

For the Sake of Beauty

By Tiona Yates

Telin loved travelling. It was simply a part of his nature. That was why he'd spent his training as he had; he'd known what he'd need to be successful enough to be called across the continent. He kept the talisman he'd gotten with help of his sister-in-law to avoid any potential complications. The last thing he wanted was to be caught with a child from one of his numerous assignments. No, Telin never intended to settle down, and had no compunctions about doing what was necessary to keep himself moving.

This was not to say that Telin was in any way dishonorable. He completed his tasks with efficiency and honor, always doing at least what was asked of him, usually offering other ways to improve a situation before he made ready to leave for another assignment. He knew that the best way to keep the Academy paying for his travel was to keep their various clients quite happy with his service. That was something he'd learned from watching his older brother work on the accounts that kept the Academy from becoming a crown liability. There was a great deal of use to be had from agents who could be sent anywhere within the two kingdoms to solve problems. While he was no bard, he had a head for problems and could solve almost anything set in front of him.

This particular assignment sounded interesting. From what he'd gathered, there was a woman who'd found some artifacts of an earlier time, but that these artifacts did not include any kee-ali-dahr crystals. Furthermore, she'd asked for him specifically, offering rooms in her own spacious manor for him to stay in while determining if these artifacts were something that could be turned into a reasonable amount of coin. For his part, Telin considered that these might be some of the few things left over from the Citadel of the Fallen Star, things that had been brought north before the godswar.

As he made his way into the small city of Nerin, not more than a day's travel from Rookhaven on the coast near Alfaren, he noticed that the town itself was walled, which was somewhat strange for this part of the kingdom. It was even more notable that the manor that he was directed to was also walled, with not only a guard at the gate, but also what appeared to be barracks of its own on the other side of the main house. It was certainly curious, for he couldn't imagine why anyone would need that kind of service, not with Karyn being so safe for the past century. There hadn't even been any large bandit groups in this part of the kingdom in more than a half-century.

He eased Moonfoot to a slow walk as he approached the gate to the manor. The pack pony came on behind, tied off at his saddle. He stopped just shy of the gate, touching the pouch at his side and calling out to the guard. "Lady Keske has called for me. I am Telin Calasti, son of Sacred Sword Arandel Calasti. There is some issue concerning artifacts that were discovered near here?"

The guard stepped out of the shadow of the gate, reaching out, as if to be certain of the orders. Luckily, Telin had them at hand, guessing that whatever had given the Lady cause for such guards might require some proof of his intentions here. He pulled the scroll out of his pouch and displayed the ring on his finger. It was a variant off of the noble crest of Akhshar, for, though Arandel had set aside his birth rank, he and his family were still close kin to the reigning Lady of Akhshar. "As you can see, I am Telin Calasti, and my presence has been specifically requested."

The guard handed back the scroll and bowed, "You have indeed been requested here. There is a stable just past the gate, and there will be a porter to carry your belongings within. The Lady will be pleased to speak with you once you have refreshed yourself. Go now; I'm certain you must be tired after your long journey."

"Thank you. I will go to stable my mounts and see about the quarters that were offered. I hope to see your Lady at dinner." He touched his heels to Moonfoot, edging the horse into movement again. Just through the gate, he could see the side of the stable around the edge of the main building. He was certainly tired from the long ride. It had been nearly a tenday's ride from Sharlan, but he had finally arrived. Soon he would see what artifacts it was that the Lady had found. If he was right, and those were devices that were drawn from the Citadel, he would certainly get quite a few people interested in such things. About the only thing that Lady Keske had said in her missive, however, was that these were not from a kee-ali-dahr ruin, which meant that it likely contained no crystals.

After getting his things unloaded from the horses, he was escorted to a nicely appointed set of rooms that were clearly not far from the Lady's own quarters. The rooms included not only a bedroom, but also a sitting room, and there was a bathing chamber just around the corner. He quickly unpacked a respectable outfit and a loose over-robe and quickly set about cleaning himself up from the trail. Since it was clear that Lady Keske intended to make these amenities available to him, he took the opportunity to make himself more than presentable. It actually felt quite good to scrub the dust of the road away.

Even had he arrived a bit earlier in the day, Telin was fairly certain that he would not begin working until tomorrow. Tonight was necessary to introduce himself to his employer, and, if he could gauge her mood from the luxuries she was making available to him, likely to be quite pleasurable. He pulled his hair back loosely, noting that it was about as long as his uncle Lisor's was, though very different in coloration. That didn't matter to him much, only that it seemed to be a length that women liked.

A serving man knocked at his door around the fifth candlemark after high sun, and Telin followed the quiet man to a small formal dining area. The manor likely had more than one dining area, for this one was small, clearly intended for more intimate dinners. The table had only a half-dozen chairs, and of those, only his own and that of the Lady herself seemed to be prepared for use. He noticed quickly that he was to be seated to the right of the Lady's chair, close enough for personal conversation, certainly.

He waited behind his seat until the Lady herself entered, and couldn't help but smile. While she was not tall, certainly not like his mother or sisters, she was also not short, and filled her dress with proper curves. The dress itself was surprisingly simple, something that she could likely have donned in only a few moments, but which draped beautifully along her body. Her hair was black and was coiled at her neck lightly. Almost surprisingly, beyond the signet on her left hand, she seemed to be wearing no jewelry at all. As she moved closer, he was even more impressed. Outside of a faint dusting of powdered gemstones to highlight her features, she seemed confident enough not to feel the need for cosmetics, nor scents, if he was reading his nose correctly. She smelled real, freshly washed, but not overdone with flower oils. He had always enjoyed women who didn't bother to cover their natural musk.

As she moved to take her position, he swept into a bow, that broad Calasti grin on his face, "Telin Calasti at your service, Lady. It is most certainly a pleasure to meet you."

The chuckle she emitted was pitched at a low alto, and he shivered for a moment before accepting her gesture that he should sit down. "It is pleasing to see you arriving so swiftly after my message was sent. It has hardly been a moon since I penned that missive. I hope that the travel was comfortable, for I know that it is a long way between here and Sharlan."

"The roads were in good repair, and there was nothing to inconvenience me, at the least, Lady. I was, however, surprised to find myself sent for, rather than, for example, Lady Reliss of Ollahm. She is, after all, the expert on artifacts from the earliest humans."

Another laugh. "Telin, I must say that my missive must have been written awry if you got the impression that the artifacts I would have you study are human in origin. When I bring you to where they are stored, tomorrow, you will have the opportunity to see why these are such a unique find."

Though I have been interested in some of Lady Reliss' discoveries, I must say that what I have is perhaps more valuable, provided we can find some way of using these things. What I can say, without spoiling what I am sure will be a great surprise for you, is that the substance of these artifacts is unique. It is as hard as glass, but my own magic has determined that the substance is organic, indeed, something that comes from a creature directly."

He arched a brow, as much at the intimation that she was a mage or priestess as at the indication of the origin of these pieces she wanted him to study. While it seemed almost impossible that something that came from a creature could be that hard, the fact that she found it worthwhile to determine that was impressive. "I will have much to learn then, when you show me these artifacts. You are certain that there were no crystals among them?"

She shook her head, "No crystals, and had there been so, it would have been your brother called rather than yourself. These artifacts come from what I suspect was a tomb of some sort. Time had eradicated any sign of the actual tomb, but these things seemed to have been intentionally preserved. I will enjoy showing you what my people have found, in hopes that you can find ways to, if not replicate these items, make them useful once again."

He ate slowly, finding that the food tended toward the subtler flavors, almost as if they had been intentionally made for a kee-ali-dahlri enhanced palate. Each bite had a range of textures and flavors, clearly designed to make one take their time to savor the food and study it with their mouths. There were two cups at his place, one containing chilled water (and this he suspected might have been attained magically, considering the Lady's mention of magic), and the other containing a wine that he was unfamiliar with. Of his family, he was the one who likely had the most familiarities with wine, travelling often and far, and having no religious reasons to abstain from the substance, but this one was unfamiliar to him.

She must have caught his surprise at the flavor and bouquet of the wine, for her tone expressed slight amusement. "Ah, you are probably not familiar with Rookhaven spiced wines. This particular one uses some of the lesser spices, such as nutmeg and honey-thistle, to flavor it. There is still plenty of the traditional cinnamon and clove in it, but I find the flavor is much richer with the other spices. Considering your reputation, I would hardly have considered anything to have caught you by surprise, at least not anything culinary. As for other things, it will be interesting to see what precisely it might take to surprise you."

He lifted his eyes from the soup to catch her expression at the last. That was a little more of an open invitation than he'd expected, though, from the mention of his reputation, he expected that she did have other things in mind than merely to have him study ancient artifacts. The twinkle in her eyes hinted that she had meant exactly what she'd said, and that she would make a game of seeing exactly where he could be surprised. That would be amusing, though he was unsure of exactly how far he should expect that behavior to go. Whether she wanted him to express surprise easily, or be hard to surprise, was uncertain. All he knew was that she was giving every indication that he would not spend much time alone, certainly very little of it when he wasn't hard at work.

"I will endeavor not to leave you disappointed, whatever your expectations of me, Lady."

Despite his eagerness to find out exactly what this Lady wished of him, Telin kept his behavior cool, certainly not overstepping the bounds of civility. He could tell that her excitement was rising, but did not wish to risk any inappropriate behavior, at least not while there were servants around. The thought that he had been deliberately sought out pleased his pride, and could easily explain why he was more than looking forward to any evening 'discussions' that might well happen tonight. It was more than merely having spent most of the past two moons in Sharlan, where he did not dare indulge his senses as he could elsewhere, but the thought that he might well have attracted attention that was worth cultivating. No, he did not intend to settle down, even if that was something she was considering.

But he knew that they could easily both enjoy time getting to know each other very well before that question might have to be dodged.

She took a bite of food and then tilted her head to regard him piercingly. "I have heard that you never leave a client displeased, Telin. That is, in large part, why I have asked for you specifically. As well, your areas of interest seem far more refined and expansive than what I have heard of your brother Maran. Though these artifacts are quite old, possibly as old as the crystals that your brother is known for using, they do not seem to possess the same form of properties, and someone with a wider area of interests is more likely to be able to unlock their secrets."

He dropped his gaze, if only to keep from choking at the subtle hints. With Maran as well known for his marriage to a steppelander as his Singer skills, this could be little more than a barb to let him know what she wanted of him. Telin expected that more than half the world still thought of Denora as little more than a half-wit, the image his sister-in-law had taken care to cultivate over the past more than thirty years. Maran had made himself as clearly devoted to Denora as his father was to his mother. Telin began to wonder if these artifacts were in fact something that he actually was needed for, with all of these hints. Attempting to regain his composure, he decided to probe a little more on the artifacts.

"I can understand why you might wish to have me wait before discussing these artifacts fully, but I am curious as to what my skills might be useful for? I've done mostly problem solving for various cities, preparing defenses against outbreaks of illness, mediating agreements between groups that are traditional enemies, and so forth. While I do have a great deal of bardic education, because such knowledge and history are useful in my various assignments, I don't know why I would be so much better than a person who might have spent decades studying whatever period these artifacts might come from."

"I believe that question would best be answered tomorrow, when I take you down to the vault where they are secured. You, in large part because of family connections and studies, have a greater understanding of the distant history of our land. It has reached my ears that your nephew, when he sacrificed himself for Jirel, had some knowledge that he passed on to your family regarding the earliest days, knowledge that you can draw off of when you see what I have. It is clear, however, that the kee-ali-dahr, which your brother is the expert on, were not the only race that predated humanity in this land. What you will see will doubtless test your ability to discern function and method soon enough."

Something ancient enough that it predated humanity would be quite interesting if it could be proven. He knew something of the history of the world. He'd sat and watched and listened when Maran activated the crystal that Lisor had brought back from Largo's transformation. He had also listened to his oldest brother, Jalak, tell him about fighting the xilcan in the ruins on the edge of the Steppes. The faedh had clearly existed through all of that too. This offered several options, and possibly could point to yet another that he was unfamiliar with. So, she did have a purpose for him beyond the bedchamber.

"You have me more than intrigued, Lady, and I humbly regret my earlier confusion as to why I was chosen. If these artifacts you have do not represent any known civilization, then there would be no expert indeed on any of them. And, showing brilliance that many lack, you decided to find someone who had experience in figuring out how things work rather than a mere scholar. I cannot say what I will discover; only time, and the nature of the artifacts themselves, will reveal that. I will certainly endeavor to discern whatever you need to know about these items you have. Did you have further use for me before I retire for the evening?"

There was that smile, the knowing look in her eyes. "Perhaps it would be better to continue our discussion elsewhere. There are things I am curious about, and it would set my mind at ease to know a few things for certain before any real work begins." She looked ready to stand up, and Telin hurried to help pull the chair back from her.

"I am at your disposal, Lady."

Whether this was usual behavior or had simply been instructed ahead of time, the servants seemed to vanish as Lady Keske guided him back along the passage to his chambers. She settled herself on a couch in his sitting room and proceeded to directly question him on one thing that he'd come to expect over the past two decades. "I have heard that you have a method to keep certain activities from proceeding to a rather uncomfortable conclusion. I would wish to see this."

"Then I will bring you the object you are so curious about. If you will give me a moment to return to my bedchamber, I will be back momentarily with the method in hand." He knew easily what she was about. His spelled-token, the thing that kept him from impregnating women he spent time with, was something he knew she, like most women, would be interested in having proven to them. He had been lucky over the past several years, as he always seemed to end up attracting women who wished no children, or at least not right away. With Lady Keske a member of the lesser nobility, eventually she would likely marry and have children, but he understood that she wouldn't want such now, especially not from a situation like this.

He slipped into the room without another word, going into the pack set across the chest at the foot of the bed and pulling what would appear to others as a tiny tube of metal, capped at both ends with colored wax. This was what he was looking for. He hurriedly retraced his steps, bowing as he took his place before the Lady, and opened his hand, revealing the token. "It's spell-treated, as you might expect. And keyed specifically to me. I can assure you that, with this around, I will not dishonor you with an unintended child."

There seemed to be a moment of mirth that crossed her features as she reached out carefully to touch the metal tube with one finger. If she was a mage that would be enough to show her that the magic was still strong and viable. It had been cast by one of the elvari mages in Sharlan, so likely would remain viable for at least decades to come. He held it steady until she could satisfy her curiosity for the form of magic. "I should hope that answers any worries that you might have, Lady Keske?"

"The magic is as you indicated. Which leaves us with my previous curiosity, Telin, finding out what it is that might surprise you."

He laughed and pocketed the talisman. "I am more than willing to see if there is, in fact, anything you can do to surprise me. As I had mentioned before, I am at your disposal. While I am in your employ, I will answer your needs in whatever way you're interested in."

She stood up in a smooth, controlled motion, taking a step toward him. As she ran a hand lightly down the edge of his torso, he could tell that he was going to enjoy being here. He let her lead him back to his quarters, and proceeded to follow her instructions. While he had spent more than twenty years now traveling and enjoying himself wherever he went, there were still a few ways to intrigue him, if not outright surprise him, and it seemed that Lady Keske knew all of those, for all that she was likely still in swaddling when he first started his travels. It was with a great deal of regret that he watched her slip out of bed eventually to return to her own room. This was going to prove quite the assignment, if it should continue this way.

The morning felt glorious to him when he awoke, just slightly past dawn. To have slept past dawn was something luxurious, something he'd hardly be able to get away with at home, much less on the road. But, while he was on assignments like this, it was not unheard of to laze about a bit. And Lady Keske, Marilsa, he remembered her correcting him, had left him in quite a relaxed mood. He had thoroughly enjoyed exploring her body, and he hoped he had managed to avoid disappointing her. That would certainly complicate things, especially if these investigations she requested him for required a few moons of study.

He slipped into a comfortable, but well-made, outfit and made his way back toward the dining room. As expected, he found the table set with several breakfast foods, including a large basket of fruit and several pastries. He wasted little time in filling a plate and breaking his fast. He didn't know when to expect Lady Keske, but wanted to be ready easily as early as she was. If these artifacts she had had him brought here for were anything like what she'd hinted at, he would be busy for quite a while. Especially if the artifacts contained some form of magic. That might require testing on both of their parts.

He was pleased to find that he didn't need to wait long for the Lady's presence. He'd barely finished his first pastry before she sat down to eat, the subtle smile on her face indicating that she had enjoyed herself. That was something that would make things easier. While he wasn't certain how well he'd be able to keep pace with what he'd done last night, the fact that she wouldn't be shunning him while he was here would keep things quite pleasant. He nodded affably and finished his meal, waiting in silence for any response from her.

She'd finished an apple and had taken a few sips of her tea before addressing him. "I am almost surprised to find you awake and mobile so early, Telin. I would have almost imagined you overborne by the activities of last night. It is pleasant to see that you recover so quickly, for there will doubtless be much work to be done determining the nature of the artifacts you are about to see."

Telin laughed hoarsely, reddening just a bit. "You might say it's a shifter's benefit, or perhaps merely the result of such strength as my family claims. It required much to recover from such attentions as were laid upon me, but I will have the strength to see to this study you have placed before me."

She clearly took amusement in that response, a lightly jesting tone in her own voice. "Oh, was that the answer to your stamina? Merely the ability to force the body past its usual limits?" There was no hiding what she'd done in that statement, but neither of the serving maids seemed to pay attention to a thing that she said. There was almost no hint that she'd said anything at all in their faces. That told Telin that not only was he not her first, but also that she likely had a discrete reputation of her own.

"I'm pleased to find my skills so agreeable." He still felt uncomfortable being so open about what he'd just done, but, so long as there were no suitors ready to chase him off at sword-point, or angry fathers to brandish writs against him and his family, he couldn't argue with her open admiration of his prowess. He bit into a pear to avoid further comments on his performance, if only because he could not find any effective way to answer such statements publically. To his pleasure, she did not seem intent on embarrassing him further. Instead, she finished her own meal and turned her mind to the day's tasks.

"If you have had sufficient food to act upon, I would take you down to the basement, where I can finally reveal the reason I called you here. If you will follow me, I will have the pleasure of displaying the results of a mining expedition on my lands not far from here."

Telin wasted no time in standing up and pulling the Lady's chair so that she could stand easily. With only a hint of his usual cockiness, he bowed low and stood back to let her lead the way. "I am at your command, Lady."

She led the way out of the dining chamber, toward a set of stairs almost hidden behind the kitchen entrance. The way was not dark, for she clearly made use of her magical talents. Mage-lights floated at regular intervals. The stairs went down fairly deep, to a place that might have been a dungeon in a proper castle. For her, instead, it was a laboratory. The place was aired out by elemental breezes caught by magic, and lit by the multitude of floating globes of light. There was a door at the end of the room, and the Lady took a key from her chatelaine and carefully unlocked the door ahead of her.

The light of mage-lights awakening from their slumber flashed off of something within the room. Without realizing it, Telin held his breath before following Lady Keske into the room. Scattered on worktables was an odd assortment of things, plates looking like sheets of some dark, but reflective material, some long narrow objects that seemed to throw the light around in unusual ways, and even what

appeared to be a breastplate. She led him to the nearest table, the one with the breastplate, and motioned for him to look at the object more closely.

"I'm not sure what you're meaning, other than that it's what appears to be a glass breastplate," he began, but then stopped himself. A closer look indicated to him that there was something distinctly odd about it beyond its size, which could have covered more than a man's torso in length. The sides were scalloped in more places than a man would need for movement. It seemed suddenly as if this were made for something with four arms. Could it be? Were there actually xilcan artifacts? And was that what this was?

"You see." Her voice carried clearly the implication that his clipped statement indicated that he was now aware of how unique these are.

"Unless I miss my guess, these are xilcan in origin. I've never heard of anyone finding anything from the xilcan, and, according to my Uncle, there is reason to believe that they are greatly reduced now from what they had been. This could indeed be a valuable set of artifacts. I will need as much information as possible, where these were found, any information that you might have on the state of the location, as well as any pieces that might be broken." As he ran his fingers over the surprisingly smooth surface, he found himself becoming all business. This was what he was called to help with, and that was now the focus of his attention all in a moment.

"Xilcan? I'm not certain that I am familiar with them? Is this something that you can speak with surety?"

"The xilcan are a race that, as far as we know, now only live in the south, past the Dark Lands. They have four arms, which is why I think that they may be the source of these items. They are described as large insects that live as hunters in the south. One of my brothers fought one of their warriors who had been preserved in some form of kee-ali-dahr ruin. Most of my knowledge of them comes from either Uncle Lisor or Jalak. Jalak seems to have had quite an interest in the creatures, though he has yet to fulfill his desire of going south to wrestle one fairly, strength against strength, with no special talents on either side. The one he fought before had been frozen by ancient magic. He overpowered it as much from surprise and kee-ali-dahlri shifting ability as by physical strength."

She nodded, "So you think that the shape of this would indicate these xilcan that you speak of? That is a piece of information already that makes you a wise choice. Take a look at these other things that I have. Perhaps you can determine the nature of these things far more quickly than I had anticipated."

He moved to the next table, running his hand with delicacy over one of the glass plates. "Bring me more light. I think I might have discovered something already."

At a gesture, one of the globes of light moved to hover right above him. He picked up the plate, tilting it this way and that, then rubbing hard at it with the sleeve of his tunic. "There is something to the surface of this, and I don't think it's deterioration, or decoration, for that matter." He ran his fingers over the surface again, and nodded. "I was right. These seem to bear inscription. I know of no way we have to determine what is written on them, but I will endeavor to find some way to interpret as much of it as possible. Likely, if it was from a tomb, as you said, it describes the deeds and lineage of the person, or persons, buried there. This could be a lead that would entrance the bards at the Ollahmic College for decades, possibly as much as centuries, if any means can be used to interpret what is written thereon."

She nodded, "I suspected that these contained writings, at least because some of the oldest records in the two kingdoms are scribed upon plates of metal. The strength of this material was the reason for my curiosity about its origin. The magic can trace it back to some secretion of a creature, but more was unknown. All of these objects are derived of such a secretion, whatever it might be. But there is far more to the nature of the other pieces. There is some unknown magic on each piece, both the writing and the other objects, and I would have you learn what you can of it. An ancient magic would be valuable indeed to bring to light."

"It could indeed, though I am no mage to devise tests to retrieve such magic. Perhaps, with aid, I might be able to uncover enough of the writing on these plates to ascertain something of the culture they had, but I suspect that the magic may be lost forever."

"Then we should devise tests together. I am more than competent in my magic, having accepted teachers from as far east as Tse Lar, teachers who still retain much ancient lore. You have a greater knowledge about how many things work, and I can adjust my magical divination to work along new lines of thinking. There are things I would have us discover before turning these artifacts over for further study. I would have the secrets within, for they will doubtless prove very valuable."

"This adventure will take moons, if not years, Lady. While I am at your disposal, and more than willing to assist where I may, I want you to understand that it is not something that can be easily overcome. Considering your human heritage, even if I kept at this study for long, you might not live to see the true understanding of these things."

"We will at least endeavor to see what a few moons gets us. I have heard that you are very insightful, and, given time and as much in the way of research materials as I can acquire, you might be able to find out key facts about how these work. Nor will you be given reason to leave, not for a few moons at least." With this last, she emphasized her point with a hand placed on his arm, fingers gently rubbing at his skin.

He couldn't help but shiver. With what she'd shown him last night, he would be more than willing to spend a few moons in her company, though he really did intend to pass this off to another after perhaps a few summers. By that time, doubtless she would tire of him, or would be pressured to finding a mate and creating an heir. That was something he would happily back away from. He needed no wife, nor children to follow after him, and, in fact, considered that he would be a very poor father.

She directed his attention finally to the last table, filled with several strange items, the one she was most interested in was a long piece with strange protrusions. This piece was cut almost like a c along its length, as if designed to fit around something. But there were protrusions within as well as on the terminating end, almost as if it fed off of something to create something more. "This is what I think holds the greatest magic," she breathed. "It seems to take power through the inner protrusions and funnel them to the outer, but the method of transformation of this power I do not yet understand, nor can I think of what it might draw off of."

"I will study these things, determine what I can of them on my own, and then make suggestions for magical tests that you can make. But it will take time with me doing little but handling them and studying the patterns set into the material. You are right for wanting a kee-ali-dahlri to do this, because our senses, our ability to perceive patterns within things is much greater than a human's, and I expect that I'll have some information for you within a few days."

She let her hand drop, "Then I will leave you to your studies and see you in the morning. I will leave this key with you, so that you can enter and leave the workroom at need. I have another of my own. I hope to see you at dinner tonight, with some private discussions afterward." She smiled and he couldn't shake the feeling that he wanted her, even here, in a damp basement. It couldn't be anything more than the excitement she'd raised last night.

"I will endeavor to have something interesting to tell you about these artifacts tonight." He accepted the key and bowed, working to keep his face neutral. He had been given a task and all he could consider was another, more enjoyable one. Where was his discipline going?

The days past almost in a blur, with Telin working hard at deciphering the purpose and construction of the xilcan artifacts during the day, and the often heated passion he experienced every night. During this time, he made a few discoveries, the first being a realization that the long partial tube

would fit well over a forearm, or at least one only a little longer than was normal for a human. If that were the case, the protrusions on the inside would almost work as barbs to enter the skin, or, in the case of a xilcan, under the carapace. That would actually fit with what little Telin could remember of his brothers talking about the memory sphere in the ruins. The xilcan had some form of energy weapons, the ability to project energy from their wrists or so. With these artifacts being mostly translucent, it would be hard to say what precisely had projected that energy. This could explain it well, and, in that case, these tubes were weapons of a sort.

Notes were scribbled across many pages, detailing what Telin knew about the xilcan themselves, how they were built, and what he'd been told about their gifts. His latest discovery, however, came about not from the artifacts themselves, but from observing a few insects in his room, when he'd taken the time to relax and clear his mind. The small creatures were chewing on a piece of furniture, and he realized that as they did so, they excreted some sort of shiny substance. So, Marilsa was correct. It was organic in origin. The artifacts were created from some excretion, likely made when the xilcan had eaten something that could be processed into a hard secretion. A little research in the library produced some vague information about insects being cultivated in Toyurasi for the purpose of their secretions, which were broken down with alcohol into a clear paste, then spread over something to protect it. It hardened clear and very hard, almost as if the object were coated in glass.

Marilsa had proven to be quite the mage in the past two moons. Almost any test he suggested, she could find some way to accomplish, inventing magics when those she knew did not cover the need he had. A little more testing, and he might be willing to see if he could reproduce the pattern needed for the energy conversion of the weapons that had been found. That was one thing that she'd been insistent upon. She wanted to see if there was any way to replicate their magic. Though she'd had some luck in replicating the magic on the breastplate, finding that it produced an energy field that deflected certain attacks, she wanted to see if she could replicate these weapons.

As he settled into his chair in the dining room, his mind nagged at something, something that he could almost see but not quite. He wasn't even certain of what subject it was on precisely, only that there was something he was overlooking and couldn't quite put his finger on it. Whatever it was that he could only half-see left him agitated, though he couldn't guess at what he was missing, only that something was there.

He listened for Marilsa's step on the floor, indicating that she was back from whatever real work she was doing in the administration of her lands. She had indicated before that she had a more than adequate steward, but preferred to handle certain aspects of things herself. He wasn't entirely certain why that might be, but merely deferred to her judgment. She had been handling things quite well since her father had died, some form of accident about two summers back.

He had almost stopped using her formal name and title by this stage, calling her Marilsa in almost any non-public place. Though he still did not intend to settle down, he was much more content to stay here a while longer. There was so much yet to determine, and she was certainly quite pleasant company, easily a match for his own strong desires. He could almost feel himself rising to the occasion at the mere sound of her footstep.

After dinner, which somewhat surprised him because she seemed to be eating less robustly, but filling out a little more than she had been, they retired to his sitting room. Almost as expected, there were two glasses of wine on the shelf near the door. Getting a sense that Marilsa was a little tired, he offered to bring her the wine, rather than having her serve him in this. After all, he was working in her service now.

As he reached the shelf, he noticed that one of the cups must not have been completely clean when set out. Without wanting to draw her attention to it, in case a servant would be punished for what was likely an honest mistake, he rubbed the dark smudge off of the base of the crystal, then picked them up and brought them over.

She seemed to study the cups before accepting the one he offered her, though he could not understand why she would be so curious. It was merely one of the many mysteries that she kept. He didn't begrudge her such mysteries; they kept him on his toes, and that was always a good thing.

He almost regretted not instantly feeling the warm snuggly feeling that he usually got from these after dinner encounters. He found that he was still thinking too greatly about the potential problems that would be associated with the likely upcoming test of how the weapons worked. He hadn't even attempted to activate one of them himself yet, though that would be the first step in testing them. While he did not heal as fast as his sister-in-law or his nieces, he would likely easily survive the blood drain that would almost have to be a part of activating those weapons. He had decided, upon looking at the protrusions, that that was almost certainly the origin of their power. They drew off blood, or possibly life force through blood, to power their magic.

While he sat there, his arm around Marilsa, he could feel her snuggle up against him. It left him with a good feeling, but did not really turn his thoughts away from the problems inherent in a test of the weapons. He had no way of knowing how powerful these would turn out to be, nor of the kind of collateral damage they might cause when set off. Even with powerful warding magics, they could well be dangerous, even to the one setting them off.

"Marilsa, I still think that we need to get some experts here before attempting to test my theories on the weapons. We need more warding magic than you can provide, and it needs to be varied, which means at least two other mages, likely specialized in different styles. These are too dangerous to test on our own."

"I need to test this, before anyone else knows about it," her voice was soft, but intense. "The power that can come from such magics, especially if it can be replicated, would leave me with nothing to stand in my way."

Stand in her way? Telin bit back the words that came to his mind, suddenly wondering why she was acting as she was. This was not her usual behavior. "Why would you need such power?" he asked. "Especially with the Two Kingdoms at peace?"

There came a little laugh, a sound of derision. "With weapons like these, if they work over the distances you suggested they might, one could hide an assassin in a tower, and when their attack fell, they could be away before any knew the truth of the attack. Come lover, let's talk of other things."

He tried not to show how what she'd just said worried him. Instead, he picked up his cup of wine and carefully sipped it. It didn't have quite the nuanced flavor it usually did. And, as he ran a finger over the rim of the cup, he suspected he knew why, now. That mark, the one on the base of the cup, had been to differentiate between them. And she had accepted wine she'd intended for him.

"Love, it is early yet," he carefully kept himself from expressing the horror and disgust he was now feeling as the pieces slipped into place. "Let us walk into town. I have something I'd like to do, and it would be better with you there." He pulled up his mental map of the town, remembering that there was both a Railahn shrine and a guard station fairly close to the manor. All he had to do was get her there, then demand that they both be examined by a truthspeaker.

Though she tried to demur, he realized that the drug she'd intended for him would weaken her will. He merely kept on pleasantly insisting until she did as he bid. It disgusted him to have to use her own weakness to whatever potion she'd intended for him as a point of leverage, but he had no choice. With what she'd just revealed, she had to be stopped, using whatever method was necessary.

When they reached the guard station, he pulled her inside, "Now, Marilsa, you just need to cooperate here. Stay here while I speak with the watch officer. Then we'll see about making you a bit more comfortable."

He left her in the antechamber and motioned the watch officer back, out of easy hearing range. "Sir, you're going to have to arrest both of us, for now. And she's a mage; you need to use a mage bond, before she comes to her senses. Call for a truthspeaker; we both have to be examined. If I'm right,

their Imperial Majesties will be quite pleased with your work here." He pulled at his signet, "This should give you reason enough to believe me, even against Lady Keske. Considering that my father is one of the highest ranking Sacred Swords, you have to understand that I would only do this in direst of emergencies."

The watch officer looked at the signet, recognizing the variant off Akhshar's seal. "You will accept responsibility if your accusations turn out false?"

"Without reservation. I wouldn't act if I weren't certain that things are very dangerous now. Send for a truth speaker, and get a mage bond on her. I'm more than willing to wait uncomfortably for the chance to prove myself in this. I suspect Lady Keske of plotting treason against their Imperial Majesties, and, right now, she's under the effects of a drug she intended for me. She'll be easier to control for a little while, but I can't say how long the drug will last. If possible, send for a healer to examine us too. Proof of this potion, both in her now, and possibly lingering within me, will go far in securing the aid needed."

He walked back with the guard to speak with Lady Keske. With a sentiment he did not feel now, he apologized for the inconvenience she would shortly face then lifted her hand to bare the wrist for the mage bond. Even as the magic was sealed around the Lady's wrist, she seemed to regain some sense of what was going on. "How dare you?"

He bowed before moving to guide her back into one of the holding cells. "I dare because I must. We will be held and truth-tested, by Sacred Swords if there's any luck. If I should prove wrong, I'll pay whatever penalty is necessary for this inconvenience. If, however, I am right..." He left her to consider what might be the result of their mutual imprisonment as he entered a different cell, leaving her alone in the first. He settled onto the bench within and waited for the click that indicated that he was locked in. Though he could hear her sobs near him, he tried to steel his heart against them.

A few candlemarks passed, and he tried to get some rest in the cold and damp of the holding cell. He'd almost gotten to sleep when he heard the outer door to the cellblock open and footsteps come in his direction. Sitting up, he prepared himself. A moment later, the key was inserted in his door, but Telin waited patiently while a white-haired man with a soul sword entered the room. Telin knew the formalities, knew that with what Marilsa had revealed earlier, he had to prove his innocence and ignorance of her plans. That was why he'd insisted that they both be imprisoned. "May Railah aid you in finding the truth to this matter, Sir."

"What is it that brings the son of one of the most well known knights as a petitioner in this state? What truths do you have to tell me?" The knight's voice was soft, and yet also carried the strength common to all Sacred Swords.

"I have come because I have only just discovered how I was being manipulated, and even controlled, by the power of Lady Marilsa Keske. I will speak with you of the artifacts that she keeps hidden, locked within a warded basement, artifacts that, by her own words tonight, she intends to use as weapons, offering her great power.

"I believe I have been drugged, possibly for almost as long as I've been there, kept from realizing fully how dangerous her intentions for recreating what appear to be ancient xilcan weapons are. These artifacts need to be secured, likely escorted back to Sharlan where they can continue to be studied, but in a safe environment. She spoke tonight, when she ended up accidentally under the effects of the drug she intended for me, of possibilities of sending assassins to use such weapons, perhaps from towers where the source of the magic would be less likely to be seen. In doing so, she revealed far more than I had reason to guess before."

The knight moved forward, unslinging his soul sword. "Will you allow me to truth test you for any remains of this drug you believe has been used against you? That would make your story easier to believe."

Telin spread his hands and nodded, "I am willing to undergo any tests you might have. With the reality of what we had been doing becoming more and more clear to me, I realize that I must submit to any and all testing asked for. I dare not risk my family's reputation with any show of pride or resentment."

The knight held the sword across his palms and nodded to Telin, "Stand then, and place your hands upon the blade. No matter what you feel, stay still, for this magic is not pleasant, but very necessary, as no doubt you understand."

Telin did as he was instructed, placing his palms upon the bare heartsteel of the soulsword. Almost instantly, he felt a ripple of power move from the sword into him. It wasn't pain, precisely, but almost a tickling feeling. It probed and prodded throughout his body, causing him to bite his lip to keep from withdrawing his hands in order to scratch the itch that manifest within him. And that itch seemed to go on forever before the knight indicated that he could remove his hands.

"It appears that you are correct. There are traces of an enamorment potion still in your body, and, from what I have discerned, it seems that you've been drugged often, and for more than a moon. Merely the fact that you bear these traces indicates that at least part of your story is correct, and I have heard no untruth from you. Stay here for now. I will go and question the Lady. I doubt, if what you've said of her intentions is true, that she will be as willing to test as you were, but there are ways around that. My partner can assist as necessary, in order to find out the truth."

Partner? The knight looked almost too old to be one of those who had begun traveling in partnered pairs now, but Telin remembered suddenly that they'd only begun doing so in the decade or so after his sister had earned her sword. And it had been more than forty years since that time. "I will await your return. Thank you for believing me." Telin fumbled for words, trying to calm his own racing heart.

The knight merely nodded to him and stepped out of the cell, locking it behind him. Telin sat back down and prayed that things weren't quite as bad as they still seemed. While it was clear now that he had been drugged, in a way that would make it less likely for him to have questioned the Lady's motives, he was uncertain how far that would go to absolving him of any guilt in her plans. Though he was not devout like his father and sister were, he turned his thought to Railah, begging for any help straightening out the mess in which he found himself.

~Railah, I may be a disappointment to my family for being involved in this kind of trouble, but please see to it that this does not stain them as it will me. While my indiscretions may have gotten me into this, I am loyal, and will do whatever necessary to make sure that your laws are upheld here.~ He didn't know if she was listening to him, and his stomach was tied in knots over his difficulties here. How could he have been blind enough to allow someone to drug him, to allow someone to set him on the path toward treason itself?

It was maybe a candlemark after the knight had spoken with him when there was another scraping of the key in his lock. He stayed well back of the door, waiting to see what was to happen. This time, a pair of knights, including the one he'd spoken with before, entering. He waited impassively. He knew that what he'd heard from Marilsa tonight was serious, but he hoped that there would be some way to recover from this wrong.

"Lad," the other knight addressed Telin and he couldn't help but feel amusement that this knight, likely no more than five years his senior, would consider him little more than a youth. "You will be allowed to go free, but there are things that you are going to need to know, need to do. It took work, including some magical compulsions of our own, to convince the Lady to speak, but we have heard enough to recognize that your earlier words were true, and that you are indeed still a loyal servant of their Imperial Majesties. There are, however, some complications, and some choices that you will need to make. There is a good chance that the choice you make now will determine the Lady's fate in the end. Sit for a few minutes; I think you'll need the support."

Telin looked at the two knights in confusion, but did not disobey. "What complications? And why would her fate rest in my hands?"

"They do because of something I doubt you knew. She suggested that you wouldn't have known; and I imagine from the earnestness you presented earlier that this is true. While it is clear that she intended treason, and her own words have damned her on this, even if she were brought immediately to Chralis for judgment, no sentence could be passed on her in her current state. She is carrying a child, one that was sired within the past two moons. If that child is yours, and she has given indication that it is, you might be able to grant leniency to her against the charges, merely by taking her under your care fully. You would have to marry her, and if she committed another crime against the realm, your own life would be in danger because of the protection. Which is why I want you to think very carefully about what you're going to do here. In any event, she would not be allowed to be executed until the child is born or dies within her womb."

Telin lowered his head. The situation was worse indeed. But there was little that he'd need to think on, not now. "I will not offer her that sanctuary. The fact that she used magic to compel me, to blind my mind to what she was doing, makes it necessary that she face the full judgment of the courts. I cannot trust that she would not simply use me as a fool again, were she given the chance to live. I understand the nature of the mistakes I've made, and would ask a favor of one of the two of you. Because of the nature of the difficulty I'm facing here, I would ask the opportunity to take a sword oath, to make it impossible for this situation to happen again. Just as I dare not let her have the opportunity to control me, directly or indirectly, again, I must also make certain that no other can wield such influence over me in the future."

The knights looked at each other. He suspected that they weren't expecting such a fast, and determined, response. They likely had expected that they might have to dissuade someone still caught by the effects of love or lust. He was ruled by neither now. He felt nothing but disgust for the Lady after what she had done, and hoped that he would not need the added incentive of the sword oath to avoid such complications again. But he wanted to be safe if his will wasn't strong enough on its own. The first knight placed his hand to his soulsword's hilt, as if questioning if this was the right thing to do.

It must have been, because it was only a moment more before the sword was unslung and the tip set into the dirt. "It seems that the Goddess agrees with you, lad. I hadn't expected you to see sense, especially after being overpowered by magic so recently."

Telin managed a wry grin. "My father is a Sacred Sword, and my sister. I know enough to realize where discipline is needed more than emotion. Nor can I forgive myself for allowing myself to be manipulated so easily. I did not even question her eagerness, though, had I been wiser, I should have. The assignment I was given was nearly perfect, and I did not look to see why it should be so perfect."

He slipped to his knee, setting his hand over the crosspiece of the soulsword before him and took a deep breath. The decision he felt he had to make was not going to be a pleasant one. It would take him directly from the path he'd chosen for himself more than a score of years ago. But it was the only one that could guarantee his safety, and his family's honor. "In the name of Railah, I promise to never again touch a woman out of desire, nor perform any actions that would have the opportunity to lead to the birth of another child of my loins."

There was a quirked eyebrow from the other knight. Apparently, the oath, though simple, went to an extreme that he hadn't expected. "Your words might have been spoken hastily, lad. Yet the Goddess will hold you to them. I pray that you have not made the wrong choice here."

Telin's reply held all the explanation they needed. "I dare not make a mistake of this sort ever again, and this is the only way to prevent that."

They stepped back, letting him rise. "I would suggest you probably need some time to discuss things with the Lady. Because it is late, and she seemed overwrought, I had a priestess use some sleeping magic for tonight. Come tomorrow; we will need to discuss the other things that need to be

done about this issue. There will be much that has to be decided in the next several days, and your understanding of the situation will be greatly needed to untangle things enough that nothing is left undone."

Telin knew it was late. It had to be near upon moonset by now. He wasn't sure he could sleep though. Not after what he'd found out. "I will go to rest, though I do not know how much of that I will get. Perhaps, before I return tomorrow, I will see about giving the Lady at least a modicum of comfort for the length of her imprisonment. Clean clothing would not be amiss, even after this betrayal."

"Yes, that would be appropriate. Get back up to the manor, because you will be necessary in ordering things." They moved to let him out of the cell. Though they had said he was now free, cleared by the Lady's own words, he did not feel clean, and doubted he would again anytime soon.

Though he did not rest well, Telin did not return to the town until mid-morning. He arranged for clothing and personal items to be brought to where Lady Keske was being held and took a long time preparing himself for the inevitable confrontation. It would be harder this time, because she would have the full use of her wits about her when he dealt with her. He still wasn't certain how he would deal with what to him was ultimate betrayal, the use of whatever magic she'd managed to nullify his talisman and allow herself to get pregnant. And because the Sacred Swords were doubtless listening for truth when they dealt with her, he had no doubts that she was at least certain herself that the child was his.

Before he returned to the city, he pulled out the talisman he'd kept. To his knowledge, it hadn't been out of his belongings, but he also knew that there were plenty of times when he was down in the basement working and she was elsewhere. With her magic, there was little doubt that she either replaced his talisman, or altered it, likely with the intent of a child. Because the change in the talisman had to be intentional, he doubted the child was anything less than so.

He went first to speak with the Sacred Swords, within Railah's own shrine. He had attempted to make himself reasonably presentable, for he wanted to make certain it was obvious that he wanted to repair what damage may have been unwittingly done by his service to the Lady. "Sirs, I have come, as instructed."

"It is well that you've come, because the situation will need your advice, certainly, and likely your service." The knights introduced themselves for the first time as he sat down on the indicated bench in the shrine. "I am Larand Kelor and this is my partner Quil Reyk. I am not certain you realize how difficult it is arranging for the trial and possible execution for a member of the lesser nobility, but it is something that will have to be done in this case, especially with your statement that you will not attempt protecting the Lady. It means that other duties may well fall upon your shoulders, at least for a time."

"Other duties?"

"While I am certain that the Lady has a capable steward, certain things will have to be arranged on a long term basis regarding her properties and titles. While you were at the manor, we looked into her family circumstances, and discovered that, outside of a pair of distant cousins, the closest thing she would have to an heir is the child within her. Which means that you, as likely father to that child, are perhaps the best person to manage the estates until their Imperial Majesties make a decision about final disposition of those properties and her title. It may sound somewhat illogical, as you were merely in her employ until now, but it is not without precedent."

It took a moment for this to sink in. He, through nothing more than responding to her apparent passion for him, was to become guardian to her lands, at least until the final disposition of the estate. It would likely eventually return to those distant cousins. He could not imagine an illegitimate child, especially in this kind of situation, becoming heir to her titles and lands. But, for now, despite his desires

to be gone from this place, he might well be the best person to oversee the property. At the very least, it would put him in a direct position to get those artifacts back to Sharlan.

"I assume there would have to be some formal act on this, at the very least paperwork to present to her steward?"

"Most of that has already been arranged. The paperwork will be waiting for you as soon as you've seen to the Lady herself. I would like to ask you what your immediate intentions might be, because those intentions might make this trial easier or harder to bring before the Emperor."

He shook his head. "Beyond getting the artifacts to the only place safe enough to study them, I haven't considered much. I suppose, with the appointment as guardian over her estates, I must go through her documents and effects, finding anything that supports the word you have from her over her own intentions. Copies must be made of my notes on the artifacts, and placed with the documents I find that support her treasonous intentions, so that all the facts are available. Other than that, I have no idea what might be asked of me."

Quil spoke up, "Actually, it is perhaps best if the Lady remain here, within town, though perhaps in a more comfortable cell, until you have all of the documentation you need to bring to Chralis. If for no other reason than that it would be more difficult to have her travel while still in the early stages of her pregnancy. From what I've been informed, such times tend to leave a woman weak and unable to hold her stomach for long."

Though he didn't like it, Telin agreed. "I think it's best to give her as much comfort as we can afford to, without releasing her and without removing the bond that keeps her from using her magic. I've seen what she can do magically, and it is impressive. Under no circumstance should she be allowed full use of her abilities."

"Will you be taking the child, when he or she is born, to raise as your own? You will be the surviving parent, and have the right to determine the child's fate."

Telin frowned. "I would not be a good parent, though I know one who would be. If I could convince either of my brothers to take the child, I could be assured that they would be well raised, both understanding their responsibilities to the world and with enough stability to not become destructive or manipulative easily."

He thought about it for a moment, "Actually, that might be the best idea. I would like someone who has some understanding of the nature of the artifacts to help escort them back to Sharlan. If I could get a message off fast enough to my brother Maran, who, while his expertise is in kee-ali-dahr crystals, might understand the danger of these items, he could come here personally to have them brought back to safety."

"This brother is at the Academy?"

"Yes, last I checked. He and his wife have a cottage there, and Maran would certainly travel to help retrieve something of this value."

"There is a Far Speaker in one of the nearby towns. I could have a messenger run a message from you to the Far Speaker. If it works, your brother could be on his way in a handful of days, and back in Sharlan in a moon. It would be good having a written agreement on the raising of the child, something that will indicate your responsibility in this case. I can tell, from your reaction, that you did not wish this child. It is no shameful thing to ask another, one who might be better equipped to care for a child, to handle their upbringing."

Telin nodded, feeling self-conscious at his open admission that he would not do the best job of raising the child. It may have been completely honest, but it was not something he was proud of. He just hoped that he would be able to convince Maran of the necessity. "Let me write out a short message, asking Maran to come here. I won't tell him everything, not until he arrives. It will be better that way. It will still give him moons to prepare."

He was offered paper and ink, and he hastily wrote out instructions to be given to the Far Speaker.

Maran Calasti,

The artifacts that Lady Keske obtained are xilcan in origin, and, due to a difficulty here, it is requested that you come as soon as possible, with an armed escort, to retrieve these artifacts and take them back to Sharlan. An explanation will be provided once you arrive.

Telin

"There," he commented as he dusted the ink and folded the paper. "That should bring Maran quickly, without giving out any more information than necessary. I believe you did not wish the word to carry far quite yet about what's happening with the Lady? As well, considering the possible danger if someone should acquire both the artifacts and my notes, I felt it best that nothing be mentioned beforehand about them including weapons."

Quil accepted the note, "That is indeed the best way to handle things. There is now only one thing to do, I think. You must speak with the Lady, inform her of your decisions, and then take control of her household for the nonce. I wish you the best of luck, but I suspect that she may attempt to play upon your emotions when you see her."

Telin shook his head, "She will get nowhere with that. From the moment I realized that I had been drugged, all desire I might have once had for her turned to disgust. She will not win me away from my resolve now."

He allowed himself to be led out of the shrine and into the watch station. He waited while the key was inserted into the lock and ducked under the lintel, allowing himself to be locked in with her. Though he felt great temptation to do something, anything, in revenge for what she had just cost him with her deception, he did not wish to touch her, not now or ever again. "Lady Keske, I believe you have been informed of the charges being pressed against you?"

She looked up from where she sat, and he realized that she must feel greatly reduced already, to shiver with such fear. "I know that you can reduce the effects of those charges, if you choose to, Telin. I would certainly make it worth your while to do so." Though her tone seemed filled with fear for herself, there was still that tone of bargain, and he dug his nails into his palm to remind himself that this would of course be the play she wanted. He was the only hope she had, and, from her perspective, she still had a hold over him.

He knew he had to break that hope, no matter how devastating that was. He could not allow himself to be manipulated again, especially not by her. "I will not take you under my protection, Lady. The nature of the crime you were committing, and the way you went about it, using magic and manipulation both to attempt to alter my ultimate allegiance, have damned you in a way I cannot save you from. I cannot be certain that you would be true to any promise you made. Nor can I trust that you would not simply turn around and attempt to use me in another nefarious plan. I simply cannot take the position needed to save you."

She moved toward him, lifting her hands to set them on his shoulders, to try to bring him into her embrace. He backed up, against the cell door, thrusting his hands in front of him to ward her away. "No, I have no such desire for you, and, in any case, am bound away from such pleasures anymore. That is as much your doing as my own, proving that my judgment of women was flawed to such an extreme. I do not desire you, nor can I allow myself to accept any such desire in the future."

There was a hardness to her eyes as she retreated, almost spitting upon him in her anger. "How dare you? You have been offered much in my service, and spurn it all now."

"It doesn't matter how angry you are with me, Lady. It only matters that I am a true servant of the Emperor. I am not the traitor that you tried to make me. I, like my brothers and sisters, am a true Calasti, and will not support treason."

"Not even for your child's sake will you take me under your protection? So that he, when he is born, will have a mother?"

"Lady, you would not make a good mother, and I would not risk a child's future on your venom. I will not stand by as other lives are ruined by your desire for power. You are not going to change my mind, not with anything you can say or do."

She lifted her hands, clutching them together over her head and got a cruel smile, "Then you will watch as an innocent life is lost because of those desires." She moved to bring her hands down upon her stomach, clearly in an attempt to force herself to lose the child she carried. But he was fast, enhanced by the kee-ali-dahlri blood that ran in his veins, and he caught her before her hands reached her own stomach. He forced her back, pulling those arms up again, though he did not relish the feel of her helpless in his hands. Holding both her wrists awkwardly with one hand, he pulled at the manacles high on the wall of the cell, locking first one wrist, then the other, where she could not pull them down.

"I can and will have healers provide ways to calm you, and keep you from committing such harm. Is it not enough that you have ruined one person's life in your pursuit of power? Do you have to harm others as well?"

There was little response but a scream of rage as she pulled at the manacles holding her wrists. Shaking his head, he turned toward the door, calling for the guard, and a healer. "She has attempted to force herself to lose the child. She will have to be bound, though preferably in a more comfortable way. And we must find something to calm her, so that her anger alone does not force the child to die."

The healer, who had not been far during the conversation, thought a moment, "I have a potion that would assist in that, without harm to the child within, but the difficulty would be forcing her to drink it, and to eat enough for both she and the child to survive."

Telin grimaced, "We'll have to try. There has to be some way to stop her irrationality."

"I propose a deal, Telin," came the call from behind him. He turned, regarding Lady Keske's leaning against the walls, her expression caught in a mask of cruelty.

"What deal do you propose? You know that I will not take you under my protection."

"This will do instead. If you wish to make certain that I eat, and take these potions you demand, I will offer you a deal for them. I will accept such, taking them willingly, but only from your hand. Every day, until the child is born, you will need to come to me and feed me."

He understood what she was doing. One last chance at revenge against him. But, it was also a chance at cleaning his spirit. "Your hands will never be free to damage the unborn within you. Nor will I waver in my defiance of your charms. But this I will do. Call it penance, if you will. Putting myself in a situation where I will see directly what brought my downfall every day may help me keep my oath. That is something you are willing to agree on? Even to an oath upon a soul sword?"

She seemed almost surprised at his instant willingness to do this, but did not turn away. "I will do this, and not attempt to kill the child within me, so long as you keep your part of the bargain."

He nodded, and turned back to the healer, "Get the potion, and food. I will deal with this now, and again tonight. Guard, if there is some better way to chain her so that she cannot easily go back on her word, please see to it. And get Larand and Quil. I want them to witness this."

As they turned to carry out his orders, he inclined his head to her. "So, you can be reasonable. I will do as I have said, for the child's sake. It does not dishonor me at all. But the necessity for these precautions will not look good for you. Morning and evening, you will be fed and given the potion. I will be gentle, respectful, and though I do not expect the same from you, it would look more to your benefit, if there is any doubt as to your intentions when you are brought to trial, should you prove yourself easier to deal with." Her only response was a low growl of anger.

Despite his annoyance at having to take the time to feed Lady Keske every morning and evening, Telin tried to enjoy what he was doing. He diligently made copies of all of the notes he'd previously made for her so that he'd have both copies for the courts when he brought her to Chralis, and notes for the scholars in Sharlan to work from when his brother came to collect the artifacts. He began going through the accounts and private writings of the Lady, though these left him with holes he didn't like. There were references to reasonably large sums of money going out, though to whom and for what, he could not discern. He considered that they might relate to fleeting references in her journal, mentioning someone called Firial, though there was no indication of whether this Firial was male or female, or who they might be. All that was mentioned was that the person had done a job for her. With that kind of reference, Telin wondered if the person might be a thief or assassin.

It was only fourteen days after he'd written his note to be relayed to his brother when he got an excited messenger arriving while he was finishing up Lady Keske's morning meal. True enough to her word, she accepted food and drink, including the potion he needed her to take, willingly, but she often switched between trying to wheedle him into taking her into his protection and insulting him fully for what he'd done. He had to stop himself from forcing her to eat more quickly at the quick hint that his brother had arrived. He had promised to be gentle and respectful, and that, like his other promise, he intended to keep. Maran would wait while he handled this. He could trust that his brother would understand.

He uncorked the potion vial that had been brought with her breakfast, and lifted it to her lips. "This is all that's left until tonight." He kept his tone as gentle as he could, despite the knots that were tied in his stomach each time that he did this. There was little doubt that she wanted to convince him to step in and save her. And that it would be probably seven moons before he could turn his back on this duty.

She looked ready to refuse the potion, or be petulant, but his annoyance in any delay right now showed in the ripple of his skin, furring then scaling along his arms. She had seen him use his shapeshifters abilities before, at her request. But she also knew that he did not use such enhancements lightly. He waited until the vial was empty then called for one of the servants that had been assigned to her to clean her up and try to make her as comfortable as she likely could be, in a storage room that had been turned into a reasonably private cell for her. It was time to go and speak with Maran.

He guessed that he likely still looked a right mess when he reached the private dining area in the manor, where Maran was waiting. He'd barely been able to keep himself in good shape the past tenday and more, mostly because of the nightmares that came most nights of her attempting to seduce him again. That most of those dreams left him powerless to fight her was something he was not pleased with. "I'm glad you're here Maran. There's a lot that I need to discuss with you, and the hope is to get at least part of this mess off my shoulders by getting the artifacts and you back on the road to Sharlan."

The older Calasti merely raised an eyebrow. "You look like you've hardly slept or eaten in the time since we received the Far Speaker's message. What could be dire enough to have that effect on you?"

Telin poured himself a cup of tea, for he'd been avoiding wine ever since he'd figured out that he'd been drugged through it, and began his tale. "You tried to help me, just over a year ago, when you found out what kind of life I was making for myself outside of the Academy. I didn't listen, and now have realized how right you were. Even at her worst, Denora has never had anything but your best interests at heart. She cares nothing for power or any kind of place other than at your side. I wish I'd stopped before and seen that even if it lacks variety, mystery, and an exotic air to it, such a life is much safer than where I've ended up."

Maran leaned forward, "I don't know what you've been up to, but I knew that there was something serious when you asked for me to come here. To my knowledge, neither Father, Jalak, nor

Talina have any guess as to what you'd asked Denora for, all those years ago. So I guess I'm the one you need to talk to, to find some form of solution to whatever problem you've found."

Telin set down his cup and fell silent a long moment before starting his explanation. "I knew that there was something interesting about this assignment from the first, because it came with me specifically asked for. I merely thought that maybe I was getting a reputation that I could put to good use, either in finding pleasures, or finding more work. I should have been worried at her obvious interest in me at dinner that first night. It took two moons to discover that she'd been drugging me, possibly from the first night. She needed my wits clear for the research she was doing, but wanted to keep my mind off of any motives she expressed. I was an easy fool for her. It was luck alone that allowed me to slip her lead."

"Drugged? You sound like you would have followed her eagerly without that."

"I would have, but the drug kept me from asking uncomfortable questions, so that I did not realize that she wanted these artifacts for a purpose that could not be accepted. These artifacts are xilcan, perhaps older than the ruin that you and Jalak and Denora went into. And, among them, are weapons. I was getting close to finding a way to activate them when I accidentally handed her the cup with the drug meant for me. Because I hadn't realized that the smudges on the base of the glass were intended to tell the difference, she ended up drugged, and admitting the truth of what she wanted. She planned treason; I had to have both of us arrested until a truthspeaker could verify what was going on."

Maran's fingers tightened around the arms of the chair he was sitting in. "Treason? You mentioned weapons. She meant to use those weapons against the Emperor or his family?"

"Certainly she considered that as a possible use, even though I've found little to support that as an actual plan. Her plans closer to home were more noticeable. She had maps of several local holdings, and appeared to be considering an attack on Rookhaven itself. She only needed the weapons, and she intended to use me to get those for her. There is little I know of what she would intend for me at that stage; surely she wouldn't have thought I would knowingly have been party to treason. It is possible that she intended to have me killed at that stop. With my defenses down around her, it would have been far too easy."

"She's locked up, I guess now? Ready to be transported to Chralis for trial and likely execution?"

"Actually, the execution won't happen any time soon. She's modified or switched my talisman. She's carrying a Calasti child, one that perhaps she intended to use against me, or perhaps merely as an heir that could potentially be very powerful. We don't yet know if our gifts will pass to any children Jalak or I have. There's no way to know. Largo and his sisters were shapeshifters on both sides of the family. She's already threatened to kill the child if I allow her any way to do so...because I won't take her under my protection. I have to have her bound tightly all the time. The only way she'll take sufficient food, drink, and medicines, is from my own hands. I know she means it as a torture, and perhaps as a way to foil my resolve. It certainly isn't an easy thing to deal with every day."

Maran stood up and crossed the space between them. "Words will never express correctly how much it hurts me to see you reduced to this, brother. It's not something you're going to be able to face with any kind of strength, even if she is executed after the child is born."

Telin wiped helplessly at the dampness that clouded his vision. "One reason I wanted you, even more than Jalak, though he would have been sufficient for escorting these things home is that I need your help. I have no idea how to raise a child, and I'm afraid I'd do far more damage than I could conscience. You've raised two to adulthood, and have a pair of delightful twins that seem to be doing quite well. Is there any way you can convince Denora to help raise another, for my sake?"

Maran set his hand on Telin's shoulder. "What are your reasons for thinking you couldn't do as good a job as I could? Especially in this."

Telin shook his head, and his voice was weak as he answered. "It would be far too easy to blame an innocent for my situation, the oath I've had to take to protect myself from further manipulation, and

for the fact that I'll be stuck in one place for near enough to two decades. I don't think it will be easy to look at the child, son or daughter of hers, and not remember how badly she used me. I never expected to have to settle down for any real length of time, and this scares me. How could I care for another when I've never before considered any kind of permanency in my life?"

"You're afraid that you wouldn't have the distance from the situation to treat the child fairly yourself? I can see how that would be a problem. You at least know your limits and your own temperament very well. Even if I did take the child, there would be some requirements made of you. The child will likely lose their mother shortly after they're born. To have that hanging over them and having their father abandon them would not be good. You would have to be a part of the child's life. I'm not going to lie to the child and tell them that they are mine. I couldn't anyway. Denora's further along than the Lady Keske doubtless is. To have two children so close in age, but not identical. He, or she, would know the difference. Which makes it imperative that you be an active part of the child's life. They will need it to grow to adulthood with a healthy outlook."

Telin looked up, "Denora's carrying?"

"We found out right after you left Sharlan. She's hoping it will be a son. I don't care as much, but if it will give her some peace, I'm not against it. At least the twins are a little older now, and might actually be able to help her."

"Then she'll be able to provide milk to mine? I recall you saying before that she always produced more than enough."

"You have to promise to be there for the child. It will tie you down for, as you said, nearly two decades. But, I understand why you hold a lot of doubts already. You weren't planning on this, and, with the mother in such difficulties, you might have a hard time preparing properly to raise a son or daughter. I'll take the child if you're willing to promise to be there for them, as much as possible."

Telin almost surged to his feet. He knocked his chair back into his brother's leg as he rose. "That will help me with a great deal of my worry, brother. I don't know how I could thank you for this. I'm not sure how I'll be able to thank Denora for her work on this, though I know that you'll have little trouble convincing her."

Maran laughed and hugged his brother. "Denora would do it for more reasons than my asking her, Telin. She's still far more likely to consider your requests than she would from anyone in the family other than Father or myself. I may be her husband, but you've always been a friend. I'm still not sure how that happened, but it will help encourage her in this."

Telin managed a smile, perhaps the first he'd had in several days. "I will endeavor to be as much a friend as I can to her then. But I will accept your requirement. I will be a part of the child's life. It won't be easy, sometimes, but the child deserves to know that they aren't abandoned."

Maran nodded and stepped back. "If you've the strength then, I'd like to see these artifacts that you want me to escort home. And whatever notes you've already gotten on what they do and how they do it."

Telin laughed. "I had been making very good progress until I found out what Lady Keske was doing. We were perhaps a tenday away from the first test of the largest weapon. If that had worked, I think we might have been able to start duplicating the magic on it within a moon or two." He led the way past the kitchen to the stairwell, now no longer lit with mage lights. He'd had to scramble for a few days to get enough glow stones to keep the workroom and stairs properly lit, but he'd at least trip over nothing now.

It was a moon later when he heard the clatter of his shutters against the walls. He'd been certain to latch them, so someone must be in the room with him. Taking a moment to adjust his eyes to

see in the dark like an owl's, he sat up very carefully, trying to see who was here. There, in the corner near the door, was a shadow that he couldn't pierce clearly. "It won't do you any good to attempt to kill me. Even if you succeed, the Lady will still go to trial." He tried to keep his voice as neutral as possible, and wondered if the person here knew of his shifter's abilities. They could be countered, by someone who knew them. But, at this point, he wasn't certain exactly how much he'd fight for his own life.

"I'm not the assassin who intended to visit you tonight." The voice was female, but low enough to almost be mistaken for a man's. "That one is at the bottom of a well not too far away, waiting to be dealt with by someone who has taken offense at their temerity. It would seem that the Lord of Serpents is rather unhappy with her."

He didn't move more than to gaze around the room. "If you weren't sent to kill me, why are you here?"

"At least you're thinking. I had wondered if the one I serve made a mistake. Usually she doesn't interfere when someone makes such mistakes as you have."

"I don't know who you're mentioning, but again, I have to ask, why are you here?"

There was a rustle of papers then the sound of a heavy sheaf of them tossed onto a nearby shelf. "I was instructed to acquire these from the assassin, and make them available to you. The question is if you are worthy of the other item I was told to offer you."

"I don't know if I'm worthy of any aid from you, no matter who your employer is. But I am grateful if those papers include information that's missing from Lady Keske's notes. If that is what you gave me, I'll put them to use, according to what is in there. You indicated that Lord Vythen is interested in the assassin. Would this assassin be named Firal?"

"An appropriate question, but one that I'm going to let you find out the answer to another way. The fact that you asked it indicates that your mind might just possibly be trainable enough to be of use. Because of that, I will leave the other gift." There was a sound of metal being dropped onto the table near where the unknown woman stood. "I'm not going to tell you what the gift means, or who meant it for you. That you're going to have to wait on, to determine if you are indeed what the one I serve wants. I'm less than impressed, but it isn't my job to decide this."

He couldn't help but laugh. "I doubt I impress much of anyone at this point. I have no idea why your employer would be interested in me, but hopefully they know that I won't be treasonous myself. In fact, the artifacts that I was studying here before are no longer in this place at all. I had them safely taken away a moon back."

The room seemed to echo back his laughter at him. "The one I serve has no interest in treason, though she might ask nearly anything of those who serve her. I will bid you good even, and suggest that you find better ways to guard your sleeping quarters. It was far too easy to get in here."

He tried to focus on the shadowy spot she was in, but after a long moment, he could tell that there was nothing there anymore. He fumbled at the table at his side for a lamp, brightening the room enough to see what was left for him. On the shelf near where his visitor had stood was a stack of papers almost as thick as a small book. On the table to the right of that shelf was a dagger, unsheathed, and reflecting his lamp's light.

He examined the dagger first, trying to see if there was any mark that could explain why he'd gotten his nightly visitor. Outside of a very faint tracery of what looked like a web wrapped around the hilts, there was nothing distinguishing. The blade was very well made, wires wrapping the handle, each one etched faintly to cause that hint of a spider web. Without a mage, he'd not know if the blade had any magic on it. He could find no reason for this night's visitor.

The papers appeared to be missives from Lady Keske to some unknown recipient. They detailed payments to be offered, and assignments needing fulfilled. Several of those seemed to be assassinations. At the bottom of that stack was a set of instructions that chilled him.

If I do not contact you before the end of the fourth moon from now requesting more time to work with my intended visitor, you are to find opportunity to remove him. The usual reward can be acquired, even without my presence, by presenting the ring I'd given you to my steward. He has instruction on what to do if that ring is presented. The name of your target, if something goes wrong, is Telin Calasti. I do not expect to need him past the fourth moon, but depending on how long he takes in determining the nature of the things you acquired for me, it might be necessary for him to live somewhat longer.

So, the Lady had planned his death long before, seemingly before he had arrived in the city. He wished even more that he had been able to get more information from his mysterious visitor. He wanted to get to the assassin before Lord Vythen visited his judgment upon her. He also wished he knew who had sent his visitor. That piece of information, he suspected, would put things into place. But it was one that he hadn't thought to ask, and it was too late now.

He took the papers and stuffed them between his clothes in the carry pack kept at the foot of his bed and walked over to the window to pull the shutters closed again. The window looked out over a small section of roof that dropped off more than ten feet into the kitchen garden. The walls below the roof were plastered over mud brick. It would have been very difficult climbing up the walls, especially without a rope and grapnel. So, likely the shutters were a ruse. His guest came in another way.

Taking a moment to think, he realized that it probably would do no good to try to find out either who his guest was or who they served. Rather, he should be trying to follow up on the information he'd been given. He dressed quickly and tucked the dagger into his sheath. While he had a perfectly serviceable dagger, this one had a better balance, almost as if it had been made for his hand. It felt right, though he had no understanding of why that might be.

Exchanging his room lamp for a lantern that he could carry, he warned the guard at the gate to the manor that he was going after the city's guard, and hurried out onto the road into the city. It wasn't far to the guard station, and there was, as always, a welcoming light within. He pushed his way past the door, carefully holding the lantern where it wouldn't be upset. He faced the same guard he had more than a moon before, and had to chuckle dryly. "I suspect we'll be getting news soon of a very unusual, and likely awkward death. I had a visitor that told me that an assassin had been detained near here. We need to find that assassin, preferably before one of Lord Vythen's servants get to her. The only information I have on where to find her is that she was caught at the bottom of a well near here not long ago."

The guard looked up, "An assassin now? What makes you think of that?"

"I had a visitor that did not reveal much about themselves, only that the assassin that was sent after me would be at the bottom of a well waiting to be dealt with. She left me a sheaf of papers, including the assignment that had been given to the assassin to kill me. If we find this assassin before Lord Vythen removes them, we might have useful information."

The guard shook his head, "I'd need more information than merely that she is in the bottom of a well near here. The wells are spread pretty widely. There are two within town itself, one on Lady Keske's property, and at least three others on nearby farms. I can try to send someone to check, but I doubt we'll get answers very soon."

Telin was restless; he wanted to get that assassin, preferably before Vythen silenced her permanently. "Do you know where, in Lady Keske's properties, that well is? I can at least check that one, once I know where to look."

"It's off to the east of the stables. There's a path heading that way from the kitchen garden. It would give us one less place to check, though, if you're right about Vythen wanting to silence an assassin, I don't give too much of a chance to save them, not even long enough to get confirmation."

Telin moved toward the door even as he got directions, letting his long legs cover the ground at quite the clip. He nearly ran past the guard at the manor's gate, only stopping long enough to identify

himself. The kitchen gardens weren't very far, and, even in the dark, he had the means to see reasonably well. He hurried along the cobbled path toward what appeared to be a covered well. It was only when he came to a stop next to the well that he could see that there was a crystal wedged into the wall beside it. He was already humming an activation before it registered what he was doing, and what was there. The crystal flared to light, almost dazzling him for a moment. Just at the edge of his suddenly enhanced vision, he saw what resembled a bound figure. He pulled at the crystal with his free hand, setting his lantern on the ground. The crystal would be better, though he had no idea how a kee-ali-dahlri crystal would be here, especially one attuned to voices rather than taps.

Carefully he approached where the shape lay, deciding quickly that he was in fact too late. The figure was clearly bound, hands and feet tied together behind them. He hesitantly reached out to brush away the hair that obscured the person's face. Even as his hands came into contact with the hair and skin, he knew at least part of the truth. This assassin was one of his mother's people. Which probably made it very easy to vanish within the city. She had been a kee-ali-dahlri, though he had no idea how she'd gotten here. It was purely possible that one or more had left their homeland over the past sixty years, and this one had taken to an occupation that her natural abilities made easy.

With a little disgust at having to do this, he drew the dagger he'd been given, using it to cut the bonds that bound the corpse. With the light of the crystal in his hand, he examined the body, not entirely surprised with what he discovered. Dozens of puncture wounds appeared on the woman's arms and legs, and he thought he saw a few other tears in her clothing. Her death had not been easy. Vythen had taken his revenge on one who had displeased him. It would have been nicer if he'd had a living captive rather than a corpse, but at least that assassin was dealt with now.

A glint on the left hand caused Telin to examine her hand carefully. There was a ring, gold with some form of a seal on it. He tugged the ring off swollen fingers, brining the glowing crystal close enough to study it closely. There was writing on the inside, and the seal on the top was not solid. He set the crystal on the ground and carefully pried the top of the seal off, noting that a small amount of dark liquid lay within. So, she had poison too. Not entirely surprising. Closing the reservoir again, he turned the ring carefully to see what was inscribed.

The characters weren't in Trade, but he could read them anyhow. Firal'dan'kril. He could almost taste the bile at the translation to that. With only a part of the name, he hadn't understood the joke, if joke it could be termed. Claw of war. He doubted that the Lady Keske even knew what Firal's name meant. He carefully tore a piece of the woman's clothing so that he could carefully wrap the ring in it before calling the guards in the barracks to get the corpse and take it to where it could be studied. Any hints as to where this woman had come from would be useful. If she had indeed been attempting to start a war, there had to be others who would be missing her. Humming to drop the light from the crystal, he picked up his lantern and crystal then headed back toward town.

He got near the Railahn shrine at about the time the sun cleared the forest to the east. He would be late in feeding the Lady. But this was more important. The risk that there might be other kee-ali-dahlri who intended to bring about war was not something he felt at peace with. Knocking at the shrine's door, he called within. "Sacred Swords, it seems that we have more to concern ourselves with than the artifacts now resting safely in Sharlan."

Larand made it to the door before Quil did, and Telin was pleased to see he hadn't awakened the pair. "What do you mean, more to concern ourselves with?"

He thrust out the cloth with the ring, "Be careful, for there is poison in that. The one who bore it has been eliminated, but not by me. It's going to take me a moment to explain what has happened in the past few candelmarks."

Larand accepted cloth and peered at its contents. "Poison? Someone attempted to assassinate you?"

"They didn't get anywhere near me. Someone, someone who can get in and out of the manor without any difficulty, said the assassin was detained in a well, awaiting Vythen's displeasure. Almost as soon as I had all of the facts I could from my unseen visitor and what she left, I went to try to find the assassin, hoping to catch her alive. I failed there, but this ring was on her finger. More importantly is the fact that she held kee-ali-dahlri blood. She was a shapeshifter like myself. I know from touching her skin. The writing on the inside of the ring translates as Claw of War. I haven't heard of my mother's people settling onto this continent on their own yet, so I have no idea where this woman came from. My visitor left me a bunch of papers taken from the assassin, papers that indicate not only that this Firial was to kill me, but also that she had killed several others, at the behest of the Lady Keske. My death was arranged by a safe-code. If the Lady did not contact Firial before a certain date, Firial was to complete the last assassination, mine."

Larand folded the cloth around the ring again and nodded. "I hope you placed those papers in a safe place? Those would likely be precisely what we need to verify Lady Keske's guilt. We have a dead assassin, and though, like you, I'd like to know more about who else this assassin worked for, I can't be completely disappointed that she's dead. Do you have any idea who it might have been who gave you those papers?"

Telin shook his head. "Whoever it was, they can move without noticeable sound. They were working for someone, though there was no indication who it was, only that she was sent, and didn't seem to think I was very impressive. At this stage, I'd have to agree with that statement. There was only one other thing that she left. This dagger," he pulled the blade free of its scabbard. "Perfectly balanced, weighted almost as if it were made specifically for me, but no mark other than this faint hint of a spider-web."

Quil studied the dagger, "There is no magic upon it, though it is, as you said, very well made. Was this a gift?"

Telin nodded, "The visitor sounded like she wasn't too happy with having to give me any aid. But she seemed to think that at least one of my questions was the right thing to ask. She left this to me after that. About the only other thing I got out of her was that her employer was not interested in treason. Though there was a hint that such an employer has been known to ask almost anything from their servants."

Quil handed the dagger back. "We'll take it as someone we're on the same side of for now. But I would suggest you be very careful. Having an assassin stopped by some stranger who can sneak into the manor easily would leave almost anyone uneasy."

Telin laughed, "Uneasy isn't even beginning to describe it. I'd like you to question the Lady after I feed her this morning; perhaps you can get some truth out of her regarding her assassin."

The Sacred Swords nodded. "We can do that. Go ahead and get things started, and we'll speak with her privately afterward. Perhaps with that calmative potion in her system, she'll be a little more reasonable."

Telin nodded. "I'll go ahead and get her fed and given her potion. She might be a little stubborn this morning, seeing that I am a little late now."

He left the shrine and walked over to the guard-station, and waited to be let in to feed Lady Keske. The food and potion were already ready, and she looked almost surprised to see him here. Well, he had an idea of why that might be. "Good morning, Lady. I am sorry about my tardiness, but there were things that had to be taken care of." He intentionally did not mention the assassin. That would be for the knights to do later.

He picked up the bowl of porridge and started spooning it into her mouth, taking care to touch her as little as he could while feeding her. She did not oppose him today, nor make anything difficult. He wondered if he'd somehow gained a bit of respect from her unintentionally. If she thought he'd taken out her assassin, that might explain much. He wasn't going to tell her one way or the other. If the

knights thought she needed to know, they'd tell her. He carefully fed her a full meal then uncorked the potion. "Only this last bit, Lady." He couldn't help but enjoy her nervousness around him. Perhaps things might be going in his favor for a bit now.

It was only two tendays from the day that Telin had his visitor before he, Lady Keske, and the two Sacred Swords, along with a pair of guards and two servants, began the long ride to Chralis. Due to the manner in which Lady Keske had to be bound, they had to use a carriage. There was no way the Lady could ride with her hands bound behind her, nor would they wish to risk her losing the child she was carrying through an unintentional fall. Consequently, a trip that would have lasted just over a tenday on horseback would likely take almost two, escorting the carriage.

Telin rode Moonfoot, grateful to be on the road again finally, although there would still be moons to wait in Chralis, while waiting for his son or daughter to be born. It was only after the child was born, or died in the womb, that he would have any kind of freedom, and even that would be limited likely enough by his promise to his brother.

Each morning and evening, he'd crouch next to the stairs for the carriage, carefully feeding Lady Keske her meals, always ending out with a flask of the potion needed. He had the recipe of the potion with him, in case the trip would be delayed by foul weather. Hopefully it would not be, because he could hardly imagine how they'd survive having to spend a few days in an inn somewhere with a noble lady chained up. About the only thing that would make that bearable was that there was a pair of Sacred Swords to silence any and all questions.

It was with a sigh of relief that he finally saw the towers of Chralis peek out from over the horizon. One more day and they'll be safely in the Capital. As he settled down near the fireplace in the final inn on their journey, he caught sight of a flash of brilliant purple out of the corner of his eye. Could it be?

Turning he found himself face to face with someone he really hadn't been ready to see, but couldn't help but be relieved by her presence. "Talina! What brings you down from the Guardian Wood?"

His older sister laughed and shifted HeartBeacon from her back to her lap and sat down beside him. "I got word that you'd found yourself in a patch of trouble, little brother. Maran seemed to think that it might be good to have someone to help keep an eye on the source of that trouble. He sent for me as soon as he knew that you were on your way up this direction. There's already a replacement pair riding through the `Wood, but Istlyn will miss me while I'm down here."

Telin looked down. The last thing he wanted was to make anything difficult for the sister whose relationship, despite its unique state, was working quite well. Istlyn and Talina deserved each other's company, and to have Talina down here simply to make sure that Lady Keske behaved herself was a price he wasn't happy with.

"I didn't send for you, Sis. I have managed well enough thus far."

"Maran said that when he saw you, you were barely able to eat or sleep. That's not managing well enough. Maran hasn't told me much, other than that you were caught off guard, and that the Lady bears a Calasti child. I'm not sure you told him everything; though I imagine you are more comfortable talking to him than you are to me about that."

Telin didn't look up to his sister. "She could have had me willingly, but it seemed that she wanted to keep my reasoning ability where she needed it, while lowering my ability to judge her motives. It was nothing more than an accident that I ended up feeding her the wine that had the drug in it, instead of drinking that myself. I'm not proud of what I've done, and for longer than you likely knew. I was safe, until she managed to switch my talisman out for one with the opposite effect. Now, as you

can see, I'm stuck coddling a traitor and looking forward to being tied down for nearly two decades after that."

Talina set a hand on his shoulder. "The thing to look at, Telin, is not that you were taken as a fool, misused and tricked into near-treachery, but rather that you have recovered from that surprisingly well. I should expect that you have more than enough evidence of what she intended to seal this case nicely. You've already talked to Maran about fostering the child, and that shows that you were thinking ahead. The child is what's important now, and you're doing everything you can to keep them safe. As for the behavior that the Lady has been using, I suspect that a nice chat with me, once we reach Chralis, will manage to make some reasonably strong suggestions that she behave. The more she fights her fate, the harder it will be on her. And, unlike my Sword-Brothers here, I'm more than competent as a mage. You know that much."

He managed to look up at her. "I know I made a mess of things. And I know that neither of my brothers would have even considered what I've been doing for years. And they aren't even oathbound like you've been for decades. It's not something I'm proud of now, though it won't be able to happen again."

"You're so certain?"

"For a reason you'd understand, Sis. I took sword-oath, right after I found out how much of a fool I'd been. No woman will feel my touch like that again."

She merely nodded. "I suppose that, even though it is too late to fix the current situation, your planning may protect you from another attempt. Especially if you're open about that oath. I'd wondered at how you planned to avoid such temptation in the future. It seems that you thought things through rather well. As for sleep; it's clear you still aren't getting what you need, but that's not impossible to fix." She murmured a few syllables and held out her hand. "This spell will give you long enough to get up to your room and lay down, not much more than that. And you'll sleep until dawn. It means you'll be a little slower to get to Chralis, but it's not a full day's journey from here, even with a carriage."

Telin only nodded as she released the spell onto him with a touch. He forced a smile and excused himself, knowing that her magic would be sure this time. He would at least get one night's peaceful rest.

He noticed his sister hovering nearby as he readied himself to feed Lady Keske the next evening, with her safely ensconced in a tower in the Imperial Palace. With several guards in adjoining rooms at all times, it became less of a worry about Lady Keske doing something dangerous. Even with that to protect the child that was even now clearly showing beneath the Lady's gown, Telin insisted that the Lady remain bound. There was all too much of a chance that she could still force herself to lose the child before help arrived if her hands were left free. The concession he had made, however was a change of the manacles to a softer, slightly stretchy cloth, something that would have enough give to not chafe at her wrists anymore, but not enough to allow her to break free. The cloth was silken, so would cause less irritation, though a single metal manacle was kept around her left wrist even yet, the manacle attuned to keeping her from using her magic.

He didn't say anything as Talina took up a position behind the chair where the Lady sat while Telin fed her. He carefully fed her a hearty meal of stew and bread, even going so far as to tip the bowl of stew to her mouth, letting her savor the last juices of the meal. Then, as ever, he offered her the potion that she would need. He hadn't seen her throwing any fits lately, and was uncertain if she still needed the potion, but as long as he had the opportunity, he intended to use it. He didn't need her working herself into a fury.

Even as he got up to leave, keeping himself as reserved and polite as ever, Talina stepped around the chair and addressed them both. "I'd like to make a few things clear, now that I'm here, brother. And that would work best with you in attendance too. Now, Lady Keske, in case you weren't aware, I am Talina Calasti, Sacred Sword of Railah, and a more than competent sword-mage. Where others of my order may not have been able to force your obedience, I can. And, if I see any further abuses of my brother's amazingly good nature, I will. He's done far more to your benefit than you've done for him, even if he is allowing himself to take a stipend off of managing your estates at the moment. Somehow I doubt he's doing more than funding the travel necessary to bring you here."

The Lady looked up, "He's the one who agreed to this bargain. For the safety of his child, he will himself offer me food and drink and medicines until I have delivered. Surely you think that his own choice matters in this."

Talina set her hand on the woman's shoulder. "I think that a little courtesy on your part is something he has a right to. I know how abusive you've been. Your servants speak of it clearly. There are many who wonder that he does not attempt to break the deal, even to give you the fear you'd need to obey him on his far too polite requests."

Telin attempted to stop the potential for a fight before it began. "Sis, I knew what she'd be trying, before I agreed to it. I also consider that perhaps my enduring such abuse will go far in cleansing my own soul. It is not as if I am completely without guilt in what happened. I could very well have refused her, even with the potion she was using. I allowed myself to be tricked into some very poor judgments."

Talina shook her head, "Telin, there is no reason you should endure being spat upon, or insulted thoroughly, especially when you don't even raise your voice to her. I can understand her being angry at her situation, but it is one she created for herself. And you have borne up under it with no complaint. I wonder at your willingness to put up with this."

Telin grasped his sister by the arm. "I do this for the same reason Father, though no longer bound by the demands of the Goddess, still will not even consider shattering JusticeBeacon again. While he no longer bears a debt to Railah, he knows how far he's fallen, and considers his work to be the penance he demands of himself. If I want redemption, even a much lesser form than what he got, I will have to work for it."

He caught the sly smile on Lady Keske's face. "I do this, not for you, and, really, not as much for the child, though I would have him, or her, safe, but because I feel that there are a lot of things I have to expiate. I will face my mistakes, and try to correct them, even if doing so hurts. I don't think you have the honor to do the same, Lady. Which is why, even were I not oathbound now, I would not take you under my protection."

Talina couldn't help but laugh, "I expect that that was as close to an actual insult as you've given her. You've changed, little brother. You're no longer the light-hearted man you were. I don't understand how you've weathered such a change without completely losing your gentleness, but somehow you have. I am serious, though, that the Lady needs to show a little courtesy. Or at least less rudeness, and, now that I'm here, I can make certain of that."

He tightened his grip on her arm, "Don't. Let me handle this the way I choose. It's hard enough facing myself in the mirror each morning. I don't need any hint that I need someone else to ease my path."

She made to argue with him, but the pain in his eyes seemed to silence her. Shaking her head, she pulled her arm out of his grasp and walked out of the room. It was a moment of silence before Telin looked at the Lady. "It isn't often that I win an argument with my sister, and for good reason. You might consider what she asked. Even if not for my sake, perhaps it will win you a few more comforts from those who have you imprisoned now. I don't like to leave anyone in the state you have to be left. If you hadn't proven that you have no care for the innocent, I wouldn't have forced even these bonds on you."

But the innocent lives by your choice, and now you will have to put up with a few indignities until they are born."

There was a hint of a sneer on her face, but he did not dignify it with any further response. He inclined his head, almost as if she were still his employer, and turned and left, perhaps with a touch more firmness in his step, a slightly straighter back.

It was the next night that he acquired his visitor again. Talina had warded his quarters after hearing how he'd been accosted while he slept more than a moon back. He didn't argue with her, though he sensed somehow that if whoever had come before wished to speak with him again, they would have no difficulties at all. He had turned down Talina's offer of magic to let him rest, knowing that he'd have to find a way to sleep without magic at some point, and without wearing himself into full exhaustion either. So, he wasn't fully asleep when he heard the creak of the door.

He held his breath a moment, attempting to discern who would manipulate wards to enter this room tonight. When there wasn't another sound beyond the extremely faint hiss of breath, he decided that he might as well say something. "I'm awake, whether it was your intent or not."

The voice was recognizable, that of his previous visitor. "I knew you would wake swiftly if you were still asleep when I entered."

"Why are you here this time? Surely with the Lady here, and the trial soon to come, there is little your employer could wish of me."

"How little you know, Telin."

He froze at the way his name was pronounced. There was a subtle hint to it, neither elvari nor human, but almost a blending of the two. It was familiar, something he'd heard long ago, though he couldn't place precisely where he'd heard it. "Who are you? Something tells me that I know you from somewhere." He eased himself into a sitting position, scanning the darkness with his enhanced vision.

"You wouldn't remember me. Nor is it important. I have come because I was told to offer something that might make your life a touch easier." She stepped into a place of only vague shadows, but a hood was pulled over her head, and he couldn't tell enough from her silhouette to determine where he'd met her before. She held out a tube, likely a scroll case. "In this is a recipe that might assist you with keeping your oath. What you do with this is completely your own choice. You can use it or destroy it. Because of what you are, the recipe is necessarily different from what might be obtained from normal healers. Whatever you choose to do, your choices will be observed."

"This is a test then?"

"Take it as you will. I don't personally think you'll measure up to what is being considered for you. In this, I disagree with the one who has the ear of she who I serve. He might have been an exceptional case, but you have spent too much time caring for little but your pleasures."

"I know I've made mistakes because of my prior choices, miss. But I've learned that that path leads only to a fall. You sound so bitter when you speak of my deeds; did I hurt you?"

There was a sudden movement, almost as if she'd flinched at his words. But she didn't seem to rise to the bait. "You did not hurt me. I knew from the first what the expectations were."

"That doesn't mean that it didn't hurt you. I know I've made a lot of mistakes. I don't think until now that I've considered that my actions could have been painful to others. I was too concerned for myself. I spent my life chasing after beauty and pleasure, and didn't understand where such actions would lead."

"And now, because of the realization that you can misjudge people, you set yourself apart from good as well as ill, from Beauty as well as the horror of your last escapade."

There was something in the way she said beauty that made him flinch this time. He had a fairly good guess now as to who she was, though he couldn't recall a name, if he'd ever known it. "I'm sorry. I wasn't the type of person who you probably deserved, though I meant you no ill."

"You mocked me then; do you mock me still?"

"That's where you're wrong, miss. I never mock a woman, even one like Lady Keske, who has brought me nothing but pain. Nor was anything I'd said that night an untruth. You are beautiful, no matter that most people cannot see it. There was little so touching as to see a wilted flower of a girl open up to the merest hint of kindness. I knew that there had been those who had hurt you. I offered you the comfort I could, because it hurt me to see someone so lost and pained. And, in doing so, I seem to have earned your hatred."

He pulled back the covers and stood up, ignoring the fact that he was wearing nothing but a clout. "If you are still in pain from what I said, if you don't believe me when I say that I saw beauty in you, then use the dagger I know you have. Strike me, so that you can heal. I will not defend myself, not against someone I clearly have wronged."

She seemed to withdraw from where she'd stood, backing up a step or two. "I don't have a right to defy the one I serve on this. She has determined that I am to offer you this recipe. I will not strike you."

"If it is about the test, then know this. I know how much it's going to hurt me to keep the oath I have taken. I know exactly how easily it will pain me to keep true to what I've promised Railah. But I'd be less of a man if I were to accept such aid. I understand that it's freely offered, and now you will know that it is freely refused. But you have rights, no matter who you work for. I'm offering you recompense for the pain you have doubtless held onto for years. I never meant you any harm, any pain. I would not have been of any value to you then, and I knew it."

He stood near where she was lurking, and, slowly, deliberately, turned his back on her, leaving himself open to any attack she might launch. He forced himself to remain impassive, to not grow the scales or carapace that could save him, as he heard her take a step forward. He was perfectly content for the blade to fall, if it fell. He wasn't certain it would. There was a strange sensation as he felt her come close to his back, wrapping her arms around his sides. There was something there, in her hands. He didn't understand until he felt her fumble with a buckle. She was belting a belt, with a scabbard attached to it, a small one, likely for a dagger, to him.

Almost as soon as the buckle was done, she stepped back. "I did not expect to owe a service to the one who said that would be your choice. I did not expect him to be right, though he has reason to watch you."

"You will owe a service, why?"

"You chose the harder path. I did not expect that. It isn't the path you would have chosen before; I'm sure of that."

"If it saves you a service, I would accept such a potion from your hand, even though it would cause me a loss of personal pride. I do not wish you harmed any more by my carelessness, Beauty."

"Selah. That's my name, though you chose to call me Beauty that night. I thought you mocked me. Now, I'm less certain."

He turned around, stepping close to her and wrapping his arms around her. He could tell that she was hurting, though he had offered her more than one opportunity to repay whatever he'd done to hurt her. "I called you Beauty because that's what you represented; the hidden beauty of one long tormented, but had a pure spirit. Your attempts to avoid what you clearly wanted touched me in ways I didn't understand. I'm not sure I understand it yet, only that you are one I had every reason to attempt to avoid hurting."

He held her as she sobbed into his chest. It left him with the awkward feeling of what his body wanted, but he knew he could not do. "Be at peace, Selah. If there is any way I can ease your pain, merely tell me."

She pulled herself from him. "You don't understand yet, do you? It wasn't pain, though I became bitter the more I felt that you'd mocked me. That evening, the only one you granted me, was perhaps the most beautiful thing I'd ever experienced. After a lifetime of darkness and fear, you introduced me to joy. That is where the pain comes. Without knowing light, I did not know I walked in darkness. And yet, because you showed me that light, I learned the nature of my path. I am where I am now, because I learned how gentle a man can be."

He brushed the hood from her head and smiled. "I'm glad that something I did turned out right then. Knowing that I did something that brought another joy, even if only for a little while, gives me more peace than I've had for a while now. Thank you." He looked down, able to only faintly catch the tracery of the birthmark on her very thin face. She was unusual, having both elvari and human heritage, but it bringing the beauty of neither. Her form was too spare, gaunt even, and it seemed that she had almost no flesh upon her, though he remembered her eating well. Yet that mark on her forehead signified beauty, it spelled that in his mother's people's writing. He had not lied there. Nor had he lied that her spirit held a beauty in it that caused all of the others in the inn that night to pale before her. Even if no one else could see it.

She seemed to manage to regain her composure. He doubted that her closeness to him while he was nigh completely bare was any more comfortable to her than it was to him. He let her back up and return to the quiet competence she'd had before he knew who she was. "The belt and the dagger are the other gifts that were to fall to me to give you, should you prove capable. You have done more than that. It may be moons before the final test comes, and it will not come at my hand. The other will have the privilege of that test. I will leave now, though, perhaps our paths might cross again sometime."

"I will look forward to that opportunity, Beauty, Selah. Even though it will remind me of my mistakes all too keenly." Carefully, he turned away again, and walked back to his bed and crawled in. He would not attempt to watch her go.

Telin was given a full tenday to rest and prepare himself before his greatest challenge would occur. He took much of that time going back through his notes and the paperwork brought from Lady Keske's manor. He wanted to make certain that, no matter how much he now loathed the woman, he would be presenting facts, rather than opinion. He would be fair, and would present only those things he knew to be signs of her guilt in the intended treachery. His conscience would not allow any accusations that he could not verify.

He'd almost missed the most important paper, for it was stuck with some sort of glue to the paper on top of it, looking as little more than a single page. The top page was nothing more than a description of a horse race that the former Lord Keske had intended to participate in. As this paper was one of those taken from the assassin, Telin found that an odd thing to have here. But his fingers brushed over the edges of the paper, suddenly noting a much finer sheet of writing pasted behind the first. With a bit of water and careful persistence, he separated the two, and was aghast at what he'd found.

The lower page was a set of instructions to Firial, addressed by name, that had asked that the assassin move to use one of her less known drugs to incapacitate Lord Keske not before the horse race, but during it. The drug was to leave him with sudden debilitation. Telin was on his feet before he knew what he was doing, seeking out the Lady's servants. If this was right, and he expected it was from the

date of the horse race, the Lady had arranged the assassination of her own father. And the proof would be easily known if the Lord had died of injuries from a fall during a horse race.

A quick set of questions determined that Lord Keske had indeed died of injuries associated with falling from his horse during a series of jumps in the race. Other horses, right behind his, had kicked and trampled him, unable to avoid the falling man. It was assumed to be nothing more than an accident, and he had never regained consciousness after his fall. Now Telin knew better. This bit of information would go with the rest to be presented at the trial in two days time. He wouldn't even mention it to the Lady until he charged her with the death of her father before the council directly. He knew, full well, that this alone would merit the death sentence for her, but there was no way he could allow such an act to remain unpunished.

It chilled him to think how easily he'd been under her power for two moons, completely oblivious to the evil that was lurking behind the beauty she had. Now, knowing how dark and twisted her spirit was, he wished that he'd spent more time around Beauty, seeing her for what was within, rather than without. Selah had come with no expectations, not even that he would see her at all, and had been a delight to hold. The pleasures were less physical, but more ephemeral. He paused for a moment in writing up the information on Lord Keske's death to hope that Selah was right that their paths might cross again. He might not be allowed to do more than hold her, enjoy her wit, but that would be something worth doing.

He hated to tell the guard at the door that they'd have to delay the trial until the Lady had finished sufficient food, but he was not going to rush her, even today. His heart felt icy with the necessity of even pretending courtesy to such a traitorous wretch as she was, but he had made his agreement in good faith, and would follow it through until the child was born. And that was likely more than four moons from now, if the child was to survive. He could sense Talina's impatience too, but she had made no further disagreement on how he handled the issue since he had nearly begged her not to interfere. At last she was fed, and he left to allow her to be robed befitting her rank. It would be only a half-candlemark or so before they would both appear in the high court.

He waited, dressed as formally as he could be, outside the court, a thick sheaf of papers under his arms. He had mentioned to Larand about his recent discovery regarding the death of Lord Keske, but the other had agreed that that might be best to be presented as a surprise; undoubtedly, its presentation would heavily influence the courts. But, on the negative side, it might also taint the reputation of the child before they were born. To be borne of a mother who had such low concern for her family would not do the child well, and Telin hoped that his insistence that the child be raised by his brother Maran, who was known both to be extremely loyal and caring, would help protect the child from his heritage.

Hearing trumpets blaring within the room (which rather hurt his sensitive ears), Telin followed the guard assigned to his door into the chamber, taking a seat where indicated, and waited for the rest of the Court to be called. Across the floor from where he'd been seated, the Lady Keske was brought in, his sister standing guard at her back, soul sword visible over the pauldrons of her armor.

As the rest of the hall filled, mostly with lesser and greater nobility from the close environs, Telin turned his attention to the dais at the near end, where their Imperial Majesties, Emperor Lanak and his Queen Neira, would take their positions for this court. They were the ones he would have to prove the veracity of his information to. He waited for indication that they were about to make their entrance, then stood up, waiting behind his seat until they had taken their positions. It was to begin.

After the beginning formalities were concluded, he was called to a small dais in the center of the hall. Carefully, brining the papers he had with him, he began his formal accusation of the Lady Keske.

"My Lords and Ladies, I have come before you today to accuse my former employer, Lady Marilsa Keske of treason in intent, and, it appears now, in deed. I bring proof of her intents to use weapons that have been reclaimed from a xilcan ruin to expand her personal influence, and also letters given to a now-deceased kee-ali-dahlri assassin, Firial'dan'kril, to assassinate several people. All of those assassinations save one were completed, the last being foiled by agents of an unknown force who brought me the assassin's records. That assassin was executed at the will of Lord Vythen through the application of serpent bites, but a ring of theirs, with their name and a poisoned reservoir, was recovered from the corpse. Most notable among the assassinations already carried out is one in particular, that of her father, Lord Kylen Keske, through a poison intended to disorient and incapacitate him while he was performing in a horse race. Recent efforts have uncovered that the Lord did in fact die of injuries sustained from an unexpected fall in that horse race, and that he did not even recover consciousness after being pulled from the field."

The Emperor studied him, "Do you have these letters regarding said assassinations, and have they been verified as the Lady's handwriting?"

Telin pulled forth the stack of letters to the assassin, as well as a separate, completely innocent, missive that he'd found among the Lady's paperwork when he was going through that. "I have these letters here, as well as a piece that has both her signature and seal. You can verify these at your leisure."

He was allowed to hand over his paperwork and stepped aside. He waited while the Lady herself was walked to the dais, her hands still locked at her sides, and her belly showing quite clearly as to the pregnancy that would prevent her immediate execution. She looked livid, as if she was truly ready to insult the entire court. Larand and Quil stood side by side at the foot of the Emperor's dais, swords resting unsheathed with their tips between the fitted stones. Talina stood behind Lady Keske, her blade still sheathed, but with the balanced prowess that meant that she could and would, restrain the captive if it became necessary.

"Lady Keske, any falsehood that is presented will be identified, and truth compelled from you in those cases. You have been accused of both low treason, in the death of your father, Lord Keske, and high treason in the threats of these xilcan weapons that were to be used to carve out a kingdom for you. What say you to these accusations?"

"I certainly entertained thoughts of using the artifacts I had acquired to my advantage. As you will not permit an untruth, I will speak it fully. My father was a fool, not considering what we had, or what we could have. His death was merely necessary to solidify our power. And the Calasti who was in my employ was all too willing to study the artifacts, and feed me information on how they had to work. He was an easy fool, though one who has not yet seen the advantages in keeping me alive. Had he not switched the wine cups, he would have had working weapons for me, and this trial would not have been possible." She seemed to laugh at that last, "And you can't kill me instantly. The child that is growing within me keeps you from doing so."

There was a roar from the rest of the hall as several nobles realized how easily their positions could have been threatened by the Lady's plans. It took a long moment before the guards could quiet the hall down, whereupon the Emperor stood up, rapping the heel of his staff onto the ground. "Your words do not bring you any service, Marilsa Keske. It is true that, while you carry the child within you, you may not be executed, but the execution can come swiftly thereafter, should there be no defense for you from the child's father." He turned to look at where Telin sat.

Telin rose to his feet and inclined his head, "Sire, I would not take her under my protection, for it is clear that I could not control her adequately to keep her from further plots, nor would my own life be safe. As well, I am held by an oath, and may not touch a woman in such a way any longer."

"Sword-oath?"

Telin nodded, "That is correct, Sire."

The Emperor gestured that Telin could take his seat. "Then my ruling in this is as would be expected under the circumstances. The Lady Keske is to be kept within these halls until she is delivered of the child she carries. After giving birth, she is to be executed as soon as she has the strength to face the headsman's axe. In the interim, she is to be given only those comforts that will keep her from losing the child before its time is come. As for the dispensation of her lands and titles...I think that there is a clear heir available to such properties, though it may discomfit our loyal Calasti servant slightly to accept this. The child she carries would be her nearest heir, and I would not bring discord to the rest of the court in passing these things to a further heir, or giving them to another altogether. The child will be the primary heir, and the lands and titles shall only be transferred to her cousin Malakor Kenesk if the child should die without issue. As the child will be a minor for several years, no matter where the child is reared, the lands and title will be cared to by the child's father, Telin Calasti. This will essentially be no more than a continued guardianship of the same kind he has done so far."

Telin blanched at the thought that he'd have yet another duty chosen for him beyond having to spend much of his time in Sharlan while the child grew up, but did not dare defy the Emperor. The reasoning was certainly clear, that being to satisfy the long-titled that the Emperor would not dispense with their estates for anything other than a dire reason. Much as he had hoped that the child would not be burdened with position, he could see now exactly why it might be the best, as far as the court was concerned. "I will endeavor to serve you in this, as ever, Sire."

"Is there any plan yet as to the child's dispensation?"

"Yes, Sire. My brother Maran Calasti, kee-ali-dahlri Singer and your loyal servant, has agreed to foster the child when it is born. As he has proven himself quite a capable father, I am pleased to see that he will do what he can for my child."

"That is a perfectly reasonable choice. Your duties with regard to the properties and titles should allow you to remain close to home, should you be needed. They should only require a trip out to her properties perhaps once or twice a year. Now, as this case seems to have been closed, we will all resume our more normal duties." He gestured toward where Lady Keske still stood on the dais, and Talina reached out and grasped the woman's shoulder. As the Lady did not resist, Telin suspected that Talina was using some form of compulsion. And for this, he didn't mind that so much.

Despite the venom that Telin expected from Lady Keske, he began feeling like there was an end in sight to the torments that he was facing. She was getting closer to the time she would deliver the child, and it was becoming more and more likely, according to the magical observations of the healers attending her, that she was carrying a son. That felt almost like a relief to Telin, for there had been a strong set of traits in the Calasti sons for the past generation, and he hoped that it would continue. If the child looked nothing like his mother, it would be far easier to love him without reservation. Or at least with less reservation than he might have with a child that clearly showed her stamp upon them.

Often, especially after he'd finished feeding the increasingly frustrating Lady, he thought of how it might have been if he'd chosen another path in life. To some extent, he knew that it was better that he'd been placed in this position than someone of lesser morals. He knew that there were many who wouldn't have questioned the purpose of the weapons, and others who would have been too frightened to act. He hadn't been. But he also wished, for himself, that he hadn't put himself in a place where he couldn't ever hope for another relationship, whether formal or otherwise. His oath held him now, against good as well as harm, as Beauty had put it.

She was often in his mind, when he had a few minutes to consider where things might have changed. It was fully true that, according to the world at large, she would not have been considered attractive to any. With almost no flesh to fill out what would be womanly curves, and that distinctive

birthmark, many men would consider her almost the last thing they'd want to touch. But that had been a part of her appeal. She had a far greater beauty hidden within, where it wasn't obvious to a casual observer.

He knew that he'd hurt her, though he was less certain he'd understood how. His intentions had never been to hurt anyone, much less someone as vulnerable as she'd been. He'd sensed desperation in her, as she'd almost flinched upon seeing him that first time. He thought he'd read expressions fairly well, and from that expression on her face, she'd wanted his attention. She'd craved it with a strength that had taken him aback. He could believe she'd been starved for attention before. It wasn't her fault that her physical form displeased so many. He doubted that she'd had much in the way of friends before, either. He was less certain of this fact now, but he guessed that then, she would have given complete loyalty to anyone who was willing to give her a chance, someone who was willing to show her more than a modicum of kindness. He'd completely ignored those chances that night, and left before she awoke. The only thing he'd left her, beyond the memories that he'd hoped were pleasant, was a small note, showing her the symbol that meant Beauty in the kee-ali-dahlri tongue, and telling her that he hoped she'd enjoyed the night as much as he had. And, thanking the unlikely chance that had brought her to his attention, he had enjoyed that night more than most. He'd enjoyed being able to bring joy to those haunted eyes. He'd loved playing the game of asking her permission for every little touch he gave her. It had left him with a lot more peace with himself than he'd had for a long time. And it was a long time again before anything had overshadowed that.

If he understood what she'd said, he'd hurt her by showing what pleasure could truly be. He'd made certain that she was more than satisfied, given everything he could give her, both emotionally and physically for that one night. He hadn't considered before that it might hurt more to see that kind of consideration; he'd never considered that she might not ever be able to find anyone else to show her that kind of joy again. It was something that haunted him now, because he knew that if he'd taken her with him, he would have had a companion who would have done anything for him, like Denora was with his brother. He'd lost a powerful chance for himself, and hurt someone he'd only wished well.

As he walked in to feed Lady Keske her evening meal, he was stopped by a sharp word from her. "You seem to have gotten yourself into a fine mess, Telin. I can tell by the look on your face that you've been thinking about a woman, and ruining the fact that you can't touch her."

"More ruining my own actions. Even if I'd not taken that oath, my mistakes were enough to drive her away, I think. I had a chance at something I didn't realize I could want, and now realize that loss quite keenly."

She seemed to take pride in the fact that her fall had not left him unscathed. "You will likely rue that for centuries, if your family lives as long as I'd expect them too. That one revenge I will see, the fact that you cannot have what you've finally decided you want."

He took his place on a stool next to where she'd been seated. Despite her intentions to leave him riled, he realized that he was much calmer than he'd expected. "Lady, it's time for your meal, and I don't think your barbs are sharp anymore. What I'm facing, I prepared for myself. I will be content with what I have, because becoming angry, at anyone, including myself, is no longer productive. The only productive thing I can do is to try to figure out what Beauty's intentions really are, and perhaps better, the intentions of whoever sent her."

"Beauty? Such a quaint name."

He laughed as he picked up the bowl of hearty stew and prepared a spoonful for her. "It is what I've always called her, because, though her body would not bring desire by itself, her personality held all the beauty I could want. I was just too blind to see it when the opportunity was there." He carefully fed her the first spoonful, interspersing food with sips of a cooling tea. He did not risk the tea being nearly as hot as he preferred, because it would be too easy to spill and burn her. But he was diligent about

getting her to eat. And, for whatever reason, this line of questioning from the Lady did not upset him at all. If anything, it put things into perspective.

All his life, he'd ignored the concept of love, save only for recognizing that there was a kind of love, if only a rather rough camaraderie between himself and his family. He'd much preferred the concept of pleasure, because that was something he could understand. He knew how devoted Maran and Denora were to each other, or Jalak and Ilsira. He wondered if there was any reason other than simply being blind to the idea that anyone might ever care about him like that that he hadn't even given any consideration to what kind of life he might want. He'd always intended to never settle down, but, perhaps, after spending most of the next two decades in one place, he might change his mind about that too. The only problem with him realizing this now was that there was no chance of finding anyone he could share that time with. And he knew he'd put himself in that position.

There was a strange sensation as he considered these things, a brief brushing against his thoughts by something, though the sensation passed before he could clearly determine what it was. It didn't feel like a normal mind, though he'd had only the briefest of experiences with actual mind-speakers. Almost the only thing that drew his attention to this brief flicker of thought was a sense of satisfaction. He couldn't understand where that came from, for it was clearly not his own emotion. He had been wistful over lost opportunities, and so that warm satisfaction was something he couldn't understand, unless it came from someone else. But there was no sign of who it was.

Finishing up the meal with a hunk of bread sopping up the drippings from the stew, he managed a wry smile for Lady Keske, realizing something as he did so. "I may have hated you at first, for tricking me so greatly. I don't hate you anymore. The fact is, you revealed to me flaws in my own judgment, and I wasn't ready to see those then. The truth I've discovered is that you didn't lead me anywhere unwillingly, not really. The reason you will die when the child is born is because you intended far greater harm, and committed a great deal of harm in the assassinations that you ordered. I'm not going to waste any annoyance or frustration on you now, because you simply aren't worth it. You brought about your own fate, as I have mine, and we must each live with that."

He uncorked the potion and tipped it to her mouth, gentle and respectful as always. When she'd finished it, he wiped at the few drops at her mouth with a handkerchief. There was a strange look in her eyes, as if something he'd said had surprised her. He stood up and inclined his head, "I'll leave you to think on that, Lady. I know that where I'm at, the problems that I'm facing, are my own, the results of my own weakness and blindness. I won't blame you for those any further."

She seemed to almost flinch at this response. He was at the door before her screech of rage reached his ears. "You admit your own failings, but will allow me to fall!"

He turned back for only a moment, "You fall because you have proven that you cannot be trusted, Lady. That mistake, at least, I have not made." With no other words, he passed through the door, leaving her behind. If his back was a little straighter, his head held a little higher, it wasn't because he'd achieved a victory over her, but rather one over himself.

A persistent knock woke Telin from the relaxing sleeps he'd had since he'd made his peace with Lady Keske. Though she had been less willing in recent days, to accept the food and potion that he offered her, there were magics available now that could compel her. And he did not ever shirk the duties he'd taken on. He pulled his robe about him and answered the door, surprised to find a very harried page at the door, "What is it?"

"The Lady. The healers have been called; they say it's her time."

He managed a smile, "Then my wait is nearly at an end. Tell them I will be in attendance in a few minutes. I will prepare myself now." That she was finally going into labor felt like a relief; it meant

an end to the endless insults she spat at him, and a chance to finally go home. He wouldn't be at home long, he knew, before he'd have to take a ride back to her estates in Nerin, but that trip would be short, barely enough time to ride there and back. And he would likely hold his child today. It was an odd feeling, realizing that. He wasn't sure it was something he really wanted, but he was no longer quite so afraid of that.

He quickly went to the chest at his bed, pulling practical clothing. Even though there was no promise that required his attendance here, he would not leave her side until the child was born. It was, if anything, something he demanded of himself. He had wrought this, even if not intentionally, and he would see it through to its conclusion. Once dressed, he hurried to the kitchen, to get some warm broth and a skin of fruit juice. These, he'd discovered when researching what to expect, would help her keep up her strength for the delivery. Though some might consider his promise done with her labor, he would at least make certain to offer her what she could take, from his own hands. It was the least he could do in this situation.

They had unbound her hands from where they had been kept for the greatest part of the last seven months, caught behind her back. But there were chains attached to each manacle, and they could pull her hands away if she appeared to be ready to take any action that would threaten the child. He set down the tray with the food and juice next to the door as the healers worked to settle her into a somewhat reclining position on a bed, propped up by several pillows. Though she would continue to wear a skirt that would hide most of the birth, he was the only man allowed in the room. Both guards stationed in here were women, likely chosen because of her noble birth. A commoner accused of the same crimes would not have gotten that consideration.

Her face seemed a mask of pain as he moved to stand beside her. "This was your choice, Lady. But I hope that you will accept such sustenance as I have prepared. It will make things easier for you. And the healers will try to keep the pain from becoming too much." One hand reached out, attempting to dig untrimmed nails into his arm. Even as the guard on that side moved to pull the chain so that she couldn't do that, Telin shook his head. "She can do me no harm now." Rolling up his sleeve, he revealed skin that had become fine leathery scales. "If she can pierce that enough to hurt, I deserve what I get."

He tried to stay as much out from underfoot as he could while the healers got things organized, and Lady Keske went through several periods of great pain interspersed with short rests. Whenever she seemed to be able to relax a bit, he offered her broth or juice. He had been honest before, when he told her that he no longer hated her. He wanted little more for this mess that she'd made of things to be over. He'd have to let one of the Jirellians here take care of the child for a period of a few days, and then attend her execution. After that, he'd be riding hard for Sharlan. With good speed, he'd make the northern edge of town within a half-day, and Maran's home was not much further. But he no longer held any animosity for her. He didn't want her to suffer more than was necessary, and hoped that she'd somehow make her own peace with her fate before her execution.

The pains began again, even as he put aside the now empty bowl of broth. He let her grasp his arm, though he felt nothing but pity for her now. No matter that her hands had jagged nails like claws. They skittered off his scales without doing any damage. All he felt from that was a little firm pressure. And that was easy to deal with. This one seemed a bit different, however. The spasm of pain she was going through left her nearly doubling over for a long moment. The guards had left her hands mostly free through this, after ascertaining that she wasn't going to hurt anyone. And she made use of her hand, for almost the first time in seven moons. She grasped at his arm as if it were some sort of lifeline.

A sharp look between two of the healers gave him reason to think that the time was come. He watched as they took their places at her feet, one whispering a spell, while the other lifted the edge of the skirt, obscuring his view of the proceedings. He reached down to try to wipe away the perspiration from her forehead, knowing that even with magic to ease it, this would not be easy on her. A little comfort on his part would not be amiss here.

He spoke soothingly, mostly mindless nothings meant to calm her down. He let her grasp both of his arms, let her release her fury with her pain. Even if he took some minor damage, he'd not worry over it. A little pain, a few cuts, especially something that could be healed with a simple prayer by any priest, would not bother him much. What was more important was trying to make this as easy as he could on her. It might have been her intention, but he suspected that she didn't anticipate the potentials of a Calasti child. Denora was at least a shapeshifter herself. Jalak had been cautious with Ilsira thus far, because it was uncertain what would happen with a non-shapeshifter bearing a kee-ali-dahlri child, just as it was uncertain if either his children or Jalak's would have that heritage strong enough to manifest still. Honestly, Telin wasn't sure if he wanted his son to have strong shapeshifting abilities like those that he'd grown up with. They might make things more difficult for the boy as he took his position as Lord of Caslen Nerin.

As another scream rent the air, he tried something he'd never attempted before, though his brothers had long debated the potential use of it. He could tell that she was weakening, and that she needed to have the strength to push the child out of her body. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he looked down and simply willed his strength into her. It felt almost like he was funneling some intrinsic nature of his, but she seemed to pull something from it. She bit back the next scream, but it was only a few minutes more before he heard a different cry. Channeling just enough strength to give her comfort before he moved, he turned and moved around her, to where one of the priestesses was carefully wiping clean a small squirming form.

The set of lungs on the child indicated that it was likely quite healthy, and he waited a few moments for the woman to get the baby wrapped up and warm. "So, it's a boy, as expected?"

"Yes, it's a son for you." She offered him the wrapped bundle, and he very carefully took the child and held him close to his chest. It was a very different feeling, having something so tiny and fragile in his arms. There was no indication so far of dual tones, but neither Hela nor Iera had manifest that for several tendays after their births. He pushed the wrapping back from the boy's head, and smiled at the faint traces of reddish hair. It was a little darker than his, but still obviously a Calasti son.

"I suppose he has to be named. Belor would be a good name for him, I think." He carefully cradled the child to him and considered bringing the boy where the mother could see him. After the intents that Lady Keske had shown toward this child early in her pregnancy, he didn't want to risk her damaging him, but felt that she should at least be able to see what she'd created. "Guards, if you'll please secure her arms, I would like to show the Lady her heir."

Carefully, as the chains were pulled tight, he approached Lady Keske. "It was a son, as you'd intended. His name is Belor Calasti, and he will be heir to your lands and title. Between Maran, Denora, and I, we'll see that he's raised with a little more honor than you have."

There was a look of rage when he moved to where she could see the child tucked into his arms. He kept a step back, in case the strength he'd funneled to her a few minutes before allowed her to break free. He could likely still protect the child better than any other, but did not want to risk Belor getting hurt. "I'm sorry I can't bring him any closer, but I don't trust you, and it would not do to allow him to be any further hurt by you than he otherwise would be."

He backed out of the way while the healers finished their reparative spells, so that she would recover more quickly, and then backed out of the room, still holding Belor. A few minutes later, one of the Jirellian priestesses came to take the boy from his arms. She had magic which would allow her to nurse him for as long as he remained here. He didn't expect that to be even a tenday. He expected that Emperor Lanak would want this problem out of his hands very quickly, likely only delaying long enough to allow her to stand steadily, and that should be no more than a few days. After Lady Keske's death, Telin would be free to leave, taking Belor to be fostered by his brother.

Over the next two days, while waiting on their Imperial Majesties to declare a time for Lady Keske's execution, Telin wished he had someone close at hand to share his feelings with. Talina had returned to the Guardian Wood shortly after the trial, especially once it became apparent that Telin had things well in hand with controlling the Lady. Maran and Denora were safely in Sharlan, tending to their own new son, Caldor. He would have been happy if Jalak, or one of their younger sisters, was close enough to drop in, but none of them were. He had no one to speak with, and he very much wished he did.

Despite that, however, the two days passed rather quickly, and he had hardly finished a leisurely breakfast in his room before he received word that he was to appear within the Traitor's Square within a candlemark. He was not surprised with the haste of this preparation. Doubtless the Emperor wanted to make certain that she didn't have any chance to possibly seduce anyone else while under a death sentence, and that could only be made certain if she was executed quickly indeed. Three days really was not a long wait, overall.

He hurried to dress, tossing his few belongings into the carry pack at the foot of his bed. He'd sent most of his belongings ahead when it became clear that she was close to bearing. He had little more than a suit of clean clothes and his weapons left now. None of those would be with him, not into the presence of their Imperial Majesties, but they'd be waiting here for him. Once this was done, he'd barely take the time to take his leave formally. Almost as soon as he was given leave to go, he'd be on the road, heading home, finally.

Pulling his hair back into a tight braid, he hurried to the appointed meeting. All nobles currently in residence would be called, but no one beyond himself was required to be present. And even if he hadn't been required to attend, he would have done so anyhow. He wanted to end this cleanly. Straightening his tunic as he came to the courtyard, he tried to look even half as imposing as his storied father. Arandel wouldn't have needed any special effort to dominate the gathering. All he needed was a tunic in Railahn Red and JusticeBeacon peaking over his shoulder. Unlike normal weapons, soulswords were always permitted now within the royal presence.

He took his place on the dais where the execution was to occur, arriving just a few minutes before the appointed time. This time it was clear that the Sacred Swords assigned to the Palace were using compulsion magics on her. Where otherwise Lady Keske might try to twist and pull away from the chains binding her, the magic was calming. It didn't do much for the look of pure venom she gave Telin, but there was little he could do to assuage her anger that didn't require him breaking at least one promise. A few minutes later, their Majesties arrived and took up positions on a temporary dais that had been erected for this very purpose. Telin bowed elegantly, gratefully taking the opportunity to not have to look at Lady Keske. She was in terrible form, and not even the fastidious attention of the maids she'd been given would make her look even remotely presentable. She wanted everyone to know that she was not pleased.

Emperor Lanak stood facing the execution platform and announced gravely, "You have committed treason, both Low and High, against the two Kingdoms, and will face death consequently. As determined previously, all of your lands and holdings will fall to your son, Belor Calasti, upon his reaching majority of years. Until that time, such properties as you have will be managed at the direction of the child's father, Telin Calasti. Do you have any last words before meeting the headsman?"

She paused just a moment to look up at the Emperor. "One I had in my employ once told me that there was a chance that this would happen, but that it wasn't the end of anything. I cannot replicate the words she gave me for such an occasion, but I'll attempt anyhow. Fe'kri'l'deri'nag les'hando'l."

Telin froze at that badly mangled attempt at speaking the kee-ali-dahlri tongue, but he understood the intention exactly. *Where a claw breaks, another is grown.* He wasn't pleased at the

indication that things were not done. There was a quizzical look on the face of the Emperor, but all he could do without giving the Lady any more power, was merely nod, indicating that he understood the words.

The Lady's hands were bound in front of her, and she was forced to her knees, next to a large block which was carved with a place for a head. Telin steeled himself against a sudden surge of pity for her; all he needed was a few more heartbeats. Though he expected that this was a last attempt by the Lady to stave off her death, he also had a good guess that she didn't have the information to back up the words she'd been given. There had been no indication in her writings, or in any of the sessions in which she'd been questioned before about the assassin, that she had any knowledge more than that Firial had been kee-ali-dahlri. It was an empty gesture on her part, but something that he would have to research later, when he had the opportunity.

Before his eyes, the axe raised, then fell. As Lady Keske's head fell into the basket beyond the chopping block, he saw the manacle around her left wrist spring open. That had to be a response to the magic that she'd held in her body disappearing. That was the only thing short of a spell or spell-token that would open such a block. It was done.

As the Emperor left the dais, Telin moved into position to ask to be let return home. "Sire, I can tell you what her words meant, but I don't think that she had the information to back them up. They were doubtless intended to scare us, but I will do what I can to try to locate any with real information as to why they were uttered. The words themselves meant 'where one claw is broken, another is grown'. It seems to indicate that while she may have failed, and perhaps been a minion to another, that there will be other attempts. The only way we can protect against those is research, and I am more than willing to begin that, once I have returned with my son to Sharlan."

The Emperor paused only long enough to acknowledge those words. "Bring those words to your family, because they are the best equipped to answer this puzzle. Take your son, and your leave. I imagine you are restless again to be on the road."

With nothing more than a bow and a grin, Telin was off, hurrying through the halls to his rooms and gathering up his belongings. A quick word to the palace servants sent ahead the call for Moonfoot to be saddled and readied for a trip. There was only one more place to go, and that was to pick up Belor. Once the child was safely ensconced in his arms, he'd be off.

Telin had hardly gotten past the city's gates when another rider closed in on him. What was stranger, as far as he was concerned, was that the horse being ridden was very familiar. It was Greymoon, one of his brother Maran's horses. But with the rider being lean and short, it couldn't have been Maran. He waited for the other horse to catch up, all while carefully holding Belor close against his chest in the frosty air. The baby was wrapped in a warm fur to protect him from the cold, and barely squirmed. Calling over his shoulder to the rider, "What news?"

A familiar laugh broke out of the other rider. "You and Belor are likely going to be news here for a while, and at least for a bit among the Heavens as well."

"The Heavens? Uncle Lisor?"

"Yes, I borrowed Greymoon because I had need to talk with you, and this offered the most private method. Belor won't remember what you've said, and you can take the time necessary to deal with what you need to know."

"Of course, Uncle. Though I'm eager to get home, I'm more than willing to speak with you, especially with you riding my brother's fastest horse. I have to wonder what causes me to be as much a talk among the Heavens as on earth. Surely I've done nothing truly notable of late."

"You're going to be doing more notable things, I think, once you start putting pieces together. But, without going into that just yet, I'd like to ask you how you'd feel about working rather closely with an ally of mine. She is rather looking forward to the possibility, even with knowing your current difficulties."

"An ally of yours? Who do you mean? And why would I be working with her?"

"Selah needs someone to interpret the information she gains, and your mind is more than adequate to sort through what she finds. In fact, with your heritage, you're likely the best one to do that, as we're expecting some of the information to be locked in a language that she can neither speak nor read."

Telin bit back a gasp at mention of Selah's name. That was one person he'd been hoping to speak with again, no matter that her presence sorely tempted him where his oath was concerned. "How do you know Selah? I wouldn't have imagined you having met her before."

"I know that she's the Beauty that you spent a single night with ten years ago. I helped her grow into the calling she found as a result of that. Our Lady has reason to be thankful to you for that already. Your interference brought her a very valuable servant."

Telin's eyes strayed suddenly to Lisor's form, or what he could see of it under the heavy cloak. He knew the figure his Uncle cut, gird always in Lady Night's silver-grey, twin daggers belted at his waist, a pair not too far different from the daggers that he'd been given, and were now sitting beside the sword Telin wore. Things began to fall into place. "That's why she was sent...because you want me, too?"

"It took you long enough to recognize it, but we aren't meant to be obvious, any of our Order. Yes, the Lady wishes your service, and had to wait long until you were mature enough to earn that position. While she's always thought you'd make a fine Finder, it required you to learn your own nature and weaknesses."

Telin looked down, "Even though I won't be able to travel to deal with problems for the next two decades, Uncle?"

"Not all Finders need to travel. That's where you'll work best with Selah. There isn't another of our Order who's better at getting into and out of places unseen. Despite her distinctive features, no one even considers her. There have been many times she's simply walked in and out of a place she had to retrieve something from, and no one cared enough to stop her. But she lacks your education, your linguistic knowledge. And I have a strong feeling that such knowledge will be necessary soon. You have words from the one I assisted her in removing from a threatening position. Both the words written on the ring, and said by Lady Keske today. There are things moving through the land that Lady Night needs to know about, and that will take someone of your background. Will you accept this service?"

Telin was still in shock at realizing that he was being called to a new service, "Uncle, this is really what Lady Night wants? Me to serve her, in the same way you originally did? As a Finder?"

Lisor laughed, "You were a little more challenging to approach, because we needed you to already be ready to dive into the work that will be presented, but yes, our Lady wants you. I have the one thing you lack still for her service, though it won't be an openly worn mirror like my original one. No, you will need to be covert, as much because you're covering for another's identity as well as because of the nature of your work. Instead, like me, and like Selah herself, your mirror will be smaller, more easily hidden." He pulled out what appeared to be a shining pendant on a chain. "You've got your arms busy, so hold up and I'll set this on you."

Telin stopped Moonfoot and allowed Lisor to lean over and settle the chain around his neck. The pendant was cold against his skin, but there was an almost surprising feeling that came over him. It felt like he was being studied from the inside out. Hesitantly he tried to focus his thought upon this other awareness. ~Lady, I have come, at your bidding.~

There was a sense of mirth, coming almost as a rolling laugh through his head, ~Welcome, Chosen, to my service. I have long awaited thee. There will be much for thee to learn soon, and thy training must be hidden, that thy identity as one of my own not be openly seen. Thy family will know, but beyond those, only Selah will know to find thee. And she is among my own because of thee.~

Lisor nudged the horses back into movement as Telin fought to contain the strange feeling of the Goddess' attention upon him. Finally, his words tumbled out, "Is it always like this, when she greets one of her own?"

Lisor grinned, "It's different for each of us, but because there are so few of us, it is always very personal. She's been pleased that you aided her so much already, Telin. We would never have gotten Selah without your following your instincts when the Goddess brought her to your attention."

Telin looked down, "She thought for years that I'd mocked her, when I never intended it that way. I'd only seen someone whose life I could brighten for an evening. It looked like she'd never known a man's kindness, never felt what it meant to be cared about."

"She hadn't known those things before you came to her. What you showed her, even in your blind way, was something that allowed our Lady to reach her finally. Nocta trusted that you'd manage that well, and you did. As for her misunderstanding of your intent, you should know well what those who are jealous would do. You left Selah while she still slept. Of course she would hear what those you spurned there wanted her to hear. They did that because they felt hurt that you chose her over them. She had nothing beyond your note to comfort her; you weren't ready yet to see what she could mean."

"No, I wasn't. And by the time I was, I'd already made the mistake of making sure that I could never hold her like that again. It is one thing that I think I will forever regret. Especially if she finds it in her heart to forgive me for leaving as I did. I was far too blind then."

Lisor chuckled and urged the horses a little faster. "It is easy to make mistakes, especially with your heritage. It took your father a long time to learn moderation, though I daresay he has learned that finally. It likely happened because of your mother. My brother is one of the reasons that Nocta and I knew that you'd be redeemable. You understood, because of what Arandel did, that even those that truly fall can be brought back, so long as their intentions were never evil. And yours never were, just as my brother's weren't. So, accept the offer of redemption, and work hard at what you're being given to do. I think we can count on you to put forth the efforts necessary."

"I will do my best, Uncle. I'm glad you have as much faith in me as you did in Father. Even though he tries to play down what he's been through, he is so much more than I ever felt I was."

"There are a few bits of advice I'm going to give you, before I leave here. You would do well to consider these things. The first concerns your son. Though it may sound counterintuitive, you're going to have to set aside a stipend both for you and for your brother out of Belor's inheritance. In both cases, it's going to send out a sign to the other nobles that you have no intentions of keeping Belor from inheriting his lands and money. What you will do with that money, you specifically this time, is invest it wisely. Maran can help you with that. Once your time raising Belor is done, you will be needed in many places, and, while you can use the Academy as a good excuse for that, you will need money beyond what the Academy will provide. Those investments will provide that. If Maran is reluctant to take money for his part in raising Belor, at least suggest for him that he can use that money to help Uhbara's school. While that is mostly funded by Railah's church, it could certainly use the extra help. But you both must take the money, even if it isn't something you would want to do. Otherwise, there might be those who would attempt to require the Emperor to take those funds from your care, and they would be more likely to misuse the funds than you would. So the stipends are necessary."

Telin took this in silently. He could see where that might be important; taking the fees that would be his for the efforts that he's putting in on behalf of his son. He knew that there were others who were greedy, and who would not understand his own reluctance to touch anything that came from Lady Keske. And the considerations of travel in the future were legitimate. If he were to help Selah with

difficulties, he'd need money to cover occasional bribes or other unexpected expenditures. "Ok, Uncle, I'll do that. I should be able to find out what's reasonable by asking Father. It's something he would know."

"That's good, now, I know you'll only be able to stay at home a few days before you have to set out again for Nerin. I'll likely be meeting with you at some point on the trip. Just listen to our Lady, and she'll guide you to the right place. For now, I should head on ahead and get a few other things done. I'll just tie off Greymoon at your saddle. You'll be at Maran's in a few candlemarks and can return him then. May you learn the peace that comes from our Lady's service."

Telin smiled, still getting used to that sense of Lady Night's presence within him. "I will, Uncle. Thank you."

It was just over three candlemarks before Telin got in sight of his brother's cottage on the outskirts of Sharlan. The child in his arms had wakened once during that time, accepting a little milk that had been placed in a skin for that trip. It had felt strange to hold Belor all that time, and as Telin dismounted from Moonfoot, he couldn't help but feel a strong connection with the tiny boy. He still wasn't certain how well he would bond with his son as he aged, but he hoped that there would be ample opportunity to grow to enjoy the boy's company.

Maran waited at the door and told him not to bother tying off Moonfoot. No horse would stray from the property without Denora's permission. Telin laughed, as this was an old bit of information. Denora never had to tie off a horse, for they always obeyed her practical simple words. Telin didn't bother unsaddling either his horse or Greymoon, only unhooked Greymoon's lead from Moonfoot's saddle. As Denora never used anything more than a halter, the horse could eat well enough until they could take care of it.

Carrying his precious bundle toward the cottage door, Telin felt a sudden tug at his heart. He knew he wasn't the parent that Belor needed, but he thought he knew now why Maran had insisted that he at least be a part of the child's life. "I'm here, Maran. This is Belor, my son. Lady Keske died just today, leaving me little more than the time to ride down here. I wanted him to have as little time in the Palace as necessary. "

Maran let Telin into the little cottage, lit as always by crystals, as well as a blazing fire in the hearth. Denora was sitting near the hearth, holding her own small bundle, one only a little larger than the one that Telin was carrying. "Caldor was born just over a moon ago, Telin, and he's doing well. I think Denora will be happy to be raising not just one son, but two. Even if Belor isn't mine, I think she'll treat him as though he were."

Denora looked up for a moment and her statements were as simple as ever. "Sit, Telin. In a moment, I will be able to bring you tea. Perhaps Maran will care for the horses while we talk."

Maran laughed, "That's about as close to asking me to do something as she gets, and that only because she has more than enough to manage with the girls and Caldor. I expect I'll actually be doing a full share of chores soon enough with Belor added to her duties."

Maran excused himself and Denora stood up carefully with Caldor, bringing him to a cradle kept in the corner of the room. Almost as if he'd been expected, Telin realized that there was another next to it. He hadn't thought about it, but realized that of course they had two cradles. The twins were only four, and had needed two cradles while they were small. A few minutes later, there was a steaming cup of tea in front of Telin and Denora was reaching over to take Belor out of his arms. There was not a sign of distress in her expression. It was almost as if she was born to do this.

"Denora," he began almost helplessly, "I hope Belor isn't that much trouble. I didn't know where to turn, and only thought that you and Maran were the best parents I could hope for for little Belor."

She partially unwrapped Belor from the skin he'd been riding in and settled into her seat near the hearth. "Telin, you have been a friend, when I did not even understand I needed one. You told Maran what he needed to deal with the difficulty with his student. I have little trouble taking care of another child. It should be no different than caring for Hela and Iera, save only that boys are slightly different. Maran has said that you will aid me often; that will make it easier, when I must go into town. But there is nothing wrong with your bringing me a son to raise."

He couldn't help but laugh. From her, that was a long discourse indeed, and one that set his heart at ease. "Thank you, Denora. I will do whatever I need to to help you and my brother out." He took a sip of tea, savoring it's warmth after the cold of his ride.

Maran came back in, stomping snow off of his boots just outside of the room. "They will do well enough, though I didn't unload Moonfoot. Father will be expecting you soon enough, brother."

Telin grinned and could now hug his brother. "Thank you again for doing this, Maran. It's something I would know nothing about. But I need to tell you something else. Uncle Lisor said that it's all right to tell family, and that I might need your help anyhow." He fumbled at his chest, producing the tiny pendant of a mirror. "It looks like I've finally found where I belong..."

Maran glanced at the pendant, then at the daggers Telin was wearing openly. "You'll be studying again, I think. Father will at least be easier to deal with on this than Grandfather apparently was with our uncle. Father at least will understand the need."

Telin had to reach out to wipe the dampness from his eyes. "I'll have to be gone in a few days, barely after I've settled back in. I have to deal with Belor's inheritance. And, from what Uncle Lisor said, it's best that we both get stipends from it, for raising him and managing his holdings. I shouldn't be gone more than a moon, and hopefully once that's done, I won't have to do this for another year, unless something important comes up."

Maran looked down, "Actually, that stipend will help. Even with the moneys I've been bringing in from the crystals Denora's been crafting, and the funds I get from the Academy, it would be tight with another child here. They grow quickly, and need a great deal. I hope you'll ask Father first what's appropriate, but it will be well used, once it arrives."

Telin laughed, "I'll still be working for the Academy myself, and Lisor suggested I invest what I am given, so that I'll have enough to use later, when I'm working more actively. But if you ever need something, let me know. It is my son, and I have a responsibility to him."

Maran grinned and nodded. "It looks like Denora's already taking well to Belor." He gestured over to where Denora had the youngest Calasti nursing already. "It's probably best that you head home after that tea. Let Denora adjust to things on her own. But I'll expect to see you before you leave."

"I promise to come over regularly, to help with the children and see those who have helped me so much already," Telin promised as he finished his mug. "I won't forget this."

It was just under a tenday before Telin was off heading toward Nerin. He was travelling lightly, only Moonfoot under him. He'd need no pack pony for this trip, especially as his father had suggested that the money from the stipend be sent as letters of credit, which could then be exchanged in ways that would allow Telin to invest carefully for his future. It would certainly be less difficult to travel with such letters than it would be to travel carrying a few chests of coins. Even when using Stars and Suns as primary currency, what would be considered a fair stipend for himself, and another for his brother, was more than enough to attract attention.

He had been on the road only two days when a vision opened up to him, showing a small woodland to the west of the road. He could already tell where what he was seeing was, the natural gift of knowing direction and distance that all Finders gained. And this woodland wasn't far along the path. Once there, he'd have to follow the Lady's direction to whatever she wanted him to see. Considering that Lisor had said that he would likely be meeting Telin, this was not entirely a surprise, though it would delay his travel by perhaps as much as a half-day. He'd almost certainly have to stop at a nearer village for rest tonight.

He nudged Moonfoot with his heels; guiding the reliable gelding according to the vision he'd been given. It wasn't too far to the place where the path would diverge. This was all new to him, the gifts that he'd begun learning almost that first night home. He still wasn't skilled at the first magic he'd been taught, though he expected that further practice would make it easier. He hoped he'd have most of it mastered fully before Belor grew up. The ability to use the Goddess' powers would greatly ease in gathering the kind of information she'd indicated that she needed.

A little way into the woodland, he heard voices, and two of them were familiar. His uncle was there, and, if he was right, Selah was with him. He slowed Moonfoot to a walk, so not to startle anyone, and carefully guided the horse between closely set bushes. There was a fairly large clearing past those bushes, and not one that could have been guessed at further back. In the clearing were four beings, three of whom he knew, though the third must have been silent to avoid attracting his attention. He couldn't imagine what it would take to bring Grandmother Mialar from Akhshar now, but she was there, seated cross-legged beneath an ancient elm. The fourth being confused Telin, seeming to be even less a part of this world than Lisor now was.

Telin swung down from Moonfoot, tying the horse off at a berry bush and stepped forward, reaching down to kiss his grandmother on the forehead and bowing to the heavenly being and his uncle. But his smile was all for Selah. She didn't look much different than she had when he'd last seen her clearly, in the tavern ten years ago. Her hair was held in the same coppery braid, and her figure was as gaunt and nearly skeletal as he remembered it. But the fact that he could see her now made all the difference. She might not physically be the Beauty he named her, but he felt he would call her that for the rest of her natural life.

With a will, he turned his attention away from Selah, focusing on the celestial who stood quietly at the end of the clearing. "I suspect that, whoever you are, you're the reason I've been called here."

The celestial nodded, taking a moment to pull off the helm in some ruddy material, revealing a person that seemed not too unlike him in form, though clearly radiating a powerful purpose. That person, a woman with eyes that glowed almost like embers, seemed to study him for a moment before speaking. "I have come at Railah's will, concerning a prior claim that is being made against your oath."

Prior claim? But how could that be? "I am not sure what you mean, Holy One."

The heavenly woman turned to gesture to Selah. "Tell him what he does not yet know. Tell him what he'd done that night, child."

Selah looked taken aback. It was quickly clear that she didn't know why she was here either. But with a gentle coaxing from Lisor, she began to speak. "I am only partly aware of what it is you ask, Holy One. I can only speak that I was close to despair before he focused his attention on me, and indeed had the means for my own destruction upon me. A tea of the right leaves and berries would have seen me to the Realm of the Dead, and with only minimal pain. But, for some reason, he not only saw me there in the tavern, but also focused his attention on me. It was different from anything I'd experienced before, a gentleness that had never existed for me. When the morning came, he was gone, leaving only a simple note, but I knew then that there was more to the world than I had thought. When my Lady came to me, asking for my service, I was willing to take it up. If only because there were wonders yet in the world."

It took Telin a long moment to realize what she'd just said. She had been ready to die that night; the only reason she hadn't was that he'd coaxed her away from it, without knowing that was what was wrong. Somehow, despite his usual caution to avoid getting where he could save a life, he had done so. And was now in a situation where solving the problem that came from that for him was impossible. "It can't be. I can't be owed a life-debt. The Lady would not have called to me for this if she'd known."

Lisor held up a hand, "Patience, Telin. Listen to what Kehana has to say."

"The life-debt was something that you did not know of, and thus were immune to its effects for the past ten years. The Sikal has warned Railah that such knowledge would have been yours shortly even without this meeting, and that things must be done to preserve you for the benefit of your Lady. He offered a service, but Railah has her own intentions in this. Telin, Railah is willing to modify your oath, in a very specific and permanent manner, because of this debt that you were unknowing of before. In exchange, she demands a service, one that will be within your honor and the wishes of your Lady, at some point in the future. She finds that often the servants of other gods are very useful for her purposes, and the service of a mortal Finder may aid her more than that of the Sikal."

"She will modify my oath?" Telin felt suddenly dizzy. Railah had always been the personification of law; for her to be willing to offer such a modification was beyond his knowledge or expectation.

"The modification is very specific, and would require the aid of your grandmother, Mialar of Jirel. As she did with your father, she would do to you. You would be bound with the earth-bond, unable to gain another life-debt."

Telin turned quickly, dropping to his knee in front of Selah. "I'm so sorry that I left you when I did, ten years ago. I wasn't what you needed then, and I'm not sure I am now. But in this, my fate is completely in your hands. If you do not wish this, merely tell me, and these blades you gave me will find themselves sheathed in my flesh. It would be the safest thing, for all of us, considering that an unfulfilled life-debt can bring madness before death."

Mialar spoke up as she rose, "Telin, before anything else is said, there are other things you must know. Even with my healing, I cannot correct the ills that lie within Selah. She is barren completely, and her body will not fill out and heal because of my gaze. Your Lady took time to study this deeply. She says that, with your being male, and the only one who feels the debt, that you can survive, merely by making the attempt reasonably often. There will be no further Calasti children from your loins, but this will offer you safety from your own gifts. As well, it is best that Selah is as she is, for it will be necessary that this marriage is kept secret. Selah is as good as my grandson Lisor at getting in and out of places unseen. You will be able to share what time is available without revealing anything, and she will travel as your Goddess wills, to learn the things that we have need to know."

He stilled his heart at those words. She would bear him no children; considering how fragile she seemed, he didn't want to put her through the rigors of childbirth. Seeing how difficult it had been for Lady Keske, he imagined it would be harder on Selah. But all of this depended on what Selah herself wanted. The decision rested fully in her hands.

Selah placed her hands on Telin's shoulders and he hardly dared to look up to meet her gaze. "Telin, you weren't listening to what I've said, not only here but in the Palace. You are the only man who's seen past my form to consider me as something that isn't merely to be used. If you used me then, it was with more consideration than I had any right to expect. While you weren't the first to touch me, that was done by two farm-boys a moon prior, you were the first and only person to attempt to bring me to pleasure. Those boys tricked me into a secluded place and used me, telling me honestly that I had no hope of bringing them to justice. No one would have believed me. Instead of being rough, you made a game of asking my permission for every touch, showing me that I mattered to you then. If I matter as much now, or even if you can merely make it seem that way, I would do anything at all for you. I have had to think hard about what you did, especially after you'd told me that you'd never mocked me. I didn't know what to believe until then. You had been so considerate, but the women in the tavern

spoke of how it was merely your own pleasure you went after. I think that even if it were merely pleasure, you gave more for it than I could ever require of you. This is what I want."

His hands naturally went into claws, cutting into his palms as he heard her bluntly honest description of the behavior she'd had to put up with before. There was little doubt that she had had reason to seek her own death then. He hadn't known that his actions would bring about this conclusion, but he would sacrifice almost anything to make sure that this did not happen again. "Selah, thank you. I don't deserve you, no matter how much you think I do. I took my pleasure that night from bringing such joy as I could. It's something that was long a habit of mine. It was more pleasurable to know that the one who I held was happy. But I left you, when I shouldn't have done so. I should have known about how close to despair you were. I could have brought you to Sharlan, found ways to at least be your friend, even if I was too blind to see that you could be more."

There was laughter from Lisor and Mialar, and Telin reddened. Lisor tugged at Telin's tunic and attempted to pull the younger man to his feet. Attempted, because Telin was too much like his father, and both far taller and far heavier than Lisor himself was. It was only after a moment of awkward silence that Telin rose to his feet. Before he turned toward his grandmother for her blessing, he closed his arms around Selah, his Beauty, and kissed her gently on the forehead.

There was a voice clearing behind him, and he realized that he had not yet formally agreed to the bargain that was being offered. Turning abruptly, he inclined his head to the celestial, Kehana. "Holy One, please bear my agreement to Railah. I will accept the bargain, marrying Selah, and protecting her as I may. My service will be Railah's to call upon."

"Mine will be as well." Selah stepped forward, clasping her hand around Telin's. "Railah has allowed the greatest thing possible to happen to me, and I will not forget that gift. Railah need only call upon me and I will aid her."

Kehana gestured to Telin, a smile on her thin lips. "Railah grants her blessing upon this, though it is perhaps the only oath she has modified in more than a millennium. Let Mialar bind the two of you together, and then accept Railah's gift to you."

Telin moved to kneel before his grandmother, noting that her heavenly radiance was showing now, giving off golden light. "I am ready, Grandmother."

Mialar gestured for Selah to kneel beside him. "This is not my garden, but it is a place sacred to Jirel. The two of you have more than made clear the intentions you have, so there is little more to do here beyond tying your essences together. Take this seed," she opened her hand, to reveal an acorn within it. "Both of you must pour energy into it, and it will be planted to show the unity that you intend."

Telin held the seed, and let Selah close her hand over it. He poured his energy, his emotions, into the seed, feeling it seem to grow and shudder in his hand. At that point, Mialar took the seed and dug a slight ways into the ground with her fingers, placing the seed in the moist earth. She concentrated for a moment, and a mixing of gold and green light suffused the place. When she removed her hands, a small sprout seemed to peek through the earth already. "It is done, though the efforts that will be needed to keep my Grandson from madness and death will come tonight, in secret."

Kehana stepped forward, gesturing for the two to stand. In her hands were small curves of silvery metal, each with a tiny ruby depending from them. One of these curves she tucked around the edge of Telin's ear, fitting there perfectly. The other she placed on Selah's ear. A moment later, she stepped back and smiled. "Those are the tokens given to you, for no more obvious token is safe for the two of you. Remember, Telin, that a part of your situation relies on keeping Selah a secret. She will come and go often from the Academy, and will use her gifts to spend time with you. But she is only safe so long as none know her for what she is. She knows this, from the service she's already given to your Lady. It is time you know that as well. I will take my leave now, relaying your words to Railah. It is time for us to part."

Telin pulled Selah against him, holding her for the first time as his wife. That would be a hard secret to keep. It was a long moment before he turned to his uncle and grandmother. "I believe, Grandmother, that you are needed in Akhshar, to keep Grandfather Tainen and Grandmother Alezra healthy?"

Mialar nodded, "I only came because I was the best of Jirel's servants for this. Lisor will return me, and Selah will use her own methods to reach the inn where you will sleep tonight. Look for her with the dark. No one will see her comings or goings."

Telin couldn't help but smile. Today had brought him far greater gifts than he had ever expected. "Thank you, all of you."

Selah pulled Telin's head down to her for a proper kiss, one that he found so full of passion that he wondered if he could make it until she would come for him. Then she stepped back, and simply vanished from view. In only a few moments, Lisor and Mialar had vanished as well. He was left alone, rubbing at the cuff resting on his left ear. Then, with a grin, he walked back to Moonfoot and mounted up. He intended to hurry to the next village, expecting that he'd see Selah again soon enough.