finally got them to let her be by issuing orders for the morning. “I want to be walking out of that door before the sun clears the city wall,” she finished.

She was already dressed for bed and pacing the reception room when a knock came to the door. She stopped, watching as Ikembe answered it, bowed, then returned with a small bottle and a smaller, ivory cup. She waited as the woman uncapped it, sniffing cautiously, then poured a measure and tasted it. It seemed to take forever before she refilled the cup to nearly full and handed it to her lady.

“You will want to drink it quickly, my lady.”

Cae frowned, sniffing the aromatic liquor. “It tastes that bad?” she asked.

Ikembe smiled. “No, my lady, though it will burn a bit. It will simply work faster.”

Cae sighed, took a deep breath and tossed the drink back. She held the liquor in her mouth for just a few seconds before swallowing it, expecting the burn. She only gasped a little.

“Are you well, my lady?” Sorrel asked worriedly.

“Is it foul?” Fern asked.

Cae shook her head. “I’ve had worse. I’ve made worse, though that was purely medicinal.”

Fern wrung her hands. “Would my lady be offended if I had a sip?” she asked timidly.

Cae looked over at her. “Think you will have trouble sleeping?” she asked, realizing the girl cared for Will nearly as much as she did, and in much the same way.

Fern nodded, unshed tears in her eyes. “I’ll be able to get up early and get you ready, my lady. I will.”

Cae shook her head. “No. You stay abed as long as you can. Coral, please see to it she’s left sleeping if she can be. It is going to be harder on you not being able to know what is happening,” she said, pouring the girl a drink. She could already feel the alcohol taking effect. She handed her the ivory cup. “Drink it fast and go straight to bed.”

Coral set her hands on the girl’s shoulders even as she threw the drink back without hesitation. “I will take care of her, do not you worry, my lady. You head off to bed now. And may the Mother grant your brother the right of things,” she said as she began to lead Fern off to their room.

Sorrel and Rosie helped Ikembe and Cae into bed, as she was already starting to feel a little heavy and dizzy. Ikembe allowed Rosie to tuck her in, even though she was more than capable of taking care of herself. It gave the girl something to do with herself.

Sorrel leaned in to Cae as she straightened the covers over her. “There is a place on the back wall of the Citadel, overlooking the tourney fields,” she said softly.

“The one above the alarum fields?”

Sorrel nodded. “Aye, my lady. If Fern is awake in time, we’ll take her with us. We’ll bring Ikembe too. We won’t be able to see the whole fight, but enough.”

“Will the guards allow it?” she asked sleepily.

“They usually allow us on special occasions. And this is more than special. If not,... I’ll sic Coral on them.”

Cae giggled at that, drifting off even before the light had left the room.

She had been right about the dragon pouncing the moment she slipped into her dreams. He was waiting for her and coiled himself around her right there in her own room. She did not fight it. She was mortally tired and sick with worry, and the alcohol weighed down even her dreaming self. The only thing she noticed as she sank back in his coils was that she felt like she had grown a pair of antlers.



Sunrise found Cae dressed in her russet riding gown, hair pulled back by combs and caught up in a net to keep it out of the way. Instead of carrying Tempest or having her run after her, she sent her out the window to meet her at Willam's tent on the fairgrounds.

Coral tried to get her to stop to eat something, but all she could stomach was a small sweet roll and a single cup of tea.

She paused at the door to give a long look to Ikembe, suddenly feeling naked without bird or itoma, and not even Fern to hold her hand through this. Ikembe said nothing, merely opened the door to reveal Sir Larch standing guard.

Cae set a hand on her hip. "Have you been there all night?"

He smiled, shaking his head. "Only since an hour before dawn. I spelled the regular guard. Wraith and my own Kettle, should be waiting for us."

She smiled as she walked with him, asking questions to distract herself from what lay ahead. "Kettle?"

He laughed, "Because she is the colour of a bright copper kettle."

"Ah. I thought you had a bald-faced brown?"

He chuckled, "Like I'd trust my Kettle to the way-stations?"



She nodded, feeling the same about Wraith. "Have you given consideration to your name and sigil?" she asked as they descended the grand staircase.

"I have, my lady," he smiled. "If it is accepted, I shall be Sir Petri Larch, lord of House Larch."

"Interesting. What made you turn your first name into a surname?"

"Well, I like it, but it really is a third estate kind of name. So, I take it for a surname, use my father's name for mine and all is right in the world. It feels right," he added, sighing as they entered the sunlight of the main courtyard.

Their horses were waiting side by side near the steps, silver beside copper. He helped her into the saddle, trying and failing to stifle a grin. Cae just glared at him, knowing what was on his mind. She threatened him playfully with her boot. "What will be your shield?" she asked as he mounted his own horse.

"A larch rose proper, though I haven't decided upon a field colour."

She nodded. "Well, a sigil proper does not limit you to colour or metal, so keep that in mind." Then she was spurring Wraith out of the courtyard, forcing him to race to keep up.

It did not take them long to get to the tourney field. Traffic on this part of the road was almost non-existent at this hour. Larch saw her to the blue and white pavilion that had been erected the day before, checked within to make certain she would be well guarded, then asked her to remain until he returned from the stable.

She barely nodded, entering the tent to find her brothers and her uncle going over the armour and weapons carefully and Tempest watching them curiously.

Jehan set down the greave he was cleaning and came to wrap her in a fierce hug. "Ah, niece! I come for a wedding and find this happening instead?" he said, shaking his head.

"Not instead," she insisted. "Just... interrupting."

He clapped her on the back. "Good. Keep thinking like that."

He released her and picked up the greave again.

She frowned. "What are you doing?"

Vyncet answered. "Making sure nothing has been tampered with or poisoned," he said.

"All of you?" she asked.

"Moral support," Janem replied, pausing from his sharpening of the long, wicked spikes of Will's morning star.

"Why are you not using your maul? Or at least one of your favourite hammers?" she asked, leaning her hip against a table.

“He said no to the maul. Any other weapon plus shield,” Will grinned.

She made a face. “Is he a glutton for punishment? He had to know you would pick a mace of some type.”

Will shrugged. “I have no idea how Sel did it, but that’s what they agreed to. I think he’s chosen a battle axe.”

Cae nodded. It wasn’t the worst choice, sadly. A sword would have been almost ineffective against plate, unless he found an opening, and with Will, that wasn’t likely. An axe had a similar edge issue, though it had the weight to do some damage. Luckily for Will, the sheer weight of an axe made it a slower weapon. She knew for a fact that Will’s mace, while heavier than most, was not as solid and thereby a much faster weapon. The spikes were no more than two of Will’s fingers long, but they were thick enough not to break easily, and sharp. If he went for Mambyn’s head, it could be over quickly.

She picked up a pauldron set neatly aside on the table after having been inspected, turned it over in her hand. “Hey, this isn’t your armour,” she said in surprise, noticing a slight sweep to the edges of it.

Janem chuckled. “Told you it would not take her long.”

“I thought it would at least take her until she saw me in it,” Will sighed.

She looked from one brother to the other, including Vyncet smirking in his corner. She looked to Janem then. “Explain.”

“Been wondering about that myself,” Jehan muttered.

“Do you remember the tourney, when I was going on about lord Tume’s armour?” asked Jan.

She nodded.

“Well, I’ve been working on it with Will in my spare hours.”

“What spare hours,” she quipped.

“Tell me about it,” he sighed.

“I thought you were spending every dark and waking hour making moonsilver?”

It was his turn to nod. “And a wise occupation in the fallow months where there is more night than day. But it is the moons I need. Also,” he added sheepishly, “the neighbours have been complaining. I’m only allowed to work so many hours. I have to stop at midnight. Now, *making* moonsilver, requires no hammers. I’ve got Rob helping with that, helping make the ingots. And before you say anything, yes, I have the stock guarded. So, once I’d met the immediate moonsilver needs, I had

time to play with the design I'd been working on for months. I only had time to get the arms done, but they seem to work."

Vyncet laughed dryly. "You should have seen the two of them in the yard at the Hall. Will standing there while Jan hammered away at him with a sword."

"Why didn't you test the armour?" she asked Vynce. "You're a better swordsman."

"Because I needed to feel it to perfect the deflecting qualities," Jan answered. "Also, he's shite with a mace. Had to test those, too."

Cae paused at that. All mirth gone as the reminder of what was happening in little over an hour struck home. "How's it against an axe?"

"Depends on how he wields it," Jan shrugged. "Cae, he is as prepared as we can make him."

"Almost," came a voice from the pavilion flaps. Lord Selgan Cygent entered with a young man in front of him. "Willam, permit me to introduce you to Knead. He's the man I told you about."

Will looked the wiry young man over. He was little taller than Cae, with a shock of dark curls, ropey muscles and the light, coppery brown skin of mixed Northern blood. "You certain this will help?"

He nodded. "As I have gotten older, he's been a gift of the Mother, let me tell you. He can warm you up without having to waste the energy with a practice bout. Also, it can help lessen bruising, don't ask me how."

"He is of your House?" he asked.

"And well trusted. And before you ask, the rub is my own stock and no one has access but the two of us," Selgan added.

Will nodded to the young man. "Are you willing?" he asked.

The young man nodded. "Dasa, lord." His accent was heavy and reminded Cae of Ikembe, but with a slight difference. He waved his hand to the side chamber. "We should begin, lord. Time this will take, and we time have not."

Will nodded again, handing his cuirass to Selgan and led the young man into the other half of the tent.

Selgan grinned at the rest of them, picking up a rag and moving to finish the work Will had begun on the breastplate. "He's good, trust me. He's been in service to my House for six years, two before I found out he could do what he does. Just... ignore any strange noises you hear for the next hour."

There was a surprised burst of Alumet profanity that made Cae blush, and Selgan and Jehan laugh.

Will called from the other room, "What?! What did he say?"

"I am not repeating that in *any* language!" Cae responded.

Knead said something else, which Cae did translate. "He says you are like working on a statue. You need to relax."

There was a sudden groan from Will and Cae's blush deepened a little more. "Do I want to know what he is doing?" she asked, glancing at Selgan.

He grinned. "Only rubbing the tension out of his muscles. He starts at the neck and works all the way to the feet. Parts can be a little embarrassing, which is why he's in there, but trust me, he'll fight better for it. I confess I feel stiff and out of sorts if I let a full week pass without he calls a 'majok'."

"It means to rub," Cae said, picking up Will's gauntlet and turning to Janem. "What am I doing?"

He gladly stopped to show her how to inspect and clean the armour. "Thank the Mother! I was wondering how we were going to do those. You have nice, small hands."

"Yes. My mitts were made to manipulate string and needle, not bang on things and people," she teased.

They spent the next hour working quietly, listening to the sounds outside the tent and trying to ignore the occasional sounds from the next chamber. Though within a half hour, the groans turned to snores, which made Cae giggle.

"Is that all right?" she asked Lord Selgan.

He nodded vigorously. "I can't tell you how many times I've slept through it. I think the more you need it, the more likely you are to fall asleep. He'll be perfectly refreshed when he gets up."

"I may have to find one for him and Valan," she quipped.

He smiled. "I am surprised your itoma hasn't offered to work on you."

She looked up. "She can do that?"

"Why do you think Alument warriors and nobility walk like cats?" he laughed. "Believe me, it helps. All good body servants know how, and a good itoma will allow no one else such intimate access to their matama."

Cae resolved to ask as soon as she got back to the Citadel, provided all went well today.



When Will stepped out of the side chamber well over an hour later, he looked looser, more relaxed, and, somehow, bigger.

Knead grinned at their reactions as he slipped around Will to return to his lord. “Tension make you shring,” he said.

She smiled, “ShrinK,” she corrected gently. She said it in Alümet, then repeated the Elanthian word slowly.

He echoed her, catching the K this time, then smiled, bowing.

Selgan moved to begin helping Will don his gambeson. This made Cae stop and look around. “Where’s Harlan? Shouldn’t he be here helping?”

Will frowned. “This is a different matter. The second stands in the place of a squire. And as the boy is not noble...” he sighed.

“But he’s a knight’s son, isn’t he?”

Will shook his head.

“Oh. I suppose Sir Larch was only acceptable as a guard because he is a knight, therefore noble.”

“Partly,” her uncle answered, beginning to pass Selgan pieces of the armour and moving to help him buckle them on. “And partly because he is part of the prince’s guard. Royal guards are an exception.”

“Stop,” she said, fighting sudden tears. “I want a hug before you put that on.”

They stepped back, and Will enfolded her in his embrace, lifting her off the ground and squeezing her as tight as he dared. She was overwhelmed by the smell of him, currently well accented by the scents of rosemary and oil of incense wood, plus something pungent she could not identify that seemed a cross between anise and mint.

“I will survive this, Cae. I feel better than I ever have.”

“Mother willing,” she breathed. “I don’t know how I will handle it if you lose.”

“You will survive. We always do.”

She pulled back, setting her hand over a place on his chest where she had felt something. Pressing it with her fingers, she realized it was a ring. She looked up at him. “I saw her last night,” he said softly. “I will not lose a second chance.”

She nodded, sniffing a little and reaching for her kerchief. She backed away so they could dress him. Tempest moved over to her shoulder, watched with her as they applied his armour.

Just before they helped him into his gauntlets, he stopped them, pulling the moonsilver ring from his hand and handing it to his sister. She slipped it onto her thumb. He glanced at Selgan. “You are supposed to be watching for things like that.”

“Forgive me. I missed it,” he said. “Even though I think the man is being a prick about it.” He glanced suddenly at Cae at that, was relieved when she didn’t even flinch at his language.

“He’s been looking for an excuse to take Will on for years,” Jehan said. “He’s going to claim every advantage he can.”

“Is his weapon going to be checked for poison?” Cae asked.

The men looked at her, shocked that she would suggest such a thing. Apparently it was a breach of etiquette to assume. She just glared back.

It was Jehan who spoke first. “She’s right. This is a trial by combat, his honour is already in question. It can’t hurt.”

“We’ll have to prove our own,” Will said. “How are we going to test spikes without weakening me? I can’t very well cut myself on one and have him satisfied.”

“Vyncet, would you be so kind as to fetch a bucket with enough water to submerge just the head of the mace and a cup?” Selgan asked him.

Now all eyes were on him. “Trust me,” he grinned.

Will nodded, taking a deep breath. Outside they could hear the gathering nobles and the sounds of readying for the trial.

Larch poked his head in. “My lady, it is time. We must go.”

She stepped up to Willam, placing a kiss on his cheek. “One piece, brother,” she ordered.

“Yes, my lady,” he said formally, a faint smile upon his lips. “My princess.”

She frowned, using it to quiet tears. “Not yet.”

“Soon enough.”

She nodded, turned and followed Sir Larch to the royal box. Behind her, she could hear the quiet repetitions of ‘One Piece’ from her family.

She arrived at the box just after the royal party. Valan had been standing at the rail watching for her, pacing fretfully. He calmed upon seeing her, gauging her emotional state. She gave him a soft smile as he helped her up the steps, struggling with the split skirt.

She paused to curtsy to the king and queen. The queen stood to give her a light hug, offering what comfort she could. Cae could feel her uncertainty. “Do you have any idea at all?” she asked softly, afraid of the answer.

The queen shook her head. “Nothing at all. I know she does not mean to torment me, but... this is a thing I cannot know.”

Cae hugged her again, offering comfort this time. She knew how much this uncertainty bothered her, almost as much as knowing something horrible was going to happen and that it had to.

The queen thanked her with a kiss and sat back down. Syera claimed her then, holding her as if she was trying to hold everything together by sheer strength. "How is he?" she gasped.

"Better than we," she said. "Selgan loaned his majoka. He is fit and ready."

"I'll ask what that is later," Syera sighed. "When we didn't see him on the practice field, warming up, I worried. Mambyn's been out there the last half hour. He's more than ready. He's got a spiked axe."

She drew Syera over to the king's side of the viewing stand. Valan sat beside his father, settling Cae and his sister beside him. Syera all but collapsed in the chair. "Was he... wearing..." she tried to ask.

Cae nodded, knowing what she was asking.

Liliwyn and Balaran arrived, glancing over at them to give a nod of support before taking their seats on the queen's side.

Then came the blare of trumpets and the arrival of the combatants from opposite ends of the field followed by their seconds.

Syera's hand clamped upon Cae's as they turned to watch the field. Cae saw her brothers and uncle joining their father in the stands not far from her.

Will walked tall in his gleaming plate, his antlered helm under his arm, and carrying his shield. It had been freshly painted, with the midnight blue surrounding the rearing stag in bare, highly polished metal. Behind him came an armoured Lord Selgan, carrying his morning star and a bucket.

The crowd murmured at the sight of the bucket, and Cae felt confusion even from the king.

Lord Mambyn came to stand five feet from where Willam stopped before the king and queen. His armour was blackened, with a coiled viper welded upon the breast and helm in bright copper. He was followed by a cousin carrying a spiked axe. When the four men bowed, the king stood.

"You each understand the rules of this combat and the consequences of it?"

They nodded.

"Should either one of you yield, the other will honour that and be ceded the victory and the right of the matter. Should Lord Mambyn yield or be rendered unable to continue, he will then be summarily taken to a place of execution and be accorded a swift and private end."

They conceded they understood.

“Have the weapons and armour been inspected to the satisfaction of the seconds?”

The Asparadane cousin assured all had been. Lord Selgan gave a wry grin, “Almost, Your Majesty.”

The king frowned, irritated with the delay. “Then do so at once.”

Selgan stepped forward so that Mambyn and his second could see what he was doing. He set the bucket down, then dipped the mace’s head in the water, swishing it around thoroughly. Mambyn’s cousin started to object but Mambyn held out his hand to stop him. Selgan then handed the dripping morning-star to Willam and reached into the bucket, pulling out the cup. First he showed it empty, then filled it from the bucket, spilling a little to prove it full, and drank it in front of everyone.

The crowd began to mutter and gossip in shock at the audacity, even as they watched Mambyn’s reaction to this. Everyone waited to see how this would be answered. It had been clever, proving that they had not poisoned their weapon while not outright accusing their opponent of doing so. If Asparadane did not follow suit, it would be assumed he had.

Mambyn scowled. “My axe head will not fit in the bucket,” he said flatly.

“Wash it,” the king said tightly, with more venom than was diplomatic.

Selgan held out the cup to the cousin who slowly came forward with the axe, bracing it across the bucket’s mouth and took the cup. He scooped out water from the bucket and poured it on the blade, rubbing it lightly. He then flipped the axe and washed the spike. His hand trembled a little as he then drew more water from the bucket, spilling just a little before drinking it down.

He made a slight face at the taste of the water, muttered the word, “Metallic,” as explanation as Selgan lifted a brow at his expression.

Selgan then turned to the king and bowed. “I am satisfied, Your Majesty.”

The king raised his hand, “Then step back, clear the field and begin.”

Cae spared a glance around as she felt a spike of fear when the men put their helmets on and separated. She saw Malyna seated beside Rosemary, clutching the woman tightly. Vyncet offered her a hand, giving her a worried look. Glancing up, he met his sister’s eye and faintly nodded. Jehan sat beside her father with his arms over his chest, glaring out over the field.

Cae turned back, reaching blindly for Valan’s hand.

The combatants stepped to the centre of the field and saluted one another. Then, with a blood-curdling cry, Mambyn charged.



He aimed high for Will's head, leading with the spike, but Will deflected it with ease, countering with a stab of the morning-star. It scraped along the shield, gouging out a line of black paint, but drove Mambyn him back a half step from the force.

Will kept his shield close, waiting for the strike. He was in no hurry to wear himself out. Mambyn made three more, rapid attempts at him: axe to the neck, spike to the hip and shield to the helm; but Will deflected or dodged them all. When he made a fourth attempt, Will struck it upward with the shield and swung the morning star with all his weight. The spikes bit into the shoulder plate, putting a hefty dent and a number of small holes. Jerking the mace free nearly tore the pauldrons from his shoulder.

Mambyn staggered back, trying to find room to recover. His arm had to have gone a little numb from the force of the blow, but he held his shield close and swung the axe between them to ward him off. Will did not give him the time and stepped into the swing, taking the weak hit upon the arm and hammering his shield, edge first, into the chain gorget.

Mambyn fell back, choking. Will stood there, waiting, letting the man catch his breath. He outweighed Mambyn by a good seven stone or more, and knew how to best use and conserve his energy.

A moment passed and Mambyn suddenly charged, shield up and axe swinging in a wide arc. Will stepped into it, catching him before the blow could be completed and stopped, letting the man bounce off of him and following it up with a ramming headbutt to the visor that rocked his head back.

This seemed to enrage the smaller man, who retaliated with a flurry of blows, both with weapon and shield, and Will allowed most of them to land. The axe blade was easily deflected by the soft outward swoop of the plate edges and the shields locked up with one another, preventing either man from backing away. They hammered away at each other, Mambyn reaching around for Will's side and Will easily reaching over to hit the back as well as the helm, but none of the blows had enough force to be effective. Mambyn resorted to throwing punches.

Finally annoyed, Willam brought the mace cross-wise between them, grabbed hold of him somehow and with a twist of his body, brought Mambyn up and threw him to the ground. Once their shields slid free, Will brought the morning-star high and slammed it downward towards his head. Mambyn was only stunned by the act for a second, and managed to roll out of the way in time.

He scrambled to his feet even as Will stalked towards him, throwing some of the sands at his face. Cae could hear the sand hissing against the helm, though she doubt any made it through the visor. Will kept coming, more slowly than she knew he could move.

Mambyn grew a little smarter, deciding to play at cat and mouse, darting in for lightning strikes and dodging away again. Willam allowed all but the spike to land, the rest he deflected with either mace or shield. Mambyn got one lucky blow to the head with the axe blade, but the strike merely tore the visor from its mooring, leaving it hanging. Willam retaliated with a crunching strike to his side, right upon the seam of front and back plate, then calmly ripped the other of his visor half free and threw it aside.

Mambyn staggered back, clutching his side and gasping for a moment. When he drew back his hand, there was blood on it and the crowd roared. Feigning that he was more wounded than he actually was, he lured Will in for another strike and danced out of the way, shoving at him with the shield and hacking downward at the back of the knee with the axe.

Caelerys gasped in horror, covering her mouth to smother her scream of terror as Will went to his knee and the axe rose, twisting in the air and coming towards Will's head spike first. Then Will spun with lightning speed, bringing his other leg up and around to catch Mambyn at the hip and bore him to the ground with his full weight, slamming his shield into his face as he fell with him.

Behind her, Cae heard Larch smirk quietly, "I wonder where he learned to do that?"

Will was the first to his feet, stood back and kicked Mambyn in his dented side. His shout of "Get up, Viper!" was heard by everyone.

Mambyn scrambled to his feet, backing up to lift his visor, clearing sand and blood from his face. He grinned, hissed something at Will meant to drive him into a rage. Cae could not hear what he said, but it did not have the effect he wanted. Will still came towards him with inexorable calm and inevitable violence. Cae shuddered, feeling the white hot burn of Will's well-banked anger. It was like Jan's forge, stoked for a purpose, but held in check until needed. It was a calculating rage. In contrast, Mambyn was wild and growing desperate. His confidence was waning.

He hacked away, with Will batting aside maybe one in four strikes. Desperate, he swung the spike with both hands, aiming for Will's head. He raised his shield in time, but the spike went clean through the metal. Will looked casually up at the

spike a few inches from his helm and grunted, jerking down and twisting to try and free the shield of the weapon. His shield cracked.

He pulled it from his arm, letting his morning star hang from the strap at his wrist and ripped the spike free. He threw the weapon at Mambyn's feet and cast his shield away. Mambyn took a quick look at his own before he reached for his weapon and decided a fresh shield was also in order. He bellowed to his cousin even as Selgan was running out to the fighters, unasked, to bring Will a fresh shield. He stayed out only long enough to help Will into the straps before snatching up the remains of the old one and returning to the rail below the royal box.

Will waited patiently for Mambyn to strap on the fresh shield, verbally abusing his second as he did. Then Will said something that made Mambyn charge him, screaming in rage. Will sidestepped the charge with ease, striking a blow at his back as he ran past, then turning to wait for him to return.

Mambyn managed to turn, but came back more slowly, circling Will with crab-like steps, as he waited for an opening. Will hunkered down just a little, anticipated another charge. Eventually Mambyn obliged him, though this time he guessed that he'd be sidestepped again and spun as he passed, feinting with the shield and bringing the axe up to catch the underside of Will's shoulder plate. The force of the blow ripped the leather straps from their moorings and tore the pauldron clear off. He followed it with the edge of his shield, hammering into the unarmoured top of his calf. Fortunately, the shield's rim caught the rolled edge of the fan plate and skittered off without real damage.

Will spun, catching him on the back of the helm and sent him flying.

Mambyn rolled to his feet, straightening his helmet. He seemed surprised to have survived the blow. He crouched, bringing his shield up but seemed off balance. Will walked over, stopping just out of reach, said something. Only the words, "kidnapping my sister," were heard.

Mambyn tried to strike, seemed surprised to miss. Whist he was staring at his weapon where it hit the sand, Will backhanded him with the shield. Again, only a few words drifted to the crowd. "Your sister."

Mambyn staggered back but caught his balance and took advantage of the opening, struck at Will's midsection. He made a minor dent, but nothing more.

"For Kitlana, Halwyn, and Marshan," Will said, louder, swinging and catching him in the shoulder with the tip of the spikes.

Mambyn got his shield up too late, chose to charge, using it as a battering ram. Will sidestepped and tripped him, sending him sprawling to the sand. “For Cinder and Marta who had charge of them.”

Mambyn rolled, tried to rise and failed. He kicked at Will, trying to stall him or bring him down. The blow went wide.

The morning-star came down on his chest, glancing aside the spikes but still making a dent. “For Naeden who would have been married a gold month past. I was to stand for him,” Will growled.

Combat had wandered nearer to the stands as Mambyn tried to escape. Cae could sense both confusion and fear from him now.

Mambyn made it to his feet, swinging the spike over his head with both hands and striking Will at the join of the shoulder where the pauldron had been torn free. Blood welled through the exposed gambeson. Will merely nodded. “That’s one for you.”

He let his shield slip from his arm and reared back with the morning star. He swung it upwards, underhand, catching him on the edge of his chest plate. “For Queen Feranda, who was a better woman than her sister ever could have been.”

The crowd gasped as blood flew through the air and Mambyn staggered back further. The copper serpent from his breast plate went flying. Lord Selgan had to move further into the field to avoid the combat, thoughtfully dragging the stunned cousin with him. Mambyn made a weak thrust, his anger clear but his aim off by far too much. Cae leaned forward to see over the rail of the box, saw the trickling of blood from below the small holes in his helm.

Will’s blows rained faster. “For Lord Galen whom your mother nearly killed. For Queen Sigrun whom you tried to subvert. For the king you killed and the king you tried to suborn for your ambition. And lastly,” he paused, the morning star hanging limply at his side as he stared down at the battered and shocked traitor, “because you are an cruel, arrogant, entitled piece of shit that doesn’t deserve an honourable death,” he finished calmly, spitting at Mambyn’s feet. “But then, you hardly had a chance, did you?” he conceded, kicking away the helmet that had been battered from Mambyn’s head. “Sucking at that viper’s poisoned tit all your life.”

Mambyn surged at that, managing to find the strength to raise his axe one last time. The backhanded blow that caved in his skull seemed almost an afterthought. Will slipped the leather strap from his wrist, letting the weapon fall with the body, one of the spikes protruding from his eye.

Will walked away then, paused, remembering to turn and bow to the royal box. Lord Selgan had to grab him, to keep him from pitching forward.

With a cry, Cae was on her feet and running from the royal box, climbing through the railing to her brother's side, pressing her hand to the exposed shoulder. "Pressure!" she ordered. "I haven't the height or the strength."

Will managed to stand, in spite of Cae's pulling at him. Selgan replaced her hand with his, keeping pressure on the wound.

"I will walk out of here on my own two feet," he snarled.

"Then do so quickly before you bleed to death," Selgan retorted and began helping him from the field.

Cae attempted to help, but was swiftly replaced by Janem. He and Selgan each locked their arms across Will's shoulders, draping his arms across theirs, thus staunching the blood flow whilst they walked him towards the end of the lists. Cae ran ahead, to make certain there would be a Physician waiting.

He was already setting up when she got there, and she held the flaps open for them. By this point, Selgan and Jan were all but carrying Will. They sat him down and began swiftly unbuckling his armour. Cae knelt at his feet and began stripping his legs. She was relieved to see Harlan slip in, gathering up the pieces as she pulled them off.

No sooner had they peeled off his gambeson, the Physician stepped in. "Keep him in the chair, please. It will be easier to reach this."

"Tell me what you need," Cae said. "I've tended battlefields before."

He nodded, grateful, told her what to fetch from his things. They gave him a draught to dull physical sensations and Selgan and Jan had to hold him up, while trying not to be in the way. Finally, Cae grabbed Will's sword belt and used it to strap him upright in the chair.

Jan nodded gratefully and slipped out again, heading to inform the family what was going on.

The Physician allowed Cae to do the sewing whilst he prepared the poultice. In short order, Will had been doctored and cleaned up, with the rest of him inspected for unseen wounds.

"Were there any places upon his legs that might need attention?" the Physician asked her, since she had been the one to remove the armour there.

Cae shook her head. "There was no blood. He might be bruised on his calves and behind the knee, but I doubt anything more. Harlan knows what to do for that."

They struggled to get Will into the other chamber to lay down. “Feed him fortified wine, and rich meats: venison and boar, marrow broths and organ meats, especially liver.”

She nodded, thanking the man. Selgan escorted him out, bringing the single chair in for Caelerys. She sat beside him, with her hand upon his chest and Tempest at her feet. She monitored everything, from his breathing to making certain the bandage on his shoulder was not soaking through. Harlan popped in momentarily, to see if she needed anything. All she asked for was a glass of water and for him to run an errand for her.

He readily agreed and she sent him back to Stag’s Hall to fetch Colt with the pain tonic.

He did not return with the water. To her surprise, it was brought to her by Ikembe, who bowed as she gave it to her and said nothing, only setting her hand briefly upon her shoulder before taking up her post.

Cae could feel her dragon lurking about outside, sent him calming thoughts, but did not go to him.

More than half an hour passed when the boy returned with Colt and the tonic. In quiet tones, she drew them aside and explained to both of them what the injury was and how to monitor and treat it. Though Colt knew now how to make the tonic, she made certain that Harlan knew as well. “Always know what is in the medicines you give him, so you can tell the next healer what he is already taking before they administer anything else. Many things that are helpful by themselves are deadly mixed with certain others.”

The boy nodded and the two of them left the tent to report to the rest of those waiting.

“I do not need,” Will began from the cot.

She rushed to his side as he tried to sit up. He gave an involuntary cry of pain, and froze. “On second thought...” he groaned. “How much to dull the pain and not my head?”

“Only you would really know that,” she smiled, pouring him a small dose. “If you took it as I instructed when you routed the raiders.”

He nodded, remembering, looked into the tiny cup. “That looks about right.” He drank it down, holding the bitter liquid in his mouth a moment, then swallowed. “Actually a hair short, but it’ll do for now.”

She chuckled as he took what was left of her water and drank it to wash away the taste. “Not quite a swallow?”

“Not quite the half swallow I was taking.”

She grinned. “Oh, right, I forget you can drain a tankard in three.”

“Five,” he corrected. “Uncle is three.”

She called for Harlan to return, to help him get dressed. Because of the limits to his mobility, Cae stepped in to help.

“So what did he say to you to try and goad you?” she asked.

“Vile untruths that none-the-less would damage you if they had been heard,” he said without emotion.

Cae sensed something in him and did not press. “Well, what did you say to him that made him fly into such a rage?”

He shrugged into his tunic, “I suggested his mother suborned him by seduction rather than potion.”

“Ah,” she said, impressed as she straightened the fabric at his back. “And the things you said about King Rorlan’s family? Laying the blame for their deaths at his feet?”

He gave her a long look as Harlan helped him into his long vest and belted it. “I had a very long talk with Malyna.”

Jehan poked his head into the side chamber as they were helping him into his cote. “You presentable yet? There are people waiting to see you.”

“I’ll be out as soon as I get my boots back on,” he said, sitting so that Harlan could help him.

Cae gave him a peck on the cheek. “I will see you outside then.”

He nodded and she slipped out.

Larch was standing guard at the doorway and Valan paced not far away, deep in conversation with Lord Selgan. She stepped up beside him and slipped her arm around him. He pulled her in, a little surprised by the gesture and squeezed. He chuckled. “Post battle fatigue?” he asked softly.

She looked up at him, exasperated. “Can we get married now? Before anything else happens?”

He held her tighter. “Oh, that we only could. It would be uncaring of us to do so right now.”

“Not to mention a bad omen,” added Selgan, “marrying on the eve of a death like this.”

She looked over at him, nodding reluctantly. “I know. But still... I don’t want anything else to plague us.”

Selgan eyed her, “After that display? I highly doubt any would dare.”

“Dare what?” asked Willam, stopping in the doorway to carefully stretch. Harlan slipped out from behind him and darted off.

What few people were mingling on this side of the tourney grounds gave him a wide berth and watched him with a quiet sense of awe.

“Do something else stupid to delay or try to stop this wedding,” Cae growled.

Will shifted his shoulders, cracking his back audibly. “Let them try,” he said, his voice low and full of menace.

Valan gave him a solemn nod. “Are you ready to face the court, my lord?” he asked.

“If I must. And I know that I must. They have waited long enough.”

“Less than an hour, I think,” Selgan commented. “Can you sit a horse?”

“I hope so,” Will quipped. “Considering my squire was just sent to fetch it.”

It did not take long before all their horses were brought and the party mounted. Valan sent a page on ahead to alert the king that they were on their way. They set a walking pace, to spare Will any jarring, and so, before they had reached the gates of the city, the people had begun to gather to watch the procession. They cheered his passing, once they saw that he was whole.

Cae realized that most of them had not seen the fight itself, only been told the outcome. She had to wonder what the reaction would have been if it had been Mambyn on this walk.

When they entered the gates of the Citadel, the guards saluted, and horse-boys ran up to take their bridles. Will dismounted carefully, thanking the Mother under his breath that it had been his shield arm that had been damaged.

Valan helped Cae from her horse and took her arm, leading her to the steps where they paused to wait for Will. When the rest of them had caught up, he gestured for Willam to precede them.

“Precedence,” Will said, confused.

Valan smiled. “Ah, but you are the man of the hour and I insist.”

Will conceded, and strode forth. He moved slower than normally, but that was to be expected. Cae was certain he was going to sleep a lot in the next few days. Valan drew her along beside him, a few paces behind Willam, and Harlan dropped back to walk behind Ikembe and Larch who had stepped to flank the prince and his lady.

Entering the atrium, they saw that the doors to the throne room stood open and the crowd spilled out of it. Cae thought it possible that there were more people here now than had attended the coronation.



Somewhere a trumpet blared, and those not in the throne room bowed or curtsayed, followed soon by those within the throne room. Cae watched the reactions of those they passed, felt their emotions. The bows were all for Willam. That the prince walked behind him was only a secondary cause. The sense of fear and awe was thick in the air, and respect deepened with their surprise at his resiliency. Everyone here had seen the punishment his body had taken and wondered that he was even walking. She noticed the way some of the ladies watched him with desire and hunger, thought them very likely the women who had gawked the day Will and the prince had tangled. Even the royal court was subdued as they approached.

The king stood as they neared and Malyna waited just off to the side of the dais on Vyncet's arm. When Willam stopped just shy of the end of the carpet, Malyna stepped away from his brother and curtsayed before him, thanking her champion. He held out his hand to her and drew her to his side, and both bowed before the king whilst Valan quietly led the rest of his retinue around them to their places upon the dais.

Cae still did not know how she felt about standing up here whilst her family stood upon the floor, but she realized it was something she was just going to have to get used to.

When her brother and Malyna rose, the king bowed, though not as deeply. "Lord Willam Maral, the crown thanks you for your service as champion in this matter. You have served us well," said the king.

Willam bowed his head in acknowledgement and drew Malyna further forward.

"Lady Malyna Asparadane," the king continued, "by the grace of the Mother and the right of arms, you have proved your veracity and your eldest brother's complicity in the plot against the throne. Let no man or woman in this kingdom doubt your words." With a gesture, he waved the both of them to stand with the family, and, after bowing once more, Will led her over beside his father. "Let the prisoner be brought forth."

Malyn was led over from where he had been held against the wall, still in chains and well guarded. He looked a little the worse for wear and white as a sheet. Clearly he had been allowed to witness the battle. At the moment, he was a frightened sixteen year old boy. He barely remembered to bow.

"Malyn Asparadane," the king intoned. "You have been accused of unlordly behaviour, and defiance of my own order that your sister was no longer a matter for your House. Your behaviour towards the fairer sex is appalling if anything I have recently heard of you is true. You are now the eldest of your House by right of suc-

cession, though you have cousins aplenty. I will not yet be removing you from the lordship of it.”

Cae felt immediate relief from the boy, as well as a surge of curling vengeance. It was swiftly quelled by the king’s next words.

“However, you have proved you are not yet ready, nor is your family capable of controlling you or, indeed, teaching you any better. Therefore I am fostering you until your eighteenth birthday to Lord Halbourne, who shall be granted permission to discipline you as he sees fit. If, upon your eighteenth birthday, you are brought before me by Lord Halbourne and deemed reformed and worthy of the title, you shall be granted your lordship. If you are not... then I shall strip you of your title and pass you into the accounting of the remains of your family to deal with you as they deem fit. In the meanwhile, your cousin lord Unther Asparadane, shall have the dominion of the House and its vassals, and likewise be brought to measure in two years time.” He turned his eye upon the man in the crowd, “You have this time in which to get this House in order and your vassals brought to appropriate respect. Tread carefully, Unther. I am to understand there is much in the way of sewage under your House.”

The man bowed, and Cae felt a sense of vindication and opportunity rising above the fear of the threat.

“Now,” the king sighed, “if there is anything else?”

Cae was a little surprised that her father asked to be rolled to the carpet. He and Vyncet bowed as the crown acknowledged them. She got the sense from the three of them that they knew what was about, but no one else did. The king was both pleased and irritated, the latter at himself for forgetting, but pleased at what was to come. There was a shred of regret as well.

The herald hastily stepped forward to announce, “The crown recognizes Duke Elyas Maral.”

“If it pleases, Your Majesty,” her father said. “It will be duke no longer.”

There was a gasp and a rash of murmurs from the crowd and Cae felt her heart skip. Will looked to his father with a frown, surprised and not entirely pleased.

The king nodded for him to go on.

“I am, truthfully, no longer personally capable of defending my lands, and the management of them grows more difficult in light of my infirmity. I cannot do as I once did, and ride amongst my people to know their needs and have them know their lord as I feel they should. Therefore, I wish to retire quietly, and provide what assistance I can to my son, Willam, whom I would raise to duke in my stead.”

The king smiled, bowing his head formally. "I have no objection."

Vyncet, grinning like a fool, moved their father forward and turned him around, having to step up onto the first step of the dais and backing him up all the way and then stood off to the side. Cae wiped away a tear as she watched Will's stunned face.

"Well, come on, son," her father urged.

There was a quiet ripple of polite laughter.

Will was finally nudged forth by Janem, who all but pushed him.

Meanwhile, the duke had taken off the simple coronet of tempered steel that he wore. While her House had the right to any metal they chose, steel said something about the House that her father felt was more valuable than silver that required too much care. Cae knew that coronet was modestly embellished with two stags coming together, head first, at the front centre, their antlers rising only a few inches above the rolled rim. Cae had a feeling that it would not be long before it was replaced with one of moonsilver, if Janem had anything to do with it.

Will was slow to move, and slower to kneel before his father.

"There aren't really many precedents for this, son. So, I'm sorry I do not have a fancy speech prepared. But that wouldn't be us anyway, would it?"

There was a quiet "No, sir," from Will, tinged with amusement. He was still stunned, and more than a little light-headed.

"I've raised you right, and prepared you for this to the best of my ability. I know you will do well by the family, by the House, by the lands and all who look to you for support, guidance and protection." With that, he set the coronet upon Will's brow and bade him stand. Elyas was the first to bow to him, which brought a tear to Will's eye where little else could have.

Willam took a deep breath, then a step back and bowed first to the king, then turned to the crowd who immediately bowed to him. There were unified shouts of 'all hail, Duke Willam Maral', which made Cae's heart sing. And her father's apparently, as she saw him reach out to clutch Vynce's hand for emotional support. Their uncle Jehan's voice was the loudest of all, followed closely by nearly the entire pack of Marroks.

The herald then dismissed the court and the king stepped down to congratulate the new duke on a more intimate level. Cae approached as the king was saying jovially, "I daresay you'll come to regret it more than once in the next few months alone."

"I do have much to attend to," he admitted.

Cae smiled up at him. "So, who will sign my contract? The man who wrote it, or the new duke?"

"Which would you prefer?" he asked.

That made her think. "I think it would please me if you both would. But I am not certain what precedent that would set, or politically what it would say."

Balaran grinned from the other side of the king. "Well, seeing as it's Elyas Maral on the contract, both will have to. Unless we want to bother with rewriting it?" he shrugged. "Because only Willam may now apply the Ducal seal."

Her father chuckled. "Well, it was bound to cause all sorts of interesting snaggles. It's not like such titles usually pass whilst the old one still breathes. It's usually such a sombre affair."

"That's because it usually means someone just died," quipped Jehan, taking control of the wheeled chair from Vyncet.

The king chuckled softly, nodding his head to them. "I think I will take my queen for a walk in the gardens and leave you to discuss family matters," he said, casting an eye towards the more subdued Malyna.

As the king began to withdraw he bade his sons to follow. When Valan hesitated, unwilling to leave Cae, he growled with mock severity. "She's not yours yet, boy. Give her some space."

Valan grudgingly agreed and paused only to kiss her hand before following his brother.

The small group then grew exponentially, as people came up to congratulate Willam.

Cae drew back, slipping out of the crowd and moving over to check on Malyna and Rosemary, who was standing surprisingly tall in light of the company she was surrounded by. She asked Malyna if she was all right.

She fidgeted with her hands, but nodded. "I... I don't really know how to feel," she admitted.

"You feel how you feel," Cae shrugged. "And to the Abyss with how you're 'supposed' to anything."

Malyna looked a little shocked at her language.

Cae gave a soft laugh. "Sorry, but you've got one of two choices where that is concerned. Get used to it, or..."

"Or what?" she asked, timidly.

"Or learn not to hear things not meant for a lady's ears."

"Here here," Rosemary added.

“I grew very adept at at least pretending I hadn’t heard one improper word,” Cae said. “It will serve you well.”

“I shall try to remember that, and to school my expressions.”

“That’s the hardest part,” Liliwyn said, coming up to them with Syera in tow.

“Let’s go out into the gardens,” Syera suggested. “It is getting a little stuffy in here.”

The ladies took themselves outside, striving to find a place away from the largest amount of people now milling about the property looking for gossip.

“Has anyone seen lady Robyne of late?” Cae asked suddenly. “I mean, since the last court.”

Syera frowned. “I can’t say as she was *at* the last court. Though it would be foolish of her to show her face at this point. It would not surprise me if her customers haven’t driven her out of town.”

“I wish I knew,” Malyna groaned. “That is one it is best to know the location of, rather than not.”

“You think she is still dangerous?” Lili asked.

“Very likely. But she’s out for herself far more than anything else. If she wasn’t directly harmed, she’ll be more likely to slink away.”

Syera shook her head, “I don’t know, I would consider the loss of my livelihood ‘significant harm.’”

“I can ask Janem later,” Cae said. “He’ll know people who will know.”

Liliwyn was thoughtful at that. “Hmm, I think he and Bal ought to work more closely together.”

Cae laughed. “Only if you are all right with him disappearing into taverns for hours on end.”

Malyna frowned again. “Your brother is a very hard worker,” she said. “I wouldn’t think he’d be in and out of taverns at all hours.”

“He does work hard,” Cae admitted. “He plays, too. And when he’s worn from work, he goes to the tavern. There’s good food, common people, good drink. They know him and like him. That’s how he’s able to get half the information he does. Though I daresay his current schedule has put a slight damper on that.”

“So,” Liliwyn began, nudging Malyna once they were far enough away from too many people, “how *do* you feel?”

Malyna sighed. “Lost, really. It’s a little like getting married, in that I’m of my House no more, I’m away from everything I know and having to get used to new customs and ways. But without the ...marital duties part, of course.”

“Oh, of course,” they replied.

“But... I feel safe for once. I mean really safe. Though I feel sorry for Malyn, being handed over to the Halbournes.”

“They can be kind of rough,” Syera conceded.

“But he might be the better for it. I feel guilty, but I almost hope that he won't be deemed worthy, because I know the House is better off with cousin Unther.”

“And about Mambyn?” Lili prompted.

“I feel...,” she paused, searching for words to express the complicated emotions within her. “I feel relief. He was almost as self important as Malyn, and much more cruel and devious. I wouldn't have felt safe as long as he lived. Especially if he had won that fight. I'm glad he didn't.” She looked up at Cae suddenly, “Was he playing with him? Willam, I mean. Was Willam playing with my brother?”

“I don't think so,” she answered slowly. “Not in the way you mean. Will doesn't like killing unless he has to. An arena like that... he's trained himself to win without killing. Put him on a real field of combat like Tombolo and he will not hesitate. What you saw was nothing to what I've seen. Mambyn was with them on that trip to route the raiders, wasn't he? He should have known what Will was capable of.”

Cae took a moment to think. “Did Will use his full potential against your brother? No, he did not. Had he, the fight would have ended shortly after it began. Did he do it to torment Mambyn, to give him false hope? No, I don't think so. That's not Will's way. He was trying to hold his anger in check, to keep from shifting. He felt no real emotions on that field. He did not take pleasure in torturing him. He simply made certain he did not make a fatal mistake.”

Malyna nodded, sniffing just a little. “Mambyn thought he was playing with Lord Willam. I don't think he realized how outclassed he was until the end, when he was hit in the head enough to rock his wits.”

“I was kind of surprised that blow didn't end the fight right there,” Syera commented.

“So was Mambyn,” Cae admitted. “I saw blood running down his neck under the helm. I think the spikes went into the brain,” she said softly.

“How did he get up from the blow then?” Malyna asked, confused.

Liliwyn answered. “I've seen men take an arrow to the head and survive. Not unchanged, mind, but survive. Sometimes it is their personality, sometimes their wits, sometimes their balance. I think that's what happened to Mambyn, why he kept missing after that. I've known men struck blind by a blow to the head that left their eyes perfectly intact.”

Cae nodded, and Liliwyn thoughtfully turned the conversation to Cae's impending wedding. A topic which entertained them for a few hours until they made their way back to the terrace, hoping for something to drink and maybe a bite to eat. They found a seating area under an awning relatively empty and commandeered it for themselves. Syera sent a servant for refreshments.

Will joined them before the food arrived. He sank onto the bench beside his sister, shooing off the bird who sullenly walked over to Cae's other shoulder to resume her nap. He groaned as he sat.

She moved to check his shoulder, slipping an expert hand up under his tunic before he could complain and checked it gently for wetness. He was dry. She sighed. "Rough first morning as duke?" she teased.

"If I hear the phrase 'I have a daughter...' one more time, I may lose control of my temper," he growled.

The ladies giggled at that. "Well," Syera said playfully, "since all the most important eligible men have been taken off the market, you are now the most desirable. You've been twice, no, three times tested in as many gold months and once right in front of them. I'm not surprised that the ladies are swooning over you and clamouring for their daddies to ask."

He gave her a glare that said a great deal more than just chastisement for her teasing. "And for how many of them is it for my fighting prowess, my recently displayed honour, and how many for the band of metal that is still warm from my father's brow?"

"A little of it all, I should dare say," Liliwyn commented. "You were always going to be the duke."

"So what have you told them?" Cae asked casually.

"That I am in the middle of marrying off my sister and my brother and I have to settle in as duke before I can even consider any offers of marriage," he sighed.

"And they believed you?" Cae grinned. He glared at her. "I know, it is the truth. But you know very well that they are going to send the offers to both the Hall and Taluscliff anyway. You'll have to consider them."

"I have to determine what our situation is, before I can determine what is best for it," he snapped. He took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "Forgive me, ladies," he said. "I am weary beyond that which I am accustomed to, and it wears on my temper. I should not, however, take it out upon you."

Tempest walked back over and nibbled affectionately at his ear. He pulled away and looked warily at her, then relented and stroked her neck.

“Well, I think you’ve done your duty for the day,” Cae smiled. “You should go home and rest,” she said as she passed him the cup of cider that Ikembe handed her.

He took a sip. “I should.” He drank more deeply. “I should eat, too. I should find Harlan and have my horse readied.”

“I doubt anyone will question your right to rest at present,” Lili smiled, choosing something fortifying from the food brought and passing it to him.

“Though the fact that you haven’t, after what they’ve seen you take...” Syera began. “I think even Valan would hesitate to confront you in a fight.”

“He already knew that,” Will smirked, leaning back and closing his eyes.

“He did and he didn’t,” she said. “It is one thing to fight beside it, when you are distracted by combat. It is quite another to watch it happen to someone else. Personally, I don’t know which would terrify me more: rampaging stag Will, or cold and calculating human Will.”

“In a fight?” Cae commented, “Cold Will. You have a chance to out-think Raging Will,” she smiled. “Though it is a very brief chance.”

Lili nodded, her eyes widening slightly. “He is frightfully fast for a man his size.”

As the ladies talked him up and tittered around him, the infernal man had gone to sleep. This only made them giggle more, though Cae very carefully checked him over. His breathing was deep and regular. Laying her ear against his chest, she found his heart beat what she expected and relaxed.

Cae asked after Galen in her normal tone. The others were quick to urge her to keep her voice low. Cae just smiled. “If you whisper, he’ll wake up for certain. He’s too much like father. If the noise level remains whatever it was when he fell asleep, he’ll stay asleep. The moment it gets too quiet or he hears whispering, he’ll be up in a shot. And right now, I’d rather he didn’t wake up like that.”

Half afraid she was wrong, Lili ventured to keep her voice not too soft as she answered the question about her brother. “He’ll be on his feet for the wedding, but is forbidden to dance. They’re trying to make sure he saves his strength. He’ll need plenty of rest still, but should be completely healed in a little over a week.”

“I am glad. It would have been horrible if he had died from it,” Malyna said quietly. “Your father’s mistress is very nice,” she said to Cae, daring to change the subject.



“There is something different about her, though,” Caelerys commented. “I have to wonder what it was the queen told her. She’s been much less... skittish since.”

“I’ve noticed,” offered Liliwyn. “Before she seemed like... she was dressing up in her lady’s clothes and was afraid of getting caught.”

Cae smiled. “That is exactly how she felt. She didn’t want my father to declare her his formal mistress because of her birth station. She was terrified he would be derided for it.”

Syera nodded, “Mother probably told her that if she acted the part no one would know the difference.”

“I daresay it’s worked,” Malyna commented, sipping her tea. “I have no idea what her station was.”

Lili and Cae looked at each other and just giggled. “I am glad you like her,” Cae told Malyna when she looked at them in confusion, fearing she was the one being laughed at. “She takes very good care of my father and raised my brother well.”

“She’s Janem’s mother, isn’t she?” Malyna asked.

Cae nodded. “When she thought she wasn’t going to have another child after Landyn, mother made him take a concubine.”

“She was a concubine?” Malyna asked in shock. “That would make her...”

“Third estate, yes,” Cae nodded. “Father cares a great deal for her, even though she only gave him the one. But then mother kept turning up unexpectedly pregnant,” she smiled. “She loves my father, and only wants the best for him and us. She was very good to us growing up. Even after she was set aside.”

“I’m glad he has someone to look after him, all things considered,” Syera sighed.

“He’s made provision?” Lili asked, ever practical.

Cae nodded.

She heard her uncle coming before she saw him, his arm thrown around the neck of Master Olen with Vyncet bringing up the rear. “Niece!” he bellowed when he saw her. “There she is!”

She gestured for him to keep his voice down, pointing at Will. He began to make exaggerated gestures of quiet as he came under the awning to join them. “What is it, uncle?” she asked, nodding to the Master of the Hunt. “Master Olen,” she said politely.

He merely smiled, letting Jehan do the speaking for him. “We are going on a hunt,” Jehan told her quietly.

“Oh?” she asked, her heart leapt but sank again, knowing she would not get to go.

“Yeah, we need to get fresh meat, venison, for the new duke,” he said, pointing at his sleeping nephew. “Make his blood strong. So, you coming?” he asked, cajoling her. “It’d be nice to have most of the family together for a hunt. I mean, you’re already half dressed for it.”

Her heart leapt again. “Wait... you want me? I can go?”

Master Olen nodded. “Not like that, of course. Like we discussed. And it’d have to be within the hour, to be safe. It’s just to be a small party. My nephew can come too, if he wants and if he follows your rules.”

“Has the king... agreed to this?” she asked, afraid to hope.

“I asked him myself,” crowed Jehan, then dropping his voice again. “I asked when I asked permission to hunt for Will. Cause he needs the meat now and it would take too long to wind a party into the Reach portion of the Mistwood. Told him it would do you good.”

“And I promised to keep you safe and none the wiser,” injected Olen.

Cae glanced back at Ikembe. The woman thought the matter over, then nodded. “So long as I go, too. I am a fair hand with bow and arrow.”

“Leave already!” snarled Will without moving or opening his eyes. “It’s the only way I’m going to get any peace around here.”

Grinning like a fool, she bent to kiss his cheek.

“Just watch out for boar,” he added. How he managed that without grinning was beyond her understanding.

Lili made shooing gestures. “Go on. I’ll stay with Malyna.”

“And I’ll keep an eye on Willam,” Syera offered.

Cae smiled softly at that, though she tried to hide it. She paused to kiss her friends, startling Malyna by including her. When she kissed Syera, she only whispered the word, “Patience.”

Syera pushed at her playfully shooing her off.

Ikembe and Cae moved as swiftly as they dared back to her rooms, donning the huntsman’s disguise that they had acquired for her a while ago but never got to use. She made Tempest remain behind with promises of meadow hunting soon, and hurried to dress.

Hiding her sex and clothing beneath a cloak and hood, she and Ikembe, identically attired, slipped into the secret passages where she was met by a waiting

Valan. Had she not been so in tune with him, she would have taken him for any huntsman. He had taken oil and ashes and combed it through his golden locks.

She stepped up to him and took a deep breath. She exhaled with a sigh. “You’ll do,” she smiled. “Though you might want to rub a little something on your clothes when we get out there.” She fingered a single stray lock sadly. “This will wash out, yes?”

He laughed, began leading them down the corridor. “What, you don’t like me as a dirty blonde?”

“No,” she simpered, “I don’t.”

He pulled her to him, growling as he made a play for her exposed neck. She tightened her shoulders up, stifling a squeal as she tried to escape him. Ikembe quietly reminded them that they were in places that were not supposed to exist, and Valan laid off, leading them down into a servant’s hallway on the first floor. From there, they casually walked out of a side-door to the stables, mounted up and rode out.

Cae was a little disappointed that she and Valan were not upon their usual steeds. She could only imagine Wraith inside the stable fretting at having been left behind. She even had to carefully keep her bow and quiver hidden by her cloak.

They rode out without any fanfare or acknowledgement beyond a ‘good luck’ from the gate guards, and headed around the wall to the tourney grounds. They were all but deserted. Only those that lived and worked here remained, along with the few that were finishing the disassembly of the two pavilions. They rode past them to the stables, where, to Cae’s surprise, they stopped.

Valan dismounted and started to help her do the same, but she quickly got on her own. He grinned as a stable hand led out his own smoky black stallion as well as Cae’s high-stepping Wraith. She looked in askance at Master Olen who shrugged. “It would not do to have you on a mount you are not used to, my lady. Besides, she’s been itching for this as much as you, and no one out here will give up the game.” He turned his horse’s head around. “Do not keep us waiting, nephew, my lady.”

She caught the smile from him as she led her mount to the stable hand holding Wraith and traded horses with him. Wraith was indeed itching to be away. Cae flung herself into the saddle and caught up to the hunting party with Valan on her heels.

It was nearing twilight, and the deer were coming out to graze. Game was sur-



prisingly plentiful for the time of year and the hunt was good. Valan took one with

a single antler clinging on stubbornly, and Caelerys took down a decent buck, for all he was without his rack. She had to chase him down a fair distance, but took him cleanly. Wraith was nearly as single minded as she was on the subject, racing up until she was almost alongside him.

At one point, Cae heard the squeal of a boar, and felt her blood turn to ice, but it was a goodly ways away, and Master Olen broke off with a smaller party of men to take it.

They were kneeling beside her kill, waiting for the bearers to come and collect the carcass, when Valan asked her a question.

“It has suddenly occurred to me to wonder,” he began. “As a sympathy, and aware of the emotions of everything, animals included... how is it you can hunt?”

She stopped, looking at him, for a moment, lost in the question. “I think... well, just then, I knew he was frightened, that he was running for his life. But I also knew that I had done no more than a wolf would have, and killed cleaner. I felt more one with the hunters, with Wraith. My purpose is understanding. And I understand that to hunt is to eat, for a great many things. I could never hunt for sport, I have no understanding for that.” She stroked the great beast’s head as she thought. “I understand his purpose as well as mine. I can take joy in a successful hunt because it means my pack will eat. I think I will also know when to hold my shot.”

He reached out and took her hand. “I worried that you might feel the kills as you felt the fears and emotions of the crowd, the death of the toomi that long ago day.”

She shook her head. “That toomi died of heartache, because of something that did not need to happen. Her death was senseless, and I... I had felt the death she felt, when her other half died. I shall likely feel that too, if you die before me.”

“I don’t want to even contemplate that.”

She gave him a soft smile. “Then do not ever forget to harden your scales.”

In response, she felt his hand go scaly without changing size or shape, first soft, then carapace hard. He grinned, “I’ve been working with Uncle.”

“Who clearly cannot leave the pair of you alone for more than a minute,” said Master Olen, walking silently up to them.

He bent to look over her deer, nodded, content. “Good shot. Clean kill.”

Cae blushed, slipping her hand from Valan’s a little sheepishly. She looked around for Ikembe, didn’t see her. Olen caught her looking and nodded his head off to the left of her. “She’s over there, investigating something of questionable security or other.”

Cae saw her finally, walking back towards them. “What was it?” she called.

“I thought were a pig, but it was not. I convinced the thing to stalk other prey.”

The bearers began to arrive, carrying lighted torches. They bound the deer to a pole to enable them to carry it back with the others.

Master Olen held Wraith’s bridle whilst Valan helped her into the saddle. “We have enough for now. And it grows late.”

Cae smiled. “Thank you for allowing me this release, Master Olen. I have greatly appreciated it.”

“And badly needed it, I dare say,” he grinned.

“That, too,” she blushed. “Though there is an advantage for us coming back after dark.”

“What’s that?” Valan asked, vaulting into the saddle.

“No one will look twice at either us or our mounts.”

He frowned. “I would still rather not risk it.”

“I concur,” said Ikembe, mounting.

Sighing, they turned to follow where the bearers with the torches led.

In the end, they returned as they had left, though Cae’s deer was borne to Stag’s Hall at Master Olen’s instruction. Cae left Valan in the secret passage, to find a bath and a meal waiting for her. She was intensely grateful for both. Sleep, when it came, was, thankfully, uneventful.



The next morning found young Harlan knocking at her door. He was admitted as Cae was finishing her breakfast and the overgown was being lain out for a fitting. His eyes bugged out at the mountain of dark blue velvet. She smiled at him, amused by his gawking. Then she noticed how smartly he was dressed.

“And what is it you are about this early morn, young squire?” she asked. Her formality shocked him out of his stupor.

“Oh, sorry, my lady. It’s just... are they going to be able to see you under all that?”

She chuckled. “You’ll see, same as everyone else. You are here for a reason? With a message, perhaps?”

He shook himself and stood straighter, bowing formally. “I have a message, my lady. May I speak softly?”

She nodded, curious.

He stepped closer and bent to whisper, still with the same, stiff formality. “My Lord the Duke would like the honour of your lovely presence tonight at Stag’s Hall for a dinner in honour of the living ascension.”

“Living ascension?” she asked just as softly.

“Aye, my lady. Seeing as he ascended whilst his father still lives. Will you come?”

“Who is asking? Will or father?”

“Lord Elyas, my lady. But the duke is allowing it.”

She smiled. “Likely he’s still not strong enough to object.”

“Or it is an excuse to get you all under one roof again,” Fern offered softly.

Harlan glared at her, as clearly he had been told to make sure no one overheard, but he nodded. “I guess that would mean you, too, Ferny.”

She blushed at her childhood nickname and drew herself up. “My lady, they are ready for you.”

Cae nodded, turning back to Harlan, wrapping a sweet bun in a napkin and handing it to him. “I imagine you have other visits to make?”

He bowed, the bun swiftly vanishing into his pocket. “I do, my lady, thank you. And for your safety, you are being asked to be discreet about matters.”

She nodded again. “I understand. See you tonight.”

The boy bowed and left the room.

Cae submitted herself to the fitting, with Ikembe watching like a hawk as they measured and pinned her within an inch of her life. Once the dress was pinned and the seamstresses whisked off with it for the final adjustments, Cae sat down with Ikembe and Fern to discuss that night.

“How to get there discreetly?” Cae mused. “Another diversion?”

Fern was thoughtful. “I suppose I could loan you one of my gowns, and we’d just look like a trio of maids on a night out.”

“That is an idea.”

Sorrel interrupted at this point with information that the princes were at the door and was my lady prepared to receive?

Cae smiled. “Yes, Sorrel, you may let them in.” She turned back to Fern and Ikembe. “Maybe he’ll have some ideas.”

Ikembe nodded. “I do not see your Lord Father not inviting them.”

Fern frowned. “If members of the royal family are going, how are we to keep it discreet?”

There was a laugh from the door as the princes entered. “By not advertising ahead of time,” Bal chuckled.

“We’re all going,” Valan added. “Father, mother, Syera and all.”

“Janniston and Verlan too?” Cae asked, rising to give Valan a kiss. He crushed her to him and took more than the light peck she was offering.

She melted for a moment, before becoming aware of Balaran's amusement, pulling away enough to reach out and swat his arm.

"Ah!" he exclaimed dramatically, clutching the limb. "An assault upon my princely person!"

"You deserved it," Valan grinned. "If she didn't, I would have."

Cae gave him a pert tip of her head. "That's what it means to be in a Maral's 'brother camp'," she said airily

He groaned.

They took the seats that Ikembe and Fern vacated. "So how are we doing this?"

"Carefully," Bal said. "And no, the boys are not going."

"Aw," she said. "I agree that Verlan is too young and too risky, but Janniston would have a ball with Harlan and Marko. They're about of an age."

"That might be what mother is afraid of, but I'll ask her," Valan sighed, taking her hand. "I believe we're just going to pile into carriages and ride out. No one but the drivers are going to know to where, and no one will know we're going anywhere until the carriages are ordered."

"Who all is going? Do we have any idea?" Cae asked.

"Don't you know? It's your family," Bal grinned.

She glared at him. "Like they tell me anything? Harlan was the soul of discretion and I did not ask."

Valan took pity on her, "Well, all members of your family, which includes Janem, presumably. Five members of the royal family and their brides."

She smiled, relieved. "So Liliwyn, too. Good."

"That's just from the Citadel. I have no idea who else will be going from outside."

She nodded. "Probably the top of the Great Houses, plus what ever Maral vassals are in town. Marrok's for certain."

"Sounds like fun," Balaran grinned.

"Sounds crowded," she sighed.

Valan laughed, rising and pulling her to her feet. "Then let us air you out now. A walk in the gardens?"

Tempest was on her shoulder immediately, chirping an acceptance for her.

It was just before dusk when Valan came to collect her and Fern and Ikembe. He was dressed plainly, but well. He took in her dusty rose coloured gown with its simple cut and lack of rich embellishment and nodded his approval. Both Fern and Ikembe were wearing clothes other than their usual blue gowns of service. Fern's



was a deep, cheerful green over a fine wool chemise for warmth. It was the dress she wore on her days off. Ikembe was in a deep brown borrowed from Rosie for the evening. All three of them wore cloaks against the cold. Tempest had already been sent to Stag's Hall, so as not to give them away.

As Valan led them down a back staircase, she asked him quietly, "Will there ever come a time when we can dispense with such subterfuge?"

"Perhaps," he sighed. "But until your candle is lit, I will take no chances. We are not certain we have all the pockets of resistance, though I think for the moment, all thoughts of more open rebellion and snatches at power are on hold."

She sighed herself. "One day."

He just smiled and covered the hand on his arm with his own.

There was a plain little coach waiting for them in the yard pulled by two plain brown pladders. Cae smiled as Ikembe climbed inside before Valan handed her in. He gestured for even Fern to precede him, before climbing in himself. Before they knew it, they were trotting along the road, out of the Citadel towards Stag Hall.

It did not take long before they were disembarking in the yard of the well-lit house and the coach was trotting back out again.

They were welcomed into the house without much fanfare or obeisances beyond politeness of servant to guest. It was not until the doors were closed behind them that anyone behaved as if there were a prince in their midst.

Willam met them at the foot of the staircase and bowed once the door closed. The servants who took their cloaks, likewise bowed, acknowledging his royalty.

"Your Highness, welcome to my residence."

Playing along, Cae curtsied before her brother, even as Valan bowed formally. "Your Grace," said the prince.

Will closed his eyes for a moment, still trying to get used to the title. "For the sake of comfort and security, this is the last time anyone in this house will treat you as royalty for the rest of your evening here. I bid you to unburden yourself of your crown for one night, and breathe as an ordinary man, free of such obligations. Tonight, you are merely my sister's betrothed."

Valan grinned, even as Cae was confused. "I freely accept, Your Grace. And let that be the last time I address you so tonight. In three nights hence, you shall be as my brother."

Will nodded his acknowledgement and crossed to take Valan's hand, clasping it firmly. "Very well then, supper will be held in the great hall, just through those

doors. Selgan and his wife are here already, and Vyncet is entertaining them whilst he awaits the arrival of his own fair maid.”

Valan nodded.

Will turned to his sister, cocking an eyebrow at her. “Ask.”

She tried not to grin, “How much of this was father’s idea and how much yours?”

He tilted his head towards the solar. “Go ask him yourself. He wanted to see you anyway,” he said, placing a kiss on her cheek.

She started to head in that direction, but Valan caught her arm. She looked back, confused. He did not say anything, but placed her arm in his and walked with her.

“Highly unnecessary,” she muttered.

“Highly enjoyable,” he countered.

They found the former duke seated by the fire with a tankard, engaged in a conversation with his brother. Rosemary lurked nearby, came over to kiss Cae’s cheek. She had to stop herself from curtsying to Valan, which only amused him. He made her blush by taking her hand and kissing it. Without much said, she made her way to Fern and whisked the girl off.

Jehan noticed them as Tempest flew from her perch by the fire to land happily on her shoulder. “Ah, the happy couple!” he crowed, raising his tankard.

“Uncle, are you drunk already?” she asked, kissing him.

He just laughed. “Not even slightly.” He gave her a strong, one armed hug, deftly avoiding the falcon, then gave Valan a thump on the back. “So, you’ve done more than duel for your maid,” he grinned. “Just be glad you didn’t have to fight your own brother for her!”

Cae’s jaw dropped. “Wait, *you* were the one father fought for mother?”

He laughed again. “You didn’t know? Why else would I have slunk off to the Free Legions? Not that I held it against him. Had the shoe been on the other foot, I would have picked a fight, too. She loved him more anyway,” he added with a dismissive wave.

“I still say you threw that fight,” her father growled into his cup.

“Yeah, well... that’s old news,” he evaded.

Elyas looked up. “Wait, you really threw the fight?”

Jehan blushed for perhaps the first time Cae had ever seen. “Well... Once you challenged, even father could not stop it. When I had you down and I saw how she

reacted... I... I let you beat me,” he shrugged. “Made it look good though. Had to preserve the family honour and all.”

“But... that meant you had to give up... being duke,” he stammered. “Why would you do that?”

Jehan scoffed. “Maybe I didn’t want to be the duke? You were better cut out for it. Like Will. I was always more like Vynce, chasing skirts, drinking myself pissed and picking fights.”

Vynce grinned at that, but said nothing.

Cae had to sit down. “Wait, what? Why? I mean...” she looked from one to the other, completely lost.

Jehan poured her an ale and pressed it into her hand, then, after a moment’s thought, poured one for Valan.

“I only ever told you part of the story,” her father said.

“Mother told me part,” she managed, taking a drink. “That she’d fallen for you the moment she met you, and how disappointed she felt when she found out that you were not to be her groom. She never said who that intended groom was,” she added, looking up at her uncle. “And I asked, more than once.”

“How could you remember that?” her father frowned. “You were, what, six when she died?”

“About that. So, she was supposed to marry Uncle Jehan? But I thought... you were the eldest?”

Jehan laughed. “Why do you think he grew the beard? ‘Cause he was baby-faced most of his life.”

Elyas managed to reach out with his good leg and kick his brother in the calf. He sighed. “I was only younger by a year,” he huffed. “But I fell in love with that woman the moment I laid eyes on her. I was devastated to discover she was Jehan’s intended. Worse, that she was meant for the heir, specifically. Lord Haru was a prideful old tercel, and didn’t really care who married her, so long as she was the next duchess.”

“That didn’t sit well with sawdust-for-brains,” Jehan chuckled, drinking. He deftly moved his shins out of his brother’s reach.

Elyas sighed and continued. “So, I challenged my brother for the rights to her.”

“Father said that if we did this, whoever won would not only get the girl but inherit the duchy to boot. The contract was already written up and agreed upon, just not signed. I told him I was fine with that.”

“So we fought.”

“For two hours,” Jehan interrupted.

Elyas looked up at him, still unable to accept it. “But you let me win?”

He grinned. “And well enough you still didn’t know some fifty-odd years later.”

Elyas shook his head, unable to believe it. “But to give up your inheritance?”

Jehan shrugged, refilling his tankard. “You were my brother and you loved her. And she loved you. I thought you were stupid to do it at first, but when I saw the way she watched you....” He shook his head. “No, I had already been getting fed up with father’s lessons in statecraft long before that. I wanted to be off enjoying life, not tying myself down to one woman and one place for the rest of my life. I suddenly saw an out. I will admit, you caught me off guard with that first strike. I’d been so caught up in my realization, I didn’t see you get up.”

“I thought you were just winded. Mother knows I was nearly blown,” said Elyas, remembering ruefully.

“Nah. I mean, I was, but not that much. I just had to make sure it looked good and you didn’t do too much damage to me,” he added with a chuckle. “I’ve never regretted a thing. Well, accept not being able to be there for the wedding. Father thought it would be bad form.”

Cae was dumbfounded. “But... but you’ve always been around. And you two always seemed to have such a good relationship.”

It was her father’s turn to chuckle, “That took a while. And a lot of work on your mother’s part.”

Jehan grinned. “That was because she knew.”

Her father’s jaw dropped. “She knew you cheated?”

“Let you win,” he corrected. “And yes, she figured it out. She and I began corresponding shortly after Landyn was born.”

“Which is why she pushed so hard to have me go after you, to reconcile. And why Landyn’s death struck her so hard,” he added softly.

Jehan nodded. “She blamed herself. Said if she had not encouraged you to come to me, you would have been home when the ...incident happened.”

“All the while I was blaming myself. And partly you for going off in the first place,” he sighed. “Why wait until now to bring all this up?”

Jehan grinned, pointed at where Valan sat with his arm around Caelrys. “Brought back old memories.”

Cae, not knowing what to think, just sipped her ale.

Valan chuckled, “And here I only started a war.”

“Well,” mused Cae, “up until that first dance, you might have ended up fighting your brother. He was at the top of my list until that moment.”

“My brother? Really?” he asked, looking down at her.

She shrugged, grinning up at him. “He was so full of life, and we were interested in a lot of the same things, ...and he didn’t act as if I were something stuck to his boots,” she added pointedly.

He ignored the jab, admitting to the truth of it, gave her hand a loving pat. “Actually, I had noticed. And it did not help early on.”

“Though if it had gone that way,” her father mused. “I think there would have been no kidnapping and far less trouble.”

Valan nodded, thinking it through, “Yes. The trouble only really started when it became known I had an interest.”

Caclerys shook her head. “I started having trouble with Lady Asparadane the moment I was seen with Balaran.”

“Speak of such evils and they shall appear,” came Balaran’s voice as the door opened. They turned to see him escorting Liliwyn in, with Syera right behind them. “Father and Mother have arrived.”

“Have they been given the speech?” she asked, half afraid of the answer.

He nodded with a grin, “As we speak.”

“How’s the king taking it?”

Instead of answering, he held the door open and stood aside, letting them all enter the atrium to witness it.

Willam was just finishing.

The king spoke up. “Well, let me first say this then: Congratulations, young man. I believe you will make a fine duke.” The king heard the wheels of Elyas’s chair and turned. “Also,” he said, crossing to them, ignoring the fact that two of the three women curtsied. “I desire to wish you a pleasant and lengthy retirement, and,” he lowered his voice, “offer you my endless envy,” he grinned. “You have raised a fine brood, Elyas. And I am very glad that you are able to see your own son’s coronation.” He glanced wistfully up at Valan. “Who knows, I may take a page out of your book in five or six years,” he chuckled.

“Better make that at least a decade, father,” Valan warned.

There was laughter at that, and the king turned back to Willam, where his queen still stood. “I accept and glad of it, Your Grace,” he called, and crossed back to collect his wife.

Will smiled. "Then enjoy my humble home away from home. There is wine and ale aplenty as well as fresh beer in the great hall, and meat on the spit."

The king perked up at that. "Beer?" he asked hopefully, looking at his wife. She merely nodded indulgently. The man then happily led her into the great hall.

Jehan looked down at his brother from behind his chair, growling, "You didn't tell me there was beer!"

Elyas chuckled. "That's cause I wanted there to be some when the king arrived."

Still snarling, Jehan began pushing his brother's chair after the royal couple, with the others trailing along behind.

Syera broke off from them and drifted back to the foot of the steps, looking up at Willam with a shy smile, but Cae could see the new steel beneath her youthful exterior. She had definitely grown up these last few months.

Smiling softly, Cae let Valan lead her into the great hall, which was when she noticed that her ever-present shadows were missing. There were a large number of people here already. Most had apparently arrived whilst she had been listening to family revelations. Cae thought she saw a glimpse of Ikembe's hoape at the edges of the crowd and guessed that she had gone to double check on the security of the food and the house. The Cygents were talking with Kellen Griff and some of the Delphinus. The queen had broken off from her husband to have a small reunion with her ageing mother and what Cae guessed to be a niece and nephew. Malyna was at the large keg, drawing a cup of the beer for Galen Cygent, blushing as she passed it to him.

Balaran caught her watching and leaned into her ear. "She could do worse."

She smiled, looking away from the pair. "I have to wonder if any of those her mother turned down will make Willam an offer for her," she mused.

"I am certain she is even more desirable now that she is in Maral hands," Liliwyn said, handing Cae a glass of small ale, and sipping at her own wine.

Cae smiled at her. "You know me so well," she chuckled, taking a sip. "How so?"

"Besides the alliance being with a great house instead of merely a noble one?" she asked.

"Yes, besides that."

"Because there is a rumour," said Janem, slipping up from the side carrying his own tankard of the beer, "that there is a good possibility that she could inherit House Asparadane."

“Leave it to you to learn the blatherskite before anyone else,” Cae said, taking his tankard from him to steal a sip. She played with the brew in her mouth for a second before swallowing. “Colt brew this?” she asked.

Jan took his tankard back and nodded. “Not bad for his second batch.”

“Second?” she gaped.

“His first was undrinkable,” he chuckled. “But he figured out what he did wrong quickly enough and apparently fixed it. He’s been practically sitting on this barrel since he poured the first sample yesterday.” He took a good, long pull from it. “You ask me, it’s stronger than the stuff Old Barley used to make.”

“Then maybe you should go easy on it?” she commented.

“Old Barley?” Valan asked from beside her. Somehow he had managed to acquire a glass of it without her having been aware he had left her side. Ikembe would have a fit if she knew how much had been slipping Cae’s attention of late.

“Reach brew-master when we were young,” she explained. “Famous for the strength of his beer, especially his fallow beer.”

“Legendary,” Jan corrected. “That beer was legendary. I think I might see if I can get hold of the recipe for the boy. He’s been a rare find for this house.”

“Remind me who Colt is again?” Valan asked, savouring the beer.

“The boy who brought me the dying bird.”

“Oh, right. I remember him now.”

She chuckled. “He certainly remembers you. You all but growled at him.”

He had the foresight to look sheepish at that, mumbled something about “dragon” into his cup.

This brought forth a laugh. There was a long moment of quiet as they enjoyed their drinks.

“So...” began Janem, “is there any truth to it? Cause if there isn’t, I can quash it. And best it were done soon, lest it cause more trouble for her with the rest of the family.”

Valan shrugged. “It really all depends on her brother. Maybe her uncle, too. If the whole house is religious, there is scant chances they’ll accept her authority, cause she’s just not strong enough. And there’s going to be a lot of ...resentment at the moment to a woman in control, seeing what the last one did to the family.”

“Either way, I imagine we are years away from being able to determine that,” Cae added. “Best quash it. Those that firmly believe it will be vindicated if it happens and quietly proven wrong if it doesn’t. Also, it will make for a pleasant surprise and not a relationship souring disappointment to whomever she marries.”

Valan gave her a proud look then wisely went back to his beer as she glared at him. "Cheat," he playfully muttered.

She casually elbowed him. "Don't be an open book."

Malyna drifted over, surreptitiously watching Galen walking away to join his brother and sister-in-law. "Good evening, ...Valan, Balaran," she said a little shyly, stuttering just a bit as she stopped herself from using the honorifics. "Caclerys, Liliwyn, Janem," she finished, bobbing just a little.

Caclerys smiled. "You know, all the rest of my friends and family call me Cae in private."

"But I..." she began.

"Are technically family, now," Jan grunted. "Don't worry, I'll make sure they're gentle while they rough up some of that polish."

Malyna went pale. "But..."

Liliwyn rescued her. "Look at me," she said. "Am I the epitome of what a lady should be?" she asked her.

Malyna blushed. "Well, ...yes. Mother always said you were the perfect example of quiet grace." Her blush deepened. "Of course, she also said that you were made to be a widow."

Liliwyn felt her cheeks flush a little herself, but she ignored the statement. As inappropriate as it was to have voiced such a thing on Semelle's part, remembering how Lili had looked when Cae had first met her, she had to agree: grief made her radiant. She still wouldn't wish it on her.

Lili took a breath. "Well, I grub around in the dirt in a simple workday dress. I also know how to use a rapier, a dagger and know several ways to make a grown man weep."

"Surely not you?" Malyna gasped.

Lili nodded.

"It is the metals that have taken the roughest treatment that have the deepest natural shine and hold the strongest shape," Janem said.

"Without strength, which comes from certain kinds of roughness and adversity, nothing lasts. The prettiest flowers will wilt fastest," Lili said.

"I like the metal analogy better, I think," Cae mused. "Without a coarse core, or at least a little inner roughness, the most beautiful and delicate structures don't hold up. Like you."

"Me?"

"Yes, Mal, you," Jan said



Cae felt the startlement from her at the shortening of her name, followed by a testing to see if she liked it.

Janem continued, “You see, you’ve been polished before you were tempered. But the shine doesn’t hold up to rough treatment, making you skittish and uncertain of yourself. You’re always worrying that you’ll get scuffed. First we have to roughen your edges and build up your substance, then you polish. Besides, a thing too smooth cannot be held onto.”

Cae gave her an indulgent smile. “Don’t worry, we’ll temper you properly.”

“Yeah,” Jan chuckled. “We’ll slowly heat you ‘til you turn blue and then dunk you in water.”

Malyna looked absolutely shocked and horrified, but Cae could feel an edge of irritation as she slowly realized he didn’t mean it literally and was just having fun with her.

Cae smiled. “All right, Mal, first lesson. Take that feeling and act on it.” Malyna hesitated, mortified by the suggestion and how tempting it sounded. “Suppressing it is how you end up like your mother,” Cae warned her.

The hand snaked out and slapped Jan’s arm a stinging blow that surprised everybody.

Malyna began rubbing her hand, too shocked by her pain to be shocked by the fact that she’d hit someone.

The laughter was quiet but no less heartfelt. “And that’s how you handle brothers,” Cae grinned. “Though you should try it with a less stiff hand and aim for a glancing blow rather than a thudding one. It stings more and hurts you less. When you punch, you aim through what you’re hitting, like this...”

Jan jumped back out of the way. “Oh, no! I’m not going to be your jousting dummy. Go practice on Vynce! He deserves it more!”

He made a hasty exit. Balaran kissed Lili’s cheek, pardoning himself and went after him. Lili smiled, but rolled her eyes.

“That... hurt,” Malyna whimpered. “But it felt surprisingly good. Maybe if I’d hit Malyn, he wouldn’t have grown up to be such an absolute fewmet.”

Liliwyn burst at that, trying to cover her giggles with her hand.

Cae smiled. “It’s a work in progress.”

Malyna drew herself up, going all prim and proper. “Well, a lady should not swear or speak certain words, and definitely not in polite company.”

At that Valan laughed. "This is not 'polite company'. This is..." he looked around, taking note of who was here and how relaxed everyone was, "this is a family gathering."

She frowned. "Well, the Marals count that way now, and you and yours will soon, but the Cygents are not. Griff is not."

Liliwyn got herself under control. "It has been set up as a family gathering, with no regard to rank. You speak however you are comfortable. Cursing is *not* required. Relaxing is. Worry about polite company when it's appropriate."

"And no hitting in public," Cae added.

Vyncet crossed over at that, grinning. "And we're talking about mother why?"

Cae flushed. She had forgotten that had been her mother's most commonly spouted order. "Actually, we have been learning quite a bit about mother that I never knew," she said.

Valan grinned. "It's been an education."

Cae was rescued from having to elaborate by Will entering with Syera on his arm and lord Tume and Princess Semiana in tow, grinning like she was up to something. Then the bell was rung for the meal. Everyone broke off and moved towards the great table. Cae noted that two of the largest tables had been pushed together side by side to bring everyone closer together instead of scattering them around the hall at tables by rank. It was very odd, seeing Will seated in the middle at the end, between his father and his uncle. Everyone else was mostly arrayed by precedence.

The main course was the stag Cae had taken the other day along with a whole roasted boar and plenty of other delicacies. The Marrok twins were attacking their food like a pair of wolves, and Cae noticed Lucelle torn between their infectious manner and Lady Marrok's stately, but methodical one. Conversations crossed the table as the food was passed and the drink flowed. Cae even noticed the household servants, including Fern and Ikembe, eating at a lower table equally laden. The servants seemed to be taking turns going around both tables making sure there was enough of everything for everyone.

She indulged Tempest with a few titbits before sending her to find a place to perch elsewhere. Reluctantly, the bird agreed, flying off to make herself comfortable upon a set of antlers on the wall where she could watch the meal and judge whether or not she could beat the dogs to anything dropped.

Cae was a little surprised to hear Valan stating that he intended to tour the country 'a-dragon-back' once Planting began.

She looked over at him. "I understand the desire to see the kingdom from above and to more easily get from one end to the other, but... do you intend to leave your new bride alone for an entire third of the year?"

He grinned. "Oh, no. I intend she come with me."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Have you any clue how uncomfortable it is to ride a dragon?"

His eyes flashed. "Have you any idea how weird it is to be the ride and not the rider?"

She glared. "Don't make me stab you," she said flatly.

Across the table, Vyncet crowed with laughter, raising his glass. "NOW, you're part of the family!"

Valan looked confused for a moment.

Jehan, who was nearest, grinned. "Apparently it isn't official until she's threatened to stab you at least once."

Cae blushed furiously. "It is not."

Valan grinned at her discomfort. "Ah, but I thought you were her favourite uncle. Don't tell me she's threatened even you?"

Jehan guffawed at that. "Never! I'm the only one she actually stabbed."

"I was eight!" she protested. "And we were... practising."

"She needed a lot of practise," Janem grinned.

"At least she wasn't trying to kill you," Malyna commented. "My brother tried to poison my twin and I when we were infants."

This sobered the table up more than a little until Balaran stood and raised his glass. "All right, all right. A toast. First, to the veritable goddess in the kitchen and all her little spiritual assistants. Madam, I would steal you for my own kitchens were I not terrified your lord would murder me in my sleep for the presumption," he laughed. This brought a few titters and made Fennel blush brighter than an apple. "Second, to the brewer of some of the damned finest beer I have ever drank, and I mean no insult to the proprietress of the Galley. May all your medicines be this fine!"

Colt's eyes bugged at the comparison. His neighbours began clapping him on the back, cheering him.

Balaran continued. "To Lady Caelerys and my uncle Olen for putting the beasts on the table and keeping my brother in line." This earned him a mock threatening gesture from his twin. "To the former duke, who is thankfully not late, for breeding such a strong, beautiful and damned 'useful' family." There were louder cheers at

that. “As well has providing this kingdom with such vital, loyal and dependable vassals. And finally to the man of the hour, for tonight at least. To Willam. A fine man, a steadfast brother, a legendary fighter, and now a great duke.” He held up his glass to a surge of cheers, then drank.

Cae had to laugh, seeing a blush on her brother’s face.

The rest of the actual meal was more of the same: good food, and a great deal of cheer. It was not until sometime after they had begun to leave the table to other diversions that Ikembe returned to her side. “I take it this house was safe enough you did not need to be sewn to my side?” Cae asked her quietly as she watched her father playing Balyra at Castle with Vyncet hovering nearby, gloating.

“Getting you here was the risky part. For this one night, your safety was assured. Have you enjoyed yourself?”

Cae smiled. “Yes. Life feels normal for once. Though I daresay we need to work on my attention span. A great deal slipped my notice tonight. Things that should not have.”

Ikembe brushed a curl away from her face, hooking it back under its pin. “You have had a very great deal on your plate of late. With such a feast, it is forgivable to miss a pea or two. You are not in such great danger as you were.”

“Though by no means safe?” she asked.

“By no means.”

They wandered away from the castle table, pausing here and there to talk with small groups of people. The queen was curled up on a couch against her mother, talking softly about many things, and Cae felt a range of emotions coming from the pair of them. Not so much conflicting as flitting from one thing to another. She smiled tenderly and moved away.

Balaran was in the library with Liliwyn. He was perusing the thin collection. Liliwyn was deep in conversation with her sister and youngest brother. Sigourney gave her a wave as they passed. It was not until she found Princess Semi in a hallway talking fervently with Tume and Jehan that she realized she had lost track of Willam. She approached the trio who immediately stopped talking and turned to face her. She heard footsteps retreating behind them, but they blocked her view of whomever it was. She narrowed her eyes at her uncle and glanced questioningly up at Semi.

“I was going to ask if any of you had seen Will, but now I’m suspicious.”

“You should be,” Semi smiled toothily. “Always be suspicious. You will live longer.”

Cae put up her hand. “You know what? Never-mind. I’m more worried about Will. I’m not sure he’s well enough for all this.”

“It’s nothing bad, anyway,” Jehan chuckled. “I think I saw him going that way,” he said, pointing further down the hall towards the garden door and other areas more often used by servants.

She nodded. “Thank you, uncle. I shall leave you to your conspiring. If I need help getting him up to bed, I’ll send for you.”

The two men nodded.

“I have not been able to congratulate you on landing your dragon,” Tume grinned, lighting up his dark face.

“Thank you, Tume. I know you have been very busy with Legion business.”

He nodded. “And apt to be more so. T’is why Semi and I were late and came together.”

She paused. “Nothing too terrible is it?” she asked, suddenly afraid of what could be brewing.

“Nothing for your chilly little kingdom to sweat,” Semi smiled. “Alumet is having some... issues and I am taking steps. Don’t worry. I will be here for the wedding and will allow nothing more to interfere. Here, I will come with you. I, too, worry for the new duke.”

Cae, unwilling to argue, nodded and slipped past the two large men towards the garden door. Behind her, she heard Tume asking her uncle for details of Willam’s combat.

The garden was almost gilded by the Southern Lord, with a faint silvering from the Eastern Lady. Will was seated near the roses, which were clearly thinking about budding. He was staring out at the neat rows of fallow vegetables and herbs growing in their patch and the toomi were already settled and sleeping in their baskets.

Ikembe and Semi hung back a little, letting Cae approach him alone.

She sat down beside him. She could tell that he was mulling something over, trying to understand something he couldn’t quite believe. She glanced him over, seeing no signs of weakening or the multitude of other little things she looked for in a patient. He was a little inebriated, but only mildly. After a long minute he looked down at her, frowning. “Legendary? Really?”

Cae was stunned. “You’re still going on about that?”

“Well, ...yes. I mean... are they talking about it on the streets?”

“You’d have to ask Janem. I don’t have the access to answer that question. But you have always been a good fighter.”

He frowned, nodding. "Good, yes. But legendary? That's a bit much."

Cae pinched the bridge of her nose, trying not to laugh at him. "Not really."

"But Uncle Jehan has always been the best in the family. I'm not that good."

She sighed. "Will, even father beat Uncle Jehan once. Lord Tume's beaten him."

He shrugged. "Well, he is in his sixties. Tume's still in his prime."

Cae gave him a tight smile. "Try his seventies."

Will looked at her, as if trying to see the words written on her face. "No. Father is in his seventies. Jehan's younger."

She shook her head. "Jehan is older, and not by that much."

"Well, you see, that just proves my point. He's that good in his seventies! How can I even think about..."

She put her hand on his arm to silence him. "Sweetling, while you were busy comparing yourself to a man you saw maybe once a year at best, you surpassed him. And not just because you're a young shift. You've always been a monster on the field. I've even heard Valan say he'd just as soon never face you in combat if shifting isn't an option."

He was still shaking his head when Semi and Ikembe came over. "I find that hard to believe. He can sprout scales."

"And blunt force does what to the man inside the plate?" she asked with a cocked eyebrow.

He started to protest, thought, then closed his mouth.

"Your Grace," said Ikembe, "I have seen monsters fight. I have seen monsters beaten by smaller, more nimble fighters. You are more effective because you are also patient. You husband your strength, strike when it counts. That crowd watched you fight a battle for a purpose that would have sent most men into a rage, but you fought it cold. You took so much punishment and it did not seem to effect you."

"He didn't hit as hard as it looked. He was stupid to use an axe."

Cae sighed. "But you took damage that would have killed most men, and walked off the battlefield."

"With help," he countered.

"You walked off the battlefield," she repeated.

"I was out for hours."

"Less than one," she said. "It doesn't matter how long. It matters that only hours later, you walked into court as if nothing had happened."

"I..." Try as he might, he couldn't find an argument.

“To a great many people in this city right now, you are nigh unkillable,” Cae said.

He shook his head. “No, not unkillable.”

“Better let them think it,” Ikembe said. “Spare them trying.”

“But don’t be surprised if the next grand melee you enter, you find yourself alone on that field,” Cae quipped.

“Or swarmed by everyone at once in hopes one of them might get lucky,” Semi chuckled.

“Will the Wall,” Cae giggled. “Who sprouts antlers and pins traitors to hedges.”

He rewarded her with a glare. Semi shrugged, grinning. “I like it.”

“If you doubt it,” Caelerys said, “when you are fully healed, see if Tume will spar with you. Get him to test you. I am willing to bet it will be a very long fight, but I would not bet on the outcome.”

He was silenced. “But legendary?” he finally managed.

“You will be when I am done with the tale,” Semi gloated.

He looked up at her. “But you weren’t even there.”

She shrugged. “I sent someone to watch for me. I know every blow that was made. And I have sent that witness home to spread that tale.”

“Why would you do that?”

She just laughed, her voice purring. “One, because it amuses me. Two, if you are training my fighters?” She did not finish the sentence, merely staring at him pointedly.

He figured it out fairly quickly. He sighed, looking down into his empty tankard. “Sister, I am paid.”

It was Caelerys’s turn to be confused. “For what?”

“For what I put you through out here. For all the unwanted attention I directed your way.”

“Fewmets,” she grinned.

He frowned, looking at her. “What?”

She laughed. “Mal’s first curse word. I kind of like the sound of it.”

“That’s not a curse word,” he scowled. “That’s... that’s just...?”

“Stag shit, specifically,” she nodded. She shrugged. “She’s doing her best. Careful you don’t create a monster.”

She rose, kissing his cheek, and taking the empty tankard. “I’ll see if I can get you some ale. Don’t overdo it, though. You should still be resting another day at least.”

He just nodded.

Semi walked with her. "I need to talk to you anyway about the ceremony."

"We can go up to my old room," she began. "Oh wait, Malyna's probably been put in that room." She thought a moment. "The still-room. We'll be private there."

They met Syera opening the door to the courtyard and peering out. "Is he...?" she began, stopped when she saw Will. She held up a tankard. "I got him the last of the beer."

Cae stepped out of her way, smiling. "Just make sure he gets to bed before dawn. He needs to rest."

"I will see what I can do," she said airily, though there was a glint in her eye of mischief.

Cae decided not to investigate any deeper, showing Semi to the still-room where they could talk privately. Colt was already there, fiddling with another brew whose mash smelled very strongly of apples. He was more than happy to leave them some privacy, asking her if she would double check a few of his distillations if it were not too much trouble.

She rounded on Semi when the door closed. "Why do I get the feeling that he was the one you three were conspiring with?"

She grinned. "Oh, just talking beer," she said. She wasn't lying, but neither was it the complete truth. Cae debated whether it was worth it to try and pry it out of her. She decided it was not.

"So," Semi began, "exactly what does this entail, my standing for you? Tume and Jehan spoke of militant things, but I think there is more to it than mere force of arms."

Cae smiled, finding a perch on a cleared worktable. "There is. I've never done it. I don't think any woman ever has. You'd be better off talking to Duke Cygent or his son, Selgan, or Vynce. They can tell you the ceremonial portion. It's really simple. The long term portion... well, hopefully it is never needed, but you're basically promising to enforce the contract, and to step in if necessary."

Semi had other questions, which Cae answered as best she could. She was just getting around to checking the distillations when she felt Valan looking for her.

Semi chuckled, watching the change in her expression. "Is he on the prowl?" she purred. Cae blushed, making the princess laugh. "I still stand by my offer to instruct you on matters of mattresses... and other surfaces."

Cae made a few hasty adjustments to one distillation and made her way to the door. "That... that will be unnecessary," she stammered.



She opened the door, backing out as Semi rumbled. “Well, I suppose I should not deprive him the fun of educating you himself.” Her eyes shifted to a point above her head and Cae’s blush darkened. “Though if I find out he is remiss or less than considerate in said education I will have words. Maybe claws.”

“In that case, I think I’d let you,” came Valan’s voice from behind her and Cae just wanted to crawl into a very deep hole. That or just fly away. “Are you ready to retire for the evening, my lady?” he asked, though Cae could feel his amusement.

“I think it best we went home, yes.”

He just laughed as he led her back through the house to the waiting carriage.



**A**lmost before Cae knew it, she was waking up on the day of her wedding to the realization that she was not alone in the bed, and that there were more bodies than she was used to there being. The one person she expected was curiously absent.

Slowly, she remembered. Syera, Liliwyn and Malyna had spent the entire rain-swept day with her in her chambers. There had been sewing, conversations and a fair amount of drinking and laughing.

Malyna had been the hardest to unwind and make comfortable. They had begun with light wines to relax her whilst they worked on whatever sewing projects they had undertaken. Cae had been working on a shirt for Valan and managed to finish it before they'd moved from wine to something more substantial.

Liliwyn had been wise in making certain they drank plenty of water and ate enough in between, and so they had only gotten warm, relaxed, and quite a bit silly.

There had been bouts of crying, too. Mostly from Malyna who had burst into tears at how she was being treated. Even her old friends had never spoken so freely, or laughed so much about whatever it was they had been talking about. The picture her mother had painted of these three women was nothing like the reality.

The others were quick to comfort her and soon, even they were in tears over one thing or another. That was what Cae had broken out the hand-keg of a potent ale her uncle had given her and very little after that was remembered.

The first thing planned for the day, as Cae was dusted and dressed, was the contract. Cae was gowned in her mother's underdress, all pinned up and carefully sewn into place so as not to drag the ground. Syera blushed as she presented her with a pair of cloth-of-silver slippers embroidered with pearls.

"They are absolutely lovely," Cae smiled, "why are you blushing?"

"Because I did the embellishments myself, and my embroidery is nowhere near as good as yours."

Cae inspected the flower design in pretty sapphire silk with seed pearls decorating it. "Sai, I know how difficult it is to sew on slippers. Liliwyn could not have done better."

Lili fought her own blush and took them from Cae's hands, setting them on the floor for her to put on. "We are not comparing needlepoint skills right now. Come on, you don't want to be late."

"You don't want to be too late," Syera corrected. "A little late will do my male relatives good," she huffed, catching up the bulk of Cae's hair into a pearled net and pinning it in place. "There! Now can we go? This is going to be boring enough without delaying it."

Cae allowed them to rush her out of the chamber, and Tempest followed along dutifully after Fern and Ikembe, who brought up the rear.

They were the last to arrive in the king's study, and the room was full nearly to the brim with observers. They made way for Cae's party, though it was tight, and she heard the quiet gasps at her appearance. She ignored them, her eyes upon the silvered candle in its box in the middle of the table beside the gold nibbed pen and the appropriate sealing waxes. Apparently, it had been retrieved from whatever nook it had been secreted in by the library worms. No one had mentioned to her if anyone had made an attempt on the decoy candle or not, and it was the last thing on Cae's mind.

The herald stood behind the table and nodded politely to her.

She turned and curtseyed before the seated royalty without really looking up, and moved to stand behind and between the two chairs set down for her father and brother. Her retinue aligned themselves behind her, and Tempest flew up to perch on the back of Will's chair. She had already been warned that Cae's shoulder was off limits today. Once everyone and everything was settled, the herald unrolled the con-

tract and began to read it aloud. Only then did Cae look up to the other side of the table.

The king and queen were seated as Will and her father were, and Valan stood where she did, behind and between. Arrayed behind him were the three who were to walk with him: Lord Kellen Griff, lord Norwyn Delphinus and Sir Larch. Valan, however, had eyes only for her, and once their gazes locked that was the end of it. Neither one of them took notice of anything else.

It was a great deal later when Cae's attention was snared by a pain in her hand where she gripped the back of Will's chair. Tempest nipped her again. Across the table, she heard a faint grunt as one of his men poked Valan. There was a ripple of laughter at that and more than a few 'awws'. Even the herald blushed just a little. Cae was aware of small pockets of jealousy, envy and plenty of just plain romanticism in the room. She blushed herself and turned back to the herald. "Yes?" she asked.

He took it for agreement and turned to Valan who, with only the barest hint of chagrin, also said yes. It was very clear that neither of them had heard or cared about the details. Then the seals were brought out and the waxes prepared.

The gold tipped swan quill was passed first to her father, as the duke named in the contract. He signed on one side, and Will on the other, affixing the silver and blue wax with the Maral ducal seal between them: a rampant stag with the ducal crown above its antlers.

The king signed his name and affixed his seal. Then the herald approached the candle and carefully applied the green wax above the indentation of the Maral seal. Her candle was larger than Sai's had been, a finger's length wide and a hand span and a half tall. It was a triple layered candle, predominantly blue, but with a layer of silver coated by another layer of blue under the silver exterior leaf. When the Maral seal had been pressed into it at its creation, it revealed the silver stag and a small field of blue within the silvered whole. Hers was a candle that would not be easily broken.

The king pressed the dragon seal into the warm wax to the delight of the gathered nobility. Cae strongly suspected that those allowed the privilege of standing witness had been carefully screened.

Glasses of wine were passed around, and Cae noted that the cluster around her ladies were set so that no one not in the midst of them saw Ikembe take a sip from Cae's glass before it was handed to her for the toast.

It was a delicate, pale wine which Cae barely tasted. Her eyes were locked on Valan's across the table and she began to feel a cold dread and an excited heat all at once. She sipped the wine.

The next thing she knew, Lili and Syera were pulling her away, and Valan's friends were doing the same in the opposite direction.

When they got to her chambers, Cae sank onto the nearest chair. Tempest flew to the back of the seat, began fussing over her, nuzzling her to comfort her. Liliwyn saw how pale she was and immediately called for water. Ikembe fetched it, pressing the cup into her hand.

Lili pressed a hand to Cae's cheek. "How do you feel?" she asked clinically.

"Is she all right?" Syera asked.

Malyna did not seem surprised at all. "It's typical, actually. A 'bridal malaise' is what mother used to call it."

"I wouldn't call it a malaise," Cae said softly.

"Terror?" Lili chuckled.

She thought for a moment, then nodded.

Malyna frowned. "I thought you wanted this? You told us last night, unequivocally that this was what you wanted more than anything. Have you changed your mind?"

Cae took a sip of water, handing it back. "Wine, please. Just a little." She shook her head in answer to Malyna's question. "It's not that, Mal," she said. "It's... it's just... There is something terrifying in realizing that you are hours away from getting your heart's desire. Especially if you'd convinced yourself you were never going to get the 'nursery tale' and that you didn't need it."

Lili handed her a cup of wine. "That and the sudden realization that you're going to get it in front of a very lot of people you don't personally know. Caelerys is about to be the dreaded 'centre of attention'."

Cae looked at the cup, then Ikembe who nodded. She took a low, slow drink.

"But... I thought you'd be used to it by now," Mal said, pouring herself a cup and adding a little water to it.

"I'm never going to be used to it," Cae groaned. "I can just steel myself. I don't like it and never have."

Malyna's eyes widened. "But you're going to be queen! You'll be the centre of attention for the rest of your life."

"No. Valan is. I'll be supporting him and that's not the same thing. At all."

"Keep telling yourself that," Syera laughed.

Cae glared at her, but drank the wine.

Lili sat beside her, sipping her own glass. "So don't think about them at all. Focus on him and what's waiting for you at the tree. The tree herself should help," she added, thinking about it.

"Not 'til I'm in reach," she sighed.

"So focus on us," Syera shrugged.

Malyna frowned, looking from one to the other of them. Cae, sensing her confusion, smiled. "My brother is a shift. I am a sympath," she explained.

She shook her head, still confused.

"She can sense the emotions of those around her," Lili explained.

"It's more than that," Cae replied. "I have the gift of understanding. I understand how people and animals are feeling. I can, mostly, get them to understand me. What I do not have is control."

"You are much better than you used to be," Fern commented as she crossed to answer the knock on the door. She bowed and held it open.

When the queen entered with Lady Caena behind her, the women stood and curtsied.

"Welcome, Your Majesty," Cae said formally.

The queen glared playfully. "I thought we had talked about that."

Cae laughed softly. "Well, I am getting it out of my system now."

The queen gave a sigh. "Very well. I have come to give you both my blessing and my gift."

"I thought your gift lies in my dressing room, and your blessing given the moment you laid eyes on me," she asked.

The queen's smile was indulgent as she crossed to her. "There are blessings and Blessings, my child," she said softly, formally kissed Cae on the forehead. "And I said that gift was from the crown, and that mine would be far more useful and personal."

She placed a worn, leather-bound volume in her hands. The book was a little bigger than her spread hand, and as thick as Will's finger. The cover was plain, the title embossed so long ago it was barely legible. It translated roughly to 'maternal gifts'.

She opened it. The script was careful and easily read, the lines evenly spaced. It was in the language of changes, and appeared to be a letter written from an experienced sympath to a young one who had no idea what they were going through. Later it seemed to explain shifts and how they related to the sympath. Cae got the

impression this book had been read and referred to often but not in the last century or three. She looked up at the queen with wide eyes.

“This... this is...”

“Just what you need, and I know you will take a great deal of care with it. Not to mention have it copied. I read through it once when I was very young, but I only remember a little bit. It is how I knew what you were, ...and what I was not. There was a little there that explained what was happening to me, which is why my great aunt gave it to me. Once, Echo women read it frequently. Lately, it’s only been once every few generations, sadly,” the queen sighed, taking a seat. “I only wish I had thought to ask for it long before this, as they had to hunt it down. It is not well marked.”

“I... I will take very good care of it. I will read it as soon as I can. And by moonlight as well.”

The queen smiled. “Just in case?”

She nodded.

There came a knock at the door and Lady Caena went to answer it. “I hope you will forgive my taking the liberty of ordering a dinner for us,” the queen said as a small army of servants trooped through carrying enough food for all of them.



The mid day meal helped to while away a couple of hours without Cae being too aware of their passage. Eventually, the queen left and Caelrys had a few more hours to fritter away while not dissolving into a nervous wreck.

“Oh, why must there be so much time between the signing and the lighting?” she groaned.

Liliwyn laughed. “To give them time to set up.”

“And you time to question your choices,” Syera replied.

She threw Syera a glare, “Why can’t they set up earlier?”

“Perhaps it may take some time to redo my lady’s hair?” Coral suggested diplomatically.

“That is a good idea,” Lili said, getting up.

They had dragged Cae to the dressing table and taken the net off when Sorrel entered to inform them that Janem had arrived.

Cae started to get up to go to him, but Lili held her down, handing the brush to Malyna. “Here, brush her out, but try not to brush out her curl.”

Jan was escorted in while Lili and Syera were finding and laying out pins and Ikembe was testing each one of them.

“Jan!” she cried, and once more thought about getting up, but a glare from Lili made her remain still. “Apparently, I am forbidden to move.”

Lili sighed, “You can turn sideways, but you can’t get up.”

Janem laughed at her. “I did not mean to set the cat among the toomi.”

“Since when have you not?” Syera grinned.

“When have I ever?” he challenged.

Malyna blushed. “I have heard some talk about you amongst some of the minor ladies, even a noble or two.”

Janem stopped for a moment, swallowed. “What kind of talk?” he finally dared.

“Oh, the kind unmarried young ladies do when desirable, available men are mentioned,” she evaded.

Cae giggled as her brother blushed. “I think it’s only going to get worse, Jan.”

That helped him regain his composure. “You are no doubt right, Your Highness,” he said, bowing sarcastically.

Without moving her head, she snatched a comb from the dressing table and threw it at him. Unable to move, she couldn’t get much force behind it, but she managed to hit him. He laughed it off, picking it up and handing it to Fern who blushed as she took it from him.

“I only stopped by to give you this,” he said, handing her a small box.

She accepted it and opened the hinged lid. Inside was a gleaming moonsilver ring, sleekly formed into a dragon that wrapped around the finger. It looked almost liquid. There were sapphire chips for the half closed eyes.

She gasped. “Jan, this is beautiful!”

“Well, you wanted a ring for him. I borrowed Prince Balaran’s finger for the measure, and had Daph carve the wax model for the mould and set the eyes when I was done. There will never be another like it, I can promise you that.”

“You and Daph need to go into business together,” she replied, her eyes devouring the jewel.

He laughed at that. “We already have. Just not... officially.”

“You mean openly,” she smiled shrewdly.

He nodded. “It’s the way he wants it for now. We’ll need more stock before we can make it official. We’re thinking of finding another location for a smithy/shop. Some place we don’t have to worry about security, or keeping the neighbours awake.”



“You’ll find a place, I’m sure,” she smiled, handing the box to Syera. “One of you hang on to that for me? I’ll give it to him afterwards. Semi?” she asked him, trying to be discreet.

“Present and keeping a low profile.”

“That’s unusual,” Cae mused.

“Her brothers are here and they are not,” he grinned.

“That’s perfectly normal,” Lili smirked. “Is that all, Master Smith?” she asked airily

“For now?” he said, unsure.

“Then off with you!” she said, shooing him off by flapping her hands at him.

He laughed, bent to steal a kiss from his sister and fled the room.

Lili turned back to survey her canvas as Malyna put the brush down. “Now what to do with you,” she mused. A grin spread upon her face and she took Mal’s place behind her. She carefully and efficiently began to comb back her hair lock by lock. She held out her hand and called out what she needed and one of the others were swift to put it into her deft fingers.

By the time she was done Cae had despaired of what it would look like. There had been so much fussing and pinning that she feared it was one of those elaborate and highly complicated sculptures she had seen the day she had arrived. The others had all taken brief breaks to do each other’s hair, all except for Lili, and theirs were arrays of braiding artfully pinned with jewelled hairpins. What confused Cae was that her hair did not feel weighed down by masses of braiding.

While the others fetched the overdress and Lili swiftly did something with her own hair, Cae stole a peek in the mirror and was shocked by what she saw. It was mostly down. It had been drawn back from her face, curl by curl and held in place by pearl headed pins. The curls were then left to fall freely down her back, but each one perfectly twisted and placed. The moonsilver stag comb sat in pride of place and seemed to hold the whole thing up.

She looked at Lili, “But... you took so long,” she began. “It couldn’t have taken that long for just this?”

Lili merely smiled at her as she twisted her own locks up and pinned them into a much shorter cascade of honey gold. “Mal brushed some of the curls straight. I had to coax things just where I wanted them. Trust me, you’ll be a vision. And visions take time to craft.”

“Apparently not for you,” she smirked, waving her hand at Lili’s seemingly instant perfection. Her pale blue gown set off her complexion and golden hair perfectly. “I shall be a pale comparison,” she smiled.

Lili blushed for a brief second, then eyed the oncoming gown and smiled. “Oh, I highly doubt anyone will be looking at me.”

Fern appeared, holding the feather wand and quickly brushed it across Cae’s face and throat.

Syera and Malyna approached from behind, holding the overgown open like a coat and Ikembe helped them slip her into it, making certain the sleeves did not ride up and tugging things into place after doing up the silver buttons. They spent a few minutes adjusting the overlay before stepping back and breathing a sigh almost as one.

They tittered amongst themselves in low voices, comments overlapping so low and so fast that Cae could not understand any of them. She knew they were highly pleased. She could sense that. Finally Sorrel and Rosie carried in a large mirror and held it far enough back for Cae to see the whole dress.

The effect was breath-taking. The underdress peered out from beneath the midnight velvet like a sliver of the Eastern Moon. The colours accentuated her lightly gilded complexion, though she was a little paler than she had been when she had first arrived in the city. She had not been able to enjoy the outdoors quite as much as had been her wont. And her dark hair fell down her back as the perfect accent. Her heart fluttered in her chest.

Coral entered the room and took a moment to drink in the vision she presented. Then she curtsyed formally. “My lady, it is time.”

She looked around her to her ladies, all of whom were wearing their best. Liliwyn and Syera were not wearing their finest, not wishing to outshine the bride, but they were visions of loveliness themselves. Even Malyna was well dressed and in brighter colours than her mother had ever allowed her. Fern wore her festival dress and Ikembe was in her own native costume: colourfully patterned blousy trousers that tied at the ankles and a flowing tunic that was richly embroidered. She had even woven a bright scarf through her hoape. Cae’s leather bracers were on her wrists, and Tempest flew to land on one of them.

Coral led Rosie and Sorrel out of the room, taking their leave early enough to arrive as witnesses. Cae took the time to stroke the bird fondly, and embrace and kiss her friends before they were escorted by Maral guards down to the waiting car-

riage. As much as Cae wanted to ride to her own wedding, she knew there was no saddle that would accommodate this dress.

Cae was surprised to find the road from the Citadel to the side gate, and the whole path down to the wood, lined with the people of the city. They cheered at the sight of her and she was nearly overwhelmed by the genuine joy of them all. There were only tiny pockets of resentment, or indifference, so small they only barely registered. Until one of them swelled to action, she decided that they were best ignored.

The carriage was not very wide but the path was, and there was more than enough room for people to line the road. Cae was less surprised to see people lining the way out here. There was far more room here. The closer to the forest they came, the more noble were the spectators who waved wands with ribbons upon them in green, blue, white and yellow. Coral and the others were here, near the back, but they smiled and curtsied when they caught her eye, and Cae could feel their encouragement.

Finally, it was time to disembark. The bridle path, though wide, was less suitable for a vehicle and Ikembe stepped out first. A footman appeared, helping each of the ladies down, leaving them free to help the bride with her dress.

Cae was taken aback as everyone bowed when she stepped out. She did not even notice the others adjusting the velvet behind her.

She paused to accept a nuzzle from Tempest, leaning forward and letting the bird press her feathered head to hers. Then, with a quiet word, the bird took flight, gliding low along the path ahead. Stepping out in front of the carriage, she smiled at the crowd as Fern and Malyna led the way, Lili and Syera walked behind her and Ikembe took up the rear, still her itoma.

As she entered the approach to the tree, she began to feel more frequent pockets of disappointment and indifference towards her. But she figured this was normal, as there were more here who had wished themselves in her shoes. It was nothing more dangerous than mild envy and minor ambition. The closer she came to the tree, the more confident and safe she felt, even as she noticed the crowds closing in behind her.

They rounded the curve, finally able to see into the clearing itself, and she could see Valan's party approaching from the farther path. Larch walked in front, but his other attendants walked at his side. She could feel his tension and anticipation from here. Some of that eased as they entered the influence of the tree, but not all of it.

Her party stopped at the outer edge of the clearing, gathering around her. Fern and Ikembe both embraced and kissed her before disappearing into the gathering, though still close enough to be of service. Syera moved in front, and Liliwyn and Malyna each took a hand. Tempest cried a welcome from the lower branches of the tree.

Finally, Caelerys took a moment to view the clearing. Her family was arrayed on her side of the tree, as Valan's were on the other. Even her father's chair had been carefully placed. Her candle was set up on a stand apparently made to fit around the knobby roots and keep it steady, and a small, shielded brazier was burning something aromatic several feet in front of it. Duke Cygent waited on one side of the brazier, holding a green taper, and Princess Semiana stood on the other holding a blue one. She flashed a smile at Caelerys, which vanished quickly behind a stern and regal expression. She was dressed in Alumat royal formals, though in warmer versions thereof, with still, a great deal more skin showing than anyone. She wore a ca'theryn skin cape over one shoulder, the head fastening it to a breastplate-like top made of small gold plates. Chains draped artistically over her ribs from it, and a band of gold graced her brow beneath the leolan mane of braids.

Cae was led to stand in front of her. Semi's voice rang out, imposing and clear. "Do you bring this maid to the candle of her own free will?"

Liliwyn, Malyna and Syera's voices chimed in joyous unison. "So we are assured."

She looked down at Caelerys, a faint smile playing at her lips. "Do you concur?" she purred, more softly than before.

Cae felt a warm flush flood her body, managed to say "I do."

Semi handed her the taper. Cae paused for just a moment to step out of her slippers, to find a better footing upon the uneven tree roots. Every step towards the brazier infused her with warmth and love. She stood beside it and waited, turned to watch Valan.

He was already bootless, and, even bare footed, looked regal in his dark green cote. The yellow silk shirt she had made and embroidered for him peeked out from beneath his sleeves and the sight made her feel even more loved and desired.

Duke Cygent asked his question, and Valan answered with a fierce intensity. Cae felt one or two pockets of indifference and resentments in the crowd vanish as he spoke, flickering briefly to fear then to resignation. Then Valan was standing across from her and all she could feel was him.

They looked at one another a moment before lighting their tapers. It was an act they had to focus on, as the fire was shielded to protect the tree from any stray sparks. Then they carefully stepped to the candle and both of them could feel the weight of the spirits all around them, urging them on. There was a small spark as they set their tapers to the wick, and then the candle flared to life. They blew out the tapers and, joining hands, turned to face the crowd.

The shouts that went up were loud and echoed throughout the wood.

Carefully, they raised their joined hands over the brazier and stepped down to the path. Something fell from the branches above as Cae paused to slip her shoes back on. They looked up, but it was not the branch Tempest sat on. Valan smiled.

“My princess has been blessed,” he said.

She put her hand up, felt a strand of long, feathery needle caught in her curls and chose to leave it there. She looked back, closing her eyes. She could barely see the flow of energy for the intensity of the glow. She opened them quickly, blinking to clear her vision.

Valan already had his boots on again and the two of them began the walk back to the carriage. The tide of people parted for them, waving their ribboned wands as they passed in stately procession. Larch and Ikembe had fallen in behind them. Tempest flew overhead, shrilling her mistress’s joy.

It seemed to Caelerys that there were more people lining the path than had been there before. Then she noticed that the clothing was more common and workman than before and she realized that the nobles would have followed to try and watch the ceremony, and that the common people from the city would have followed in their wake. With him at her side, she felt strong, even bombarded by the emotions of so many people. His hand on hers was a lifeline. She glanced shyly at him almost as much as she looked and smiled at the crowd.

The carriage had been turned around somehow, and Valan helped her into it. Once seated, he ignored the presence of Larch and Ikembe and stole a kiss that made the crowd roar with delight. Cae could feel nothing but the roiling volcano deep within her.

“Looks like there is going to be quite the fair here tonight,” Larch commented pointedly as they rode past the tourney fields.

Caelerys pulled back, promising him more later. “I don’t want to miss anything of today,” she told him.

Reluctantly, he agreed and they looked out the windows to see that the whole area was filled with colourful tents and stalls and makeshift stages being set up.

Wooden pallets had been lain out on the tourney field to make the sands a better dancing surface and a group of musicians were setting up in what was normally the royal box.

Caclerys leaned back against the cushions and sighed. "It almost makes me want to celebrate here instead of the Citadel."

Ikembe shook her head. "Too risky."

Valan pulled her closer. "You will have plenty of time for country fairs and courser celebrations when we tour the country. I shall make sure of it."

"I am not certain I am comfortable with you travelling without guard or entourage," mused Larch.

He smiled. "I can only carry so many, my friend. And you cannot argue that Ikembe is not perfectly suited to protect us both."

"Division of labour," he grumbled.

"Won't we have to be back in time for your brother's wedding?" Cae asked him.

"Of course," he answered, giving her a smile that had nothing to do with what he had to say. "But that will be some time from now. She still needs a little more mourning time, and they are not in a hurry. Unlike me," he added hungrily.

She blushed and looked out the window as the horses strode over cobbles. The citizens were not gathered quite as before, but those that had not yet gone down to the fairgrounds and were on their way, moved off the road and cheered. The rest of the city looked almost deserted.

"Tell me there are patrols out today," she said, "to watch for those that stayed behind for more nefarious purposes."

He laughed at her. "Of course, my princess." He laughed even more when she twitched at the term. "Get used to it, ketava."

The Vermian endearment made her blush even more.

He leaned in and whispered, "Reyn ketava."

That made her shiver.

Then they were pulling into the courtyard and disembarking. It seemed that all of the servants in the whole of the Citadel had poured out to greet them. Cae even spied Rue and Roan near the stables. Roan winked at her as he bowed, grinning like a madman.

Valan sought a page out of the gathered, gave him some signal which prompted the boy to run off.

"What was that about?" she asked suspiciously.

“You’ll see soon enough. Quickly, we haven’t much time before the rest of the nobility descend upon us,” he urged, and swept her into the Citadel and out into the gardens by the shortest path possible. Ikembe kept up, though Larch accepted a more sedate pace, pausing to rearm himself.

“Where are we going?” she laughed as he moved them faster than was meet if they had been observed.

“Oh, some place sweet,” was all he’d say.

Caclerys figured it out before they arrived that they were going to the bower.

Once she ascertained that the little dead-end was empty, Ikembe took up guard at the entrance.

The fragrances blended into an early fallow wonderland, dotted here and there with snowdrops and other early blooming flowers.

He took her to the bench at the end and sat them down. His dark blue eyes devoured her hungrily. “This time no one will disturb us,” he rumbled.

She smiled. “Until the others arrive and figure out where you’ve whisked me off to. We can hardly accomplish anything in so short a time.”

“You underestimate me, princess.”

She cocked an eyebrow at that. “One, I would think that over-estimating you. Two, I hardly wish my first time to happen here or quickly. Later... maybe,” she added, blushing.

He laughed. “Not at all what I meant. Though I think your brother was right.”

“Which brother about what?”

“Will, and about there being as much ca’theryn as mouse in you,” he chuckled, stroking the side of her neck tenderly. “He was wrong about regretting it, though.”

“Maybe not,” she smiled slowly. “I do believe I have just been challenged.”

He laughed, placing a light kiss to her lips. “Life with you will be one long challenge. For both of us.”

She sighed. “I do have much to learn if I am to be queen one day.”

“That is not only what I meant,” he smiled.

Tempest dropped out of the sky onto the bower roof, shrilled once as she dropped something through the lattice onto Cae’s lap. She smiled up at the bird. “Thank you, my sweet.”

“What is this?” he asked, eyeing the small box she was unwinding from the carrying ribbon.

“Just a gift,” she said dismissively. “For you,” she added, handing the freed box to him.

“Well, I... don’t quite know what to say,” he said, taking the box from her fingers.

“What, have you never been given a gift before?”

He smiled devilishly, “Not from a woman I had more than temporary interest in.”

“Just open it,” she growled playfully.

He obeyed. She watched his eyes light up and smiled. “I take it you like it,” she said.

He pulled the ring from the box and turned it in his hands. “I suppose there is an advantage in marrying a woman with a moonsmith for a brother.”

“*The* moonsmith,” she corrected. “For now. This should help when I am not able to be right with you. You said once that your family had no moonsilver beyond the odd ring. Since you were not wearing one, I assumed you could not find one. I asked my brother to make you one when he had the time. I had not expected it to look quite so...” she tilted her head, lost for words.

“It is exquisite,” he breathed, slipping it upon his finger. It fit almost perfectly. He could feel its effects steal over him.

“It is unique,” she said. “Jan used a method that destroys the mould. There will never be another. Also,... now you have no need to worry about hurting me because you lost control,” she added.

His eyes caught hers. “You are my control,” he whispered, leaning in for a kiss. He was interrupted by the sound of someone approaching swiftly.

He looked up as Ikembe stood aside to allow the page to enter carrying a large box. Cae looked at him in horror. “What have you done?” she accused.

He merely laughed, gesturing the boy closer. “Well, a certain maiden once complained that riding dragons was annoyingly windy.” He took the box from the boy and removed it from the base, revealing a visored helm.

“So you bought me a helmet?” she gasped, picking it up.

It was fairly lightweight and had all the markings of Janem’s work. There were a small pair of antlers with a rose between them upon the brow. The back of the helm was skirted with scale mail, more for aesthetics than function and the front was double visored. The top swung upward and had a slit fitted with a piece of curved, clear glass. The bottom swung in a wide arc, she assumed for ease of putting it on and for lowering it when it was not needed. It was riddled with air holes.

“He has assured me that the wind speeds will not break the glass. So long as you aren’t in combat, there should be no danger of it breaking. These holes should



provide you enough ventilation without the speed stealing your breath. He also assured me that it would fit over a crown of braids.”

She looked up at him. “Is this why they were measuring my head?” she asked, turning a glare to Ikembe.

The woman only smiled.

“You’re going to need one yourself, you know,” she threatened.

Ikembe bowed. “I am aware, Your Highness. Though my hoape has proved a problem. Something different is being rigged for me.”

She turned back to Valan. “Well, husband,” she said, savouring the word. “It seems we have both given things of practicality.”

“But you gave a thing of beauty,” he said. “I shall have to find a thing of beauty to give you. Oh, wait,” he said, turning the box over and pulling a small ring at the top, removing hidden panel. The compartment was padded top and bottom with stuffed velvet, and revealed a beautifully jewelled coronet.

With a tiny gasp, she picked it up, turning it so that she might see it from all angles. It was delicate, twisted of silver and gold, with a dragon base and antlered points tipped with pearls. The rest was jewelled with both emeralds and sapphires. It was beautiful, and yet not overly ostentatious, which was no easy thing. She noticed something on the inside rim, however, that confused her.

“Is it broken?” she asked, fingering a long, narrow crevice that ran along the sides.

He smiled. “Not at all.” He took the diadem from her and did something with a pair of emeralds near the back half. Something clicked and the whole came apart in his hands. He set the back half down and held up the tiara, turning it to slip it into her hair. “You see, women’s hair fashions change so quickly, and very often does not allow for the wearing of a full coronet. So, master Daph was challenged and came through gloriously. Now you have a crown for when it is needed and practical, and a tiara when, like today, you wear your glory up.”

She blushed as he fiddled with her hair. Finally, Ikembe rescued him and adjusted matters, even rethreading the queen’s leaf so that it would not fall out. “I... I didn’t think you paid much attention to things like that.”

He shrugged. “I pay attention to what I like. And I’ve said before, I like it best down. But at the moment,” he rumbled suggestively, “I am satisfied that I shall have that mostly when I can have you to myself for a few hours. Bal designed the hinge. Master Daph did the rest.”

He carefully put the remaining half into the hidden box and replaced the helm, covering it all back up. The page took it, bowed and carried it back into the Citadel.

Val leaned closer, was surprised to see tears in her eyes. He gently brushed them away. "What is this?"

She took a deep breath. "This is real, isn't it?" she asked softly.

He laughed softly. "Yes."

"I'm not dreaming this at all?"

He kissed her tenderly. "No."

Music began to filter into the bower from various places around the gardens and voices could be heard drifting on the winds. A light snow began to fall.

They both looked up, watched the delicate flakes floating in the air all around them.

"Is my princess warm enough?" he asked.

"My prince shall keep me plenty warm, I assure you," she whispered.

A voice drifted to them, familiar and a little annoyed. "I'll find them. I think I know just where to look."

A feminine voice drifted after it, "Behave!"

"Never!"

Valan groaned, pressing his forehead to hers. "He *will* find us."

"I know," she whispered. "We should go."

"Or give him something to find..." he suggested.

She laughed at him. "Oh, I think not. He'll tease unmercifully and I would hate to have to hit him on our wedding day."

He rose, bowing to her as he held out his hand. She set her fingertips on his and he curled them up in his fist, pulling her to her feet and into his arms. He paused to kiss her once more before reluctantly setting her upon his arm and escorting her out of the bower and into the rest of their lives.



Turn the page for a special treat!

# Elanthus:

A Cultural Treatise of the Kingdom

By Altessa Tavari, Mercari Fleetmaster of Telmar

Our neighbours to the West, (across what they call the Eastern Sea,) are a mixed and confusing lot to those of us who have no experience with them. In the name of trade, I have worked among them, sending my crew out at various ports with the interest of picking up as much cultural knowledge as I could glean. Herein lies what I hope are the more important cultural facts to assist traders and their crews to better blend in and convince these confusing creatures to part with their money and goods.

## TIME

The first thing I must mention is their calendar system. Personally, I feel it superior to our own, often confusing system of recording the passage of time. As we all know, there are two moons in our skies. The Elanthians call them by several names. The larger, more golden of the two is most often referred to as the Southern Lord, though it will also be referred to as the Southern Moon, The Eye of Justice and the Golden Brother. They believe he governs righteousness and justice and right thinking. The second, smaller moon, in all its silver glory, is most often called the Eastern Lady, but also: the Eastern Moon, the Silver Sister and the Lady of Love. She is the softer side, patroness of couples and governing such things as peace and tranquility.

It is by these moons that they make their calendars. The southern moon has the shortest cycle, and so it is by this that they measure their months. This is referred to as a 'gold month', as opposed to a 'silver' one, which is measured by the Eastern Moon and rarely used. A month is broken into four weeks, and each week is eight days. The weeks are further broken down by a mid-mark known as Fourth Day. Every four days is apparently a day of rest, and, for a certain portion of the population, worship. A much more efficient way of breaking up one's labours, in my opinion. This is usually utilized by the peasants who spend the rest of their time working for their lord, to take care of their own households and needs.

They also have a very interesting ritual called Bonfire Night, which happens on the rare occasions that both moons are new at the same time. They light huge bon-

fires in public areas, (though the upper classes tend to have their own in large enough cities) and gather around them. They make straw dolls, write upon them wishes or things they are casting from their lives and throw them into the bonfire, believing that this carries them to the ears of the Great Mother. Whether this is true or not, it can have a very cathartic effect upon the individuals, often helping them move on from traumatic events. The second portion of this ritual, involves torches upon which they inscribe the names of their loved ones and light from the bonfire. This is to protect or bring fortune or luck to the individuals, I do not know which. I have not been able to glean a consistent answer from the population. The rest of the night seems to be given over to all sorts of behaviours best done in the dark, and everyone turns a blind eye to it.

The year itself is broken up by only three seasons, unlike our four, which are roughly four months apiece: Planting, Harvest and Fallow. This comes from their largely agrarian society, measuring their year by what matters most to this southern continent. The new year begins at the end of fallow, two months after the fallow equinox.

## CLASSES

The division of the population by classes is one of the more backward practices of their culture. It must be remembered that they are still a feudal society and much larger than our own fair country. It is far more difficult to maintain a true republic when your borders are a fortnight apart at a hard ride.

The classes are referred to as Estates, and there are three, unimaginatively called, the First, the Second and the Third Estate, respectively. There are also those who are technically 'outside' of this class system, but more on them later.

The First Estate is the ruling nobility. They are set up as is expected in any feudal society, with a King at the top, and the rest falling into place in a pyramid below that. The First Estate is broken up into Houses, which is a system not unfamiliar to us. What is different is that there is a ranking system within the Houses.

Each House is represented by a lord or lady who is responsible for everything and everyone below them. They are all related by blood at the noble level, unless married or adopted in, and all bear some form of the house Sigil, their totem or guardian spirit. This is usually one of the First or Second Born, but has been known to be other things like various trees or flowers, though this is mostly among the Houses Minor. The head of the House carries the sigil of the House, which is traditionally the full figure of their guardian animal. His heir usually bears the same sigil

with some marking designating the heir. The rest of his children and lesser relatives who hold their own lands usually bear only the head of the beast, or some portion marking them as a lesser branch.

The rank of a house is determined by the crown by how many men or other resources a given House controls or can field. Thus, whether one is a great house or a minor one can fluctuate with the fortunes of the family in control.

First are Great Houses. These were originally the five clans claimed by the First Born: Alvermian- the Dragon, Roshan- the Unicorn, Griff- the Griffon, and Levitau- the Leviathan. Of these, only Alvermian and Griff are still Great Houses, though these days, I suspect, Alvermian is so only because it is the family that holds the crown and has for as long as anyone can remember. Roshan is now merely a Lordly House and Levitau is extinct. The Houses Maral and Cygent have since risen to fill those roles. Maral took up a goodly portion of the eastern seaboard in the wake of the destruction of Levitau, and inland, Cygent rose to cover what Roshan was unable to provide. This has been the status for the better part of nine centuries, though the Cygent/Roshan inversion was more recent by a good five hundred years. Each of the Great Houses is ruled, not by a lord, but a duke; thus Duke Cygent is a very different man than Lord Cygent, who would be either a brother or cousin in charge of his branch of the family.

Next are the Lordly Houses, who answer to the Great House above them. Followed by the Noble and then the Minor. Minor Houses are mostly landed knights or other vassals duly rewarded for some service.

Curiously, Elanthians are so rank conscious that they have a way of marking it even in correspondence. For example: the head of the noble House Delphinus would be called Lord Delphinus. So, too, would his lady be named. His children, or relatives who are not land-owners, while they would still be titled lord or lady, would be named by the title, uncapitalised, and their given name only: ie. lady Senna. Those belonging to the ruling House of the Great Houses, on the other hand, have their titles capitalised. i.e. Lady Senna.

Other titles you will see in use are Master and Mester or Mestress. Master is, as here, only granted to someone who has reached the pinnacle of their trade or craft: a Master Bowman or Master Blacksmith. These are so designated by those under which they learned or journeyed, and in the matter of crafts, it is not given lightly. The title Master is mono-genderal, in that anyone who has reach said pinnacle is a Master regardless of gender. Mester and Mestress is the title given to bastard chil-

dren of noble families if they have been acknowledged. (see the section on relationships below)

The Third Estate is tied to the First, being the peasant labour from which they derive their income. The most civic minded of lords understand that these peasants are their responsibility as well as their labour source, and make certain they are protected and have what they need to survive above and beyond what they require from them for themselves. Some lords are not so intelligent and treat them as slave labour, leaving them with the barest minimum to survive, and abandoning them swiftly at the first sign of trouble. Unlike the feudal kingdom of Harmoth on the Northern Continent, however, these peasants are not serfs bound to the land. If they are not being treated fairly, they are legally permitted to go to another House or village if a place can be found for them. So most lords at least try to keep them content if not happy.

The advantage of the Third Estate is that it is bound to a higher one, to whom they are encouraged to go to address any needs or wrongs that are not being met. If, for example, a well has gone dry, or bandits have raided livestock, it is to the lord they should go, and his the responsibility to see to the problem. If they are ill, the lord provides a Physician.

The Second Estate, while they are accorded a great deal more freedoms because they are beholden to no lord but the crown, they do not have the advantage of being guaranteed that their base needs will be met. These are those who have stepped out of their traditional, feudal agrarian roles and fend for themselves. Most often these are craftsmen for whom there was no place available back home, but just as often servants and merchants. We, as free traders, fall under this classification, so anything listed as open to the Second Estate is fair game for us.

Finally there are those who are 'Outside' for one reason or another. The royal family are, of course, Outside, mostly because they answer to no one above them. There is a growing priesthood who are trying desperately to be declared 'Outside' in the same manner, but for now shall have to settle for being relegated to the Second Estate. (More on them in the subject of Religion) Mendicants and other vagabonds, travellers, beggars and entertainers are mostly Outside and Under, answerable to no one and protected by the same, though technically they are still Second Estate.

It bears mentioning that there is a group of people, most often of the Third Estate, called Rustics, who's manner of speaking is highly broken and doesn't seem to follow any of the normal rules of either Elanthian, Alumet or Old Vermian: the three languages predominant in the West. They seem to make up words or fragment

them as it pleases, making it very hard for anyone not familiar with them to understand them. They seem to have no problem understanding most of Elanthian, however, so long as you do not use what they call ‘fancy wordings’. While some members of the Second Estate may have started life as a Rustic, they quickly learn other modes of speech or find their upward mobility somewhat curtailed.

## RELATIONSHIPS

The nature of relationships in this southernmost kingdom is complex and almost enlightened. Though it bears mentioning that it differs between the estates. The lower estates are far less convoluted, as they can afford to marry out of desire, not economics or politics. For them it is usually a straight-forward union between two individuals.

The First Estate, and, in some cases the Second, have far more to concern themselves with than mere affection, and matches are normally arranged by parents for political or economical gain. In such cases, you find men and women who either actively dislike their spouses, or are, at best, wholly indifferent. And here is where and why I call them enlightened. They actually plan for this. While it is not generally acceptable to do so within the first few years of a marriage, lovers can be taken without retribution, and in some cases are even sanctioned. A man may take one at any time for any reason, barring a love-match and spousal jealousy. Even their wives may seek affection outside of the marriage contract, though they are expected to wait until they have first provided a reasonable number of heirs for their husband to ensure the line of inheritance. These lovers come in three flavours: Mistress, Concubine and Paramour.

Concubines are women (or men) kept for the purpose of sex or children, with no real intimacy. Never do these come from the higher estates, most often Third or, more rarely, poorer Second. They are contracted, bargained for like a wife, with provisions set up for when their services are no longer needed. They live with their contracted lover and are very often servants of the house, though admittedly of lighter work. Handmaids can fall into this duty. They have no status, though they usually have no trouble finding spouses of their own once their contracts are up due to the settlements they have been provided.

A mistress is like a concubine but with status, though she lacks the security of a concubine, as she may be sent away for any reason. She is below the wife in all things, but above the rest of the household. Whether she or her children live in their lover’s house is up to the spouse. Sometimes she even acts as a lady in waiting

(or began that way) for the wife. A man can keep a mistress against his wife's will if he is strong enough, but to keep her in his house against her will is to invite trouble (often from the wife's family because of the disrespect which can lead to the termination of the union). Everything is provided by the lover, whether in the main house or separate. Extremely rare for these to come from the Third Estate. They are most often Second or lesser First. The male counterpart is not as common but is merely referred to as a formal lover.

A paramour is a lover, male or female, taken for affection. There is no obligation between parties and they are not 'kept'. They can come from any class, but are most commonly from the same social rank or within one step, as anything less would be foolish not to seek formal assurances. Widows and Widowers very often fall into this category. The term is mono-genderal.

Courtesans are on the rise, fortunately, for those of us who prefer our sexual favours to be of a more professional nature and with less commitment. Prostitutes abound and always have, but, being common and cheap, extend certain risks. Courtesans are wealthier and more particular about their clientele, and the provision of clean locations as well as non-sexual entertainments alongside the carnal make them worth the little extra they cost. Amusingly enough, they are often referred to as 'seamstresses', though rarely will you find a single dressmaker among them.

Now, most cultures do not deal well with the products of these unofficial unions, however they may smile, wink and nod. Bastards in Elanthus are treated, though not as well as legitimate children, better than anywhere else I've encountered in my extensive travels. In Elanthus they are called Subsequents, while legitimate children are Precedent, largely because they precede any subsequent child in order of inheritance and rank. These subsequent children may take their father's name if they are recognized, and are expected by society to be provided for as for any child. Men who refuse to acknowledge their illegitimate offspring without cause to doubt paternity are looked down upon, as it is only a coarse individual who creates that for which he cannot provide.

As subsequents are most often deliberately made by households seeking heirs or extra children in case of calamity (the proverbial 'heir and a spare'), it is only intelligent to make provision for their ability to do what they were born for. In other cases, they are born of love-pairings and, as such, are loved for their own sake. In the matter of inheritance, regardless of age, all subsequent children are considered as if they were younger than the youngest precedent child, and thus will only inherit anything specifically willed to them. In cases where there are plenty of precedent



children, many subsequents seek trades as if they were (and often becoming) members of the Second Estate.

## MARRIAGE RITUALS

There is a unique and very strange ritual undertaken by the women of Elanthus. When they come into their first womanly courses, they soak a candle wick in the effluvium. This, when dried, is then taken to a chandler and made into a very special candle. Colour is a matter of personal choice in the lower classes, though nobility have them made in their House colours and dipped in a thin sheet of gold, silver or copper leafing. The seal of their family is embedded in the freshly made candle and the finished product locked away in a special box for the wedding day.

The reason, I am told, for the moon-blood in the wick is believed to be magical in nature. The candle, invariably belongs to the woman whose blood resides in it. Through it, women are believed to be able to curse their own union if forced to light the candle, but a willing bride brings fortune to the couple. The ability to dissolve the union also resides with the candle. Should the terms of the marriage contract agreed upon be violated in anyway, the candle and all that came with it can be returned with the bride to the bride's family. There are parts of the ceremony itself which ensures that this is honoured and upheld, and there are individuals on both sides designated to do so.

However, if a marriage becomes untenable, and a husband refuses to allow her to go, a woman may break her candle, thus dissolving the union, though this leaves her with nothing, not even the goods she brought into the marriage or the children of the union, and so is only a tactic for the desperate. A husband can do the same, but this is never done lightly, as he too, loses what she brought to the marriage, though he loses less than the woman does in the long run. Candles may be relit, should another union be desired. Widows keep their candles and are not beholden to their families for remarriage.

The process of marriage itself is a curious mix of economic transaction and sentimentality. The day of the wedding, both families gather for the signing of the contract, which is read aloud by a neutral party, affirmed by all involved that they understand and agree, then signed by whoever in each family has the authority, usually the head of house. The husband's seal is then affixed above the bride's. After a brief period of time, in which the bridal couple are kept separate, they are led by their friends to the candle and asked once more, by the individuals who have been designated to ensure the contract is fulfilled, if they come to the union of their own

free will. Agreeing, they light tapers from a 'sacred fire' (though what designates one fire sacred over another is uncertain) and together light her candle.

How the ceremony is done with the lower classes, I have not yet learned, having only been witness to two Elanthian weddings and both were royalty.

## RELIGION

This one section alone could take up an entire volume of its own, but needs must be mentioned here. There is a faction growing in Elanthus which bears careful watching.

Most of the Elanthian faith is not unlike our own: a Great Mother who created the world and all in it, who then created a race of beings to help her with the world, who, in turn, created children in their own image. They call them by different names, but they have known the Goddess and her children and pay them their proper respect.

They have created something called a church, lead by followers of the very first of the first born of the Great Mother's children who in turn created the race of man (They call him The Eldest). They have an established priesthood (though they prefer the term pontifex to priest) who sermonize from a pulpit every Fourth Day and leads their congregations in ritual prayer and song. The call to attend is made by ringing a large hammer upon a large anvil mounted upon the steps of the church hall, a sound which will never be confused with that of an actual blacksmith at work.

The danger lies in the doctrine of said church. It is a not merely a perversion of the Great Mother's few teachings, but an active attempt to supplant her with The Eldest, and I would not be surprised to learn that, at some point in the future, they claim him the supreme and only god, and relegate the Great Mother to little more than a mythological footnote, or, worse yet, vilify her entirely as the source of all evil. They have based their oppressive and male-centric religion upon the tenet of the Divinity of Man. By which, as we know, the Mother implies our connection to her and the divine. By which they mean that man himself is a divine creature and entitled to be obeyed by everything not man, i.e., male and human.

Their women are required to remain pure and know only one man her entire life, being bound to remain faithful to him even after his death. They are expected to be modest, perform only those labours which are fitting for women, and to obey 'the men who have authority over them' in all things. They are taught that they are lesser beings, incapable of intelligence or complex thought beyond that of a child.

In some cases I have witnessed, a male child of any age is thought superior and more capable than his own mother.

So, beware of men in iron grey robes, as they are the clerical garments of the priesthood. And if you should happen to notice an anvil amulet upon a person with whom you are dealing, be aware that they are a follower of the Eldest and adjust your manner accordingly. They will not deal well with women and find the attire of our females to be offensive and whorish to their eyes.

They also vilify the shift and anything labelled ‘magic’ or ‘sorcery’ as evil.

At the present moment in time, (the year by their reckoning is 1564 RA (Regus Alvermius)- one thousand, five hundred and sixty four years after the ascension of the first Alvermian to the throne), the current royal family have rejected this church and its teachings, but have yet to ban or otherwise forbid its practise. Whether or not this is wise remains to be seen; but their temporarily meteoric rise has been sharply curtailed. Had the disaster which struck the previous branch of the royal family not occurred, it is almost certain they would have cemented themselves more fully, as the late queen was a devout believer.

I urge the members of the Aggregate to consider forbidding the open practice and seeking of converts within our country. We must take all precautions that this disease of the mind does not contaminate our fair shores, as I believe the close-minded nature of this religion will have a stunting effect upon our prosperity and trading practices.

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