

Deception

By Tiona Yates

Kalissa and Isala sat around a table in the merchant quarter of Caribar, the last city of any size before you cross into Toyurasi. Neither woman liked the smell of this city, with its scum-filled lake and the ragged badlands. It was too close to the border with the Wild Steppes, and they were the first knights to come out here in more than a decade. While there was actually a temple to Railah here, the priest had already warned them that it was best for them to be very careful. Far too many in this place were aligned with the demon-worshipping steppelanders, which is exactly why the motherhouse had sent them here.

Times had been too easy in the recent years, not for them per se, but for the Order itself. There were far too few knights with actual experience dealing with demon cults, and, if the pattern that were emerging were to be believed, they would soon have their hands full of such cults. It seemed that ever since Siara had made her play, two years past, that the cults had just started coming out of the sand dunes. They hadn't made it out of the desert and the coastal areas bordering such, not up into Karyn, or further away, the Kingdom of Crystal, but it was only a matter of time. And Kalissa and Isala had more experience than most knights, though little enough of it even there.

Cilian, the Railahn priest here, had warned them that it was not uncommon for individuals to disappear here. Sometimes bodies were recovered from the lake; more often, there was no sign left after the people vanished. And when bodies were recovered, it was often impossible to say if they had been killed in sacrifice, or merely had the misfortune of falling into the lake. No matter how bad the water was, there were things that lived in that lake. Maybe more than just fish, too.

But the priests at Alamber were determined to try to find out more about these cults, before they would get completely out of hand, and the best way to try to do that was to send someone who knew what they were looking for to the city most likely to be affected. That meant that Kalissa and Isala, both still fairly new to their blades, were out here, trying not to get themselves killed, and maybe, if they were lucky, bring home some useful information.

Kalissa was in a fair dudgeon, barely able to stomach what passed for tea here, with water that just couldn't taste right. Much as she disliked the desert areas she'd been in recently, at least the water was reasonably clean. If she had had her way, they'd be boiling their water three times per pot, just to clean it reasonably. She was still surprised that there was no sign of out-right plague with the corruption in the lake. The only reasons she stayed here were the Goddess' will, clear through her soulsword, and the fact that Isala could at least partly clean the water with her priestly gifts.

They'd only been here for two days, but both young knights could see that Cilian was right about things being dangerous. Today, while passing the lake-side market area, they ran into one young woman wild in terror about her missing daughter. While Kalissa and Isala aided in the search, nothing showed up. In fact, when they asked if there was someone at the mage's guild could perform a divination searching for the missing child, they were informed that it was obviously the woman's own fault for letting her child run loose. There was no help to be forthcoming here, and if what they'd heard from the people in the marketplace were to be believed, those who made a fuss over how things worked tended to be among the next missing.

Isala could sense her partner's black mood, and shook her head. It was too soon, only two years after they'd tried, and failed, to stop the cult that claimed one of their mentor's lives, and the other's blade. Kalissa still blamed herself for failing to wake in time to save that child back while they were

travelling. Even when the northern Sacred Sword's mind-gifts were active, they seldom gave enough information to really be of use. And Kalissa often blamed herself for not being able to discern more. If Isala didn't find a way to temper her partner's guilt, it might end up destroying them both, especially in a place like this.

"Sister, you can't continue to blame yourself for the past. You've done as much as any knight could. Most actual seers don't take up the blade, so it's only people with marginal gifts, like yours, who end up out on circuit. Remember what Kinian told us about your gifts when we returned to Alamber. Those who push a gift too hard risk burning it out completely. And then you'll be less useful to anyone. Even the best knights in the Order can't do everything."

"I can't help but remember his face, his voice in the night-time. I should have been able to waken faster. Just like I should have been able to get some sort of sense from the missing girl today. But there was nothing."

"Perhaps there was nothing because you were looking into the future, and the girl lay in the past. You have no skill for seeing what has been; nor are you one who can commune with ghosts. When there is nothing to go on, do not blame your gift for failing you."

Kalissa sighed and stared into her mug of tea. She felt the eyes of the regulars in this inn upon her. While Isala could pass almost unnoticed, save for her armor and the sword now resting in her lap, there was no such hope for Kalissa. Born to a family of tall northern woodsmen, Kalissa had not only extraordinary height for these parts, but also dirty blond hair that marked her even more than her hinted at faedh heritage. "How long, do you think, before we become targets ourselves?"

Isala's eyes lit up in amusement, "At the rate of your pointing out faults in the local fare, and the fact that you're using your gifts, I would give it only a few days. You should be more careful. We really do not know what we're dealing with now, and, while they likely have not dealt with a Sacred Sword pair, we are not invincible. Try shielding a bit more, Sister. There is certainly a mystery here, one that we were sent to solve, but that will require more subtlety than you're used to."

With a frown, Kalissa closed her eyes for a moment to banish the heightened awareness that was the only controllable aspect of her limited foresight. Her other gifts had been powering that too much already, and she knew she would have to rebuild reserves, especially if it did come down to a fight. She was more than a passable swordswoman, and Isala was not too far behind her, but there were things even yet that could take them down.

They were staying at the Limpid Lizard because the Railahn temple had no place for them, being barely more than a shrine, hardly large enough to warrant a full time priest. From what the pair had gathered, the only reason the temple was that big was that there were enough people who would pay for wardings and intercessions from the Goddess. Railahn priestly magics were every bit as good at wards as mages could do, in some cases better. But Cilian had told them that though money and devotion for intercessions were plentiful, he felt obligated to warn his customers that such intercessions were still at the discretion of the Goddess. The money kept coming, though little enough good came of it.

Kalissa knocked aside one of the local veahra lizards from the table. The damnable things were ever-present here, with translucent skin so that you could see their organs within. That was the most likely source of the inn's name; there were enough of the hated things here. Even as she rested her hand across the sheathed sword across her lap, she got a sudden flash of something getting ready to happen. Her foresight was limited, even as Isala had said, but this was reasonably clear. There was a small carved bone statue, and some filthy creature that stank of the dead, and the lake. The statue was innocuous in form, looking like little more than the carved cats that were frequently traded from Toyurasi, but this one felt different.

Isala knew the look that crossed Kalissa's face. She'd seen it a few times before, mostly in the past couple of years. She doubted it was much different than the look on her own face when she

communed with the Goddess. It was a recognition of something that ordinary senses would not pick up; most likely a touch of sword-magic helping it along. Reaching out to tap her partner's shoulder, "What have you seen?"

Kalissa took a deep breath before answering. "I'm not sure. I saw one of those carved cats, though this one was made of bone, and unpainted. And something that should be dead, but was moving around on land. The two are connected, though I can't tell you precisely how. I feel that we'll know the answer to this soon enough, though."

Isala nodded. "The vision will make itself understandable when we come to the time for it. Until then, it has provided one possible clue. You might be less familiar with corpsefolk, but it is one of the legendary powers attributed to steppelander shamans. They are said to be able to raise the dead, and send them after their enemies. I recall Magnus talking about that to me when I questioned him on the natures of demon cults. He had always found the lore of such cults interesting; much use as it likely is to him now. I think that what you saw was one of those corpsefolk. It would fit the description that Magnus had given me."

Kalissa nodded, remembering how their teacher had been one of the few in the Order who could at least read some of the ancient steppelander texts. In the past century, it seemed that the steppelanders had stopped using normal writing for carrying the knowledge of their arts. It had probably been more than fifty years since any knight had come across a reasonably new such text, though occasionally very old ones were still found here and there.

Since there was no sign of anything they'd need to do tonight, the pair retired up to their room, one of three private ones available at this establishment. Because she was thinking about them, Kalissa noticed the small cat sitting in the windowsill of the room. Like the one in her vision, this one was carved from bone, but it wasn't Toyurasi craft. Still, it had a slight tingle to it when she touched it, some sort of latent magic. She suspected that such things, so prevalent here, had been used for wards, especially if Railah's temple was called upon so often for that magic. She set the token back in the windowsill, and hooked the oiled leather shade down over the edge of the window.

One problem this city had was a dearth of real wood, and thusly, niceties like shutters and doors. Most buildings here had mere leather curtains hanging where doors would otherwise be. Every actual wooden door in this city was made of imported wood, as the only local sources were scrub trees, nowhere big enough to supply planks for anything as large as a door. The buildings themselves were made of mud-brick, and many of the roofs were leather tarps that would be replaced regularly as they aged past usefulness. The wealthier people managed to import enough logs to support an actual roof. Most belongings within the city were locked in small metal coffers, or kept in bags and baskets. Kalissa was surprised that this city managed to not fall apart due to thievery. The Sacred Sword pair didn't have to worry as much as perhaps others, as their swords kept watch for them at night, and their horses likewise kept watch over their gear.

Their beds were merely raised platforms of mud-brick, covered by a mattress made of leather, goose feathers, and moldy straw. Isala had remarked on the state of the beds when they'd arrived yesterday, her nose wrinkling at the smell coming from it. As the roof would leak when there was a heavy storm, they knew the bedding had to be cleaned and refreshed regularly, but it still did not smell even remotely inviting. Both of them piled their armor between them, in the area least likely to get wet if a storm blew in, and laid their swords, unscabbarded, next to their pillows. A non Sacred Sword would probably worry about them accidentally cutting themselves on the holy blades. They were both familiar enough with it that they were highly unlikely to do so. And long experience had taught them that the scant seconds to unsheath their weapon could mean the difference between life and death.

They left their hair loose while they slept, each wearing a light under-tunic, with their cloaks wrapped under them to protect them from the mattresses. Their travel blankets served to keep them from chill. Because of her limited experience in priestly magics, Isala could not ward their room any

more than their swords could automatically. She wished again for Magnus' help, as he had, when she had reminded him of the skill, been able to wrap together the disparate gifts to a coherent ward of awareness that had kept safety in the villages that they had passed through when guarding the corrupted priestess, Siara. They hadn't known until later that they had curtailed her abilities, while she was pretending to be the target of the cult. No, they'd have to simply rely on Kalissa's instincts and the attuned soulswords.

Both women slept fitfully, drawn into dreams of the small amount of downtime they'd had after returning to Alamber from Miorah, after Siara had fled into the desert. There had been only a few moons allowed to try to fill the pair in on the skills they had been paired with the older knights to learn originally. Isala had to finish her training as a truthspeaker, though even that important training was cut short by the rumors that were coming in. In less than two moons back in Alamber, there were three new rumors of active cults. Though they requested another circuit with an experienced pair, they had been sent off almost immediately to a small set of villages to the south. They were lucky there; it was only a small grouping of haunts that had to be laid to rest, but that had been under their own power and knowledge. They returned to the motherhouse only to be sent here, still underprepared.

It was the dark of the night when they both awoke, sensing magic nearby through their swords. Both knights rolled to their feet, soulswords in hand, glowing with their inherent ruddy light. And not a moment too soon, either. A smoke that had entered the window resolved into the rotting form of a corpse, but one that was both mobile, and intent on killing the women. Its flesh was the same green of the lakescum, and its eyes glowed with a fierce orange light. By the build, it was the corpse of a man, though there was nothing other than general build that could determine such, so much flesh had rotted from the frame. The sudden unexpected stench of it made them gag.

It swung at them suddenly, almost getting past Kalissa's guard as she prepared to defend herself. Even as she played out a counter, Isala choked out the words, "We're cut off, someone's warded this place to keep us here. None can hear us."

Kalissa swung her blade in a truncated arc, not wanting to puncture the tarp that served as a roof for the room. Even though it hit the creature with a sickening smack, the blade did not seem to faze the unholy thing. Kalissa knew enough about the dead to know that she'd be better off keeping the thing off of Isala so that her partner could manage some magic to undo the spell that had sent the thing. Wishing she had more energy to work with, Kalissa enhanced her speed, making sure she could counter every attempt it made to strike at them. If they were cut off from the rest of the town, someone was indeed targeting them carefully.

The corpse struck again and again, seemingly unhurt by the powerful blows that Kalissa kept leveling at it. If anything, it was strengthening as she fought it. As if it were drawing from her own energy. Even the holy fire limning her soulsword did nothing to stop this manifestation of power. The revenant managed to land a blow against Kalissa's right, leaving a stinging welt that felt corrupted, as if it carried some vile disease. "Isala, we're going to have to work harder, faster."

Ignoring the lizard skittering down her neck and into her tunic, Isala fought for breath even as she brought her own blade to bear. "I am unfamiliar with the magic. It's got a focus, but I can't locate it."

Focus. That word meant something to Kalissa. Without pause, she turned, reaching her blade behind where Isala stood, aiming for that bone cat. The blade shattered it, sending shards of bone across the room, a mini-explosion. For a moment, she wasn't sure if her tactic had been the right one, but even as the thing tried to attack her now unprotected side, it dissolved, becoming at first a putrid pool on the floor, and then vanishing completely. Kalissa knelt where she had been standing, DawnSinger across her knees. "I'm glad that worked."

Isala pulled at the window's curtain to wipe at JusticeBeacon's blade, which still bore a taint from the creature's putrid flesh. "I didn't even think of the cat. That was clever work, partner."

Kalissa nodded, "So, we have made an enemy already. I didn't expect it this soon, but it gives me a slightly better idea what we may be up against." She rose and cleaned DawnSinger against the door curtain, relieved to hear the chirping of insects and snores of the other guests again. Even as she moved to set the holy blade back down on her bedding, she winced. That thing must have hit her harder than she'd anticipated. "Isala, I know you're no healer, but I need to know if I'm going to need a proper one soon."

The other Sacred Sword set JusticeBeacon down and shifted her vision into the other-sight that was needed for working magic. "There is taint there, but I do not think it is too deep. I might be able to purge it, if not magically then with herbs." She pulled at the pack at the foot of the bed, rummaging quickly for herbs that were known to take out taint. They didn't have a pot full of hot water, but she could make do with the water still in their botas, and a little bit of magic. She knew that if they were still in danger, the swords would alert them before it would manifest. Bruising a few leaves and crushing a berry in a small bowl she'd kept for this purpose, she poured just a tiny amount of water on them, then applied the resulting paste to the wound.

Kalissa took in a deep breath as the herbs burned a bit through the wound. But it was a good type of burning, one that she was long familiar with. And it felt clean; she could sense the purification going to work. "That does seem to help. I hadn't noticed yet if there's a shrine to the Risen One here. If there is, I'd like to see the priest tomorrow. I don't doubt your skills, but they are the best healers there are."

Isala nodded, "It would not hurt to have such a one tend you. But we must become more careful to avoid such tokens in the future. After this failure, they will doubtless use more subtle, and perhaps durable, focuses for their attacks on us." Kalissa agreed.

After bandaging Kalissa's wound loosely, they lay back down to rest again, hoping that there would not be another attack this night. They would not expect to be that lucky in the nights to come; for a first attack, an enemy might think to only set one spell. When that proved unsuccessful, they would layer their attacks, to try to wear down the defenses the pair had. Which meant, even with nothing clear to go on, they'd have to find out who wanted to kill them, quickly. But there was nothing to do but go on. The Order needed the information they hoped to find here.

The call of lake birds woke the pair, slightly past dawn. They'd overslept. Isala checked the bandage again, nodding at the fact that the wound seemed to be healing quickly; likely Kalissa was rushing it. Her abilities at enhancing her body could handle such for a time, but if they weren't careful, she'd have no reserves at all to work with. Then they helped each other into their armor, cinching on breastplates, rerebraces and bracers, then cuisse, greaves and gauntlets. Even with their haste, they would not forget the morning practice. They needed the peace of mind that came from following the elegant Railahn forms, the art of the blade.

They carted their packs out to the courtyard, which, thankfully, had not been damped by a night rain. Setting the pair of packs against one wall of the courtyard, they pulled on plumed helmets and faced each other. Despite the quality of armor they had, many normal people wondered from time to time why Railahn helmets were almost always plumed. Isala had asked that question herself during her novitiate. The answer was simple. Railahn knights were there to protect the people of the land. When there was a danger of an active cult or a bandit camp, occasionally there was need for more than a single pair of warriors to face the enemy. The tall plumed helmets served to identify the knights in such a battle, giving courage to the villagers, while serving to make it easier to organize a battle.

They unsheathed their soulswords, with only the faintest trace of dim red light limning them. Normally it would be undetectable at all, but there was likely still a touch of danger at the moment, which would summon such a sign of the Goddess' favor. They went through the forms, step, pivot, slash, with a precision that would be nearly unmatchable by normal fighters. Each blow was measured

precisely, and their concerns and worries drained away as they followed the ancient blade dance that was life and purpose for all Sacred Swords.

Even with her concentration on the sword dance, Kalissa noted who stopped to watch them in the streets. Anyone could be reporting on them; she did not discount that children as young as four or five summers might be unobtrusive, and likely unwitting, spies. With the plates of her armor disguising her wound, she likely seemed completely untouched. That was intentional. Whoever had sent that revenant to kill them would be looking for any sign of weakness. She intended to give them no fuel for their next attack. She made sure to work her muscles equally, not favoring the injury at all. She'd learned how to do that at a young age, long before she'd taken river boat down to the coast, a mere wisp of a girl. It had been a few years after arriving in Alamber before she'd been deemed ready to test for a blade. Despite her natural athleticism, there were some among the leaders who doubted that she'd be what the Goddess wanted. She proved their doubts wrong, emerging with DawnSinger swiftly upon entering the hidden chapel. It's ruddy limning proved her position, a true member of Railah's Chosen. And she continued to train for the years beyond before they would send her out on her first circuit.

As the sun cleared the dunes to the east of the lake, they disengaged. Both women were sweating, despite it being cooler here than in much of the desert region. As they stripped off helms and gauntlets, they looked around carefully. There were a few people who were watching them still, though most of those passing by had ignored them. They tucked gauntlets into their belts, and situated helms back in the tops of their packs, nestled with remaining rations and their travelling burnouses. They would go to speak with Cilian, trying to find out if he had any knowledge of magics that could send the dead along the wind. But first, they had to find a temple of the Risen One, should one exist here.

Slinging their packs over their shoulders, they quickly walked to the stables, checking on their battle-mounts. To their relief, neither horse had been bothered, and both were quite happy to see their knights. With a couple of carrots and a good rub-down, the knights left the horses in the stable. They'd take them out for exercise later, but for now, they'd be safe enough where they were. With a quick copper coin dropped into the palm of the stablemaster, they inquired about a shrine or temple to the Risen One.

"Ah, yes, the Phoenix Lord. He do have a shrine here, down not too far from the docks. Down where the reed boats come in, specifically. I take it ye be preparin' to pay yer respects?" The man seemed somewhat curious as to why a pair of Railahns would be interested in a temple of the Risen One, but they had a legitimate answer that did not deal with Kalissa's injury.

"There are usually messages that the churches have sent to one another. We're checking to see if there's anything they're going to need that we can send out for them."

He nodded absently, rubbing at a rheumy eye. "The priestess there be rather old, but there's likely a good chance that she'll have need of ye. It isn't often that we see your kind here, mind ye."

They thanked him and headed off, walking briskly through the early morning toward the docks. They did not hurry, precisely. In route, they stopped to purchase meat pies, noting as they tasted it that it was likely horsemeat. This close to the wild steppes, that made a lot of sense. The steppelanders had nothing if not plenty of horses. That was also likely the source of the leather used for doors, window screens, and roofs here. But it was not long before they reached a disheveled shrine boasting a once fine carving of a phoenix at the top of the doorway.

Practically anywhere else, the shrine would have been well tended, clean, with fresh greenery surrounding it. Here the stone was pitted and stained, with the carving bearing the signs of defacement with chalk and dark paints. There was none of the usual golden ornamentation that they were used to seeing. If they hadn't known where to look they probably would have overlooked the edifice as merely a well-built house. It did have a proper roof, and was solid stone, rather than the usual mud-brick. It

would seem that perhaps the second most popular god in much of the world had been relegated to little more than a back alley in this city.

Even as they crossed the threshold, Kalissa was overcome with dizziness. There was an imperative, though she could not understand it. Some great evil had been done here, perhaps on the steps of the shrine itself, and had to be somehow undone. Even as her step faltered, Isala caught her, forcing her to step further into the shrine. A few steps within the small building, and the northern knight's head cleared, she was able to see again, and the feeling of need vanished. Within, this was a fairly normal shrine, if old and dilapidated, with its proper lamp burning atop the altar.

The priestess within wore the usual gold and red of the Phoenix Lord, and seemed surprised to see a pair of armored knights within her temple. She cringed at first, as if expecting some toughs to be trying to harm the shrine, but a second glance must have made clear the greatswords at the women's backs, a clear sign of Railah's favor. As she seemed to become reassured, she stepped forward, "What can Ailah of the Risen One do for Railah's Chosen?"

Her tone was somewhat strange to them, not a pundi accent, which they had half-expected, but certainly used to the trade tongue. She had none of the golden skin and rounded features of the Toyurasan, so must have come from the west originally. Her hair had long since become a cloud of white, and her features were weathered and wrinkled with great age. That such a one was still tending a shrine actively spoke much to the woman's dedication. It must be shameful that she had no assistant to help her, or to take over when age finally overtook the priestess.

Kalissa found her voice, standing straighter now that she was past that point of power that had overwhelmed her moments ago. "Lady Ailah, we seek two things, your healing abilities, and some knowledge of this place. In return, we will see if there is aught that Railah's Chosen can do to aid you."

Isala checked behind her to make sure that the curtain covering the door to the shrine was still closed. It would undo much of their work if it became known that they had not escaped last night's attack unscathed. Seeing no others here, she nodded, and helped Kalissa pull off her breast and back plates.

Ailah moved forward with a touch of hesitation, then bent to examine the wound in Kalissa's side. It was clear now that something of corruption had touched her, for the skin where she'd been hit had seemed to almost boil away at that point, leaving a raw wound. But it did not seem yet that the wound would fester. "So you have already seen some of what goes on here, Lady Knights. You did well to clean it as you did. It will not take much healing to repair this now, but had it set with such poison, you could well have been much worse off."

Kalissa held herself still as the priestess mumbled words of a prayer she was likely taught long before Kalissa was born. A feeling both warm and cool came over the wound. She could feel the skin try to reassert itself over the injury, feel the tingling progress of power through her. Even at great age, this priestess had the healing power for which the church of the Risen One was renowned. In a moment, the injury was no longer tender, and Kalissa twisted to try to look at it, seeing only whole skin. "Thank you," she managed. Though she was familiar with the Risen One's church, such healing was always a miracle to her; Railahn priests were not so good with healing, those few who knew even a bit of it.

Even as she bent to replace her armor, she cocked her head at the doorway. "Lady, do you know what happened there? There is some power, something both familiar and strange that I felt there. And a sense of imperative, something that must be righted."

The old woman nodded, "I have an idea of what happened, though I did not have the chance to witness it. Maybe seven summers past, there was a great storm across the lake. In the night I woke, hearing a voice crying amid the wind and water, begging for my help. I hurried to the doorway, already attempting to remove the protections that shielded the shrine. But by the time I managed to make it to stand at the threshold, whatever had happened had happened. There was a pool of water, clean and

clear, upon the step. I saw two people walk slowly down the street, away from here, hooded and robed. Of the speaker, there was no sign, but I think the voice was not human. For ever since then, corruption has tainted the lake, and evil has grown around us. I think that whoever they had been, the robed people had attacked one of the spirits of the lake, perhaps the last one. I've never forgiven myself for not being a bit faster."

Kalissa shuddered. She knew of the faedh, the spirits of the land. There was some rumor that she herself had their blood within her veins. Perhaps that was why she was affected and Isala had not been. There had been some mind to the power that had overwhelmed her, some awareness. It was said that the faedh could not die, but could be trapped, twisted and tormented, for longer than a human could hope to live. Why anyone would have done so, however, was a mystery she could not fathom. "A lake spirit, one of the faedh. No wonder this town seems so cursed," she murmured.

The older woman nodded, "The faedh were once known here, not by many, but their presence was felt. I have not heard their laughter in many years. Things have gone downhill, though, since before that cry for help was heard. The power of the spirits dwindled for several years prior, though I cannot say precisely when it started, certes more than a decade past."

She mused a bit as she settled into a chair near the altar, "Listen, Chosen of Railah, for few would tell this truly now. Less than two decades past, this city was strong, with resources to buy the wood we needed, and some fair trees of our own at that time. The steppelanders would trade with us, but no attacks or ill would be made here. We were neutral ground. Jirel's church was the greatest, then as now, but even her temple has fallen in disrepair over the years. The people turn away from the gods, for reasons we do not understand. There is violence, people disappear, and I have treated more than one who have taken the taint of the dead. Not many, because most of those who the dead come for are unable to fight them effectively. More often, I am called to cleanse a corpse. If Railah is with you, perhaps you will be able to solve this mystery, cleanse this town. I cannot help you much, save to offer what healing skills I have when the need comes to you. But I think not that you will survive without luck, and wits, on your side. If you have found a way to dispel such summonings, that will aid you greatly. But do not count on it to work forever."

Isala knelt next to the aged priestess. "We will do what we may, and risk our swords to the cessation of this evil. We must, however, know where to look. Have you any information that would guide us in this path?"

The woman coughed a moment, wiping at her eyes. "I have seen much happen here, but I have been unable to see who is behind these changes. I think that there are more than one, working together for their goals. If you can find one, the other should not be so hidden from you. But I think not that you will be able to pace within the halls of evil openly. Your swords will give you away, if nothing else will, and the enemy will strike at you while you are not expecting them. "

Kalissa exchanged looks with Isala. This was sound advice, even if it would be difficult to follow. Railah did not permit direct lies, and the symbols of their service were clear for all to see. And yet, that nature they had, holy knights sworn to the goddess of law and justice, was likely to see them lost amid the fetid waters of the lake, forever.

After leaving the priestess, they returned to the temple of Railah, waiting patiently while Cilian dealt with a few petitioners before approaching him. Kalissa took out a few shards of shattered bone, and held them out for him. "Do you recognize these? Or any magic that may remain on them?" Her tone was neutral, but she held out hope for real knowledge from this priest. Railahn priests typically were strongest with wards and divinations. Tracing the magic from here would be something that she'd expect from one of her church.

He bent over the shards, touching them hesitantly with a finger. "There was a great deal of power in this recently, and it was released rather spectacularly, if I am seeing things right."

Kalissa flashed one of her lopsided half-grins. "Well, getting discharged by a soulsword would be a rather spectacular dismissal of a spell, I'd say. What I'm hoping for, instead, is some indication of where it might have originated. Do you know of any who craft such things? Before it shattered, it was a bone statuette of one of the cats, not too dissimilar with the porcelain cats that come through Toyurasi. I could recognize some magic on it, but had simply, and unwisely assumed it to be little more than a bought ward."

He frowned, "I have been asked to place wards on several such, so I would not put it past that having had a ward originally, but one that perhaps had been altered. As to origin, I have some guesses. There is a sorceress, a crafts-mistress who does bone carving on a regular basis. She isn't part of the local guild, and claims to have little in the way of magical gifts. I know that some of the cats that have been brought for my wards have come from her workshop. She lives out on the west end, near the wall. You'll recognize her shop from the smell of the dead. She salvages bone from almost any corpse that is found, human or animal. I hope that is of some help to you."

Kalissa thanked him, and cast the remaining shards of the spell-warded cat into a brazier. Fire cleanses magic in many cases, and flames in Railah's temple should do so much better, for Railah is the mistress of magic, and would simply take the spell-essence back unto herself. Walking outside with her partner, she spoke softly, moving toward the west side of town slowly, and keeping a reasonable distance from the others on the streets. "Isala, I don't like what I suspect we'll have to do. We need to find out more about this craftswoman. But at the same time, if she is the one who planted, or arranged to have planted, the token that attacked us last night, we don't want to show our position too quickly. I'm going to have to ask you to do something dangerous; for both of our sakes. There are two reasons I need you to be the one to do it. One is my heritage. I stand out too much; I couldn't disguise myself enough here to pass for a local; you can. The other is this. My foresight is usually decent enough, if I know what I'm working for. If you go into the shop without armor and soulsword, I'll be monitoring you with an assist from DawnSinger. I should, Goddess willing, be able to get to you if there is a threat. And you'll be much more able than I to find out what's going on. You also have more of a sight to tell what enchantments are, though really we'd do better if we had a mage on our side. But I don't think we can trust any here to help us."

Isala nodded, frowning. "I had been thinking along the same lines, partner. With your height and coloration you can't help but be obvious. If we can get you nearby, but off the street, you should be able to tell what's going on. Even when I'm not wearing JusticeBeacon, I can still feel her. Use the sword magic to connect to me through my bond with her. I could wish more that you were a mindspeaker, but there are those with magic that can tell the presence of such a searching mind. Your gift is less likely to tip them off as to what we're doing, and my own magic is slightly non-standard for a Railahn. I had enough Jirellian training that, to many mage's sight, I would appear a servant of the Earthmother."

Kalissa nodded. "There should be a tavern on that side of the city. I think I recall seeing one as we passed the abattoir. If we can go there, I can keep your armor with me, and you should be safe enough. With Railah's help, we won't need me to run after you as backup. There's a good chance, if the sorceress isn't looking for it, she won't notice your magic at all. Usually when we're recognized, it's because of our swords. They're hard to disguise to the magically talented. You won't have that problem this time."

Isala agreed, and in fact remembered where the tavern was. It had a back room that they could use for her to slip out of her armor and into her travel burnoose. Truth be told, even with the weather cooler here than in much of the desert, Isala was grateful to be out of the armor and into something that did not make her sweat profusely. The maroon of the burnoose was not associated with any of the local tribes, but that did not mean that there would not be locals in similar garb. Being a trade city, people from many places were always passing through the gates. Isala should attract little attention.

Kalissa fastened JusticeBeacon to her harness, letting the additional blade ride right behind her own. Then, carting out the armor, she settled into the main tavern and ordered a mug of ale. She hated ale; it was not a common drink among the Sacred Swords, but then again, she was trying not to be excessively obvious. Any who looked closely could tell that there were two swords at her back, but she tried to position herself where it wasn't easy to look closely. The armor at her feet was well used, if properly cared for, and she hoped only to seem like a mercenary stopping by while their caravan were being offloaded. Such should be common enough to draw no notice, here.

With the seating here being rough stone benches, there was little enough reason to slide the blades from their harness into her lap, and none seemed concerned at the blade tips reaching midway down the block that she sat on. She sipped slowly at the ale, finding to her amazement that in this city, the ale tasted cleaner than any tea. She did not know why that would be, but would not be drinking much of either at the moment. She needed to keep her wits about her, and that required avoiding the worst effects of the alcohol. To some extent, DawnSinger helped with that. It gave her the strength to purify the alcohol from her body even as it entered it. But there were limits even to what her blade and her natural mind-magics could do.

Isala pulled her cowl over her head, imitating the local custom for women here. It was not uncomfortable, for she had used that cowl many times to avoid attention while travelling. It was close, this store. When she shifted her awareness to the magical, she could see the faint patterns being woven ahead of her. She also noticed something different. Though she knew by now where the major temples were, she could also sense a bastion of priestly magics to the south, though there was some interference, as if someone were trying to hide what they were doing. That was most interesting. Priestly magics not being woven within a temple. It might be more of what she's looking for.

Keeping her powers close to her, minor detection abilities only, and those used passively, she entered the shop. Cilian was right about the stench. There was a great deal of decay around here. While the nearby abattoir contributed to the scent, it bore more of a stench of disease and corruption. She had to stop in the doorway, calm her racing heart and try to regain control over her stomach. The woman at the far end of the shop floor did not even look up as she finished dealing with a few young toughs. Isala stayed back where she was at the moment, pretending to examine a few of the statuettes on display, and strained her ears to hear what was being said.

The shopkeeper was an older woman who spoke possibly louder than she'd intended, seemingly upset at a turn of events. "I made the token, just as I was asked. I can't help it if it didn't work as intended. But you'll need more, obviously. Take these three, three together should do more than adequately. But I expect full payment for my services, from Amahlin, at tomorrow's dawn." She thrust three objects, none of them clearly one of the many bone cats on display, into the hands of the larger tough. "As for bone, I have enough for now; unless you can bring me something special. While the bones of the innocent are useful, I've got more than I can use quickly enough." She shoed the pair away from her counter, only belatedly realizing that there was another guest here.

Isala looked up from the cat she was studying, with paint and glaze over it to make it a fair facsimile of the porcelain ones that the caravans carried. "I did not wish to bother you yet. I was looking for something fair, for my sister." She did not lie, not precisely. If she could get one of these statuettes where she could study it, she might be able to pick up a trace that would identify the items that were doubtless going to be sent against them. And Kalissa would appreciate such a lead in their hunt. She managed a smile over the stink of the shop, praying silently that the shopkeeper had not had a close description of her. While she could easily pass casual examination as a local desert woman, she was less certain of being able to pass a close encounter.

The woman, clearly from the mountain region to the north west of here, barely looked at Isala. "Something fair, you say. It is surprising seeing a woman of your age around here, at least without a passel of children in your wake."

Isala blushed, looking down. "Jirel has not blessed me with children, lady." That was true enough, though it was more Railah's doing than Jirel's.

The woman grunted assent, "Then that's why you're walking alone through a bad part of the city. Your husband finds little value in you worth keeping close. I have many trinkets that might go as a good gift, if you have coin to pay." She wandered through the shelves, poking here or there before returning with a bone carving quite different from the cats that were most apparently. This one was of a butterfly, its wings so thin as to allow light to pass through them. It was elegant, and well made. "This may get you more than you're thinking, miss. It bears but a small enchantment, a transforming one. If your situation is as bad as it looks to be, it might offer you a way to get out of that spot. If bestowed on the right person, of course. What coin do you offer me for such a gift?"

Isala couldn't believe her luck. A carving clearly from the woman's hands, and bearing the trace magic that was clearly the work of this fine craftswoman. But she knew she had to keep up the guise, for a little longer. "That piece is beautiful, beyond what I would have to offer, but I will offer what I can." She rummaged through the pouch at her belt, producing three silver and seven copper. She actually had gold, hidden elsewhere, but she'd planned ahead that she would seem poorer than the knights actually were.

The woman looked at the coins, tested them for fakes then nodded, "Must have sold one of your husband's camels for this. I won't be telling him where you've been, though I'd suggest that you leave quickly. Take the carving, and good luck to you." She smiled wryly, as she handed over the delicate bone carving.

Tremors shook Isala's hands as she took the carving, for the resonance in the bone was real. The woman may be a minor sorceress, but she had apparently been properly schooled somewhere. The magic was there, and likely more useful than it appeared. "Thank you," she mumbled as she tucked the carving in her sleeves, bowed, and left. She wanted to hurry back to the tavern, but did not dare. There was much she needed to tell her partner, and more yet she could learn from the carving she held.

Isala made certain she was not followed before heading toward the tavern where Kalissa was waiting. So far, so good. The sorceress had not appeared to recognize her. More to the point, she may have given the pair a very useful tool for locating the tokens that Isala realized were going to be used against them tonight. They could destroy the tokens before they were used, or, perhaps, something better. If they could tell who was casting the spell that homed in on the tokens, that might give them something much better to work with.

Kalissa was on the streets when Isala reached the tavern, Isala's armor tucked under one arm, while her pack was slung over the other shoulder. They didn't need to exchange words. Kalissa could tell that Isala had found something, and they hurried briskly back to the Railahn temple. Without JusticeBeacon's familiar weight at her back, Isala was more cautious than her partner, though she knew that if need be, her partner would be able to draw and toss the soulsword to her in heartbeats. They had to trust to Kalissa's early warning abilities to make sure they had that time. But no attacks materialized out of the streets, and they made it in one piece to the temple.

With only the briefest nods to Cilian, they retired to the meditation chamber off of the main chapel and pulled the curtain over its doorway. Isala stripped out of her burnoose, and drew on the familiar weight of her armor, only then taking JusticeBeacon from her partner. On the table in front of them, she set the bone carving. "That's not quite what I was expecting," Kalissa remarked dryly.

Isala related the conversation she'd overheard, along with her own suspicions that the tokens the sorceress had handed the toughs were intended for their rooms. "Which is why we must use this trinket to discern the magic that was used, so we can find them quickly."

"And destroy them?" Kalissa asked, sensing that her partner might have other ideas.

"There was a woman mentioned there, an Amahlin, that would be paying for the tokens. If we can find out who she is, and where she lives, we might be able to work a very nasty surprise for her."

Kalissa laughed, "Clever indeed, Isala. The tokens are what homes the magic in...if they were placed within the spellcaster's own home, they would attack the spellcaster, and with three active spells, the chances are good we won't have to take her out ourselves. Let me study this trinket, see if it gives me any clue as to what we're looking at."

She carefully ran her fingers over the delicate butterfly, noting that the wings were extraordinarily fragile. A thrill shot through her fingertips as she attempted to see what related magic would be in her future. Images played through her head, a spoon made of bone, a bone die with a skull where the one would lie, and lastly, tiny bone flute. She was certain she'd recognize those items when she found them, but first, they needed to find out who this Amahlin was, and where she lived. They would have to get an idea of what kinds of protections she had, and the best way to secrete the objects, preferably in different places.

"I'm pretty sure I can trace these tokens you spoke of, but we're going to need Cilian again. He knows the locals reasonably well; he should be able to give us the final clues we need. Can you get him?"

Isala ducked out of the chamber and motioned to the priest as soon as the chapel was empty. In a moment the fellow Railahn was in the chamber with the two knights, a puzzled look on his face, "Back so soon? And it looks like you have an idea or two about things."

Kalissa flashed her lopsided grin and nodded, "We have a possible source for the magic. But we need more information. Do you know of an Amahlin who lives here? And if so, what can you tell us about her?"

"Amahlin? You must be meaning the Lady Amahlin Kerosa, one of the richest people in town, if not the richest. I know little enough, as she stays out of religious circles now, though, about fifteen years ago, she was intending to become one of Jirel's priestesses. Something changed, barely three days before she was set for initiation, and she cut all ties with the church almost instantly. She started investing in trading caravans, and the caravans she backed seemed to be the ones with all of the luck. So far as I know, she keeps her nose clean, though it's hard to tell, as little as she gets out herself these days. "

Isala pondered the information, "Does she live on the southwest end of town? If so, how can we find her place? We would like to discuss some of what we'd found with her."

Kalissa managed not to crack a grin. Discussion, if it happened, would be done at sword point, if they were right.

The priest did not even catch onto what was intended. "I don't think you'll be able to get in to meet her. She keeps her place rather well locked up. Actual doors on the building, rather than mere curtains, and the only multi-story building on that side of town. She keeps guards outside most of the time. You could visit her trading offices, not far from there, the wall over the offices is painted with three golden quills. But she tends to avoid anything with religious implications at all."

Isala nodded, "We'll have to leave a message with the office then, likely tomorrow. Thank you very much for your answers, Brother." She smiled warmly, and pulled aside the curtain to leave the temple, now properly attired as a Sacred Sword again.

Kalissa tucked the other token into her pack and headed out with her partner to their inn. They would be in there early, but preferably the tokens they sought would already be in place, and they'd be ready for the next play. Even if the tokens had not been placed, and Isala should be able to tell now with her enhanced senses without entering the room, they'd have time to exercise their mounts before the fun started. And in such exercise, would have the perfect opportunity to secretly observe the manor that this Lady Amahlin lived in.

They returned to the inn long enough to verify that the tokens had in fact been placed, and take a quick lunch. Much as she hated to do so, for fear of impairing her judgment later, Kalissa took ale with her meal, noting that it was far cleaner than the water used for tea. They did not disturb the tokens,

doing so too early would make it clearer what they were doing. Fed and refreshed, they saddled up their battle steeds and headed out to explore more of the town. Full armor, helms atop their heads, they looked a fine sight, and made certain to be seen, and noted. If people expected to see armored knights, they'd be less likely to expect women in burnouses to sneak out a bedroom window after dark with a trio of tokens to deposit in the spellcaster's house.

Guiding the horses easily through the southern part of the city, they easily recognized the manor that Cilian had described to them. It was an impressive place, with not only a small second floor, but a carved balcony on the street side. Of more interest to them was the window on the back of the second floor, easily reached from the garden wall. Isala might have trouble getting up there, but Kalissa would not. Growing up in the Guardian Wood, the taller knight had learned early to climb tall trees to hide in. She could get up there easily, and, without the bulk of her armor, she'd be able to fit into the window reasonably well. The only thing that might give her any problems was DawnSinger. And, if she was careful, she might be able to pull much of the trick that Isala did earlier, going without sword to place her tokens quickly and without being seen.

They continued their circuit around the southern part of town, their pace steady, giving their horses enough exercise without rushing them. But before sunset, they were more than ready to return to the inn, rub down their mounts, and settle in for a bit. They wouldn't be sneaking out until after dark, and they expected that the magical attacks would not come until mid of night, when it would seem the best time for the enemy to catch them unawares. Kalissa did not speak aloud to her partner about her intended plan, but she knew that Isala would have little trouble with it when the time came. They'd have to leave their armor unguarded, but that should be of little problem; with its craftsmanship, no one would likely buy such were it stolen.

Once finished with dinner, they headed off to their private room, letting the curtain fall over the hallway. It was still a more unguarded place to speak than they would have liked, but they hoped the soulswords would warn them before their plans were uncovered. Kalissa gathered the tiny bone carvings, noting that if they had not known to look for them, they would likely never have found any of them. "Isala, you noticed that window on the back of her house too? I can almost certainly get up there without alerting anyone, and once within, can hide the tokens safely. I will have to leave DawnSinger in your charge, but my foresight should give me the moment or two I need to get free should anyone go in."

"And with you not wearing your sword, you'll be less recognizable as a Railahn," Isala noted dryly. "Breaking into another's house is not something that would be well received by the guard, and I'm not sure they'd accept the proof of your soulsword that you were acting to prevent greater harm." She rebraided her dark hair and frowned. "It is dangerous, but I won't be far, just far enough away to not give you away. I do not think the Goddess gives us any choice in this. From what Cilian hinted at, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to accuse Amahlin of the necromantic magics. Even with me a sworn TruthSpeaker, I doubt that we'd have the chance."

Kalissa nodded, "Yes, which might be partly why the Goddess had a hand in us coming here. Our individual talents may be exactly what is necessary. If we play it right, when Amahlin dies, we'll be summoned in to try to find the source of the magic. It shouldn't be too hard to prove then that she was using such magics, especially if they are instrumental in her death."

They waited for full dark, then slid out of the window into a darkened alleyway. They wouldn't have a lot of time to pull this off; there was too much chance that the tokens might be activated while they were en route. Moving quietly through the streets by the sliver of moonlight that fell upon the town, they found their way to the alley behind Amahlin's house. Kalissa quickly unslung DawnSinger from its usual position and handed it off to her partner. "Get to hiding quickly," she hissed, even as she hunted for purchase in the mud-brick wall. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Without waiting for a response, she hefted herself up on top of the wall, thankful for once that wood was so scarce here. There would be fewer torches, fewer lights to give her away. Reaching the top of the garden wall, she moved swiftly and silently to the window. She had been right earlier. With DawnSinger slung across her back, the window would have been too narrow. The room at the top was dark now, but it probably wouldn't be so for long. Carefully slipping into the room, she gazed about for several places to secrete objects.

There, behind the chest in the corner was a good place for one, and another would fit above the shelf on the left-hand wall. The final piece, the die, she tucked behind the windowsill itself. Even as she did so, she could hear someone climbing stairs near her. Moving like a shadow, she eased her way outside of the window, dropping from the wall into the alleyway almost instantly. With a light in the window, she'd be too visible on the wall. Her only chance was to duck and dodge, making sure to remain low.

There was no immediate call of alarm from the room as the window lit up. Kalissa remained crouched next to the wall, listening and watching. This was where she'd have to find out if her plan had succeeded. A low, female voice started chanting within the room, and she could see the shadows of arms raised in conjuration. This was good. Amahlin had apparently not noticed anything moved around. The air grew cold, and then things began to happen.

Kalissa backed out down the alleyway, not wanting to be anywhere near if anyone would hear the battle that would now commence. She could sense where DawnSinger was, and did her best to remain unseen as she made her way toward that beacon in her mind. Reaching Isala, she accepted her soul sword back, and motioned for her partner to head back to the inn. "I think we succeeded, but we'd better not be caught out here. They may actually come for us at the inn, where we're supposed to be."

Isala nodded and led the way through the streets. There was indeed a commotion going on, and they found themselves jogging through alleyways to make sure that they reached their rooms and got inside before any guardsmen could approach them. It was a good thing that they'd been unseen, for there was another surprise waiting them at the inn. Both toughs that Isala had seen in the shop were waiting near the front of the inn, no doubt to sneak in soon and bring out their corpses. The two knights knew what was intended, and solved the problem neatly. Shucking their burnouses in through the window they intended to enter, they stepped up behind the toughs and Kalissa cleared her throat.

Neither man had any idea what to do when faced with a pair of knights dressed only in the undertunics normally worn under armor. It would be believable, Isala thought wryly, when they dropped both toughs soundlessly, that they had been found attempting to break into the inn. Both knights looked like they'd been roused from a sound sleep, and the rumors of goddess-given awareness would be enhanced by such a reputation. The blood splatters from their swords only indicated that the men had not expected to face a pair of wary and living knights, and that they had tried to run. Kalissa and Isala were more than warranted, should things have happened the way it appeared, to have killed their intended murderers.

Calling for help, they quickly explained to the innkeeper that they had been made aware by the Goddess of an attempt on their lives. The two dead toughs merely could not speak for themselves, and in no way did either knight actually lie. The Goddess had warned them of the toughs before they got to their window. Both soul swords had started humming as they'd gotten close. It wouldn't take much to convince the authorities that things were now under control. Nor did anything indicate that the pair had not been in their beds already.

Even as a guardsman came to take the men's bodies away from the inn, a runner came hurrying up from the south. The women kept their miens neutral as they had it explained to them that Lady Amahlin had died from apparently a magical attack. They merely asked that they be given time to dress properly before attending the scene, since the attacked woman was already deceased. Slipping in the

front way, they hurriedly donned their armor, and allowed themselves to be led to the house they had visited just a half-candlemark earlier.

They were led through the entrance, finding a shaken guard waiting at the foot of the stairs to the upper level. Isala opened her mind to the feel of the magics around the room. She was certain that they were not wrong as to Amahlin being the source of the magic, and she was rewarded with even more information. The priestly style of magics she had noticed earlier were bound to the faedh, and binding the faedh. So, that's where she'd gotten the power to manage the sendings. Holding her Railahn medallion in her hand, she surveyed the room. There was proof enough of necromancy here for anyone even vaguely familiar with the magical arts. A grimmoire lay open on the table near the window, and potions that Kalissa had only vaguely noticed before sat along the shelves on the wall. The Lady in question herself was lying in a pool of blood and greenish slime, a moldy corpse laying across her own form.

"It appears that she died of her own summoning. Have there been many such summonings that you are aware of? The signs of necromancy are clear here, and perhaps more. There seems to be signs that she bound the faedh here. I will need the help of a few priests to finish the unbindings, but it might even explain the state of the lake here. Ailah of the Risen One and Cilian of the Railahn Church should both be able and willing to work with us on this, but tomorrow. For now, we can leave the guard to keep this place closed, and have the bodies carted off on the morrow. It might not hurt to get some inkling on her business partnerships, in case there are others who may have traded magical services with her. Such beings should be questioned under truth sense and held; if any have aided in the deaths of the people of the town, they should be punished."

Kalissa nodded, hand on DawnSinger's hilts. "That is what Railah suggests, Guardsman. Perhaps with this necromancy stopped, there will be a change in the fortunes of the town. "

As they walked back to the inn to get some much needed sleep, Kalissa glanced at Isala. "I don't look forward to the absolution we're going to have to do to clear ourselves of this one, Partner, but at least there should be fewer deaths here to worry about. Maybe releasing the faedh will help in other ways as well."

Isala nodded, "We do as the Goddess demands, even if doing so puts us in such a position. I, for one, am looking forward to the time we'll be under discipline. Perhaps we'll even get to finish our training properly."

Kalissa flashed her lopsided grin, "That might just be worth looking forward to."