

## A Service for Jirel

By Tiona Yates

Pharel knelt before their Goddess, Jirel Earthmother. Jirel did not require such obeisance from her Sikal, but even with all the centuries wherein Pharel dwelt in the heavens, they had never lost the sense of absolute awe for the oldest of the Gods. They were perhaps the most active of the three Sikal on the mortal plane, but they spent far more time in the heavens, due to the unique nature of their service. Each Sikal was mortal-born, and lost not only the ability to age, but the ability to recharge their energies upon the mortal plane, once they had taken on such service. There were other effects, but none that would likely poorly effect Pharel, who took their service at a very young age. The gnoroi Sikal would not have been able to bear or engender children regardless, having part of the qualities of both genders within a single body, but neither developed enough to use.

"Lady, you have called me?"

"Yes, Pharel, I have need of thee. In the desert, near the trade city of Atil, the desert tribes have called to me for aid. Raiders attack the tribes, not to take herd beasts or for usual plunder, but after each such battle, children are missing, always those between eight and sixteen summers. Some of those children are wed already, some even with child themselves. The people have pled with the leaders of Atil to send out soldiers to hunt down these raiders, but even when soldiers come, no raiders are found. And within the city, there are parents missing children, and the children running wild on the street are reduced. This is thy skill, to find ways to protect the children from those who would prey upon them. I would have thee sent to Atil to see what thou may do."

Pharel's face turned grim. Jirel was right; this was their area of expertise. Being the size of a small child, and with the features of the young, Pharel could pass as a child, and learn what was happening. More, they had the gift of mindspeech, and a talent for illusion. If there was a place a child could go to learn what was happening, Pharel could do so. "At your will Lady. However, it sounds like not all of this will fall within my abilities. If there is a force taking children, they will be hard to stop, especially if there are those in high places allowing this to be done."

Jirel smiled, "I understand that, but the gathering of knowledge to be used must fall to thee, at least at first. When the knowledge is gathered, I will ask a favor from another god, one who has a servant well skilled at the arts necessary to remove this force. Thou know of this servant, for he is also Sikal."

Pharel nodded. They'd met with Lisor on a few occasions, and had rescued him from the energy depletion he'd suffered in the battle of Ahila'dahr. Lady Night's Sikal was surprisingly capable, especially in a set of battles. He had the physical skills that Pharel lacked, and the keen mind to know how to use the information they provided. "That will likely be of great aid to our purpose, Lady. If that is all thou have to speak to me, I will send myself to Atil and see what I may learn."

"Go, Pharel, find out a way that we may rescue these children." Jirel was not at all surprised when Pharel merely bowed and vanished, knowing that the little gnoroi was on their way to the desert city, intent upon the needs that had been revealed. It was an old pattern, for Pharel had served Jirel since before the War of the Dragonmage, and knew exactly how to gain the information that was needed.

Pharel found themselves almost instantly in the desert city, during the midday crowd. While they were still dressed in the spring green robes that they were accustomed to wear in the heavens, it really didn't matter, because they only had to step into the shadow of a nearby building and summon their magic to appear as any other street child, clad in ragged trousers and half-robe. Pharel considered themselves to appear not unlike a five or six year old boy, and the illusions that they cast hid their small breasts and feminine shape. Their hair, though somewhat long, was short enough to be ambiguous in gender. There was nothing about the gnoroi that suggested anything other than a small human child wandering the streets alone. And here, as any good sized city, there were lots of those around.

Pharel listened to conversations as they wandered through the marketplace, seemingly intent upon the scraps of food that were being tossed out here and there. In reality, other than when a disguise required it of them, Pharel no longer took in any sustenance. They drew their life force from the heavens themselves, and of necessity had to return there often to regain that energy. But there were other ways that Pharel continued their mission. They were a mindspeaker, able to listen to the thoughts of those near them, and see if there was any pattern to the missing children. It would only take a little bit of time to gain the information they needed.

Pharel tried to spot the other street children. While there were a fair number in their apparent age-group, there were far fewer among the older children. It seemed like Jirel was correct in that these were the children being preyed upon, and that suggested slavers. Jirel would not have suggested Lisor as a possible aid if the children were being sacrificed in blood magic. His skills would be less than those of a Sacred Sword in that kind of need, but, were it slavers, he could well be just the type to act. No, Pharel guessed that there were indeed slavers here, and, if they remembered the maps they'd looked at before, they were Toyurasan slavers, for that was one of the few markets that actually traded in flesh, and that kingdom wasn't too far off, easily doable for a series of caravans.

Pharel spotted a likely youth to follow, keeping themselves hidden. Though they had enough mind-magic and illusory power to hide this youth from those who preyed upon them, it would be better to see him captured. Slavers wouldn't be after children too weak, and did not like to damage their wares, so the boy would likely not suffer overmuch in the interim while Pharel got what information they needed to be relayed to the gods. Though Pharel hated the idea of children in bond, they knew that the children would likely have more regular meals and care than they would have on their own in the marketplace. And information was needed, to protect more of the children. It was a dark cost to their work, but they knew it was necessary.

Pharel wondered about what they were facing as they watched the boy move through the marketplaces, looking for dropped food or anything loose of value that he could find and sell. He seemed to be very close to what they expected the slavers to want, being around ten or twelve summers, not sickly, and reasonably strong. A thought came to their mind that it would help indeed if they could acquire someone who could work on the inside of the slaver's camp, for Pharel was small enough that no slaver would consider them worth taking. No, if they wanted someone on the inside, it would have to be a child of appropriate size and strength. It would be difficult to find someone that could carry that guise well and not panic with the helplessness. It would be even more useful if such a captive were indeed not helpless at all.

Pharel had to dart across the street to watch their mark move, because a sudden thought had distracted them. There was, possibly, someone who might fit that description. Convincing that someone's parents that it would be an acceptable risk would be difficult however. Lisor might be the key to this issue in more ways than Pharel had originally thought. His daughter, the demi-divine Glea, had reached her thirteenth summer, and had both the power to escape on her own at need, and the ability to ease the suffering of those in captivity. And, she was not tied to the heavens in the same way that the Sikal were. She could, if convinced to do so, maintain a presence among the prisoners long enough to allow her father and Pharel to locate a way to permanently end this slaving ring. The

problem would be convincing Lisor and the goddess Lady Night. They would not likely wish to put Glea into such danger, though she would almost certainly be safer among the slavers than most would expect.

Pharel kept to the shadows, keeping up their act as a wayward child and sent a thought to Jirel. If anyone could convince the Goddess of Fate and her consort to allow Glea into danger, the Earthmother could. ~Lady,~ Pharel sent, ~While I will attempt to get what information I can, I have an idea that might bring us the information we need more quickly, and without excessive danger. It would certainly help to have a spy among the captives taken, someone who not only would not be inconvenienced by the temporary measures, but who could aid the other captives. Glea can remain upon the earth where I cannot, and has both the abilities to defend herself if necessary, and aid those who are injured. Nor can she be held against her will, having the ability to step between places at will.~

Jirel's mental tone was surprised, but carried a great deal of warmth as she replied, ~Glea's abilities do lend themselves to this form of subterfuge, if her parents can be convinced to allow this. I will consider means to arrange this, because, as thou have said, this would make things safer for the captives as well.~ Jirel's tone indicated that this discussion was at an end for the moment, but Pharel had little doubt that Jirel would find some way to arrange this aid. It wouldn't be a pleasant trip for Glea, but doubtless far safer than the demi-divine had been during the Battle of Ahila'dahr, where there had been little choice but allow her to fight.

A faint tickle at the edges of their mental abilities told Pharel that the boy they were following had just become a target. They took in the image of the place where the boy was, and stepped between places to a high location where they could look out over the scene without being noticed. Yes, it was slavers, Toyurasan who were using an offer of a warm meal as a lure. It wouldn't take much for the boy to be convinced, and then he'd be caught and brought out of the town. Pharel whispered the arcane syllables necessary for an invisibility to settle over themselves, and followed the group out, stepping between places whenever it would be too dangerous to be caught. They wanted to know where the slaver's camp was, and see which guards merely turned a blind eye to the slaving trade.

The boy was joined by two others, a girl that looked to be at the young end of the scale the slavers would be looking at, and another boy, this one around fifteen summers. From the doll clutched in the girl's hands, she was likely not an orphan. There was no way to be certain of the other. One of the slavers pulled something out of a pouch and offered it to each of them, some sort of food, or drug. From the way that the children followed obediently after their captors, Pharel guessed the latter. It wasn't far from there to the gate, and none of the guards seemed to question the Toyurasan men as they led the three children down out of the town and to the east.

Taking a risk, Pharel touched the mind of the nearest Toyurasan. This was a risk, because mind-magic was far more common in Toyurasi than in the west, but the slaver didn't seem to notice the other presence within his mind. A quick perusal of the thoughts brought up an image of the camp, likely only a few hours walk from the city. Pharel didn't have much time on the mortal plane, and needed to at least verify the location of the camp. Stepping between spaces to the place indicated by the other's thoughts, Pharel found themselves on a steep bluff sheltering a small valley. There was a camp with a large pen at one end; this must be the place.

Pharel moved quietly and carefully to the side of the pen, looking within to the children here. They weren't in a coffle, but allowed free reign over the small enclosure. But there was magic on the sides of the pen, magic that would paralyze anyone trying to sneak in and out over the walls. It wouldn't take more than a single attempt per child to realize that they couldn't escape that way. Pharel studied the magic, wondering if they dared test the ability to step between places here, but decided it wasn't worth it. The divinely gifted abilities to teleport were far more exclusive than any mere mage would know how to overcome. Finders were the only mortals who could transfer like this, and they were rare

enough that no one would easily know how to defeat their gifts. Glea's ability to step between places was likely perfectly safe.

It was time to return, give what information she had, and see what Jirel had arranged. Pharel could tell that their energies were getting low, though not low enough to pose a danger. They could probably, without much magic use, have stayed three or four more candelmarks, but there was little they could do. They were no healer, nor did they risk letting the slavers know that the deities were interested in this venture. That could spell great harm to the children within, if the slavers expected to be caught. No, Pharel would return to the heavens, gain what energy they needed, and see what else could be determined.

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Jirel made her way to the garden where Glea sat, pondering the lessons she'd just completed with Railah. Even though Glea had been trained in weapon work by one of the best mortal teachers available from the time she was six, the past year and a half that she'd spent in the heavens improved her far more than Arandel could have. The Goddess of Justice was not only knowledgeable about many combat styles, but was able to teach Glea how to think in combat, which left the demi-divine far more confident in her abilities than she could otherwise have been. And Railah had forced Glea to learn other weapons, and fighting without weapons, though it would take decades to bring Glea up to what Railah considered passable. Glea was certainly willing to give it that time.

As Jirel entered, Glea immediately sensed the presence of the Goddess, kneeling with respect, though she knew it was no longer needed, not here. "Lady Jirel, I don't see you often. Is there something you need?"

Jirel drew Glea up and smiled down at her. "Actually, yes. There is a task I would set before thee, if thou are willing and thy parents can be persuaded to it."

"A task? And why wouldn't my Mama or Papa want to allow it?"

"Child, the task relates to other children. Thou know my servant, Pharel. What thou might not know is that their work is centered on helping other children deal with 'human predators' as they so succinctly put it, adults who would harm or misuse the children, especially those who have no one who can look after them. There are many children who do not have parents as diligent in their care as thou have. And there are children now in danger from others of these predators, children whose families could not protect them. I would send thee to comfort these children, give them strength, and give us the information we need to stop this group of predators. Thou, being yet a child, can go there and not be noticed, which may save many of these children's lives."

"These children are being hurt?"

"There is little doubt that they will be hurt, though likely not dangerously harmed, if thou should help us get the information we need to stop their captors. But to do that would put thee in danger. Thou would have to accept captivity, in order to be among these children. The danger is not as great as that which thou have already weathered, but it is still dangerous. I know that thou can escape at any time, because of thy abilities, but these other children do not have that ability. It would help if there were one who could give them hope, make it easier to survive that which they must face, for a time."

Glea took a moment to consider this. It was a different matter than going into direct battle. She would be asked to spend time among captives, protecting those who couldn't protect themselves, likely without revealing herself. Which meant that she'd likely have to pretend to be a captive herself. She knew instantly that her father would try to forbid her. He didn't like her in any kind of danger, but, at the same time, she knew that the other children needed help, and she could provide it.

"I'd have to let them capture me, hide what I am? But I can always get out of there, if I have to, right?"

"Yes, child, thou would have to pretend that thou were helpless, allow them to contain thee for a time. It may be painful, but, should true danger arise, thou could easily merely will thyself back to the heavens in an instant. It would be best if thou did not need to do that, however. It will take some clever trickery on thy part, but I think that thou can do that. Thy other gifts have been improving too, haven't they?"

"My other gifts? I've learned a few new things I can do with my influence over time. And Papa has been teaching me Finder magics, even though I will never really be a Finder like he is."

"Perhaps there is an idea I can give thee that thou can test with Ollahm. Thou might well face chains while in captivity, though Pharel said that the pen that the children are kept in seems not to keep them chained. Is it possible to, instead of destroying the chains, that thou could simply alter them to a time where they are unlocked?"

Glea looked surprised, "That might be easier than destroying them. And, I might be able to do it without anyone knowing. That's a clever trick, Lady."

Jirel smiled knowingly, "Would thou be willing to do this for me, for the children that need thy aid, should I be able to convince thy parents that this is something they need to do?"

Glea grinned, "I like being able to help people. It might be hard to talk Papa into this, though. He doesn't like me in any kind of danger, even though I'm stronger and faster than I look. Mama has to keep him away from the practice area when I'm studying with Aunt Railah."

Jirel reached out and laid a hand on one of Glea's black braids, "That is the kind of attitude that thou needs, Child. I will speak with thy parents, and see what I can manage. If thou need more information, I would have thee speak with my Sikal, Pharel. They will be able to give thee the details and hints that thou needs."

Almost instantly, the Goddess was gone, vanished as though she'd not been there. But Glea was more than used to the way the gods and their immortal servants did that now. She herself was quite capable in this skill herself. She pondered for a few minutes then attempted a skill that her father had been teaching her just the other day. With a moment's concentration, she moved her hand over her left axe, willing it to be invisible to all senses. While she could still sense it, it wasn't with her eyes. She only knew it because of a strange blurring of her mental senses. As far as she could tell, though she'd have to test it with someone else to be certain, she could reliably disguise her weapons this way. If she wasn't unarmed, maybe her father would be more willing to allow this trip. It at least improved her chances.

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"No, I'm not putting her in the path of slavers, Lady Jirel." Lisor's tone was flat, and he had to work to keep his expression even somewhat neutral. He could understand Jirel's request for his own aid in this mission. From what she'd said already, getting rid of a band of slavers was something he'd be much better at than her own Sikal would be. And he did owe her a debt for her help in making him ready to engender Glea. But to put Glea in harm's way was something he simply could not conscience. He hadn't wanted her to fight at his side in Ahila'dahr; he certainly did not want her in a dangerous situation alone, as Jirel was suggesting.

Lady Night looked thoughtful, studying the pattern of the manifestation of the tapestry of fate. "Chosen, let us look at what is being asked. Jirel would not ask without good reason. So, let us find out what those reasons are."

Lisor lowered his head, "As you will, Lady. I don't like the idea, but I will listen."

Jirel smiled at the interchange. Although Lady Night seldom chastised Lisor, he would heed her words, even against his own instincts. "There is more to this than thou know yet, Sikal. The problem is more than a single isolated band of slavers. According to my own Sikal, the guards in Atil did not even question the Toyurasan men leading desert children out of the city. Pharel believes they have been

ordered to allow this slavery to continue. It would agree with what I have learned from my own priestesses in the area, as well. Which indicates that someone with power has been bribed and corrupted. If they are not identified and removed, the band of slavers thou remove will only be replaced by more, perhaps in a different location, but doing the same thing. The corrupted one must be removed, in a way that indicates our displeasure, and, if possible, the same must be done to the one who arranges these deals. To do so requires time, and during that time, the children will languish in captivity. If we act first to free the children, the ones we need to kill will fade into the woodwork, only to emerge elsewhere. No, we must succor the children in secret ways while trying to locate, and remove, those who allow this travesty to continue."

Lady Night reached up, as if trying to influence the threads of the tapestry she was studying, then spoke. "It is true that the children who are there are in danger, though not immediate. Subtle succoring would aid them greatly, and give us time to learn what we need to do. We will need information to act, and gathering that information will take time. In addition to someone within the pens, it would help to have someone, a mortal, who could assist with the investigation, someone who could act discretely."

Lisor considered it for a moment. To act there, it would best be a trader, or perhaps someone with some knowledge of Toyurasan laws and practices. A memory flooded his mind, someone who he hadn't cared for when they'd first met, but someone who had more than reason to act now, if he could offer the suggestion. "Han Lo. He's in Sharlan now, near Arandel. It will be dangerous, for him, to be that close to Toyurasi, perhaps working within it, when we try to locate the one financing the slavers. But, his refusal to return to Toyurasi with Sun Xae suggests that he might be amenable to this work. And, he's a mindspeaker."

Lady Night almost flowed into his mind, taking from it the images he had of the Toyurasan nobleman who had turned his back on his own kingdom upon finding a living Rasi child in the ruins of the Citadel of the Fallen Star. She seemed to turn each memory over carefully and fully, testing each one for the sense she'd gotten from the pattern. As she eased herself out of his mind, she nodded, "That one would be very effective in this. Especially if thou are the one who brings him where he is needed. With no journey to make, he will be less of a target, and more likely to blend in where he is."

Jirel carefully prodded the other Goddess and her Sikal, "Thou are willing to commit to this plan, then?"

Lisor grimaced, "Glea would have to agree to it. I still don't like it, though I know that you're right. She can get out of there the moment she actually comes into danger. And that's what I'll command her to do."

Lady Night smiled at her consort's protectiveness. "Glea will be in less danger than she has been in before. Thou have taught her how to hide her weapons from all senses, and her gifts will protect her well. In addition to offering succor and healing to those who need it."

Jirel nodded, spreading her hands in acceptance of the agreement. "Glea has already agreed to this task. She needed only thy permission for it. Indeed, I believe she has gone to speak with my Sikal to learn what they have learned. Pharel will give her enough information to make the captivity convincing, despite Glea's natural abilities. I would ask that thou go swiftly to bring what aid thou have to Atil. I do not wish to leave these children in captivity any longer than I need to."

Lisor glanced at Lady Night. Her nod was almost imperceptible, but he knew her well. "Then I will go to Sharlan. I'll speak with Han Lo, ask him to aid me. I'd ask for Arandel's help too, but with Talina toddling about, I don't have the right to ask him to leave his family."

He barely waited for the mental touch of permission to caress his mind before he was gone, transporting himself to the forecourt of the main tower of the Academy of the Dragon. He'd have to hunt to find the Toyurasan, but it shouldn't take long.

In the end, it took less than ten minutes, for there was someone else who seemed to know that Han Lo was needed. With Arandel clearing a path through the midday crowd, it only took a few minutes to recognize what was going on. Han Lo was dressed in Toyurasan finery when he approached Lisor, blue and green patterned silk, and he carried a pack. One glance from Lisor between Arandel and Han Lo informed him of all he needed to know. Lisor clapped a hand across Arandel's back and grinned, though his smile contained the deep fear that Lisor still had for his daughter's safety. "I see your foresight hasn't abandoned you, Arandel." He turned and bowed to Han Lo, "I wished that our meeting would be in a better time, Han Lo, but I have need of your services."

The Toyurasan bowed in return, the calculated maneuver designed to indicate equals, rather than subservience. Even after all of these years, Han Lo still took appearance and position very seriously. But that might serve them yet. "I have been told by your brother that you would need me on the borders of the Desert, perhaps into Toyurasi itself. He did not know why, only that it involved children."

Lisor nodded, "Let's get out of sight. I'd feel safer discussing this in private, and my Lady seems to prefer me being obvious, though that may change for the mission ahead."

Arandel led them across the market to one of the schools' buildings, and from there into a meeting room. "I don't know what you're after here, Lisor, but I sense it's serious, as I don't like the image I had of your daughter in my vision."

"What did you see?" Lisor's voice took on a hard edge, worry evident in his tone.

"Nothing that bodes actual harm. She was with a ragged group of children, apparently unarmed and dressed in nothing better than the other children were. There was a fence around where the children gathered, and I thought I saw Toyurasan around there."

Lisor nodded, "That at least is some comfort. I had feared, when I heard you say you'd seen her, that something more would happen. I do not like Jirel's plan, not one bit. But, I do owe her a debt, and Glea has already agreed. I just hope to put her in a more secure position if possible."

Han Lo looked between the two brothers, almost opposite in appearance, but very close emotionally. "What is it that you would have me do?"

Lisor sat down heavily and took in a deep breath. "Your part, while dangerous, is mostly to gather information. We need that information, badly. Pharel, who serves Jirel, has discovered a band of slavers acting very near the city of Atil, and apparently with tacit approval from someone in power. Someone is paying the guards, all of them, to look the other way when children are taken, and when the guards are sent out because the tribes demand protection, they never find the raiders. Someone's taking bribes, most likely, and indirectly selling the region's children into slavery. We need to know who's in charge, on both sides, preferably. We don't dare move to free the children until we know who's behind it, and can remove them in a way that leaves no doubt as to why they were killed."

"What are you going to be doing?"

"I'm going to be down in Atil as much as I can be. My current state doesn't permit me away from the heavens for long. Once I have the information on who's taking those bribes, I can act. It will be messy, but it is necessary. And then, once the powers behind the ring are taken down, I can move to free the children. Pharel will be bringing the tribes in at that stage to recover their young. The part I don't like is that Glea is going to allow herself to be captured, so that she can take care of the children already caught. Her ability to heal them may be invaluable, and she can help with taking out the slavers themselves, when the time comes. She won't likely be actually disarmed, as she now knows my trick, how to hide things from all senses. And, as Jirel pointed out, Glea can always get out herself, no matter what."

Han Lo frowned, "That won't be an easy thing, especially for her. She'll have to play the part of a weak mortal, a child that hasn't trained all their life for a greater destiny. There will be times she's struck, and she must not strike back. But, as I believe you hinted at Jirel saying, having someone within

the camp may give us the time we need. And, from what you're saying, it will take time. We have to root out the sickness. Preferably both the contact in Atil and the Toyurasan who's financing the missions. I will go. Sun Xae doesn't need me here, and my talents will be useful, for more than you think. Hopefully you haven't forgotten my other gifts?"

Lisor looked confused for a moment then remembered exactly why Reyel had suggested Han Lo for the mission to the Citadel of the Fallen Star. As unpleasant as Han Lo had been then, he did have something very valuable, as much or more than his mindspeech. He could take an object or place where events have happened and pull images of the past from those. Glea could do much the same, and having them both attempting to find images of the leaders might just bring them the leads they needed much more quickly. "The kevada. Yes, I remember that. I hadn't considered it, but, any token of respect or honor that came from their 'boss' would give you a possible impression that we can use to locate that boss. And, if we can locate them, I can kill them."

Han Lo nodded, "I have most of what I need, though it will take me time to get to Atil. You won't want me to ride on the wings of the Lords of the Sky, so a caravan must be the only choice."

Lisor shook his head, "No, that won't be necessary. I will bring you to Atil, and to wherever else we need to go. You won't be registered at any gate; no one will know that you don't belong, as long as you're careful. This is also where I need Arandel's help, now that I think of it. Brother, you have some rank within your church. Can you write a letter of introduction and arrange for Han Lo to be housed at the Railahn Church headquarters there? Even without asking Railah, I'm certain that she'd agree to this request. We need somewhere for him to stay that isn't an easily checked inn. And he would be doing the will of at least two of the gods."

Arandel considered a moment, "I don't believe there's a large temple in Atil, but there is an inn that caters primarily to our roving agents. I have enough authority to arrange for him to stay at that inn. He'd be considered a temporary agent for Railah in this, which means that he would have to avoid certain types of activities, but it is doable."

Han Lo laughed, "I know what you're meaning there, and that will not be a difficulty. I have touched no other woman since Reliss came into my life, and I do not intend to dishonor her with any roving now. I will need some money to spread around, to loosen tongues, but I assume you have a method of arranging that, as well?"

Lisor nodded, "Before I get you to Atil, I'll drop us down in Akhshar. I have little doubt that either Father or Kiera will arrange necessary funds. Kiera can draw them from Jirel's temple, in fact, for this mission. Is there anything else you'll need?"

The Toyurasan shook his head, "I have clothing appropriate for a Toyurasan trader, something that will work well as a disguise. As long as I avoid any connection to my family, I should be perfectly safe. They won't think I'm stupid enough to come within their reach, which is exactly how I intend to avoid them. Arandel said that I'd likely leave quickly, so I was prepared, though not for such fast transport. Let me go to say my farewells to Reliss and Sun Xae, and I'll be ready. That will give Lord Arandel the time to write up my paperwork."

Lisor nodded, "I'll go and say hello to Quanild and Talina, and you can meet me at Arandel's cottage when you're ready. Just hurry. I don't have much time I'm available."

Arandel grinned, "I knew you couldn't resist at least seeing your niece. Let's get you to my home, and I'll write up the paperwork quickly."

Together the brothers left the building and walked toward Arandel's small cottage on the outskirts of Sharlan. Quanild was sitting in a chair outside the building, carefully smoothing a carving she was working on while watching Talina play in the grass. The youngest Calasti was just over a year old, but already toddling about reasonably well. Her hair was a vibrant purple, not matching that of either parent, but not entirely inexplicable considering her mother's heritage. Lisor did not expect the child to remember him, but knelt near where Talina was playing to watch her for a few minutes. Other



than the brilliant hair color, there was little sign of the child's Kee-Ali-Dahlri heritage. Lisor was curious to find out if the child would even have her mother's shapechanging abilities, or when they would manifest if they did, but there was no sign of the just yet, at least not to his eyes.

While Arandel went within to write the required letters of introduction, Lisor watched his tiny niece, almost forgetting to greet his sister-in-law. It was only when Quanild spoke that he remembered she was right there. "So, Lisor, entranced already by our little one?"

Lisor laughed and stood up, turning to face the former Singer of the Songbird. She really had not changed much since the last time he'd seen her, just shortly after she'd set up household here in Sharlan. She dressed mostly in loose robes of blue and purple, her azure hair pinned up so that it did not interfere with her craftsmanship. She'd always been beautiful, though Lisor had never had any reason to consider her as anything other than a new sister. And the pride in her eyes as she watched Talina play was evident. "Talina is adorable. I imagine it will be interesting to watch her grow. It wasn't all that long since Glea was that small, but I find that I can hardly remember that time clearly now."

Quanild set down her carving and stood up, tall and graceful as always, almost towering over Lisor, who'd inherited his paternal grandparents' lesser stature. "She grows well, though it will take time to see where her skills lie. Arandel says that he has seen her with a soul sword, but I will not press her in that direction. If she comes to serve Railah, it will be her choice, not the pressures of any other. Arandel has promised not to mention his visions concerning her around her, nor try to influence her decision. It will be enough if there are children in the family who do not have a destiny prepared in their infancy."

Lisor nodded, a slight frown touching his face, "I wish I had had that choice with Glea, to allow her to grow as she would. But the danger to her was too great. She had to learn not only the skills that we could teach her, but the reasons for those skills. I fear that I did not give her enough of a childhood."

She reached out and straightened his tunic and smiled, "Perhaps with another, you would have that option?"

He shook his head, "Even if it weren't too dangerous to bring another demi-divine into being, without direct intervention of Jirel that will be impossible. When my mortality was taken from me, so too was the ability to engender a child. I am content with Glea, though, and shower her with as much love as I can."

Quanild studied him, "You worry over her. She has many blessings, but you cannot stop the worry. You still need to learn to trust in what you've done, what options you have given her. She is better prepared, for nearly anything, than any other child has been. What you did with her, what you might do with her in the future, is not wrong, as such. Her path of necessity has been different, but she has loving parents, a family that truly cares about her, and the intelligence to find a path through the fates you serve. It will be hard, letting her grow into herself, but you've done the best job you could. And what comes to her now is as much a product of her own decisions as yours."

"I know. I wish I could turn back time, protect her from all she's faced, but that's not possible, not even with her own abilities. And she's making decisions that I would have made, were I in her place. It's just a lot harder accepting those decisions, because I know the pain that they brought me."

"But they also brought you great joy, as they might her as well. Do not try to steal her sense of accomplishment. She has a lot to live up to, and if you rob her of the chances to stretch herself fully, she'll never have the confidence and understanding to truly stand on her own. And that is the true crime, to cripple a child by protecting them from their own choices. You know that. Let her make her decisions."

He looked up into her eyes and managed a wry smile. "You sound too much like Mother. She would have given the exact same advice. And she's been through it. Yet, somehow, she had the faith to wait, while both my brother and I, as well as Leah and Glea, walked into the greatest danger we'd known. I wish I had that kind of faith."

Quanild's warbling laugh brought a look of surprise from him, confused at why she'd be laughing. "For someone who can sacrifice themselves utterly for others, you have no lack of faith. What you lack is the wisdom to understand that others must make their own decisions and live their own lives. You have to let her grow, as a child, and as a person entire. Consider your own words; if she's making the decisions you would have made in her place, why are they wrong for her, if they were right for you? Do you regret your sacrifices now?"

He looked down, trying to find the right answer, "I try not to regret what I've done, and the risks I've taken. The results, while initially painful, have always been what worked out the best, not only for me, but for those I care about. You're right; I'm taking away her right to make those same kind of decisions, and she has as much right, and need, to decide her own path, as I had to follow mine. Thank you, Quanild. Much as it hurts to think on this, you're right. She deserves the chance to make a difference herself."

Arandel picked that moment to step out of the cottage, chuckling softly, "I never expected you to get tripped up so easily, brother. Your own words turned against you. I don't care for what you're going to be allowing her to do, but she is both very enduring and has the ability to get away if things actually get dangerous. That alone should settle the issue. Just as Father knew he couldn't keep you safely at home once you'd learned to step between places, you have to acknowledge that you can't hold her back, only help her with the decisions she makes."

Lisor looked sheepish and nodded, "That's really all I can do. Even my Lady won't forbid any action to her, only offer her advice for as long as she'll listen to it." He laughed, "That's actually what my Lady does with me, too. She forbids me nothing, but lets me make my mistakes as I need to. I guess I've made a lot of them along the way, but she's always been patient with me. For that alone, I should be grateful, and attempt to understand."

Arandel handed Lisor the papers, "There's a reference for you, too. I know you can't stay in Atil any more than you can here, but it might allow you to conceal your presence somehow, if any try to pierce the disguise you'll be using. Han Lo will be here in a few minutes, if I'm right. And you'll be off. You don't dare take any more time here than you have to. Get Han Lo to Akhshar, arrange the funds for him, and then get him to Atil. I'd go too, if I was of any use, but I'm better here, where Talina and Quanild need me. If you get a Sacred Sword down there asking questions, all of the information will dry up and our targets will go into hiding. You're better off with Han Lo."

Lisor nodded then scanned the path back toward the city. "He's on his way already. I need to go. Farewell, and take good care of your family, both of you." He quickly embraced both Arandel and Quanild then headed off down the path toward where Han Lo was walking. He had barely reached the Toyurasan before both vanished, appearing elsewhere.

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Glea found Pharel in Jirel's gardens, taking the time to regain the energies they had spent in the mortal world. Pharel looked up as the demi-divine approached, not moving much, but inclining their head. "I would expect, if you are coming to me, that you have at least heard my Lady's proposal? Perhaps even agreed to it?"

Glea took up position on a cushion nearby, where she could watch the Sikal and discuss things. "I don't yet know if Mama and Papa will allow it, but if they will, yes, I'm willing to go. But, I think there are things I'm going to need to know. Even with hiding my weapons, I'm too far from helpless to seem like a normal prisoner. I need to know how to behave, how to keep them from realizing I'm more than I look to be. Even another chakur child isn't as strong as I am, or as fast. I can hide my divine radiance, but I think there's more I need to do."

Pharel nodded from where they sat, "That is true. It will require skill from you, as well as patience. You will have to temper your usual directness, be willing to accept abuse, in order to avoid arousing their suspicions. I can show you the types of children you must mimic, give you an understanding of how they move, how they talk. I would suggest you limit your speech to Pundi and Trade, perhaps even making Trade seem awkward on your tongue. Do not give any indication that you know even a word of Toyurasan. Such knowledge would make them wonder at you. Atil is far from the mountains; you might get away with a phrase or two in chakuri, but remember that the dialect that you speak is not modern, and might cause confusion if someone does know that language."

Glea took a moment for that to sink in. She was educated, well educated, even, and as Pharel hinted, that would give her away faster even than her divine strength and speed. It would take more effort, in many ways, to hide that training and education than it would to hide her physical prowess. Railah had already started training her in surprising enemies by seeming less capable than she was. She knew enough not to walk with the warrior's stride she'd learned in Akhshar.

"I will need you to show me. It will take a few days, in mortal time, for you to show me everything, but I need to know it. I need to you help me take on the role I must wear." She was not unwilling to admit when she didn't know something. Glea might have pride in her heritage, in her parents and her own gifts, but she did not feel any awkwardness asking for information she did not possess.

Pharel smiled. They had never had a more intentionally willing student than this demi-divine child. Glea knew how to defend herself, but wanted to know the things that would make her fully take on the role she must wear. But then again, Glea was the only one of their students who knew truly what Pharel was, and understood the reason for the lessons. "Very well. Prepare your mind, and I will show you. It won't be pleasant. But you've endured other types of unpleasantness in the past. The point in this is that you must endure it, not striking back, not revealing yourself at any point, not unless you must to save yourself or the other children."

Glea nodded, "I understand that. That's the part Papa won't like. I'm not to strike back, for any reason short of warding off serious injury to myself or someone else. Can I use other methods to stop them?"

Pharel chuckled in approval, "There are many options open to street children that do not involve fighting. A shout to distract someone from hitting another, appearing weak and nonthreatening when you're in danger. All of these things are useful tactics. You can, even, to some small extent use your own divine gifts. A broken lace on clothing, a strap that breaks, none of these things will reveal you, and serve as distractions to avoid harm. They may curse their bad luck, but usually will not strike for more than a warning, so long as you do not challenge them. Jirel has told me that she suggested that you can manipulate time enough to open a lock without revealing yourself. The same goes to causing ropes to fray, doors to open, and other such things. Do so carefully, not allowing it to be obvious what you just did, and you will have greater freedom than the other children, without having to step between places."

Pharel carefully extended a tendril of their thought, meeting no resistance within Glea's mind. Glea had far more training in dealing with mindspeakers than any other they had worked with. Showing her the behaviors and attitudes she needed would be far simpler than it would be a child on the streets, especially since on the mortal plane, Pharel never revealed themselves for what they were. They began carefully, by visualizing the streets of the city, the clutter of the marketplace. Slowly they pointed out where the children hid, moving from place to place trying to pick up scraps. They demonstrated with memories how these children moved, their instinctive flinches at harsh words from adults, the constant state of wariness in their eyes. To become a street child, even for a short time, would require her to lose her confidence, her absolute aura of capability.

Glea took in the knowledge, memorizing it as it was being presented to her. Ti-Khala training gave her mastery enough to recognize and file away the differences between herself and these helpless

children. She would have to erase those differences, truly become helpless for a time. And, though she did not like admitting it, keeping her weapons, even shielded by invisibility, would hinder her assumption of that role. No, this was something she would not tell her Papa, but she would go truly unarmed. She would not be helpless, but she would be as close to it as she could manage.

Pharel continued speaking while they showed Glea the images, seemingly unconcerned with Glea's decision, though she did not doubt that the little gnoroi had noticed it. "It would not be bad to fake a weakness to cover for your strengths. They will assume that you're faking, but that's to your advantage. They won't realize how much you're hiding in that act. A turned ankle, perhaps, bruises even, if you can manage that disguise, will go far to making you look less like what you are."

Glea's expression turned contemplative. "I probably can. There were several times I'd gotten hurt when practicing with Uncle Arandel. I can pull that echo. It may make me about two years younger, for that time, but it would not be that noticeable a difference for me. The injuries will actually hurt, and that can cover for me. If you're right, they won't think to examine more than to see that there are actual injuries."

Pharel smiled, intent upon the images they were showing, "I had forgotten that for you, those injuries could be real. That is a better disguise than I could arrange. They wouldn't hinder you any more than you'd need them to, and it will keep them from guessing the truth. The bruises you are looking at wouldn't give away the weapon used?"

Glea thought a moment, "Actually, there are times Aunt Railah has injured me, short periods of time, that might be even better. Aunt Railah's skill is enough that it doesn't look like a sword hit me. And while I can deal with the pain, it will give me reasons to be careful, as if they were serious injuries. It will be harder to be properly frightened of adults, but I think I can fake it."

Pharel smiled, "Let me show you more of how to do it, and show you the reasons that these children fear the adults. The reasons for that fear might be enough to elicit it within you, when you need to show fear. We have days before you will be allowed, if Jirel convinces your parents. During that time, you will train, pick out the injuries you need to recall, and learn the ways in which a street child survives a hostile world. You have been protected overmuch for this, but I believe you can do it."

The mortal hours passed while the two immortals conversed, Pharel always showing Glea where her mentality was wrong, and how better to respond to some of these situations. It was possible, later, when Glea came into her own fully as a noble and a demi-divine that she might be able to find ways to help the street children, and a good part of that help would come from understanding exactly how they lived.

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Lisor returned to the heavens after installing Han Lo in the Scales and Balance in Atil. He was not quite drained of his energies yet, but knew that he could not easily get started on his own investigation without other preparations, most of which would occur within the heavens. He would need to arrange to change his silver-grey uniform for something more muted, less obvious. Even traditional Finder dark grey would turn away the attention from him, allowing him to act with more impunity. While he could move about the city cloaked with the magic that hid him from all view, to use that magic, especially for a long stretch of time, would drain his energies rapidly, leaving him less time that he would actually be of use. No, for this, he would need a disguise, and he knew that he could convince his Lady to allow that. She would understand when the role of consort would be detrimental, and the role of mere Finder more appropriate.

He appeared within the central chamber within his Lady's quarters, and was surprised to find that she was not here. He had two easy ways of locating her, and decided on the former. He walked to a scrying basin and went through the ritual to bring up a vision of her. Her location surprised him, a

room that he'd never been in before, but one that mirrored in many ways the cottage in the Last Steading of the Gods, filled with a huge loom and spinning wheel. Though he knew that her hands had long plied the craft of weaving and sewing, he had only once before seen her working with the skills she'd used before becoming a goddess. She could have used her power to merely create the clothing items necessary, but, it would seem, she took pride in making them herself. It was a quality that was endearing, making her seem more real to him. She was more than his Goddess, but his love, and a woman who took pride in her crafts.

Taking a breath, he focused on the image in the water then stepped between places, appearing in the clear spot behind her, while she sat working the shuttle back and forth through the threads. "Lady, it would seem that you have anticipated my need."

"Not only thy own need, Chosen, but that of our daughter as well. She will return to the world with Pharel, once the gnoroi Sikal deems her adequate to the task before her. The clothing she wears, which is appropriate for a daughter of Akhshar, is too fine to allow her to be mistaken for aught but a noblewoman. I would rather the rags she wears have some extra durability, a means to protect her some, from the pain she will take on herself. She has a motivation to make a difference, much like that which drew me to thou. I have pride in her courage, as I have had pride in thine before."

Lisor stepped forward, resting his hands on her shoulders as she continued to work the loom. Whether it was because of divine intention or merely her great skill, the cloth seemed to be appearing far more quickly than he would have expected. Dust colored cloth, likely for a simple outfit, a half-robe and trousers, perhaps. As he watched her, he recognized that there was something darker, on the table beyond the end of the loom. "Mine is already prepared?"

"Yes, Chosen. Thou must be anonymous, and this bears not the symbols of thy service, save in the color I favor for my servants. Thou will not carry openly a mirror, as once thou might have. Thy pendant will still allow thee the access to the more advanced scrying gifts. Thou will have thy daggers, but must try not to attract attention to thyself. Thy face was known to many, when thou lived still in Akhshar; there may still be those who travel the roads who might recognize thee. Where possible, allow thy ally to make contacts, only listen and follow the threads that thou see. Until thou have the names and visages that thou will need, giving indication that any are interested in this band might have unintended, and disastrous, consequences. That means that thou must not rush this. Our daughter is capable, and will not remain in danger. Perhaps, once thou have changed, thou should go to speak with her?"

Lisor smiled and bent to kiss his Goddess. "I will do so. And, because you are right that she is making decisions I can have pride in, I will not pressure her to change her intents. It is very difficult to allow her this, though I know she's perfectly capable of changing the situation in an instant, if she needs to. It is hard to let go. My mother knew that, and Arandel and Quanild pointed this out to me. I need to make sure she has the chance to make decisions that matter. But, that doesn't mean that I won't be doing everything possible to shorten the amount of time she's hiding there."

He walked past the loom to pull the clothes from the table. With no one here save his Goddess, and she had seen his form unclothed many times now, he had no hesitation with changing his attire, carefully folding and setting aside his silver-grey finery. It was an odd feeling, slipping back into the non-descript dark grey leathers, the style he'd worn for so many years before accepting his position as Sikal to Lady Night. He hadn't been used in his role as a Finder officially since that point. Always it was the role of Consort, save only when he acted on his own understanding, and did as Railah asked, though he feared it would anger his own Goddess. That was the only time since then that he'd really felt that he was in the position he'd trained so long for. And now, for a time, it would be his again.

The clothing was loose enough for a wide range of motion. While he had needed this ability before, it was now almost imperative to have that mobility. Practice sessions with Railah and Vythen had focused on improving his natural abilities beyond their original potential. With heavenly energies,

and lots of practice, he realized he could improve far more than he'd ever imagined before. Though his initial practice sessions with the two gods had been painful and frustrating, he realized quickly that by paying attention to the secondary lessons they were teaching, the primary came more easily. Mostly this revolved around recognizing truths about that which surrounded him. If he recognized how things came together, he could better anticipate events and have an answer to any change.

A glance through the threads of the tapestry of fate located Glea and Pharel, in the garden that he'd often seen the little gnoroi in. A quick step between places found him in the courtyard that held so many planters. Jirel had many such small pockets of greenery in the heavens, and Lisor suspected that all of the immortals here actually visited these from time to time for the peace that was present in them. Glea was sitting cross legged on a cushion to his right. Pharel was actually sitting in a patch of grass, their tiny feet tucked under them. Both looked up at his arrival, and he could see a look pass between them, the same sort of look that had long passed between him and Isala, while his brother was yet partnered to the ghostly knight. There was some secret here, something he would not be involved in.

Very well, he wouldn't press it. Arandel and Quanild had hinted that he needed to learn to trust to his daughter's good sense. She was very sensible, usually thinking things through before acting, though injustice would flare her temper. There were times it would cause his own to flare, though he'd had longer to learn to control it. "Glea, your mother suggested I come to speak with you. Are there any plans you're working on that you're willing to share with me?"

She didn't answer immediately, and he guessed she was taking her time to judge her knowledge of his protectiveness before revealing anything. "I'm learning how to be a street rat, Papa. I have to learn how hard it is for them to live, how to at least look afraid of adults, trying to learn how to make that fear real enough to not make me obvious. This is hard, because I've never really understood fear. Even in Ahila'dahr, there was simply no choice. I had to keep moving, do what was needed. Even if I was afraid, it wouldn't matter, there was nothing else I could do. But in this, I have to try to understand fear, have to be helpless."

He looked down, "I think I can understand how hard that is for you. You were taught, from the first, absolute trust, in your family, and in yourself. But, it will be different this time. You have to try to not use your abilities, and simply endure. Healing others a little bit, from time to time, might be all right, as long as you're careful about it, but, much as I don't like it, healing yourself would probably be a bad move. Weakness and pain aren't a liability here, but your strength. I've learned that I have limits, but I'm not sure you've learned where yours are. Perhaps," he tried to remember the events that had left him truly helpless, "You need to ask your Aunt Railah, and Grandfather Vythen, to try to teach you those limits, quickly. It won't be pleasant; it would probably be more painful for you than it was for me, but they can do it, if anyone can. They're the ones who truly taught me about points I couldn't continue, and had to find another way."

Glea looked up, "You've never told me about those times."

He shook his head, "I didn't feel I needed to. The first was with Railah. It was when I was guessing at what she intended to do, and guessed wrong. She took a practice session to remind me of exactly how little I truly knew, questioning me as we fought, and merely demonstrating her superiority at every turn. Her intent was to show the difference between us, and that I will always have a lot to learn, and cannot judge her, or any of the gods. She made it clear to me that day that my natural instincts to manipulate situations are not always a good answer, and that I must allow others to decide their own responses, not try to force the ones I want.

"Grandfather Vythen, on the other hand, merely wanted me to know that, even among the heavens, my power was not limitless, and, with time and effort, my resilience will be depleted. He did that just shortly before our battle. Railah may be the better combatant, but Grandfather has a very distinct attitude when teaching that lesson that is effective. Mostly because, even if you know that he is

lessoning you on something, there is a part of his personality that simply makes you wonder if he will actually always abide by the rules of the council. Railah's blade teaches lessons; Grandfather's is intended to leave you vulnerable."

Glea nodded, "I might have to ask them. I will need them to push me, not to the edge of my comfort, but beyond. What Pharel says is that I have to learn not only respect, but fear, to make my disguise work. Otherwise, I'll actually be hurting myself too much."

Lisor stepped over to put his arms around her. "It's not pleasant. And, I should have known that you'd have to reach this lesson at some point. Do you want me to go with you, to ask Grandfather for this lesson? "

She shook her head, "I don't think I want you to see this, Papa. You're going to have a hard enough time with me doing these things already; if you don't remember that I can take care of myself, you'll not be able to do what you need to do. And seeing me get to that point of helplessness will make it difficult for you to remember what I can do."

"Very well, Glea. And, in a way, I thank you. You know some of my limits almost better than I do. Yes, it will be hard just investigating, knowing that you're suffering, even if you choose that suffering."

She reached up and held his hand where it lay on her shoulder for a moment. "You've done this before, Papa, in much the same way. You've told me that story, and so has Uncle Helkar. I can do it too. It's just going to take a bit longer this time."

He knew what she meant. She was referring to the time he'd been treated as a criminal by the people of Tiha'el, when he was trying to lead a diplomatic caravan to the south. Yes, it was much the same sort of thing, though the abuse there was much subtler. He just hoped Jirel had been right in thinking that these slavers didn't want to actually damage their 'wares', only intimidate them into obedience.

"I'll let you go, then. I need to see what information I can get from the pattern. Once you're ready, your mother has clothing that she's prepared, things that won't give away your status. Just make sure to let me know when you are ready to leave, please."

"I will, Papa. Now, go, your research is just as important as my work."

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Glea appeared in the training hall, knowing instinctively that if she sent out the need for her Grandfather Vythen to speak with her, he'd know it, and respond. She hadn't ever spent much time training with him thus far, but knew that her father did. He typically said little about his training, though there was occasionally a shadow of pain to his gaze after such an experience. It hadn't made sense until he told her that Vythen had taught him the true measure of helplessness. That would not be an easy thing to do, and yet, that was exactly what she wanted her divine ancestor to do.

Vythen stepped out of the aethyr near her, clad as ever in viridian and black robes, a scimitar riding at his belt. "Thou have need of me, Granddaughter?"

She bowed; light armor did not work well for curtseying. "Yes, Grandfather. I am going into a situation where I need to know something I have never experienced, and Papa told me that you might be the one to teach it. I will be pretending to be a street child, allowing myself to be captured so that I can help the kidnapped children until Papa and the others can locate who's running the slaving gang and deal with them. I am supposed to be helpless, frightened, but I have never reached that point before. Will you teach me what I need to know to take on this role?"

He studied her for a moment, "If thou wish this lesson, there will be rules that thou must abide, and be willing to suffer a ward to force such obedience. Thou will not teleport during the length of the engagement, nor use thy abilities with time to heal thyself or to attack me or my weapon. As well, no

others will aid thee, or call for me to stop. The engagement will go on until I deem thou have learned the lesson, not merely until thou are uncomfortable and tired."

She thought a moment, "Those are basically the rules that I'd have to live by during the mission, aren't they? There is a chance for subtle use of my abilities there, but, by and far, I can't do anything that would demonstrate my nature, anything that would let on that they are being watched. I think I can do it."

"Thy assessment is correct; those are generally the rules thou must follow, the last being critical. When thou will go to the mortal plane for this, discomfort, boredom, frustration and such must not allow thee to think that thou may simply quit. Thou must endure to the end, whatever end that might be."

She considered that, then walked to the edge of a practice circle, "I am ready, Grandfather. I will abide by your rules."

He raised a hand, laying the ward that she'd agreed to. "Then, let us begin." He stepped into the ring, and immediately moved to attack, catching her on the arm even as she was pulling loose one of her axes, causing her to drop and roll to retrieve it. That hurt.

Although his movements and attacks were quick and often, she realized quickly that he was playing with her. None of her attacks landed, though; with as much as she still needed to know, this did not surprise her. But he would move in and strike, then out of her way until she'd wearied herself in the attempt, before striking again. Each cut of his scimitar was painful, and the pain did not lessen as time went by. Now and again, he'd remind her that no one was going to step in, and point out that she had yet to land a blow on him. The latter may have been meant to anger her, force her into uncalculated action, but the former had an entirely different effect. For the first time, she didn't have either her father or her uncle at her back. She was alone, against an opponent that was far superior to her, and the feeling left her uncertain of her moves. It was clumsiness not only of her body, but of her mind.

She attacked regularly, trying to land a strike, though she knew that the real intent of this practice was not her axe skill, but to show her how she could feel, completely alone, and up against someone who was stronger or faster than she was. This was how the children felt when faced with a hostile adult. They had no one at their back, and knew that nothing they could do would have any effects. And, as she took hit after hit without any successes of her own, she began to understand what her father had said, and what her divine Grandfather was doing. He was proving her helplessness.

A blow fell across her shoulders, knocking her forward with a gasp. It was painful, but a sting rather than what felt like a cut. As she staggered to block, another came out. "That is the feeling that would come from a whip, often used against captives who are disobedient. Thou must learn to recognize that pain, and know that there are those who would chain a captive and inflict such pains intentionally, when the captive has no choice but to endure." His words were calm even as he moved almost effortlessly around her attacks. The stings weren't debilitating, but, they had an impact on her that she hadn't realized before. She could do nothing to stop them, and knew they would only stop when he felt she had learned the lesson. Just as the beatings would only stop in a slave camp when the slavers thought that the captive had learned, or that the others watching had learned what not to do.

Every blow left her less capable of warding off others. She staggered, fell more than once, and the attacks did not cease. She knew that he was playing with her. She had no way to defend herself properly, and she would admit to that. If begging would do any good, she might be willing to do that. But he'd told her that things would continue until he saw fit to stop them. His foot lashed out in front of her, dropping her to the ground again. She tried to roll forward, back to her feet, but had lost the agility and strength to do so from the innumerable blows that she'd taken. She fell face down, on the ground, and did not move more than to claw at the dirt below her fingers.



A few more choice blows fell upon her, across her back, and one across the backs of her legs. Then he stood back. "Rise, Glea." His words were a firm command, not angry, not hateful, but a command anyhow.

She struggled to rise to her knees, then, with a series of coughs, to her feet. She did not turn toward him, but stood there, unarmed, and knowing that she could do nothing. "I can't go on, Grandfather."

His words held a bit of gentleness as he stepped up behind her. "That was clear before thou fell. Thou tried greatly, but realized only when thy body would go no further that thou have true weaknesses. Even now, the effort to stand is nearly beyond thee. If I were to give another strike, thou would not be able to bear it without crying out. I deem that thou have learned the lesson, though, perhaps, the vocalization of such pain would give thee some relief from what thou bear." He very carefully, gently, touched her, and the feelings of pain and weakness faded, though they did not vanish entirely. "Retrieve thy axes, Granddaughter."

She bent to pick them up where they had fallen, relief evident in her expression that she could actually move, though the shadow of pain that was still with her left her stiff and unwilling to do much. "I did not understand, truly, what some within this world suffer, not before, even with Pharel's visions. Thank you." Even with the beginnings of understanding fear, she realized that this lesson was useful to her. It opened up an entire new world of understanding to her. She'd been told before that she was very lucky. Her mortal family was truly dedicated to love and justice. Until she had experienced the helplessness, hearing the words from Vythen as he struck her, she couldn't comprehend the lives of so many other people. She knew that she more than didn't like that treatment. She wanted to make sure that it didn't continue, against anyone.

He waited for her to turn to look at him before speaking again. "Pharel relayed to me that thou would need, and be willing to bear, injuries that would make thy status more believable. I have left such on thee. It is better that than for thou to try to reacquire such from thy past, for none would quite match thy story as these. There are other things to be wary of, but, for thy sake, I will send something from my realm to protect thee from the worst of that. It is something that, if thy father truly considered thy state, he would have asked for. Thou have not developed enough in certain ways that I deem this to be a likely threat, though there will be something hidden to act should that threat manifest itself. Now, go to thy parents, and finalize thy plans. For I deem that Pharel may well have recovered their energies, and will be ready to bring thee to where thou must be. They will watch thee, guide thee into the trap."

She hooked her axes into her belt then did something he did not expect. Even with her aches and pains, she stepped up and wrapped her arms around him, squeezing the god into a hug. "Even though it hurts, I know you mean me the best, Grandfather. Thank you." Then she stepped back, and moved between places back to her mother's quarters.

Glea appeared in the room that her mother had made for her, a small chamber designed to remind her as much of her mortal home as possible. The walls only faintly glowed, enhanced by a separate glow lamp that she could adjust at will, and there was a large chest at the foot of her bed where clothing would be stored. Being by nature an immortal, and in the heavens where she belonged, Glea did not often use that bed, save when she wanted to spend time thinking things through carefully. It simply was not needed. While she was here, she required no sustenance, and no rest, only occasional times of meditation. But, she certainly appreciated the gesture.

It would be different when she went to the mortal plane. There, she would again need to rest and eat, something that would make this task before her a greater challenge. She would need to conserve her energies as much as possible, because food, even if the slavers made certain of semi-regular meals, would not be as much, or as good, as what she was used to. And rest would leave her vulnerable. She knew now that Vythen would send one of his creatures to watch her, protect her, but

she would still be vulnerable to some things. The serpent would only step in if whatever conditions Vythen gave it were met, and she wasn't certain she understood yet what those conditions might be.

She opened the trunk to see if the things her mother had made her had been brought here yet. To her pleasure, they had been. They didn't look good, by her standards, but that was for the best. The cloth was a dirty tan, seemingly of undyed wool, though she doubted that was completely true. Her mother could simulate almost any type of material for fabric with her power, and no doubt this was more resilient than it appeared. It looked a bit better than what she'd seen on the street children in Pharel's mind, but suspected that the little gnoroi could give her a good story to cover for the not quite so ragged apparel. Even, perhaps, one that was at least mostly truth.

She quickly stripped out of her tunic and trousers, folding them and setting them aside, and pulled on the new clothing. It itched a bit, scratching at the minor cuts and bruises that Vythen had left her with. Before, in the nicer clothing, she had not felt the injuries as much, but now, they were readily apparent, not extraordinarily painful, but mostly irritating, which was probably his intent. She would be just slightly off balance and uncomfortable, enough to help remind her of her own weaknesses and vulnerabilities. The half-robe was tied on, and belted with a strip of braided cord. As she looked at the clothing, she noticed that there were already markings on it of hard wear, stains here and there, including what looked to be the marks of blood. Her mother had prepared her well. She was going to put on her soft boots again then decided against it. Her feet, though long used to wearing shoes, were reasonably tough, and she could survive barefoot. Or, perhaps, if she asked, she could be given sandals, which would mesh better with the image she was trying to convey.

She did not take her axes off of the pile she'd made of her normal clothing. Even if her father argued, she would not take them. She needed the vulnerability, and going unarmed prepared that. She could, if it came to it, when her father made the assault on the slaver camp itself, fight at his side unarmed. She knew her strength now, and had learned a few techniques that would overmatch a weaker person, and even Arandel was only her equal in strength now, no longer superior.

Now was the part she really hated to do, but she felt it was necessary. She unbraided her long black hair and pulled a knife, haphazardly cutting it to a little past her shoulders, with ragged strokes. She could return herself to her prior state with ease, and the ragged look, especially if it got knotted and matted, would appear quite like what she'd be expected to be. Otherwise, the shiny tresses would be noteworthy for their length and neatness. Street children did not have the luxury of regular baths or brushes.

When she'd finished, doing the entire process without a vision of herself, she risked a look in the mirror that hung in this chamber. It hadn't been clean, and she hated the look, but, it was what she needed, more even a cut than she'd feared, but still not nice. She also realized that her face was already smudged with dirt, and that there was a trace of blood along her collarbone. Her practice with her divine ancestor had given her more than she'd realized, for her disguise would work reasonably well as she now was, so long as she remembered the lesson he'd taught her. And she promised herself that she would.

As ready as she could be, she stepped between places to the central chamber in her mother's quarters, ready to see if she would be able to convince her father that his earlier permission was correct. There was still a chance that he would balk, especially seeing her now, but she had to trust that he had the sense to understand why she needed to do this. His own abilities to return to the mortal plane were too limited, and the children needed succor while his investigation continued. She needed to be down there, no matter how painful or shameful it may feel.

Lisor looked up from his scrying device and studied Glea. It burned in him to see her like that, though he'd promised himself that he would restrain his natural protective instincts. He would not order her to restore herself to her earlier state, and he would not attempt to forbid her going. The ragged mess she'd made of her hair tore at him, for it was one feature she'd always shared with her

mother, the long tresses like black silk. He noticed the bruise on her cheek from when she'd fallen, the faint edge of a recent cut across the top of her shoulder, where the robe did not completely cover it. Pharel had hinted to him that she would need injuries, to make the disguise work, but he wanted to say that these were too much. Wanted to say it, but did not. "I see you are nearly ready, Glea." He measured his words carefully, trying to control his fear and his rage over the necessity of this deception.

She managed an awkward curtsey, catching herself as the back of her leg stung with the movement. "I am, Papa. I will need to see Pharel before I go, as they will have decided the best way for me to do this. Grandfather Vythen decided on the level of my injuries. He said they'd be enough to remind me of what he was teaching. He told me something else, but I didn't understand it, only that he would be keeping watch to keep me safe from something."

Lisor arched a brow at that last, for he hadn't considered asking for Vythen's help in anything other than teaching her what she was determined to know. "Perhaps, once you are in the mortal world, I will speak with him, try to see what he had seen that I have not. Pharel is here already," he gestured to a small seat beyond the basin he was standing at. The little gnoroi was dressed as usual, a simple robe of spring green, feet bare.

Pharel stood up and paced over toward Glea, studying her. "The attire is clearly not as ragged as that of many such children, but that is not an impossible thing to get around, and, perhaps, Lisor will help us give you an alibi that will be completely truthful. You were travelling with your father and got separated, he 'vanished' and you haven't been able to find him. He can go with us, and then leave, starting on his own task, certainly checking in with the mortal who is helping him."

They tugged out at the robe, situating it a little better on her, "In fact, that is perhaps the best thing. They might ask you about your family, to see if someone's likely to come after you quickly, but when it's clear that you're separated, they'll take you anyhow. Your physical strength would make you extremely valuable to the trade, and your durability is something they'd prize. Remember what I'd said, and keep your speech limited, perhaps even sullen. If they realize you're smart and educated, they'll grow suspicious. As long as you look like you're not willing to talk much, whether frightened or angry, they won't think that you can do anything against them."

Lisor stepped away from the basin, wiping his hands reflexively against his dark leathers. "I would be ready to go now. I haven't gotten any leads yet merely by scrying, so I'm hoping Han Lo will have something for me. We'll be appearing near the marketplace?"

"Near, but not in. There is a safe place to appear and take leave of each other. Then Glea and I will step within places again, to another place, and Glea will begin her act. Lisor, you must not try to watch her directly. Your Lady will keep us abreast of what she experiences, and what she learns. For you to watch her would risk much, for you are too close, too easily overcome with worry."

Pharel sent both of the other immortals an image of the place they meant, a hidden cul-de-sac between rickety buildings. They had already scryed it to make sure it would be empty at this time, and they all stepped between spaces to the narrow area. There wasn't much room, but it would be enough for father and daughter to say their farewells. "Papa, I'll be strong. I have to be, there are children counting on me."

Lisor forced a smile and kissed her forehead, holding her for a long moment, "Just be careful, whatever you do. You are divinely hardy, but I don't want you hurt any more than you must be."

She nodded, squeezing him so tightly that it was hard to breathe. "I will be, Papa. Now, go, meet Han Lo; find out what you need to." She stepped back and looked to Pharel, then vanished. Lisor spent only a moment searching out the threads of fate to see that she hadn't gone far then moved himself into a small courtyard not far from the Scales and Balance inn. With a firm step, he walked toward the inn, hoping to catch his ally during the heat of the day, when anyone who could, rested.

His walk into the common room of the inn conveyed a confidence he did not feel. He had skill, and would normally not hesitate a bit on this, but he now knew that his daughter would be walking into

a trap, knowingly, and prepared, but still walking into a trap. Looking around, he spotted the silks of his ally, and moved to settle down next to him, waving to the waitress for a mug of tea, one of the side benefits of staying in a primarily Railahn hostelry that he hadn't thought of. Tea would be better than ale or wine; though neither affected him in the way they would most anymore. His immunity to poisons made the effects of any drug, including alcohol, far less.

Lisor kept his conversation purely neutral, asking about Han Lo's travels, his experiences over the past ten years, at least where most could tell. Despite the irrelevant prattle he did openly, he was discussing the news of their search with the Toyurasan through the latter's mindspeech. ~I've just dropped off Glea, and Pharel expects to have her captive within the day. Have you come up with any leads so far?~ It had been at least four days on the mortal world since Lisor had left his companion here, plenty of time to get the beginnings of a lead or two.

Han Lo mentioned spending time with his adopted daughter, though he carefully avoided her name. If anything could damn him quickly on this mission, it would be any indication of who he was, or truly, who she was. He'd left Toyurasi behind to protect Sun Xae from the treatment she would doubtless find at the hands of his people. It had meant exile for him, for to return to Toyurasi empty-handed after finding a Rasi survivor would have meant at least exile, and possibly death. Indeed, a few years after he'd settled in Sharlan as one of Sun Xae's appointed guardians, there had been assassins sent. They hadn't counted on the fact that Sharlan was essentially a training ground for fighters, priests, and mages of all kinds; the assassins had been returned to the Toyurasan Emperor in pieces, with the firm message from the rulers of the Two Kingdoms that such were not tolerated within the bounds of either Karyn or the Crystal Kingdom. Han Lo realized then that there was no chance of ever returning safely, at least not to anywhere he would be recognized. While his name itself would not arouse interests, so far as he avoided Tovala, where he had grown up, any association with House Tsarek would spell his doom.

~I've made contact with a few of my people in the market, who are ostensibly there as a part of a merchant's cartel. They have so far avoided mentioning what they're looking to buy, but I've watched them keep an eye on the children. I will watch from a distance and try to see who they contact, and see if I can get my hands on some token that they have.~

Lisor openly chatted amiably about his daughter, talking about her learning more than merely axe-work at the hand of her aunt. ~I would expect this to take a few layers. One of which might be the drugs that Pharel has said the children are dosed with. While they might be bringing that stuff from Toyurasi itself, it would make more sense if it is made locally. If you can disarm their suspicions by questions that would indicate an interest in the drug trade, it might convince them to let you into their circle. Your presence would be explained, and you would have a greater access to any tokens that might indicate who is in charge, on either side.~

~That is a good idea, and shouldn't be hard to do. I've let on that I work as an independent factor, arranging trades between various groups. There are a lot of Toyurasan who do that in various cities, and it won't raise their suspicions. If I indicate I'm working for someone who might be interested in drugs, I might get better answers. At the very least, I'd likely find their source, and from there, things can be traced indirectly.~

Lisor nodded absently and sipped his tea. It still felt strange to him, eating and drinking, which he only did in the mortal world. There was no need for sustenance in the heavens, and he tended to forget about such needs between his short journeys to the earth again. ~I'll try to find out from the guard where they're getting their orders from. It may take some play acting, but I should be able to handle that end of it. I know enough of how the guard is run, from my years helping my father, that it shouldn't be too difficult.~

Han Lo excused himself, saying that he had to get back to his work in the Market. That was clearly the signal to go. Lisor finished off his tea and stood up, following the Toyurasan out into the

street. But they did not stay together. Where Han Lo headed toward the marketplace, Lisor found himself a street vendor and purchased a basket of dates. These he took with him as he hunted for a guard station.

Taking the basket of dates into the guard station, he moved forward to the desk and set down the basket. He didn't look quite like a normal desert dweller, but could probably pass for the son of a trader or craftsman. He forced a warm smile onto his face and bowed to the watch officer. "I have brought gifts, as a thank you for the help of one of your guards. My daughter went missing from me for a time yesterday, and one of your guards found her for me. They said she was following an easterner." He kept his language to a rough version of Trade, allowing it to sound heavily accented with Pundi.

The watch officer managed to flinch at that statement. "Do you know who it is that helped you?"

Lisor shook his head, trying to sound still like a very happy parent, "No, it was merely someone in the uniform of the guard. He said that a lot of children go missing, but he was happy to help me."

The guardsman nodded, and took one of the dates to eat while mulling things over. "I will pass on the news, then, that you are happy with the guard, and share these fruits with my fellows, of course."

Lisor bowed again, "Thank you, for the guard has been very good to me and my family." He moved out of the station, stepping into the lee of a building and summoning his invisibility. He knew he couldn't do this long, but, he didn't expect to have to. There would be a messenger sent, probably within a half-candlemark, and Lisor intended to find out where they were going.

He was right. Within only a few minutes, the watch officer poked his head out and called for a messenger, from the many that were milling through the street. Lisor waited while the watch officer handed him a paper, and set a mental trace on that paper, so that he'd be able to track it, even if it got waylaid. Then he followed, at a distance, but close enough to see the messenger, finding them entering into a large building, likely either a banker's consortium, or a series of offices for city clerks. He carefully followed the next person to go in, so that he wasn't caught opening the doors while invisible. The messenger was no longer visible, but Lisor could follow the mark he'd set upon the paper.

He wove his way through the offices to try to find where the message had been sent. There, to his right, that was the place. He found the message dropped on the desk of a minor clerk, but one who, apparently served one of the city's councilmen. The letter was shoved into a pile with other paperwork, and, though Lisor would have loved to have had the chance to read it, he knew that he could not, without giving himself away, and that could have more dire consequences. Instead, he noted the pattern of the clerk, memorized the signature for the letter, and returned to the heavens. It might take days for him to get the answers he needed, and he had to be patient, even though his heart told him he didn't want to be.

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Glea ached when she came out of her stupor. As Pharel had guessed, it hadn't taken long for her to fall under scrutiny of the Toyurasan slavers. What's more, it seemed, from a faint image of the past she'd picked up, that the slavers hadn't had to pick her out at all; one of the guards had pointed her out, according to the echo of time she'd caught as she accepted what was supposed to be a piece of candy by the Toyurasan who had 'befriended' her. She marked the face from the memory in her mind. She'd relay it to her mother when they communed this evening, while she slept. She knew she had to play along, and accept the drug, though she trusted that with her divine constitution, drugs like this would have little effect on her.

It had left her a little mind-fogged, feeling lazy and comfortable. For that period of time, the aches from the punishment she'd caught from Vythen seemed to vanish, though she knew they were still there, and her muscles didn't like to move quite as quickly or steadily as she normally would. But none of that seemed to matter for the moment. She could feel a thought tickle at the back of her mind,

but did not mention it. All she did was follow the man who'd given her candy, the man who'd promised her more food when they reached his home. But, the inner voice that was still awake in her cautioned that was exactly what she was supposed to do.

She was beginning to return to herself when she, the two Toyurasan men, and one other child made their way into the camp a little way away from the city of Atil. She had recovered her senses enough to recognize that there was magic on the pen as she was shoved roughly into it. There were more than a dozen other children here, though still likely not enough for a full caravan, though smaller ones might take a few of the children eastward from time to time, probably the ones that the slavers thought they could get the most benefit out of sending onward. She staggered further into the pen, nearly falling as she began to regain the sense of pain she'd forgotten earlier. Her feet were entirely unused to this abuse, and her legs still stung from the final swipe that Vythen had left. One of the Toyurasan had entered the pen with her, and with the other child. He held something, some sort of wand, in one hand, and gestured for the other children to stand back, while he inspected their new acquisitions.

He bid Glea and the other one, a young boy to stand still, while he inspected them. The boy was very slight, doubtless underweight, and seemed not to have as much clarity as she had. Judging from his reactions, Glea decided to try to make it look like she was still in a stupor as well. The Toyurasan pulled at their ragged clothing, but only enough to see their physical fitness and general health. Glea could feel the throbbing of her back and shoulder; she wanted to lie down and heal herself, but she knew that she couldn't, not now.

The Toyurasan spouted off a torrent of words to one of the others outside the pen, of which, she understood maybe a quarter. But it seemed like he was relaying their status, and likely uses, to someone who would make judgments on them. As he pulled her to stand straighter, he barked out a word or two in trade, clearly asking her about her family.

Pharel's words returned to her, and she took on a sullen look, "Mama was chakur. Was travelling with Papa, lost him in city." She kept her words in as broken a dialect as she could, but also kept up just enough defiance to make him focus on her. She swayed a bit unsteadily on her feet, but curled her hands into fists, trying to take on the part Pharel had coached her on.

The Toyurasan rattled off a few more syllables to his comrade then grabbed her chin, forcing her to look up at him as he turned his focus entirely on her. "You will not hold that attitude for long, little chakur. I've never seen a half-breed like you before, but you'll learn the same lessons the others do. You're stronger than most of the others and that will be good. Just know, there will be no escape, and, if you defy us, you will be punished."

Without releasing her chin, he lifted his other hand and struck her across the cheek. She stumbled backward, pulling out of his hand, and fell. But, he merely nodded, backing his way out to the edge of the pen, and leaving it when one of his fellows opened it. It was only after he had turned away from the pen that any of the other children moved forward. A few minutes later, small hands wrapped themselves around her arm, trying to shake her back toward clarity.

A soft voice whispered in her ear, speaking Pundi, though the accent clearly meant the speaker was familiar with Trade too. "Be careful. They want to break you. If you fight openly, you'll end up like Hassif. We will fight them, when the time is right, but for now, we need to pretend."

Glea rubbed absently at her cheek, remembering for a moment when her father had been struck like that, though, by his own admission, he'd earned such a response. Perhaps, in this case, so had she. "Hassif?" Glea muttered, keeping her voice low.

The small figure at her side pointed across to the other side of the pen, where a boy, almost a man, was curled up in a ball. He didn't look like he'd been injured, but she couldn't tell from here. "What happened to him?"

"He's tried fighting, to get back to his tribe. He doesn't know if any of them survived or not, and was worried about his betrothed. He's attempted the fence twice, each time, after his body froze, he was beaten, and given something foul to drink. Whatever it was, it took the spirit from him. He barely moves unless they demand it of him, now." Glea could guess that the figure beside her was female, though with shorn hair and a concealing robe, slightly longer than the one that Glea herself wore, it wouldn't be obvious from anything other than the voice.

Glea rolled to a sitting position, getting a look around her. There were children of both genders, of the age ranges that Pharel had told her to expect. There were no pads or bedrolls for sleep, and, while there was a half-barrel with water in it, she didn't see any food now. "Name's Glea, yours?"

The girl reached out to steady Glea, easily telling that the chakur child was injured. "Daneea. Don't move much. We won't get fed until after sundown. And, you need to stay back. You'll be a bit hungry, but it is better than it was on the streets." She nodded to a pair of the youngest children, and Glea got the idea that Daneea was fairly close to her own age, likely slightly more developed in some ways, while not physically as strong or as fast as Glea herself was.

Glea wiped ineffectively at her clothing, an unconscious habit that had come from home, where she was expected to stay clean most of the time; hopefully that habit would give nothing away save that she'd once had a stable home. She looked around for the little boy that had come with her, but he was already safely ensconced in a knot of smaller children on the other end of the pen. "Do you know why we're here?" Glea kept her words in Pundi, and tried to keep them as hesitant as possible.

"There are caravans that come, take a few of us at a time. I think I've heard the men say that they want to sell us as slaves, in the east. They come in a few times a day to study us, see which of us are getting readier. There have been a few, those who gave in early, who got special treatment, little bonuses for obeying, but those are always the first to be sent away. They want obedience, though I think that the treats that they gave were just things to ensnare the minds, force the children to be more obedient, making them want something, drugs of some sort."

Glea nodded, still uncertain of trying her feet again. They ached from the rocks and sand, and, while she could probably ease that without affecting anything else, she knew that it would be better not to. It was much safer to hide herself behind her weaknesses. "You seem to know a lot, Daneea."

Daneea nodded, "I've been here for two moons. They haven't done much with me, yet, though I try not to give them reason to. I don't want to be taken off, like the others. I think I can escape, if I'm careful. But, I'll need something to get me past the pen. Like what happened with Hassif, if you try to climb the fence, you freeze, and they beat you."

Glea nodded, and struggled to stand. Yes, she hurt, but, she was mobile. She allowed the pain to shadow her expression. In this case, being strong wouldn't help you, as her new friend suggested. "So, escape isn't easy. I will listen, try not to defy too much. But, like you, I think we can escape, if we just have enough time."

Daneea forced a smile, "That's right. That's how to do it. I think, with as strong as you look, if we could just get Hassif to stand up, we might have a chance, when next they try to take some of us."

Glea managed a grim smile in response, "Then, we'll just have to convince him."

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Lisor stood at one of the basins that permeated his Lady's quarters, scrying on Atil, hoping to find out what the letter that had been sent read, and who, in fact, it had been sent to. It was night on the mortal world, and he doubted that he would get much information for a time, but he was watching anyhow, almost anything to keep him from scrying Glea, for he knew how much that would hurt.

Abruptly, he felt the presence of another divine in the room. He dismissed his spell for the moment and turned, half expecting to see Railah, who would occasionally come to speak with him regarding Glea's training. He hadn't told the Goddess of Justice yet what was being done, and had

wondered when she'd make herself known on the matter, if his own Lady or Jirel had not explained it to her already. Instead, it was Vythen who had come, a somewhat confused expression on his face. It was clear that he had come to speak with Lisor, however, and not Lady Night.

"Grandfather? Is there something amiss? I have little time, I fear, but I will do what I may for you."

"Grandson, I have come to inform thee of the precautions I have taken with thy daughter's safety, for there was something that thou likely had not yet considered that had to be addressed. Though her form has not developed like her mother's, and may not for many years to come, seeming without gender, thou had perhaps not considered that not all human predators look for a woman's curves."

Lisor blanched. "That thought had not yet crossed my mind. What have I done in putting her where that might happen?" He wanted to turn back and conjure the scrying so that he could step between places to return her to the heavens, but Vythen still held his attention.

"Peace, Grandson. It is not as great a danger as thou fears, and she is not without protection from my own realm. I have dispatched some of my own creatures to make certain that she is safe from that fate. It is unlikely that any would try for her, for, among humans, her chakuri features would not attract that kind of interest. If, however, such a threat appears, that one would not live to lay a hand upon her. The bite of a serpent would slay him where he stood, and through no apparent action of her own. She will know to be afraid of my creature, and that will absolve her of any part in this. Thou have no need to fear for her virtue."

Lisor let out his breath. He had neglected something serious, but, unexpectedly, Vythen had recognized that lack, and had a solution in place that would keep Glea's disguise, while keeping her safe. "You have my absolute gratitude, Grandfather," he breathed, dropping to a knee in respect.

Vythen laughed. "Though thy respect is welcome, I feel I prefer the sign of gratitude that thy daughter had, for the lesson she took. While it was unexpected, it was in no way unwelcome. Perhaps the heavens need her more than I had thought, for such signs of affection as she gives are quite moving."

"Her sign of gratitude? Affection?" Lisor looked up in confusion. He respected Vythen, and had gotten past most of his fear of the god, but he had never considered affection, not for any of the other divine beings, not beyond his Lady and Glea.

"She surprised me, pleasantly, with something I haven't experienced since I was a mortal. Thou have raised her well, with an open heart. Where I have the grudging acceptance of my brother and the distant respect of the other divines, even Railah has not offered any affection since before the godswar. Nor was her affection so overt, not since the night that her citadel was destroyed. I find that it is a feeling I miss, and one that I think thy Lady is lucky to be surrounded by. Thou know that I am not thy enemy, but, perhaps, thou have yet to see me as a friend?"

Lisor nodded, beginning to see what his divine ancestor was getting at. "I'm sorry to have treated you so distantly. Please, accept my respect and friendship, if you desire it, Grandfather." He rose and held out a hand, waiting to see if he was right. The god reached out and clasped it, and Lisor followed it into an embrace. It felt very odd, embracing a god that was so ill thought of by his fellows, and yet, it made sense. Vythen, like all living beings, wanted to be welcome, to be loved as well as respected. "I will try to remember this, Grandfather. And please, come to speak with me when you need a little companionship. It would be nice to have someone else to simply enjoy time with, beyond my Lady and daughter."

Vythen's face broke into a broad smile, something that eased the tension of this new way of looking at the god of destruction. "I see why it is that thy Lady chose thee, Lisor. Few would dare such familiarity, yet thou understand the need for it. I will come from time to time, and I will keep guard over Glea, for she is of my blood as surely as thine."



Lisor let Vythen's hand drop and stepped back, almost dropping into the bow that would have been second nature, though he knew now, especially, that that was not needed. Instead, he nodded affably, "Your words have given me new comfort, Grandfather, but I must return to my scrying. The sooner I know who is behind this slaver's ring, the sooner I will be able to bring Glea back home, where she'll be safe." He turned to look at the basin again, calling water to the pitcher beside it, and preparing for his new scrying.

Vythen set his hands on Lisor's shoulders gently, though they were much of a height. "Find the ones who would do such harm to her, for I look forward to her return to the heavens." Then the god was gone, having stepped between places, leaving Lisor alone with his scrying again.

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Dinner for Glea was far rougher than she'd imagined, previously. There was a large communal plate, if you could call it that, little more than the lid of a very large barrel, with mashed grains of rice and dates, with just a touch of spices, spices that she suspected included small amounts of drugs to keep the children docile. There was no bread, and the rice and date mixture was sticky and messy to eat with just one's hands. The other children, however, seemed almost excited over their meals, which gave her reason to think that they were given only enough to keep them reasonably healthy and strong. But she knew that she'd need to eat; her strength on the mortal plane depended on it. So she ate with the children, taking no more than she actually needed to conserve her strength.

After she'd eaten, she followed the example of the other children, curling up on the sand in a clump with the others, sharing body heat and making herself less of a target, if anyone should come to bother them while they rested. It was cold, colder than she'd expected, although being north of Akhshar could have contributed to that, for Akhshar was among the hottest lands around, Only the Dark Lands being hotter, according to her father.

The sand in her clothing itched, especially where it rubbed against the marks of her earlier injuries, but, eventually, she managed to get to sleep, finding her mind back in the heavens, with her mother's. "Mama, I am safe, for the moment. But it seems that the slavers have actual allies among the guard, for one of the guards pointed me out to the slavers to be captured. I can show you who he was, the one who gave me away."

Lady Night smiled at Glea, pulling her into her arms and holding her for a long moment. For this time, there would be no pain, only the relaxation of knowing her mother's mind within her own. Glea wished that there was a way to share this with her father, but neither of them had mindspeech, and both relied upon the connection with her mother to communicate mentally. They could not reach each other, save under special circumstances.

"Gently, child. I do not want thee to cry out, for thy captors yet listen, and thy dreaming words could give thee away. Slowly, and carefully, show me what thou have experienced, let me sense thy memories, so that I may advice thee, Glea."

Glea stepped back and nodded, intentionally opening her mind to the goddess that had borne her. It seemed like everything came out in a flood of memories, and Glea was grateful that her mother had a necessary distance with her; if the goddess had not had such, she would never have been allowed to act, not in Ahila'dahr, and not here. But Lady Night knew that her child was more than just her own, but a gift to the world, and would have to work within it from time to time to ease the pain of the people upon the mortal plane. She allowed such pains as Glea thought necessary, because she respected Glea's decisions on what was necessary.

Lady Night's face fell into a frown as she watched the torments, felt the experiences that Glea had allowed. While she allowed Glea her choices, she was still a mother, and disliked such pain. She

knew the reasons, certainly, but hoped that by allowing this, she'd open a way to protect more children. For the Goddess of Fate was not one to idly allow things to continue, if she could stop them.

As Glea's memories caught up with where she was in time, she stepped forward to embrace her mother again. "I'll be all right. Tell Papa not to worry. Daneea is helping me, and maybe I'll be able to help Hassif, too. And the other children. For now, though, I need to be careful."

Lady Night took the time to hold her daughter, pressing her close. "I will keep thy father from worrying overmuch. He has promised not to attempt to scry thee, and that should aid thee greatly. As well, he now knows what it is that Vythen promised to protect thee from, and is grateful to that dire deity. I know not how it is that thou have broken through Vythen's distance from us, but he is being more than cooperative, and I think that a lot of it is thy action."

Glea smiled, "I only try to give him the same regard that I would give any in my family. Even if you don't like him much, he is family, to all of us now, save maybe Ollahm, and I try to think of Ollahm as a sort of honorary uncle."

Lady Night pushed a stray lock of Glea's shorn hair from her face, "Perhaps that is something that the rest of us need to consider, even thy other divine grandfather. But rest now, the morning comes soon, and I doubt thou will be left alone long."

Glea nodded, retreating into herself and enjoying the peace and comfort of her mental place in the heavens. Indeed, morning would come soon, and she'd have to learn more about her new companions and situation.

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She woke to the sun rising in her eyes, sounds of sleepy children stirring around her. She was struck by the uncommon feeling of hunger, though she did not expect food at this time. Daneea hadn't told her if there was more than one meal served to the children, but the demi-divine was not counting on it. Instead, she rolled to a crouch and made her way over to the water barrel at the edge of the fence. She cupped her hands and took a long drink, grateful that the water was at least reasonably clean. She didn't try to wash herself. There was barely enough water for all of them to last throughout the heat of the day, especially with no protection from the sun. Washing would be nothing more than a waste, and she knew that waste would not be tolerated here.

For almost the first time, Glea was grateful for the golden skin that was one of the few things that marked her as a Calasti. If she was as fair-skinned as her mother was, she would burn badly in the sunlight, adding another ache to her pains here in the mortal world. But the golden skin tone she'd inherited from her draconic ancestry protected her, in more ways than was obvious. It shielded her from the worst of the sun, and turned many minor injuries, being tougher than even chakur skin. It was almost the only way she'd managed to walk from the city to this hidden camp, for her feet were unused to the heat of the dirt and rocks. That resistance to heat would serve her well here.

She wandered over to the pit in the dirt that was being used for refuse, and relieved herself, slightly embarrassed to bare herself for it in such an open place. But she couldn't afford to allow such embarrassment interfere with her actions. She had to make do as the other children did, especially as her chakuri background made her much more obvious than many of the children, for she was far more solidly built, stocky where most of them were slender. She doubted that even poor eating would cause her to lose enough weight to pass for one of these, for her build was naturally heavy. She would attract attention here, no matter how she behaved, but it was best to look as helpless as the others, for now, at least.

Once her needs had been met, she mingled with the children, learning a few names while keeping her speech as simple and little as possible. There were doubtless children who would mark her if she seemed to vary much from the pattern that she'd take with the slavers. The only one she spoke

much at all with was Daneea, and then, only when a little way away from the others. But, she wondered at how she might be able to ease the time for everyone else, especially those who had been badly hurt. And of those, Hassif seemed the most affected.

She'd wandered over to study him the night before, noting that he spent most of his time curled in a ball on the sand. He looked up to find her staring down at him, but merely turned his face away, exposing a dark mark across his cheek that was likely either a birthmark or the remnant of some spell that had been cast upon him. To her sight, he was a strong youth, nearly a man by the ways of her mortal home. That he had been brought to such helplessness left her with nearly a rage at the treatment. But there was little she could do about it, at least not yet. She had to learn more, figure out where exactly she could use her abilities safely, without revealing them to anyone.

Today she sat near where he lay curled up, studying him, trying to get a gauge of him with her understanding of time, and fate. She wasn't as good at this as her father was. He had spent years perfecting scrying the weave of fate, but she had an advantage, being able to see the boy as he had been, catching glimpses of his past. He had been strong, sure of himself, until just recently. She could see the pain of the beatings he'd taken, taste the foul taste of the liquid they'd forced down his throat to force obedience. She might be able to undo a part of that, though she'd have to be very careful. And, doing so would not take away his memory of such treatments, only reverse the physical effects. Everything else, she'd have to do simply by talking to him.

She stayed silent for a few candelmarks, just sitting watching him, and glancing around occasionally to see what the other children were doing. Though there were a few other larger and older children, the vast majority of them were her age or smaller. One girl, Alief, if Glea remembered the name, was only slightly pregnant. Glea would have to be very careful with her, for her healing might well harm the unborn. But, other than Daneea, there seemed to be no leader among the children, and Daneea would certainly hide her leadership role as quickly as possible, if the slavers began to suspect it. Glea could take that role, perhaps, after she knew how things worked, but Glea preferred to work subtly. If she revealed her intelligence and training, things would become far harder for her, and perhaps dangerous for the other children.

Finally, Glea felt it necessary to attempt to bring Hassif out of his shell of helplessness. "Name's Glea, you're Hassif, right?" She kept her speech in Pundi broken, knowing she could be overheard.

He groaned and looked up, "Yes, I'm Hassif, not that that matters."

She reached out a hand, pulling a time for him from before his last beating, where he was physically a bit stronger; over the past year, she'd learned how to do so without showing the other person the doubled vision of time. All he'd know is that he felt a little better, perhaps not as fog-brained as before. "You should be strong one here. Protect the littles."

His reply was almost spat out. So, her healing had offered him at least a little strength. "Couldn't save Nalia, can't save the littles. Go away and leave me be."

She nudged him with a bare foot, "Who Nalia?"

His voice choked up as he replied, "She's my betrothed. I don't know what happened to her. All I know was that I was fighting when the raiders came. Something hit me, some light, and I fell from my camel. The next thing I know I'm here and the men prove that I can't do anything."

Glea nodded, casting her thought into the sea of threads that represented fate. She could see how his thread was bound, and looked for the other one. If he had reason to believe that his tribe survived, especially this Nalia, he'd recover better. There, she thought she could see the thread, concentrating on it to bring it into focus. "Girl safe." She kept her words as brief as possible. "Seen her, like Papa had taught me. I see things, always have."

He blinked his eyes open, studying her. "How do you see that?"

She shook her head, "Something Papa taught me. He said seeing things ran in family." It was true enough, and also vague enough that it wouldn't trip her up. Her divine magics could be read as a

touch of mind-magics, especially as such have run in her father's family...her mother, on the other hand, was seeing the future long before she became a goddess.

He shrugged, "Can't tell if what you're saying is truth. But there is no escape from here. They've taught me that." He shuddered as he remembered the beatings. But, despite that, he felt stronger than he had in several days. "Go away, you can't help me. No one can."

Her words were very soft, toned exactly for his ears, and she dropped her act for just a split second to say them, "No one can help you unless you help yourself."

His eyes shot toward her, and he caught just a hint of power from her. But then she'd completely cloaked herself in the role of a kidnapped child again. But, he'd seen something; he knew it. He just didn't know what to do about it. He could try to talk to the slavers about it, try something to get them to at least reward him some, but, somehow, he realized she knew how to hide it from them. And he would just be seen as lying, and a snitch. No, for now, he'd wait, and watch her. There was something different about her, other than her chakur heritage, and he realized that she was waiting for something from him. He wasn't sure what it was, but he knew she'd keep waiting, as long as she needed to.

She smiled warmly at him, then intentionally got up, walked away. There was more to learn, and she wanted to get the general feel of her captivity before doing anything more to help anyone. She knew that Hassif had potential; his spirit had not been broken as fully as he'd thought. He just needed a reason for hope, and he'd be a great ally in this. His experiences would teach him when not to step in, but he could help give others hope, if he found his center again.

It had reached the heat of the day when a Toyurasan pointed to her and one of the boys of about her age, calling to them to approach the gate for the pen. Glea moved slowly, hesitantly, not only because of the injuries that still stung on her, but because of a wariness of what might happen now. The Toyurasan opened the gate and commanded her again. She moved toward him, showing a fear that wasn't entirely forced. She wasn't moving quickly enough, by his measure, because he walked up and cuffed her across the shoulders, causing her to wince at the sudden pain. He commanded again, and pushed her toward the gate. She obeyed silently, though her face carried the sullen look that she knew she needed. She and the other boy were ushered out of the pen, and guided by the Toyurasan toward a tent, where a worn woman had just finished mashing dates into the rice that had been brought for their food. She and the other boy nearly matched in height, and were told to carry the tray of food back to the pen.

She made sure to keep her step steady, matched to the boy. Even if she was punished, she would not wish to spill this precious food, food that would strengthen her companions in bond. She obeyed this part willingly; there was too much risk if she disobeyed, not for her, but for the others. And she would make no friends if she allowed them to suffer. As she sat down the tray in the place indicated, she was pulled back by the Toyurasan, who spouted off a jumble of what was supposed to be Pundi. Perhaps he'd realized that she could speak it. That's the language she'd used for her brief interchanges with the other children.

"You will learn to obey when called, or you will get no food, only beatings. You may be strong, but you won't have the strength left to fight soon."

She merely looked at him, her expression indicating that she understood him, even if she did not wish to obey him. She wanted to wet her dry lips, but did not wish to show him any more weakness than he'd already seen. She could hear the other children crowding around the tray, and her stomach rumbled with hunger. But she could not turn away until he allowed it, and she knew it. He stared down at her a moment more, then struck her another warning shot, this one across her already bruised cheek then dismissed her, "Go, eat. But you will respond more quickly next time."

She turned away, bending to kneel at the edge of the platter, scooping up the mess of rice and dates. Already, most of the dates had been pulled from the meal by greedy hands. Most of what was

left was almost tasteless rice, but it would fill her stomach, and for that, she was grateful. She knew that the man watched her a moment more, to ascertain that she was at least obedient before turning and walking out of the enclosure. By the time she'd managed the few handfuls of rice that were her portion, he was gone, and the children left alone again.

After she'd eaten, licking the sticky residue of her meal off of her hands, she took another drink at the water barrel and went to lay down on the sand again. There was no shelter for the children from the sun, and it doubtless was used to prove the captive's lack of value, but she knew how to shield her face by burying it in the open front of her robe, leaving a hand up and over her head to block out the worst of the light. She never got the chance to actually sleep during this time while she was in Akhshar, so this was a slight gift to her, but she knew that when the sun began to lower, and the temperatures begin to cool, the guards would likely be back, and, because she'd shown some sign of defiance, she'd be a target again.

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There, that was the location of the letter that had been sent the day before. Lisor was able to focus in on the final depositing of the letter on the desk of a councilman for Atil. The man was going through his letters, and Lisor adjusted the position of his scrying sensor to be able to read over the man's shoulder. Most of the letters were things relating to normal city work, things about trade costers, supply requisitions, and prisoners caught. But the one Lisor wanted to read was from the watch officer he'd surprised. He imagined that the letter might be quite interesting, and might lead to more interesting results. Lisor might be able to catch his side of the business easily, if this councilor acted as he expected.

The councilor opened the letter, seemingly expecting another requisition order. His expression showed anger, and he hastily took pen and paper and began another letter, his ink dripping over the paper in question as he wrote. Lisor took a moment to study the earlier message before turning to the new one.

*Councilor Theranor,*

*I received an unexpected gift from one of the city's denizens, or perhaps a trader roaming through the city. They left a basket of dates in gratitude for a child saved from easterners. I don't know which of the guards has committed this breach of agreement with your superiors, but I will punish any guards who seem to be aiding in retrieving these children. I was able to get no names from the man who left the gift, only that it was someone in the guard's uniform. I will continue to attempt to discover who betrayed your orders.*

*Alendor of Atil.*

By this time, the second letter was done, but not yet sealed, and Lisor perused it quickly, hoping that it was to be sent to the Councilor's superiors in this issue, or his partner, if it went no further up. There was a chance that it would go to the watch officer, but not a strong one.

*Lord Afel Mercian,*

*There is a report I have just received that indicates that some of the city's watch is stepping in to assist parents missing children. The watch officer in charge of that section of the city has promised that he will look into the issue and punish those disobeying the orders that you have sent down. I beg that you not stop our stipend over what might be no more than one child retrieved from your allies. I will personally conduct a review of the city's guardsmen to ascertain the extent of the damage that is being done. I will make certain that your allies are not stopped with missing children, and send out the guard to again to calm the local tribes, though they will be sent where they do not encounter the Toyurasan who you permit. Perhaps some actual bandits will be found this time, to calm the locals.*

*Your Servant, Councilor Theranor of Atil.*

Lisor tasted the fear in the councilman. Yes, his deception would make things much more interesting. They would be looking for betrayal in the ranks, which might allow Han Lo a better chance to figure out who is on the Toyurasan side of things. As for Lord Mercian, Lisor was actually at least vaguely familiar with his public policies. There had been times, even as recently as a few years ago, where the lord of Atil had tried to squeeze Akhshar's merchants for more than a fair amount. In retaliation, Lord Tainen had had to cut off merchants from Atil at the gate until the matter cleared up. No doubt Lord Mercian resented anything that cut into his lavish lifestyle. That would make things interesting, if Lisor could locate who Lord Mercian was working with. From this point on, the trail would be much harder to follow, for the Lord could not afford to respond so openly to the letter that was sent to him. It might require Han Lo to pull the rest of the information.

But this knowledge posed an interesting difficulty for Lisor. He knew he had to get rid of the heads of this slaving business, which included Lord Mercian, clearly, but at the same time, if he acted openly on the issue, he would be guilty of an act of war. There must be no trace of his own hand in what happened, even if he committed the assassination himself. He must make sure that no one connected the death with himself, as the son of the Lord of Akhshar, which also meant, since he was openly known as a Finder of Lady Night, that he could not afford to allow it to be seen as a killing at the will of his Lady. This would make things tricky.

He considered his options, even as he turned his scrying away from the Councilor, and toward the Lord of Atil. Railah's servants would demand an open trial, with evidence clearly present. He could not ask for Railahn help on this. Jirel's servants had no clear fighting force, so the blame could not be laid where the source of the quest came from. No, while he had to prove that at least one of the deities was displeased at the Lord's actions, he had to do it in some way that did not implicate most of the divines.

A moment later, the solution came to him, something that he wouldn't have even considered before Vythen's personal visit the day before. Of all the divines, Vythen still was known to act without the permission of the others. Perhaps, in this, his aspect would be most appropriate. He had only begun to form his church, and Lisor doubted that there was any church dedicated to the God of Destruction in Atil, but that made it all the more fair game, provided his divine grandfather agreed.

His scrying now would reveal little, he knew, so he dismissed it, and sent his thought to locate where Vythen held his abode. There, someplace Lisor had never been before, though the rooms he'd been aware of for a long time. He stepped between places, focusing on the dark chambers that were his grandfather's demesne. A moment later, he appeared in what appeared a gloomy room, the crystal walls emitting a dark green light that made the entire place seem sinister. There were statues of serpents here and there, and the furnishings were padded with black cloth. It took Lisor a long moment to find Vythen in this, for he was sitting nearly motionless in a chair in the corner of the crowded room.

Lisor walked toward Vythen, sensing the dread that he never doubted Vythen's mortal followers felt upon dealing with the dread god and his servants. That he clearly belonged to Lady Night did little to quell the feeling of unease. While Vythen had been helpful to Lisor in the past, both in training him, and in his protection of Glea, this was a different matter. Lisor would be asking for permission to act for a time as Vythen's representative openly, a disguise that might annoy both his own Lady, and Vythen.

"Grandfather," he barely dared breathe the name in the gloom. "I have a request to make of you, though I must also gain my Lady's permission. My search has become more dangerous, to my family, through what must be done to aid the children upon the mortal plane."

"Speak, Lisor. I will hear what thou have to ask."

Lisor took a deep breath and prepared himself. "The trail has led already to Lord Mercian of Atil, leaving him as the one who planned the orders for the taking of children. As well, a councilor Theranor has been knowingly a part of things. Both must be removed, once we know who the Toyurasan is who funds this venture. None of the three, or more, perhaps, must be seen to fall to my blade, though I will

be the one who dispatches them, when the time comes. I must go under the mantle of another, perhaps even using a weapon that would prove that such reproof comes from another deity than my own. If my hand is seen in these actions, it will mean war for Akhshar, and that I cannot do. No, I must have a guise to wear, which would require divine acceptance of my service, for a time."

"Thou have found one of the heads of this monster already? That is good, though I can see why thou would be reluctant to strike of thy own position. War upon the mortal plane would not serve any, and this matter is one that I have at least a partial interest in. So, thou would ask again for my boon, being one who may bear it without danger? To do so, I would demand a service from thee, from thy own free will given. I cannot demand it from thy Lady, but from thee, I may."

This was nothing that Lisor was surprised by. To act in the name of another god would always require some aid given to that god. It would mean working longer under his aegis, and the deed done may well be dark, something uncomfortable for Lisor, who preferred to work with honor. But, he had known for a long time that he might be called upon to act as an assassin, and to do that here, he must also be willing to do that for his divine grandfather.

"What will you have of me, Grandfather?"

"Not perhaps what you are expecting, but something that thou may do more easily than any of my own. Thy kin among the Lords and Ladies of the Sky yet seek to deny my part in their birth. I would have thou speak with one among the ilkari who questions the stories she has been told all her life. It would fall to thee to convince her of truth that has not been spoken in their aeries for many ages, of my own part in things. I think, given reason to listen, she would incline herself toward my service. Make my case, and thou will be able to act with impunity in my name in the matters for Jirel. My own fang will serve thee as the weapon of destruction, and it will be clear that I am displeased with this slave trade within Atil."

Lisor opened and closed his mouth; this was a surprise. He expected to have to use poison to assassinate someone for Vythen, someone who likely was hard to reach. Instead, he was being brought to do something that held no dishonor in and of itself. "I will speak with the ilkari, if that is what you wish, Grandfather. I also am grateful for your aid in this, as elsewhere. You allow me to act with a clear conscience, which is a great gift coming from you."

"It aids in bringing back my distant granddaughter, and also supports the rules that the council instated, for doubtless some of those slaves are intended for breeding. But I would have thou aid me in a way that none of my more normal servants may. Thou have spoken with each of the gods, and more, thou are allowed within the ilkari temple directly, by virtue of thy relationship with the dragons. I could not entrust this to any other who was born mortal, and feared that sending an immortal servant of my own would only serve to reinforce the incorrect view of myself."

Lisor went to bow, but remembered what Vythen had said before. Instead, he moved forward to hug the dread deity, setting aside his own fears in the gratitude for the other's choice of services. "This I can do, easily, and without any shame. As well, I will make certain that the deaths I bring in your name are done in such a way as to support your proper position."

Vythen managed a wry smile. "Thou serve thy lady well, and I doubt not that thou will work as hard for my aid in this. Take my fang, and do what thou must. The ilkara that thou will seek is this one," he imprinted an image of a specific ilkara in Lisor's mind, letting the Sikal recognize how they will know the ilkara in question. "Now, go, thy allies within Atil itself will watch for more information that is needed. In the meantime, thou will act for me."

Lisor took the proffered serpent's fang, then stepped back, bowed, and vanished. His goal now was the ilkari temple, and there he would work to convince one of the dragons' other selves of the truth of Vythen's part in their creation.

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The ilkara in question was tending the gardens to the east of the great mountain of the Temple of the Sky when Lisor stepped out of nowhere. He bowed to her, switching into the elegant language the ilkari and their draconic counterparts used among themselves. "Wait, I bring you nothing but peace and knowledge." He knew that he was one of the very few who spoke this tongue, a legacy from his grandmother, Sherin, known as the inkalia to these people. Hopefully she'd take his use of their private language as a sign that he was to be trusted. He wanted to disturb the ilkari homeland as little as possible, and could not stay long, whatever happened.

She looked up, catching the gold to his skin, the face that was slightly elongated from what humans would usually have then nodded, "You are related to the inkalia."

"She is my grandmother. I have come because I was informed that you had questions, about the history of your people, and the role of the once-Outcast in that."

She raised a clawed hand to her muzzle, "Who sent you?"

"I serve the Lady Night, Nocta to those who know her history, but the Outcast has asked this favor of me. Vythen has heard your questions, and asked that I, who know the truth, be the one to speak with you on this. I hold the blood of both brothers, the Risen One and Vythen, within me. And my words will be true; you need not fear deception in this."

"The inkalia's blood mixed with that of the Risen One himself?"

"Yes, her daughter, Alezra of the Risen One, married my father, whose mother is the daughter of the Risen One and the faedh, Mialar of Jirel, who I'm certain you've heard of. You don't need to doubt my word; I would take any oath necessary to prove my honesty in this. I know the truth of the godswar, and have heard from my own Lady of the creation of your people." He stepped forward, bowing gracefully. "Know that I am Lisor Calasti, Consort and Finder of Lady Night."

She stepped away from where she'd been working in the garden. "I will hear the story from you, then. Truth, not merely what the priests would say."

He nodded and followed her to a seat near a tree. It was a high perch, for the ilkari were a tall people, and Lisor was short among his, but he bore it without complaint. "Lady Ilkara, let me speak to you the truth, as it was revealed by Nocta, Lady Night. It was long ago, shortly after the gods had stopped great storms that had nearly destroyed all civilization, that Vythen began to experiment with the changing of creatures. He did not meddle directly with the first races, elvari, chakuri, gnoroi, and giants, but took the least creatures of the earth, the snakes and serpents themselves, and worked to see if he could bring them into a power of their own. To some extent, he succeeded, for they gained intelligence, arms and legs to use to change the world, but they were incomplete when his mind was taken elsewhere. He left them aside, and I do not know for truth whether he intended to return to them at some other time.

"At this time, his brother, Tyrmen, studied these serpent peoples, and began adding his own touches, granting them wings upon which to soar through the winds, and some measure of his own power. Tyrmen felt more that he could favor such children, rather than desire any of his own body. He kept working with these serpents, blunting their natural claws, and teaching them a culture not unlike his own. In time, these people, whom he named ilkari, were much removed from Vythen's original intents.

"Vythen returned to find that what he'd created had been changed, and was not pleased, but gave up all of the work he'd done for these creatures, rather than destroy them outright. To destroy you, he would have had to fight much sooner with his brother, and that came but later. But there was ever bitterness between the brothers after, especially when Tyrmen granted you the transformation and fires that were representative of his change. While there is little left indeed of what Vythen intended with you, he was at least a part of what you are now. Remember, though, that the choice had been there, to destroy what he had created, and he did not choose that."



She studied him carefully, "The inkalia required the blood of both gods to make her possible; the two are not incompatible. But you speak of the Outcast as if he were not the great evil that my people make him."

Lisor laughed, remembering his most recent exchanges with the god of destruction. "Vythen represents the concept of destruction, but he, and Tyrmen, both are forces that serve the life cycle of Jirel. To be reborn, one must first die. I know; I've done both. Vythen's motives are as yet beyond my understanding, save that he has volunteered to protect my daughter, and had given freely of his strength when a great evil threatened all of the gods, only two summers past. He has not done these things merely for his own gain, I think. He is as difficult to understand as any of the gods, truly; I would not make the mistake of trying to guess his motives, but he does want you to know the truth. That is why he sent me."

"If you know him, personally, as it seems you do, what are your own opinions, not of what he does, but who he is?"

Lisor couldn't help but smile, remembering the warmth of his divine ancestor's embrace, the welcome he'd had, and the consideration in being given a task he could not regret. "Vythen is not well liked by most in the heavens, but, for myself, I have found no true ill in him. He has many of the same motivations as any living creature. He wants respect, and love. He makes difficult decisions, but thinks them through and offers the best solution possible. I do not have the history of hating him as many of those in the heavens, but I have seen that he keeps his promises, and rewards those who aid him. In that, he is no less worthy of regard and respect than any of the gods."

She seemed to consider this for a moment, though her draconic face did not seem to be able to express emotion in the same way a human's would. "He asked you to assist him. Do you have a reward you are asking for this service?"

Lisor looked down, "Yes, I do. There are those whose evil allows them to take young, children, and use them as labor for those more powerful. I need to remove some of those people, but without causing a war between my home and the home of the ones who permit such evil. Vythen will allow me a means to do what I must, remove the source of this evil, without endangering my mortal home. I asked him for this boon, and, in return, he offered me the chance to speak with you, tell you the truth as I know it."

"You ask for the means to destroy an evil, and in return offer a service that holds no bloodshed? This does not match with what my elders have said of the Outcast."

"Vythen is not what your elders know. They have learned their knowledge only from Tyrmen, and he has not been willing, I think, to admit that the fault of the godswar rested as much with him as it did Vythen. Vythen was not guilty of the harm that was spoken of him; I know that from the words of Daevor's mother herself, and from Railah. Vythen's only crimes there were of loyalty, and he has proven himself loyal. Vythen wanted this of me because while many of his followers would relish in destruction, I can bring honesty, and knowledge. That sets me apart, and makes the service I render more valuable. He would not waste me for something one of his own would do. Nor are all of his servants assassins and warlords.

"I think, if you were to come to him in prayer, he would prove my words true. He desires in this nothing more than acknowledgement and respect from those he helped to create. The choice, however, is yours. You can either take my words as truth and ask him yourself what he would have of you, or you can decide that your people are right. I think, however, that you might be pleasantly surprised, if you spoke with him."

"You trust his word, then."

"I do. I have learned that he wishes neither me, nor my kin, any ill. I think that is the same with you, and your people."

"I will seek knowledge of him, then, upon your advice. Though the Risen One has aided my people long, there is something missing within us, I believe. Perhaps Vythen can answer that. But, I will meditate, and ask him what he would want from one of the ilkari."

"That would please him. Thank you for listening to me. I must go, for the longer I am away from the tasks I set myself, the more time my own daughter risks herself trying to slow our enemy. Vythen protects her, to an extent, but she must also protect herself, and is there to buy me time."

"Go then, kinsman. Your service here is complete, and I will consider your words at length."

He smiled, slipped off of the seat, and bowed to her, then was off, returning to the heavens, and his self-appointed task.

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Han Lo sat in a public taproom, one that catered to Toyurasan traders, and sipped at the cup of tea before him. He looked across the room to a new arrival in the town, a member of the powerful Tetsu Clan from the northern parts of Toyurasi, bordering not far from the Wild Steppes themselves. This one was rumored to have connections with the leadership of Atil itself, and that was exactly the type of rumor he wanted to be certain of. He knew that the Tetsu did often trade in slaves, between the various cities of Toyurasi, though while he was still in Tovala, they kept a scrupulous reputation, being able to prove the provenance of their wares in detail. Or, at least that was what he had been told. He had never dealt with the Tetsu themselves before, and much of what he'd heard was filtered down from his older brother, Han Kor. Han Lo considered that his brother might have intentionally fed him poor information, to try to keep the younger man from gaining any position to threaten his elder.

This is why Han Lo kept himself quiet and unobtrusive. If the Tetsu representative asked after him, he was nothing more than an independent factor, arranging trades between small merchants. He specifically kept his mindspeech at the lowest level, only picking up the thoughts loudly projected, or the words that were thoughts seconds before they passed another's lips. That was safe. He wouldn't be caught prying, though he was staying close enough that he would pick up on anything said by the Tetsu representative, or, for that matter, anything that the man wrote, for the same tendency to pre-project thoughts was known there too. He didn't dare pry to see if the man was a mindspeaker himself. He had to assume that if the representative himself wasn't, then someone in his escort was, and prying would just make him obvious, when he dared not do so.

Something told Han Lo that this Tetsu wasn't the big fish they were after, though he would almost certainly lead to the one they wanted. It was quite possible, depending on what Lisor found out from the guard, that they would be in the end be leaving two powerful organizations without leaders. The city of Atil was working too hard in the slaver's favor; whoever the leader was who'd issued the orders to allow the gathering of children, they were highly placed. And, very little of importance escaped the notice of the leaders of the various Toyurasan noble houses and clans. If it was the Tetsu behind this, their patriarch doubtless knew, and approved, of this action. How many others below him that did would only indicate how much bloodshed would be started by Lisor to put an end to this ring.

There, the implication that something important were about ready to be revealed jolted the Toyurasan exile's senses. He picked at his bowl of spiced rice and made certain it wasn't obvious that he was mentally listening. Even if he got nothing from the representative himself, due to extensive Ti-Khala training, the other part of this conversation likely did not have this protection, and Han Lo could get at least half of the conversation without appearing to listen. In fact, as a measure of protection, Han Lo had represented himself to his new contacts as being a little hard of hearing. If anyone wondered at whether he was listening, his presence might merely be excused for not being able to hear anyhow.

*"Greetings Lor Kando, representative of the mighty Tetsu clan. I have word from my superior to expect some payment for his service to your noble clan. My Lord recognizes the potential advantage to further alliance with your people, and has authorized me to conduct business on his behalf."*

*"I have heard, from my own people, that your forces are conducting an investigation of the rumors of a guard disobeying orders, and, in fact, admitting to a problem where we would not wish to be implicated. That does not bode well for further alliance. If someone has gotten the impression of what we are doing, then the time for dealing with your city should be at an end. You will have to prove to me that you have the situation in hand before I will agree to any further agreements with your lord."*

*"We are indeed trying to locate the source of this difficulty. None of the guard seems to have any idea who the man was who brought the claim of children vanishing. In fact, his description is unknown to even casual people within the marketplace. We have not found the source of the rumor, and no guardsman has admitted to helping a parent find a missing child. Though there is no reason for this rumor that we can see, we are continuing to investigate."*

*"That is exactly the danger we do not wish. If someone outside of your city has gotten wind of what is going on, even a suspicion that we are acting here, they must be eliminated, quickly and quietly. My superiors cannot afford to have this agreement identified, and, for the sake of the stability of your city, neither can yours. You must find a way to locate the source of the rumor, and remove it. And, do not think that your leadership can't be compromised. A clever adversary, perhaps one who has in fact lost a child, might seek to find out who is in charge of the issue. They must be eliminated, or made to believe that they were mistaken on the threat. A clever mage might be able to pierce the webs of magical protections on your buildings. Which is why I asked to meet here. Here we are less obvious, merely people speaking quietly about trade. I have someone watching for magical probing."*

Han Lo raised his personal shields, withdrawing his mind from the passive listening. The Tetsu expected western interference, but likely not eastern, if he was only guarding against magical probing. And Han Lo expected that whatever form of scrying Lisor would attempt, when given a target, it would be able to bypass such defenses. What he wanted now was a chance to get something a little more concrete than the words of the Tetsu and his desert companion. If he could get a token, almost anything personal from the man, he'd have something to work from. But how to do that, without attracting attention?

It couldn't be done here, but preferably elsewhere, while the Tetsu was in the open. It would work best, if there was someone else involved, someone who could get away easily. Han Lo would have to try to find a contact who could palm an object from the man, someone who could not be questioned, for the Tetsu would doubtless use mindspeakers, if they could catch the thief. Mind-reaming would clearly reveal his presence. Unless. Lisor had mentioned someone else working on this mission, someone who also had mind magic, and, if he remembered aright, also spent time in the heavens. If such a person could retrieve an item from the Tetsu, they could escape easily, and the token would be left in his hands, where he could use his Kevada to find out as much as possible from it.

As Han Lo finished his rice and tea, and stepped out of the taproom, making a show that he had only been interested in a quiet meal, he cast his mind carefully for any other mindspeaker outside of the inn. He wasn't prepared for the response he got, for while he was not devout, the message clearly came from the heavens themselves. ~This evening, wait outside the inn where thou stay. Pharel will come to thee.~ He couldn't recognize where the intruding thought came from, but had enough presence of mind to recognize that only a divinely powered being could speak to him through his shields so easily. He would do as bid, and wait until dark outside of his inn, waiting to see what happened.

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Glea managed to avoid severe punishment for a few more days, greeting demands with sullen obedience. But as long as she did not greatly dally in obeying those commands, the most she received was a cuff and a warning. She continued to quietly and carefully work with both Daneea and Hassif, learning the ways the guards did things from Daneea, and subtly encouraging Hassif to reemerge from his mental protective place. He moved more often, though he kept himself apart from the other children. But Glea knew there was much more that needed to be done before he'd be able to protect the youngest here, and she didn't have any idea how much time it would be before her father was ready to make a move.

~Mama,~ she thought as she prepared for a midday nap, ~help me to find some way to protect these. I've picked up enough to know that there will be a caravan to pick up some of the children soon, and I can't leave here, nor can I allow any of them to be taken, not without some way of getting the tribes to attack the caravan to collect the children taken.~

A warm regard filled Glea's mind and she soaked up her mother's divine presence. ~There are plans being put in place now. With a little luck, and the work of Pharel and Han Lo, they think it will be only a handful of days before they are ready to act. Thou must be ready, even if it requires thee to heal when the time comes. Thy father knows well how little time they have, and he is preparing to act already. I will be there to warn thee with enough time to act. When the time comes, the guards will be distracted, and thou must remove the children from this place. There are too many others for thou to move by choice, so it must be afoot, and that will require some to defend. But the chance will come, soon.~

Glea nodded imperceptibly. She had guessed that things would work this way. Since there were nearly a score of children now, they were too many for her to move between places, and, moving them blindly could put them in the very danger she was trying to remove them from. It would take convincing Daneea to guide them, while she, and whichever of the older boys she could convince, fought. She could see from her mother's mind that when the time came to act, at least the closest of the desert tribes would be closing in upon the slaver's camp. This gave her a dual need to fight, not only to keep the children safe long enough to be rescued, but also to disable any spellcasters, before the magic was used to decimate the tribes.

She was so caught up in her communication with her mother, gaining the plans she needed, that she did not wake until a booted foot kicked sand at her face. Sputtering in surprise, she sat up, instinctively trying to wipe the sand from her eyes. Before she knew it, a pair of Toyurasan guards was hauling her to her feet, forcing her to stand before a Toyurasan noble. She'd seen a few of them from a distance at home, and was grateful now that she looked so much different than she had in Akhshar's court. With her hair shorn and dirty, dressed in rags and bearing numerous cuts and bruises, she would not easily be recognized as Lord Tainen's granddaughter, even should the noble have been one of those welcomed at Akhshar's court.

She didn't say anything, but kept to her feet when the guards let go of her arms. There was little she could do but peer through the shorn tangles of her hair at the nobleman and stand there, her hands not quite balled into fists, but clearly showing resentment. She ground her toes into the dirt at her feet, and held her head up with a certain stubborn pride. She hadn't truly cowered yet, and trying to do so now would only attract more attention to what she was doing. She had to keep to the disguise she'd started with.

The Toyurasan walked up, lifting her chin to make her look at him. "What a unique prize. I hadn't been certain, when my messengers had mentioned picking up a unique crossbreed, but you certainly seem different from the half-elvari we've bred over the years. Chakur blood, obviously, and either human or elvari for the other parent."

Glea did not seem to be intended to respond to this, so she kept herself silent, though his words were clearly in Trade, rather than the Toyurasan tongue. She tried pulling her chin out of his hands, a

show of quiet defiance, one that would usually get her slapped. But, it was a slap she was willing to take. She had to at least appear like she'd be more trouble than she was worth for the caravan that would likely set off in a few days.

"Spirit still. That will not last. Listen, chakur-blood. You will learn your place, and that soon. I do not wish to break your body to break your spirit, so I will have you dealt with in another way. You'll learn your lessons quickly, without damaging that which is of the greatest value to us. Let me demonstrate." He pulled a small wand out of his voluminous sleeves and tapped her on the shoulder.

Instantly pain shot through her body, both burning and freezing her at the same time. It coursed through her body and she couldn't help but cry out in surprise and agony. Her knees buckled and she barely was able to remain standing, swaying as she fought to overcome the sudden sensation. Words tumbled over themselves, luckily not in trade or Pundi, but in her mother's chakur tongue. Perhaps Lady Night was protecting her from herself in this, overpowering her mind enough to keep her disguise. All she really was aware of was the long moment of pain and that she had just called for Railah's justice upon her captors. And Railah must not act, not now, for there was too much of a danger, if the enemy got the idea that the gods were involved.

The man facing her laughed at her response. "Yes, you are stronger than you look. But that strength will not serve you. With regular lessons of your weakness to this, you should be ready to leave in a moon, though, I deem, not earlier. Railah will not protect you, if that's what you were calling out for. The Goddess of Justice is limited by her own rules; her servants will not be able to interfere. Now, since you've just been given your first lesson, we should make certain that it stays with you. Kneel."

Glea was almost grateful for the command to sink to her knees. Even with the gritty sand and dirt getting into her clothing, she wanted nothing more than to collapse. This was close enough. The pain was only barely beginning to recede from her awareness, and she kept her gaze at the ground, and the man's booted feet. She remained motionless while he walked around her, studying her form.

"I wish I had more knowledge what to expect from the chakur themselves, but they are not easy to capture, and we have not had a girl-child of theirs before. Your strength might be valuable in other ways, once you're older, though I deem that may take a few years yet. How old are you, child?"

Glea moistened her dry lips and barely managed an answer, "I've seen thirteen summers."

A hand gripped her skull by the back of her neck and she could feel a pressure there that was painful, though not as bad as that wand had left. "When addressing any of the guards or myself, you will speak with respect, calling us master." The hand squeezed just a bit more, "Now, try that again."

Glea didn't want to respond in that way, knowing that she was not inferior to this man, but there was little choice. If she did not answer, he would use the wand on her again, and she was fairly certain she could not stand it again so quickly. "I've seen thirteen summers, Master." She did not spit out the last word, no matter how much she wanted to; the lesson of the pain wand was enough to cow her for the moment. It was pain easily as bad as what Vythen had lessoned her with. She just hoped that a show of obedience now would give her a little breathing room for the next few days.

She felt the hand withdraw, and tried to suppress a shudder. "Young then, even for a human. There is little wonder that you have not begun developing, with how long lived your family may well be. A few years would be needed. But, the Tetsu clan has been working with slaves for millennia. There will be little reason to worry over what may only be a slight delay. It may give us the opportunity to get others of the chakur under our control. I can see a use in keeping you to our own pens, rather than selling you, even as an exotic. It only wants for time."

He moved in front of her again, and signaled for her to stand again. "Yes, I can see potential within you. It merely requires us to be patient." He turned to one of the slaver guards, handing over the wand he'd carried. "See that this one is given kehala, daily, for the next tenday. And, any disobedience, or even hesitation at obeying our commands will earn a tap from this. In fact, make certain that the other children see what she's going through. It will leave them more malleable. I must

return to Atil, finish my dealings with Lord Mercian. I will expect a caravan to leave here in four or five days, with the ones you deem docile enough to go."

He turned and walked out, leaving Glea standing where she was. But not for long. A quick word between the guards, and a flask was brought with a drink whose scent made Glea want to wretch. She was forced to her knees, and told to open her mouth. She didn't disobey, or even hesitate, knowing the punishment if she did, but started gagging the moment she tasted the drug. A firm hand clamped her mouth shut while another pinched her nose until she'd swallowed the foul concoction.

Her insides heaved at the substance within her, but she found that she could not wretch. She could barely do anything at all except clutch at her stomach. Her vision swam before her, and she felt the pain come back from the wand's tap, even though the guard with the wand was not within reach to touch her. She could barely hear their laughter, and couldn't even make sense to the words that they were saying. Then they were gone, and she was left there, rocking on the sand and dirt, trying to find herself amid the fog and pain.

Somewhere in her mind, she could still feel the connection with her mother, could feel the worry and compassion in the goddess. But though Lady Night could restore her daughter with little more than a thought, she did not. The reason, if Glea were able to understand it was that this would offer her some measure of protection for now. Revealing that she could overcome the drug would only endanger Glea herself further. Instead, she was only given a gentle feeling of comfort to hold her for now. Glea doubted that she could access her divine gifts right now, no matter how much she tried. As Vythen had said before, she could not flee her task, no matter how much she wanted to. It wasn't even a choice anymore, for Glea lacked the presence of mind to be able to touch her own gifts at all.

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Outside the Scales and Balance inn, Han Lo stood, picking at a small cloth full of dates and watching the stars begin to come out. A small hand tugged at his trousers, and he could see a small child reach out for him. But, the feeling he got from this child was not what he expected. ~Act like you're considering giving me a date. Instead, this will allow us to talk privately,~ the mental voice came.

Han Lo studied the child, murmuring something about how a child that small could be out looking for food at this time of night. ~Are you Pharel?~

~Yes. I am other than what I appear, though from the feel of your mind, you've met another of my kind. Jirel informed me that you were looking for a way to get something small, and personal, off of the person of someone you suspect may be involved?~

~Yes, and actually, if you can do what I suspect you can, you can pull this off, carefully, tomorrow. When Lor Kando,~ and he visualized the Toyurasan agent, ~is out and about, I need you to try to pick pocket him. He won't be looking for someone as small as you, and, when you dodge away from him, drop his pouch, but keep one of the many good luck charms that he has. We can pass on the street as you vanish, and when you contact me, I can use my telekinetic power to move the luck charm to me, where I can study it at length, without him looking for me. It shouldn't be hard for you to get away, either as you are here, or by stepping between places, if you are the other person like Lisor that I've been told is working on this.~

~That would be acceptable. I should be able to get that close, and pulling a luck charm would be covered by the pulling of his pockets. All you need is his luck charm?~

~As far as I can tell, yes. It would be something he would wear in the presence of his superior. And, as such, I can use kevada on that to locate the superior. Then, hopefully, we'll be ready to take out all of the ones responsible for this.~

He reached down and passed one of his dates to the child, then seemingly shooed him off. ~I will be close when he's out and about, which should make it easier on you.~

~Keep your mind ready, things will move quickly when I take what you need.~ The child trundled off into the darkness, clutching at the date. A quick image from Pharel suggested that they would hand off the bounty to a child who truly needed it. And Han Lo was left alone to finish his meal before retiring for the night.

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Han Lo made his usual contacts the next morning, but made certain that his business kept him within visual range of the Toyurasan that was his target. He knew he wouldn't see Pharel until they wanted to be seen. He still wasn't certain if the child was male or female, but figured it didn't matter. What mattered was that the gnoroi could pass unseen, and should be able to succeed in swiping the token he needed.

Up ahead, there was a spot of commotion, shouts and people darting around. He kept himself to the side of the street, not sure if this was Pharel, or some other street child robbing someone. He wasn't certain until he caught a mental image of a small jade carving rolling on the street less than twenty feet from him. That was what he wanted. With a quick mental tug, he caused it to lift up and move around a vender. It was small enough that he hoped it wouldn't be seen. Cautiously he walked toward the vendor, catching the token and pocketing it even as he spoke with her regarding her wares. It was perfectly done, and he didn't need anything more than the momentary awareness from Pharel to know that this was what he'd wanted. They'd even made certain that there would be nothing at all to tie him into the theft.

A Toyurasan moved through the street, sputtering off curses in his native tongue. Han Lo looked up, rattled off a reply, "What ill news for my countrymen?"

"Some street rat swiped a purse, and I've been sent to catch the child. The purse itself was dropped, within only a few steps. The child likely realized they'd moved against the wrong man, but my employer wants to have him found."

"I wish you good hunting, then. I have been lucky enough to avoid such cutpurses, but I'll keep my eyes out for him, for you."

The Toyurasan continued on his route, and Han Lo smiled, concluding a small deal with the merchant he was speaking with. Then, looking at the sky, he mused aloud about getting a little more rest, and moved back toward his inn.

There was another advantage to staying at the Scales and Balance. As the inn was used by visiting priests and sacred swords, the place was warded to protect people during divination magics. Each room had a separate ward, and that should more than protect Han Lo while he exposed himself to the kevada disciplines to seek the memory he needed. He had a suspicion already as to who would be implicated, but needed a face, an image he could transfer to Lisor, in order for the purging to begin.

Han Lo walked upstairs to his small room, sat down on his cot, and pulled out a focusing crystal he'd traded for about five summers back. This would come in very handy here. Then he closed his eyes, pressed his fingers around the tiny jade carving, and sent his mind to look for the source of the slavers.

Memories flooded past him, dealings with several people, though the only desert city that seemed to be involved in this slave trade was Atil. But the meetings with Toyurasan leaders would be interesting, if he had the time to go through them all. But for now, he needed to focus on one, draw the memory of the orders that the agent had been given.

There, it was that one. He saw the room as if from the eyes of a neutral observer. It was a very fine room, the furnishings in there elegant and valuable. Across from the agent, an old man knelt upon a silken cushion. This man had an amulet about his neck signifying his position as the clan head of the Tetsu. He spoke of things that needed to be done, expansions of the projects that were needed, and that all further results would be sent to his son, Lor Kon. A moment's examination of the room provided the clan head's name, Lor Tor. Which meant that the agent here was actually a fairly high ranking

member of the family, one of Lor Tor's sons or grandsons, likely. That would be enough to go on. Now he just had to wait for Lisor to get back from the heavens. The time to move against these agents was now.

Han Lo released the use of kevada, allowing the images to recede. Then he wrapped the piece of jade in a silken cloth. There was a chance that Lor Kando would have a scrying done for his token. Wrapped in silk, it was less likely to be noticed, though Han Lo would prefer it if he could stash the token someplace safe until the murders had been committed. If Lisor could get here, he'd heard that the Finder could easily hide such things from all normal divinations. But that would require the young man to know to come. For now he'd just have to hope that the icon was not discovered.

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Lisor looked up from his scrying at a sent thought from his Lady. ~Go to thy mortal ally, he has the information thou needs, but thou must return to the heavens immediately upon acquiring it. Thou must learn the locations thou must travel to, and, Vythen has called for thy presence when thou are ready.~

An answer, already. That was what he wanted. He wasn't certain what Vythen would want, the deity having given him the fang already, but was not inclined to argue. ~It will come soon, then. I would ask that you prepare our daughter. Once I have removed the heads of this monster, I will come to retrieve her. I do not know what state she is in at the moment, and she may need the time to prepare.~

~I am watching her, and will grant what aid she needs when the time comes. Go, for speed is necessary.~

Lisor stepped back from his scrying and stepped between places, finding himself within Han Lo's private room. The Toyurasan exile was sleeping, but Lisor doubted that waking him would be dangerous. He moved to gently shake Han Lo's shoulder. Almost instantly, he felt the press of steel against his neck, and he let go of his ally.

Han Lo did not remove the throwing star that floated next to Lisor as he sat up, only dismissing the defense once he was assured of his visitor's identity. "With what I've learned now, I dared not take any risks. I'm going to need to transfer the information to you, and ask you to hide something for me. I'd like to be able to spend more time searching the item's memory, but for now, it's too dangerous. It came from one of the Tetsu elite, and he may have started searching for it."

Lisor held out his hand, "I can hide it, so that no one but a Finder can locate it. It is best we do so, if there are scrying magics in use."

Han Lo called the small silk wrapped bundle to his hand from where he'd stashed it within the desk. "Good. I vaguely remembered your brother mentioning you being able to do this."

Lisor took the bundle and concentrated, causing it to vanish from all normal senses. Carefully, he placed it back within the desk. "No one will find that, or be able to get any sense of where it was last. Not through the Railahn wards here."

Han Lo gestured to the chair, "I'll have to transfer this directly, mind to mind. I have images, as well as names. One name I don't have an image on. You'll have to scry for him. But, unless my guess is sorely missed, when you act, you'll leave a swath of destruction through that household completely."

Lisor frowned, "The enemy is that large?"

In response, Han Lo reached out to pull Lisor's mind into a protected mental room, and started showing the images that he had gathered. ~Unless you've found another target here, there are only two people in Atil who must die, this messenger I saw with Lor Kando, and the Lord himself. The messenger's name I didn't catch, but his image you can draw upon. Beyond that, Lor Kando must be eliminated, preferably without removing his guards. A clean assassination that leaves them alive would demoralize the enemy, and there will be plenty of others to kill. The others are in Toyurasi, likely in the



Tetsu clan headquarters near Ren Loral. Lor Tor, leader of the Tetsu arranged this himself, though he mentions the involvement of his son and heir, Lor Kon. It might be safest to eliminate each of the leading Tetsu male heirs, though perhaps just removing the two greatest will give them enough pause to reconsider their deals.~

Lisor adjusted himself to record the information he was being given. He had no image for Lor Kon, but expected that was why his Lady told him he would have to do some scrying. He needed the layout to the Tetsu compound anyhow, especially if he were to do this without attracting attention. ~I'll see what I can do. You have to keep a business as usual appearance. If there's any indication that you're involved, it will endanger you. I might not be the one to come and return you to Sharlan, but someone will be sent. I won't be acting openly, and you must avoid any questions as to acting. Vythen has his hand in things, out of necessity, and I'm hoping that with you not being seen as involved easily, you'll be able to avoid being asked questions that would reveal what's going on. And, because of that, I can't tell you any more of the plans, only that the deaths will be dealt, and that someone will return you to Sharlan. I must go now, however, to finalize the plans and speak with Lord Vythen.~ He returned to the normal reality and bowed, "One way or another, when the events here are done, that token will be retrieved and returned to you. But, it might not be by me. I imagine you'll find more useful information from it, if given time."

Then he was gone, returning to the heavens, but not to his Lady's chambers. Instead, he went straight to Vythen's rooms, finding himself again among the menacing statues and dark green lighting. The fang hung easily at his belt, but he wasn't sure why he would be needed before acting. "Grandfather, I have come, as my Lady instructed me."

"This is good, for there is more that thou must have now, to do the deed that lies before thee. Thou have my fang, but there is more that I have arranged, so that thou may act in complete anonymity. I have discussed this with thy Lady, and she has ceded her power over thee to me until this mission is completed. And, with that in mind, thou will need instruction on how I would have thee act, and with what magics that thou will use."

Lisor looked surprised. He hadn't considered that Lady Night would even temporarily cede control of any of her Chosen, much less him, though doing so made sense. It would allow him to clearly differentiate his duties in this from his position toward her, which might clear things up if his presence in Atil was noticed. "I will do as you bid, then, Grandfather. Show me what you would have me do."

The dread deity stood up, calling a robe of viridian and black to his hands, which he then offered Lisor. "Thou will wear this, and learn the uses of its magics. Within its folds, for a time, thou will be able to take the shape of a serpent, and can move in ways not bound by the laws of the world. Thou can climb up a seamless wall in the serpent form, and can move through the smallest of gaps. The robe will also blur thy features and figure, making thee unidentifiable, save that thou will clearly be in my service."

As Lisor took the robe, feeling the strange soft but scaly texture of the fabric, Vythen brought forth one other item, a black quill, its edges glinting with green. "This will be how thou will mark thy kills. With each leader that thou kill in my name, thou must take this quill and dip it in thy victim's blood, then write clearly, upon either paper or any other surface, the crimes which that victim has committed. Even if thou are accosted, finish thy writing, for the fear that those who see thee will feel will keep them from interfering. Then thou will take on the form of a serpent again, and leave. Once beyond their sight, thou may step between places again, for the next target."

Lisor accepted the quill, a wry smile on his face. "Would you have me return after the assassinations, but before the attack upon the slave camp, so that my presence there is not marked?"

Vythen shook his head, "Thy lady will warn thy daughter what to expect, and she will be busy enough then. She holds no fear of me or mine, so would not fear thee in any respect. But thou must

leave her alone, when the guards are no more. She will be able to return to the heavens, though I suspect that she will want to see that the harm of the camp is finished before returning."

Lisor set the quill on the nearest table, and opened the robe to slip within it. It felt odd, unnatural, almost like he were within the scales of a snake themselves. To some degree, he would be. He need only finish his scrying now, to determine the best places to strike from for his assassinations. Vythen's demands, specifically regarding the declaration of the crimes of his victims, was more than he could have hoped. It would send a clear message, one that would frighten any others who consider the slave trade. As he slipped the fang into a hidden pocket in the loose robe, to be grabbed easily when he needed it, he smiled, feeling a darker humor than was his wont. These enemies had dared to cage his daughter, and harm many children. They would learn the measure of fear before their deaths; he would see to that.

Vythen laughed, sensing at once the change in his distant grandson. "Thou will need the final pieces of information. Go to that statue and stare within the gem the serpent holds in his mouth. Thou will find it works not unlike thy normal scrying."

Lisor picked up the quill again, tucking it into his voluminous sleeve and raised his hood. Almost instantly he could feel the concealing magics in use. And could tell what he would need to do to activate the other gifts of this robe. But that would wait until he knew the proper places to travel. He walked over to the statue, staring deeply into the mirrored surface of the black diamond resting within the serpent's maw. And, with the questing of each name, images appeared, images that gave him the details he would need. It would not be long until night, and then Lisor would start upon his reign of terror against the slavers.

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Glea forced herself to stand, knowing that her body was protesting not only the excessive pain but the drug that still coursed through her system. Her mind was still foggy, but she needed water, clean water, to try to help her clear her system more. Her mother had signaled that it wouldn't be long before she'd be needed. And she really wasn't prepared. Even if she could access her divine gifts, it would take time that she wasn't sure she had, to prepare the others for what would happen.

A hand steadied her, cupping her elbow and allowing her to move forward. She didn't look up, but heard the voice hissing in her ear, "I told you, there's no hope to overcome them." It was Hassif. She took another few steps toward the water barrel, her stubbornness carrying her through the short distance. Even as he let go of her elbow, she dropped to her knees and scooped up some of the precious water. She had to trust that she could do what she needed.

"Hassif, we can stop them. I've seen it. And I know that we're going to get help. Tonight, or tomorrow morning, at the latest. But, I need you to help, protect the littles." She didn't bother altering her speech to sound broken. It wouldn't matter now, as long as she could keep up the major disguise for even a few hours more.

He looked at her, eyes narrowing, noticing the change, "What makes you so certain?"

She gulped down a handful of water, "Because I was sent here for a reason, and I know what's going to happen. I just have to be patient." She prayed that she was doing the right thing, letting him see the truth. "Jirel has heard your peoples' prayers."

He knelt down beside her, trying to shield the shock on his face, "Jirel sends a girl child to do this?" His people never thought much of women, outside of their ability to bear heirs. To have a girl child sent to endure such torments, he didn't understand, but he somehow believed her.

She wiped her mouth on her ragged sleeve and turned away from the barrel, barely nodding to him, before dropping her voice, "No one in the heavens approves of what's going on. So, they sent me, and others. I just have to hold on, just a little longer."

He shook his head, nudging her just enough to remind her of how weak she was. "You can barely stand, what makes you think you can help?"

She forced a smile, "I think you'd be surprised. But it's a secret that comes from my Mama. You'll see. But you must protect the littles. You can lead them. They'll follow you."

Hassif shook his head and moved off. He wasn't certain he trusted her, but she had spirit, determination to act, no matter how ill she was from the drugs. He hadn't had the strength to get himself to water for nearly a day after the first time he'd been forced to drink the kehala. She was strong, and, if she was right, they only had to hold on a little longer. He promised himself, if she was right, he'd do what she wanted. It would be his chance to fight back, and he felt stronger than he had in over a tenday.

The Toyurasan guards seemed to have noticed Glea's ability to move, and were entering the pen, likely to try to cow her again. Hassan realized that if she was smart, she'd give in, especially if she only had to do so for a short amount of time. As expected, one of the slavers had called her, and she forced herself to stand and walk toward him. The wobble in her walk couldn't have been faked, not with what she'd been through. He hadn't felt the touch of the wand that had been used against her, but had seen her suffer through being cuffed and struck without a sound. That the wand had caused her to cry out, seemingly begging for release from just one touch, he didn't know how she might consider standing up to them.

Glea reached the spot near the entrance to the pens on wobbly legs. It took every bit of the strength she still had to do that much. She wouldn't defy, not yet. Soon enough, she sensed, the forces of the gods would reach here, and she would be able to fight. A part of her wanted revenge, wanted to show these slavers what a demi-divine could do. But she dared not risk any of her clarity with another show of defiance, for she might well be rendered unable to defend at the time she had to fight.

The Toyurasan ordered her to kneel. She sank gratefully to the ground, hoping that whatever they were after, it was only a temporary show of power. Almost, she forgot the warning from the noble, and only responded vocally when she saw the tip of the wand emerge from a sleeve. "Yes, master." She did not dare risk that kind of pain again. But there was something else here, a collar of lacquered wood, resting loosely in his hand, a tiny lock affixed to one end. His movements were slow, deliberate, to see if she would resist. She studied the collar for a moment before it moved too close. By whatever luck she possessed, it held no magic. While her abilities were divine in nature, she was uncertain if mortal magic could confine them, if the collar had been magical. But no, there was no spell, which meant that she was safe enough. She did not move, even while the collar was fitted tightly around her neck and the ends locked.

"Smart slave," the guard seemed to laugh, "She knows that disobedience will hurt her." He cuffed her across the front of her right shoulder, just enough to make her struggle to catch her balance and return to her previous position. She did not make any other moves, and said nothing.

He reached out and tucked a finger through the collar, making it difficult for her to breathe. "You will learn obedience, and will lose that sullenness, rushing to do what we ask. Shall I remind you of your earlier lesson?"

That seemed to require a response, and she tried to bow her head, despite the placement of his hand, "No, please, master." Her anger was somehow burning the drug from her system, but she had to appear completely cowed. Her training at her mortal home came in handy here, for she knew how to appear less than what she was. She had always been a lesser member of the household, and, while her family valued her highly, even before most of them knew what she was, she had been coached to hide her emotions so that she could apply subtle pressure, seemingly without doing so.

He released the collar with a push, knocking her flat on her back, and laughed. "So, you are smarter than you look. Return to the others. You won't be strong enough tonight to help with the food." He turned away without waiting for another response from her, though she followed through

with what she'd been taught, just to make certain he did not turn the wand upon her again. Only after he had completely left the pen did she get up and move back to where the other children rested. She could feel the eyes on her, and had to disguise herself for a few hours more.

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Night was setting over the city of Atil, and, while time seemed different far to the east in northern Toyurasi, Lisor intended to take care of his targets in Atil first, only afterward stepping between places to act in the Tetsu manor. He stepped into place not far from the great manor where Lord Mercian dwelt, and allowed himself to study the building. His sense for the threads of fate here indicated that the lord was in that room, with the open window on the upper level. And, he was alone, which is how Lisor preferred it.

He folded his arms across his chest, tucked into the loose folds of his robe, finding his body already melding into the shape of a serpent. It only took a moment to learn the movements of this form, and he glided forward, and onto the adobe wall of the building, finding that he didn't need any help to hold on. Up he went, in through the window and looked around before resuming his natural form. There, sitting next to a table, was the fat and vile person of Lord Mercian. It was time for Lisor to act.

He slithered out into the room, not taking his real form until the man had registered the presence of the serpent on the floor before him. Then he seemed to enlarge and unfold, becoming the lean and wiry man he was, still concealed within the hooded robe that Vythen had lent him. Very casually, he stepped forward, hands pulling Vythen's Fang from his belt. "You have made enemies among the heavens, for your support of a slaving ring within a land promised free. I have been sent to collect payment for your crimes, starting with your life."

The man fell from his chair, crawling backwards, with a look of terror on his face, "I am not involved, you have to believe me."

Lisor's voice hissed out softly, "I know that you are involved, and that you will pay the price for defying the words of the desert cities' treaty." The fang flashed in his hands, cutting through rich cloth and into the man's flesh. It wasn't clean, but it wasn't meant to. Lord Mercian was still alive, barely, when Lisor took the quill he'd been given and dipped it lightly in the blood that came from the wound he'd caused. The fallen chair would draw attention, but he was fairly certain he had the time to do what Vythen demanded. Taking a sheet of paper from the table, he set his quill to it, leaving a clear record of the Lord's perfidy.

*Lord Mercian was eliminated at the command of Vythen the God of Destruction for the crime of selling the children of his own city, and the neighboring tribes, into slavery. He concocted this plan with the aid of the Tetsu Clan from Toyurasi, who will also feel Vythen's wrath.*

He did not sign it, but lay it on the body, which he could sense had just lost its soul. He tucked both fang and quill where they were needed, and changed forms, sliding out over the windowsill even as the door behind him opened, curious servants trying to find out what had caused the crash. They would see him, for just a few seconds, and then he would be gone. It was time for the next death.

Even as he moved silently to his next target, Lisor realized with shock that he had enjoyed eliminating the perfidious lord. It had been more than satisfying, and he couldn't avoid the pleasure that had come with making the man know why he had died. It was something he'd never considered the chance of feeling, the exultation of dealing such a personal death. The next death left him with the same elation, and he began to wonder about himself. While there was strong need for such actions, that they should bring pleasure worried him. *What am I becoming?*

The guest house where Lon Kando stayed was right before him, and he could sense something more about this target that he had not felt before. This one was tied in some way with Glea, had likely

seen his daughter more recently than Lisor himself had. The touch of that thread brought a shiver of pain, and Lisor bit his tongue in rising fury. *How dare he!* Though he could not see the actual memory just from a vague touch of the tapestry of fate, Lisor could tell that this Toyurasan had hurt Glea, and likely quite badly.

He folded himself back into serpent's form, knowing that he would have to take a circuitous route through here, for there was no open window to the chamber where his target lay. His form, while showing the brilliant viridian of Vythen's power, drew no immediate attention as he worked his way between door and frame, and then slid along passages, moving upward and inward toward his target. Lisor could feel his anger rise, the closer he got to his target. Wards upon the room fell apart at his touch, a gift he didn't even consider the source of, and he slithered into what was clearly a mage's workroom. The man in question was concentrating greatly upon a scrying bowl, trying to get a vision of something. If Lisor knew anything, he knew scrying, and knew how a disrupted spell could shock a caster. He unfolded into his true form and reached out a delicately fingered hand to stir the water of the bowl, drawing sudden attention from the mage.

"Who are you, and how did you get in here?" The Toyurasan reached a hand to his belt, likely to draw some sort of magical token to defend himself with.

Lisor dropped Vythen's fang to casually move that hand away from its target with almost inhuman reflexes. "I have been sent to punish you, and your clan, for your crimes against the people of this land. Though I wear Vythen's colors, know that none of the gods will aid you now. You, and your superiors, will pay the ultimate price for your crimes. And," he managed with a hiss, "considering what you've been doing, I will enjoy your death."

He turned the fang, and moved it to scratch ever so lightly against the man's throat, barely tracing a line of blood. Then he laughed mockingly. "You dared to touch one who you had no right to, and that will make your death particularly sweet. I need do nothing but stand here, for you to die of the poison on this weapon, but, if you ask, I might make the death more swift."

The man stepped back, seemingly unconcerned with the injury. "Your god, if the gods indeed sent you, did not protect you well, for the same poison that runs now in my veins will kill you, as well, a result of my ward."

Lisor laughed, dropping into a bow, "I had ignored such wards, because they are not useful against me. No poison will harm me, even one magically created. But, in the interest of protecting the one you have harmed, I will make this swift." The fang flashed from one hand to the other, and then embedded itself in the mage's chest, ripping open a large wound through which blood gushed. It was only a handful of seconds before the Toyurasan fell to the ground, lifeless.

Again, Lisor took out the quill, but there was no paper at hand to write the list of crimes upon. Instead, he traced the quill over the far wall of the guesthouse, pleased that the blood that had been absorbed by the quill left a brilliant mark upon the wall. It would take a few moments to write out the crimes, and he could already hear the response from below, as the wards over this room disintegrated. He hoped what Vythen had said before would hold true here.

There were two guards, their minds marked by spell control, that reached the doorway that Lisor had come through before he finished. But his aspect was terrible, writing upon the wall in blood, and seeming to radiate the same shadowy presence and power that his ancestor, Daevor, had attempted to use on his grandfathers, more than eighty years past. Neither man made a move toward him, and, as he tucked the quill back into his sleeve, Lisor bowed before them and folded himself into the form of a serpent again, sliding between them to travel down the steps. The noise the men made as their fear overtook their surprise would likely wake most of this quarter, but he had done what he had intended, and he had only two more deaths to mark before he could go to rescue Glea.

As he left the guesthouse, he focused his thought on the location he would have to go next, hoping that Glea was reasonably safe and well when he got to her. He knew his Great-Grandmother's

history, her captivity to the Tetsu, and did not wish Glea to have to bear that hardship any longer than necessary, especially now that he knew who was behind it.

Lisor found himself in an ornamental garden, and the air here was far cooler than he was used to. But he had endured the harsh northern snows when stealing the fang he now carried from Danvil Keep; the cold here was not going to slow him any. He did not immediately take on serpent form, but took a moment to orient himself on the threads of fate that he needed. Both were nearby, though one slightly closer. He moved in that direction, only catching the sounds of pleasure being given as he closed on the room he would enter. This posed an interesting difficulty, for whoever his target had with him would doubtless bear the price when their partner or master was killed, but he could not leave his target alive. He slid the door into the wall, finding that it was made of oiled paper, and looked down upon a man slightly older than he himself was, intent upon a small elvari woman. Elvari, that made it somewhat easier. He could take her to safety, though she'd have to learn or relearn a different way of life, once retrieved. He tapped his foot on the floor, causing the man to look up.

"You have been marked as involved in the taking of slaves from a free land, and for that, you must die, Toyurasan. One of your kind already lies dead at my weapon, and your father will likely fall quickly as well."

He gestured to the man, indicating that he should rise and step free of the elvara he had been pleasuring himself on. "I will make this relatively painless, should you do as I said, but you will die, that has been determined already." Without turning to the woman, Lisor spoke softly, "Lady, step behind me; your death is not indicated in these actions." He hoped she understood him, for, while he spoke trade, there was a good chance she did not, if she'd been born into captivity. Yet she did as he bid, and he looked at the Tetsu heir.

The man stood straight, not indicating fear. "Will Vythen bear the price of the anger of the other gods, for this action? Unless proof is given of my complicity, your action could bring about your own death."

"I have the proof I need, gained, incidentally, from a Toyurasan exile, one who could pull the image of your father's words from a mere trinket present for those words."

The man nodded, "Then you have a right for what you do. I cannot fight you, even were I armed, for you represent something beyond me. Let this be ended." He stepped forward, his hands spread wide in acceptance of his fate.

Despite the knowledge that this man and his clan were responsible for the pain and hardship to many, Lisor could not help but respect the way the man prepared himself for death. He did not fear death's embrace, but accepted it with honor, honor that Lisor understood. Lisor flashed an unseen smile, and bowed in respect, then drew the Fang across the Toyurasan's throat, killing him in one smooth motion. It was clean, and felt clean, emotionally, to Lisor. He carefully drew the quill and wrote upon the wall, finding that the glyphs that the Toyurasi used for writing flowed easily from its tip.

Then he turned toward the woman, tucking the fang into his belt and quill into his sleeve. "Dress quickly, for there is one more stop I must make before I can take you to safety." She must have understood trade, at least a little, for she obeyed without question. "Come, we must go to see his father. This one died well, and for that I am grateful, but I must end the monster that brings about slavery like this." He turned and left that room, following the threads of fate toward the last target, surprisingly still within the gardens. He could feel the woman follow him, fearful. That she trusted him enough to obey was something he was grateful for.

To Lisor's surprise, the thread he was following seemed to be moving toward him. It was an old man, his beard draping nearly to his waist. There was a guard at his side, but he did not motion for the guard to attack Lisor, or the woman. His words were in a heavily accented trade, but understandable. "So, the gods have stepped in to interfere in our actions?"

Lisor stopped where he stood, then executed a perfect bow between equals. This man may have been responsible for truly horrendous things, but his courage and matter-of-fact manner indicated that he was just as willing as his son had been to face the consequences. "Though I wear Vythen's colors, the council has made its will known on this, and it was given to my hands to teach a lesson to those who would enslave the innocent. Are you willing to accept the just punishment that they have declared?"

"I have little enough to live for, with my eldest dead at your hand. He was a mind speaker, and sent me your image as he died, a last warning. But, like him, I will not cower, beg, or threaten. I know what my clan has done, and know that the will of the gods is beyond any mortal laws. And the gods have worked long to limit my clan's businesses through such laws as they could arrange. Perhaps, with this action, they will gain an advantage for a time. If you are to kill me, do so. With both my son, and likely my grandson, among the dead, the Tetsu will be in chaos for a time, but they will return."

Lisor stepped forward, noting that the guard stepped back, clearly allowing this. "Perhaps, with such a major setback, your clan will learn its limits, and no longer seek to gain its power and wealth through slavery. The other clans will learn the truth, the provenance of your wares. But, let this be over, for I am weary of the death." He administered the same respectful coup-de-grace as he had with the Tetsu heir. But, instead of using the man's blood as the marker to what had happened, he stepped forward to a statue near where the man had stood. The glyphs came to his mind, but his method was different this time, etching the glyphs into the stone with his divine blood-gift, the destructive power that could come from no one but Vythen himself. With a nod toward the guard, he took hold of the woman's arm, and was suddenly elsewhere.

He stood with her outside a small house in Sharlan, a light still burning in the window. He turned toward the woman and smiled. "I cannot grant you more than this, but go to that house and knock; tell those within your story, and they will see to your safety." He had only been outside of this particular cottage once before, but knew that Sun Xae would understand the elvara, and Reliss would not turn away the visitor. Then he was gone again, finding himself on a bluff overlooking a sheltered ravine near Atil.

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Glea sat up suddenly in the dark of night. It was time, and soon her aches and pains would be gone. She knew that with her mind cleared by her mother's magic, she would be able to access her own, but it wasn't quite time to recover her normal aspect. First, she needed to get out of this collar. Even though it was unmarked by spell now, if there was a spellcaster here, they might be able to use the focus of it to catch her unexpectedly. She held onto the tiny lock at her throat. This was something she'd never tried before, and she was less than certain it would work, but she had to try. Visualizing the moment before the lock closed, she tugged at the other time, pulling it over the lock. It probably would be easier than destroying it, and she had to try, now.

With a faint click, the lock came open, and she fumbled clumsily at removing the lock from the catch of the collar. It was stubborn, and the collar restrictive, but she managed to pull it loose and set it aside. Though she didn't have pockets, she tucked the collar itself around her belt. After tonight, she would have to bring word of what had happened to her grandfather, and this collar would serve as proof of what had happened.

Carefully, without standing fully, she made her way through the sleeping children, looking for Hassif and Daneea. Hassif was easier to find, as he slept along the outside of the huddle, and was enough larger than most that he stood out. She forced her body to keep moving, though it was still weak, and shook him on the shoulder. "Hassif, remember what I'd said this afternoon?" she hissed in his ear.

He vaguely blinked up at the night sky, only barely able to make out the form above him, but he recognized her voice. "You still think we'll escape?" His voice was kept low too, for he didn't want to be caught if she wasn't serious.

"I've been told that the tribes are on their way. An ally is bringing them. And, we'll have more help. But you have to protect the littles. I will try to stop the enemies. "

"How can you do that? They'll just use that wand on you again. You can't stand up to them, not after what they've done."

Glea could barely contain the laugh, "Let me worry about that. I have a bit of a surprise for the guards, and even without weapons, well, I know what I'm doing."

He rolled over and made to get to his knees. "I won't do anything unless you manage to get someone helping us. But, if you do that, I'll protect the littles as much as I can."

"Good, I knew I could count on you. Let me give you a little gift. I've been doing this for a while now, but now it's to bring your strength back completely. After that, I'll wake Daneea. She'll have to help you keep everyone moving. Get them up on the bluff to the south. After I get the gate open, get everyone moving."

"You can get the gate open? And give me back my strength?" He sounded incredulous. But she placed a silencing finger on his lips, looked for the right time, and pulled, drawing him from the same strength he'd had when he'd fought the slavers to begin with.

"Just get them safe, that's all I need you to do." She was already moving away, even as he realized that he had none of the aches and pains of the past several days. She could only vaguely use the tapestry of fate to recognize particular people, but she attempted to do so now, homing in on the small, non-descript girl she was entrusting most of the plan to.

She could hear a distant sound of the guards noticing some moving among the children and lowered herself as low as she could as she moved toward Daneea. It wouldn't be long, now, and she would have to act, but for now, it was time to get everything in place. "Daneea," she hissed, nudging the child carefully. "Wake up. It's time. We're going to escape."

Daneea opened her eyes quickly, not moving until she'd identified the person leaning over her. "Glea? How?"

"No time to explain much, but we've got help coming. I need you to wake the other children, and, when I open the gate, help Hassif get them up on the southern bluff. Things are going to seem crazy for a bit, but I need you to trust me. I'll help where I can, but I need to keep the guards occupied, long enough for you to get away. The tribes will meet with you, once they get here. Don't be surprised at anything."

A long ululating cry split the air, and Glea stood all the way up, "It's time. Get the children and meet me at the gate. I'll have it open for you. But you have to trust me."

Glea saw the guards begin to stir around the camp, and stepped between places to the spot just outside of the gate, pulling the catch free that held the gate closed. She was still exhausted, drained, but now, when the guards could see her, was the right time to become who she truly was. "Let the vengeance of the gods fall upon these slavers!" she pulled her temporal image from when Jirel had first come to her about the slaving band. In an instant, she was healed, and she unleashed her own divine radiance, glowing with a soft silvery light, enough to draw all of the attention to her. Then, lowering her head, she charged the nearest guard, hoping to knock him back, perhaps take his weapons from him.

He staggered back as she hit him, though, surprisingly, he did not fall over backward. Her right foot shot out to remedy that error even as her hand went to grasp the curved long-knife at his side. It wasn't something she'd trained with, but Railah had given her pointers on how to fight with unusual weapons already. She pulled the knife and spun to attempt to use it against the guard coming up on her side. Her laugh was ready as she brought the blade in under his guard, opening a long slice in his side. But it wasn't her own blade that killed him.



Her ally appeared out of the night, cloaked in a darkness that was almost impenetrable. He carried a wicked curved weapon, but not one that she took any time trying to see. She only knew that he was fighting at her side. She turned back to the one she'd knocked to the ground, stepping on his wrist as he tried to bring to bear the wand in his sleeve. So, this one was her tormentor from earlier. She took pleasure in placing enough weight on the arm that he couldn't move while she plucked the wand from his hand. "Shall I show you the nature of pain?" She didn't even worry about the other guards for the moment, her ally seemed to have that well in hand, moving from slaver to slaver with a cold efficiency.

He tried to roll out from under her foot, suddenly fearful. "Who are you?" he gasped, his mastery of Trade weakening in his fear, but she understood him regardless.

"Someone you should never have touched. My Mama is Lady Night. And I am here to bring an end to your operations here." She let him move, just enough to cut him with the blade held loosely in her right hand. The children were moving, and she knew she had to kill quickly, before they were attacked. She struck again, even as he recoiled, driving the blade in under his ribs and twisting. As he fell back, she could tell he wasn't dead yet, but he would soon be so. And for now, he was no longer a threat.

She stepped between places, appearing right behind another guard, one who was moving toward the open pen. She still didn't have much height, but didn't need it, not against this opponent. She turned the knife in the same way her father would, and drove it back and up through his jaw. He slipped almost silently into the dirt and she moved again. There may have been nearly two dozen guards here, but they were falling rapidly, and not all to her and her mysterious ally. Two of them had been feathered by arrows, and lay decorating the ground with their corpses.

She reached for a little more divine power, allowing her radiance to illuminate a larger area. She did not want to be targeted by those archers along the bluff, and hoped that her silent ally was similarly protected. Rushing back toward the gate to the pen, she called for the children to hurry, encouraging them both in Trade and Pundi. "Quickly, so you're all safe. Up the bluff." She held her knife and wand at the ready, prepared to use them on the next guard that came within reach. Her long hair caught on the open collar at her belt, but she did not stop to consider it. Now was the time to fight, and fight she would, not huddle along like the captive she'd pretended to be.

The children seemed to get the point, and she could feel Hassif move along the youngest two, encouraging them to hurry up the bluff, while she stood guard over their retreat. She was surprised not to see more guards come in her direction. Perhaps they had realized that no mortal could shine with such a light, and had decided to trust themselves against the dark fighter moving among them. But, as she looked around the ground, she saw fewer and fewer of the guards standing and fighting. A quartet of them started running, only to find their ways blocked by desert tribesmen on horses and camels.

As the last guard fell to his curved blade, the dark man who'd fought at her side raised his voice, though there seemed to be some magic masking it. "The will of the gods is complete; the children are safe and the slavers are no more. Let the children with families be reunited with them, and those without adopted by those who have lost their young." He seemed to shudder and change, vanishing in the gloom of the night.

Glea tucked the unsheathed knife in her belt and looked around. Her ally was right, the battle had been won. She'd expected her father here, and was surprised not to see him, but knew that he was probably working on another angle of things. This left her to deal with the issues that were presented by the mix of captured children, some taken from city families, others from desert tribes, and finally a smattering of actual orphans.

She stepped between places again, finding herself on the edge of the bluff, and called out in the desert language, "I have come to speak with the leaders of the tribes, to answer what questions I may, and arrange all things as Jirel would have them."

Pharel was not likely to remain long with the tribes, perhaps not even openly appearing herself, save to an eld priestess, leaving the matter of the disposition of the children to Glea. But, she knew she could handle it. She stood in the center of the gathering, drawing all attention to her, despite her ragged attire.

One man swung off of a camel and approached her. "You speak on behalf of Jirel?"

"I have been sent by Jirel, first to comfort those who had no other comfort, and then to fight on their behalf. Now, I must see to it that that comfort is not wasted. The children must be returned to their families, where possible, and adopted where it is not."

The man studied her, "I heard you shout that you are the daughter of a goddess. Is this true?"

"Yes, it is true. My mama is Lady Night, and she desires that the children be protected, all of them."

"Then we will abide by your statements. Those that have been taken from the tribes will be reunited with their tribes, and those taken from the city returned to it. That you have protected our children is something we cannot do other than be grateful for."

Glea nodded, "The children are weak, though I have done what I could to succor them. Let them rest for the rest of the night, and then they must be taken from here. "

He smiled a rough smile. "Jirel has sent protection, and we will not argue with that. Find the children who need to be accepted by the tribes. No child will be left alone."

Glea walked among the tired children, asking question, sorting through those who needed returned to the tribes, and those who had families in the city. There were only a few who did not fit among either group, and of those, only one girl, but that one girl mattered to Glea, for it was Daneea. Taking the orphan who had helped her so much aside, Glea questioned her at length. "Daneea, do you not have any relatives at all? By my own words, and children without a family must be adopted, for their own safety and well being. You would be different, close enough to a time where they would marry you off, but without a dowry to offer a man, which means that you'd not likely be paired at anything near our age."

Daneea sat down and pulled her knees to her chest, "I won't go to the tribes. If you try sending me to them, I'll run away. I'll get back to the streets somehow, but I won't go through what the other girls talked about, the marrying and bearing without a choice."

Glea shook her head. She knew the tribal patterns, marrying girls off shortly after they'd become ready to bear; if Daneea went to the tribes, that pattern would not be broken, and she might die of exposure trying to leave the tribes. There had to be another choice. She remembered her own mortal family. If Daneea had someone to care for her like that, even an adoptive family, she wouldn't have to go to the tribes. Maybe that was the solution. She could probably convince her grandmother and Aunt Kiera. Her grandfather would be a harder matter.

"Daneea, I think I might have a solution, but it won't be what you expect. I could take you to Akhshar, ask my own family to adopt you. I don't live in the mortal world much anymore, but my father's family raised me for many years. They're good people. Grandfather is strict, but fair. The only problem I have is that I don't know how to convince him. I can only try. Would you be willing to attempt that? It would mean lots of hours at lessons, and some stuffy ceremonies from time to time, but it would be safety, and good food."

"I would go with you, if you think they'd be willing to accept me. I can't go with the tribes; I'd sooner die than that."

Glea reached out and ruffled the other girl's dusty hair. Daneea wasn't much younger than she was, and she really did not want to put her with someone who would not care for her. "We can try. When dawn comes, I'll tell the tribesmen that I have to bring you to Akhshar. I really need another witness anyhow, because this will affect all of the desert cities. Be warned, it will be strange, because

I'm not taking you on horse or camel. I'll bring you to Grandmother Mialar's garden, and then hope Grandmother Alezra and Aunt Kiera are available. They are the ones who will help me with this."

Daneea sat up and hugged Glea, as big a hug as the demi-divine had left her divine grandfather, just over a tenday ago. "I can't ask you to do more. If they helped raise you, they must be good people."

Glea smiled and hugged back, "Now we just have to wait for the dawn. Rest for now. I'll get you when we're ready."

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It was still early morning when Glea and Daneea appeared in Mialar's garden. The faedh woman was not out tending her plants yet, which surprised Glea to some degree. But the door was open to the manor, and Glea pulled Daneea in, despite the latter still being disoriented by the sudden change of location. "Come on, Daneea, no one here will hurt you."

Even as the girl reluctantly stepped into the quiet house, Mialar appeared out of her private study. "Glea. I had heard from Jirel that you were coming. She didn't say much, but only that you'd need me."

"Grandmother, may I present Daneea, who shared my captivity outside of Atil? Jirel asked me to watch over the children there, while Papa and a few others worked on stopping the slavers. But the slavers are dead, at least the ones at the camp. I think Papa would be able to tell you more, if he were here."

"Captivity? In service to Jirel? That is something I hadn't heard, though Kiera said that your father had mentioned something going on near Atil."

"Grandmother, I will tell everything, in time. I need Grandmother Alezra, though, and Aunt Kiera. And, eventually, Grandfather."

Mialar studied the other girl that Glea had brought, sensing a large number of minor injuries. Under her golden gaze, the scratches healed, and Daneea stepped back in shock. "What happened?"

Glea laughed, "Daneea, that is something Grandmother can do. Like me, she's the daughter of a god, in her case, the Risen One, where my Mama is Lady Night. Grandmother wanted you to feel better."

Mialar nodded, taking a distant look to her gaze, "I believe your grandfather has already left for the House of the Sword, but your other Grandmother, and your Aunt are still present. Come, let us go to meet them." She swept the pair into the dining hall, drawing a look of surprise from Kiera as she was biting into a piece of fresh bread.

"Glea, what has happened to you? And who is that with you? In rags, no less?" Alezra didn't take a moment's hesitation, but stood up and moved to embrace her granddaughter.

"Grandmothers, Aunt Kiera, I have to tell you something, something that will affect our city, but also was the will of the gods. Papa will be able to tell you more when he gets back, but I don't know how soon that will be. Jirel asked me to allow myself to be captured by slavers, so that I could protect the other children, while Papa and someone else tried to find out who was behind the slavers. They said they couldn't rescue me until they had the people in charge, so I think that's done. Daneea was one of my companions there, and, well, she has nowhere else to go, except to the tribes."

Alezra frowned, "You were put into danger? And escaped?"

"Yes, Grandmother. I have come to report the truth to Grandfather, before the messengers come from Atil. And Daneea is a witness. She can speak truth to the conditions there, and that children were stolen from the marketplace itself, in Atil. But, she needs someplace to go, and I couldn't think of anywhere else to take her."

Kiera nodded, "I know something of this. Lisor asked for funds from Jirel's church, to support someone who was investigating the matter for him. A Han Lo, as I recall; he's a Toyurasan exile. I didn't know that Glea would be there. Is this the only one you're bringing here?"

Glea smiled and moved over to hug her aunt. "The others either had someplace to go, or were boys. She's the only orphan girl. I couldn't turn her over to the tribes, not with her being almost my age."

Kiera frowned. Much as she served the same goddess that the tribesmen worshipped almost exclusively, she did not like the way the tribesmen treated their women. She understood Glea's wanting to do something different with this child. "You want her to be adopted, by our family."

Glea looked between Kiera and her grandmothers, then nodded, "If it is at all possible. Papa can't adopt her. He spends most of his time in the heavens. I need her to be somewhere safe."

Lady Alezra and Kiera both closed their eyes, turning their thoughts inward. Glea was familiar with what they were doing; she'd been around priests and priestesses all of her young life. They were getting answers from on high. Now she merely needed to be patient.

Lady Alezra opened her eyes first, then managed a smile, "The Risen One concurs that this child will need care, and can be improved by education. The main problem I see is convincing my husband."

Kiera opened her eyes and laughed, "That is not as much of a problem as you may be thinking, Mother. I think, when presented much the same sort of options as Grandmother presented him at Lisor's homecoming with Glea, he will be amenable."

Lady Alezra laughed, "That will not incline him to you on this, daughter, but, it might just be enough to convince him. Indeed, with news such as this, I would think he should be recalled from the House of the Sword. He will need to prepare for emissaries from Atil, probably within a tenday. It would be well if we could have the word from Lisor before that, but it might not be helped, if he drained himself with whatever actions he took."

She looked over Glea and Daneea, then frowned. "I will send a messenger for my husband, but both of you need to wash and change. I think there are still some clothes from when Reyel was small in one of the rooms, and Glea, you should have something here as well. If you'll take your charge to the bathing chamber, I'll arrange the clothing. And then, with you all cleaned and presentable, we will speak with Tainen."

Glea dragged Daneea after her, knowing that it would do no good to argue with her grandmother. "Come on. You probably haven't had a proper bath in years. While mine is only just over a tenday past, I want to get clean again."

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Lisor returned to the heavens after killing the last of the slavers. He knew that he dared not identify himself to his daughter; it would undo all of the work he'd done in appearing as Vythen's servant for the evening's deaths. And that could mean war for his home. He returned directly to the dread god's quarters, unhooking the fang from his belt, and offering it, and the quill, back to Vythen with a bow. "The slavers are dead, and some died surprisingly well."

Vythen accepted his items, and gestured toward a table for the robe that Lisor had not yet removed. "Thou learned much, not only of thy enemies, but of thyself, in this, Grandson."

Lisor shrugged out of the robe, grateful to return to his usual appearance. "I did, Grandfather. I learned that there is a darkness that exists within me, a darkness I'd denied all of my life. I reveled in those first deaths, in the hatred and anger that suffused me. But, with the last two assassinations, I learned that my enemy would wear as fair a mien as I do upon the earth. They knew they were wrong, and that their power came from the torments of others, and did not dispute my right to kill them. Neither raised a hand in their defense, and I think I learned the most from them. There was no joy in

killing them, no pleasure in destroying even the head of such a vile monster as the Tetsu Clan represented. My earlier pleasure and pride vanished, when I saw that I was not the only one who would face death with that calm and control. I do not know what will happen with the Tetsu, though their patriarch indicated that they would continue, though weakened for a time."

Vythen stood up, facing Lisor levelly. "Thou know, more than most others, that there is often something unseen in each crime, some mitigating factor that the criminal believes in. Loyalty led to my downfall, and the Tetsu Clan's dependence upon the trading of flesh shall be theirs. And yet, they did not consider their actions ill, though they accepted thy judgment of it. I think that it is time that the gods act upon Toyurasi, working to ameliorate the ills that that land possesses. But thou must return to thy lady. Know that thy daughter is safe, and will return to thy family home before returning to the heavens. It may be that thou will return to her there, rather than here, for there is much that thou know that thy father will have need of. But go unto Nocta; she will wish to question thee as she takes back thy service."

Lisor nodded, and managed a hug for his divine grandfather. "Thank you, for all of your help. I won't forget it." Then he was away, willing to face whatever fate would meet him in his Lady's quarters. He did not fear any serious reprisal for his actions, for she had herself allowed his actions under the aegis of the other. However, she might find his emotions during the death he'd dealt to be inappropriate, and she would have the right to rebuke him for that. He found himself in her private quarters and waited. She would come to him when she was ready.

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Glea, her hair neatly plaited, helped Daneea with the fastenings of the other's dress. In her mind, she could hear the familiar song from StarSinger. "Come, my Grandfather's here. Just remember to be polite, and don't argue with him." Glea picked up the collar, knife, and wand that she'd taken from the slaver's camp. These would be needed as proof of what she would say, though she doubted not that her own word, before her grandfather's truthsense, would be adequate for most purposes.

She pulled Daneea out into the dining room. While the sunroom was more appropriate for some things, it was better to have Grandfather at least somewhat relaxed. "Grandfather. I have come to place before you a claim of harm done in the City of Atil, and have a witness beyond myself to those crimes."

Lord Tainen rested his hand across StarSinger's hilts, and inclined his head, "Speak, Granddaughter. The message that I received said that something of import was to be revealed here."

Glea curtseyed and closed her eyes, ordering her thoughts. "Grandfather. Jirel received word from her desert priestesses of raiders that would attack the tribes near Atil, taking children but not livestock. Pharel, who serves Jirel as Sikal, was sent to investigate, and they witnessed that these Toyurasan slavers would even take children from the marketplace, both those with parents, and those without. I was asked to help with this, provide what succor I could to the captured children, and so I allowed myself to be captured. Daneea, who is my companion here, had spent two moons within the camp. While there, a noble from Toyurasi came, tortured me, with this," she pulled the wand that she held and offered it to him. "He made it clear that his clan, the Tetsu, were behind the slaving, and that they had the permission of no less than Lord Mercian of Atil. I was rescued last night, by someone wearing the colors of Vythen, though that person spoke little, and did not introduce themselves to me. The children that were at the camp are returned, either to their families and tribes, or, if orphaned, given to the tribes to raise, save one. Daneea is of an age where the tribes would marry her off, giving her no chance or choice for another life. I ask that you take her in, raise her as a Calasti, and offer her the chances she would not have elsewhere."

Lord Tainen studied the girl for a moment, then turned his attention to the other things that had been taken from the camp. "This collar, and the knife, come from that slaver's camp?"

"Yes, Grandfather. The collar was one placed upon me by the guard that I took the wand from when I killed him. This knife was also his."

He nodded, accepting the tokens, "these can be scryed to verify the truth of the matter. But the other matter that you bring before me is just as serious, I deem. You want me to take an orphan, likely one who has spent more than a year living on scraps in the marketplace, within my own household?"

Lady Alezra cleared her throat and signed for Glea to remain silent. "The child cannot help her background. And it would show your position well, to accept an orphan who was enslaved like this. She has indicated that she would be willing to take what lessons we would demand of her, for this opportunity."

He frowned, "I suspect that this has been discussed fully before I returned. But, have you considered that I might choose another path, perhaps sending her to Akhshar's orphanage?"

Kiera stood up, looking down at her father. He didn't have great height, even standing, but when she took her position, she seemed to have a greater strength than he did. "Father, forgive my disrespect, but the only decision you have in this matter is whether the child is named among your own, or mine. I will adopt her, raise her as a Calasti, if you do not. She is not much younger than Relyn, and could learn well from him. "

Lord Tainen met his daughter's eyes, then turned away. "You seem to have learned my mother's own trick, in forcing my hand. I cannot turn you, or any children you claim, from the Calasti manor, and you are my heir. Very well, as the choice seems to be made, I will accept this, provided the child agrees to obey our household rules, and will continue her schooling until we have deemed it adequate, even if it requires more time than she has before her majority. With that agreement, I will adopt her. You're right in thinking that this would be a good move politically."

Daneea tried to imitate the curtsy she'd seen Glea use, and stepped forward, "I will promise to do as you ask, Lord Calasti."

He turned toward her and laughed. "Just because my family has outmaneuvered me again does not mean that they were wrong in what they suggested. You will be one of mine, and I would have you call me father. Glea, you will have a new aunt, it looks like, and, when you are here, within the mortal plane, I would need you to aid her as you may in her lessons."

Glea turned and crushed Daneea to her, leaving the younger girl out of breath for a long moment. "Welcome to the family, Daneea. Grandfather will write up the paperwork later, I think. And you will be expected to help him with the mess with Atil. But, you have a home, now."

Daneea wiped at an eye, surprising herself at her reaction to this welcome. "I'll try to be worthy of this, Glea. And thank you, Lord...erm, Father." She went to try to curtsy again, but was surprised as he stood, moving StarSinger to hang from his back, and drawing her into a hug of his own.

"Daughter, know that I have given up two children to their goddesses, and would be glad of another child I might not have to give up to that fate. Be welcome here, among your new family. And now, I think you have likely missed enough meals for your life entire. Kiera, take your sister to the kitchen and help her get something to eat. There will be enough time to deal with the difficulties with Atil later, especially after my younger son returns, as I have little doubt he will."

Daneea looked back and forth between the adults that now comprised a part of her new family, and laughed, though her hand went down to her stomach. She was indeed hungry, though she hardly knew what to do about any of the rest of this. "Thank you. All of you."

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Lisor found his silver-grey attire waiting on the chair in his Lady's private quarters. Whether this meant that she accepted all of the steps he'd taken to remove the slavers, or had something more for him to do, he didn't know. But he knew that that attire was left for him. Nor was he reluctant to slip out of the Finder's grey, and back into the role he'd had for almost three years now. He stripped quickly and pulled out the finer cloth, finding that its almost silken touch felt right. He was only buttoning the jerkin in place when he sensed Nocta arrive.

With the top button of the jerkin left undone, he swept into a bow, then dropped to his knee before her. "Lady, I have returned, with the good news that our daughter is safe."

She placed her hands on his shoulders and stood there. He kept his head down for now, until she should signal what she wanted from him. Her words were soft, and in the chakuri dialect that she still struggled to bring him to full proficiency on. "Our daughter is indeed safe, and works to grant that safety to another. There is more than one reason for her immediate travel to thy mortal home."

He took in his breath, "She's having to tell the truth to my father. I am not surprised at that. But what else could she be doing, save perhaps recovering from her ordeal?"

"Thou will be pleasantly surprised with what she has had the presence of mind to do. She followed thy instructions regarding the children, save for one specific child. There was a girl-child among the orphans, one close in age to her."

He couldn't avoid looking up, to meet her gaze, "A girl child? What would that have to do with my home?"

Nocta's laugh was a rich rumble, very chakuri. "That child would not do well within the tribes, as thou had indicated must happen with the orphans. Glea suggested something else in this case. She has brought the girl before thy father. And thy sister has taken up the suggestion, in ways that Akhshar's Lord cannot deny."

Lisor took a moment to understand, "She wants this orphan to be a Calasti? And can get Father to agree to it?"

"Thy father has already agreed. Thou shall have a young sister. And I deem, as soon as thou have recovered thy energies fully, that thou should go and greet her, listen to what Glea has to say of her captivity. Thy father will need what answers Glea cannot provide. Ollahm's Sikal has gone to speak with thy ally in Atil, and, with my permission, has made visible the item thou hid. She will return that ally to Sharlan, where he can safely gain more information of the crimes of the Tetsu."

Lisor reached up to his shoulders, taking his Lady's hands in his, and bringing them forward, where he kissed them gently. "I am grateful that you allowed what was necessary to avoid a war for Akhshar. That you allowed Grandfather to direct me for a time was a great sacrifice on your part, and I want you to know that I am back where I want to be, in your service."

She reached down and touched the pendant hanging at his throat, a touch that sent him a feeling of power. "It was not something done lightly, but I had no reason to doubt thy true loyalty. None in the heavens, not even Railah, wishes war in the desert over this issue. Thou were acting, not truly for Vythen alone, when thou wore his colors, but upon the combined will of the council, as thou have done before. The only difference was appearance. But, does this attire still suit thee truly?"

He looked down again, "I have learned of a darkness within me, a point where anger and hatred rule me. I am not proud of what I did there, though I gloried in it at the time. You seldom rebuke me, but for this, I am willing to be rebuked. I went beyond what I should have, striking from hatred, anger that burned within me, rather than the calm reason that you have shown me. Though I know why I did so, I pray that you will show me a way to avoid that in the future."

"Even for the protection of our daughter?"

"I don't know what pain and anguish she went through, but I must have faith that she could have changed the situation in an instant if she had had reason to. Her pains did not excuse my own

mistakes. I don't want to lose myself again, not like that. I will fight in your name, kill where you have need, but do not place me where I can lose my center like that again, please."

Lady Night moved her hands to his sides, and raised him up. He was taller than she was, while she remained in her mortal aspect, but she was unconcerned about that. "I cannot say what lies in the distant future, only that thou must take the lessons that thou learned and forge ahead. I will not have thee apart from me now; as I accepted thy service before, I accept it now. Be at peace, Chosen, for thou have proved thyself."

He lowered his head to kiss her forehead. "I am yours, Lady, as always."

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It was three days on the mortal world before Lisor returned to Akhshar. Glea remained there for the duration, helping Daneea find her way through the changes that had come over the orphan. Daneea was still wary, always afraid at almost any action that she might be struck; at nights, she huddled in the bed that had been given her, expecting for this peace to be nothing more than a dream, and her captivity reality still. Glea stayed near, trying to comfort her new aunt, knowing that this would be one of the hardest things Daneea had ever done, to allow herself to be vulnerable again, to stop watching for an attack at any time.

Lisor appeared, as usual, with the sun. He stood in the courtyard, finding it surprisingly empty with Arandel gone. Relyn took his practices now in the evenings, with his father, and Glea was not even working with the pell to keep her own skill up. After what she'd been through, he didn't entirely blame her the desire for rest. But she would be worked hard once she returned to the heavens, for Railah would doubtless have seen what happened, and have advice and lessons that could prevent recurrences.

He pulled open the courtyard door to the manor, and stepped within. There would be messengers on the other side of the building, but, he wanted to see Glea before reporting his part, or at least, what he was willing to say of his part, on the mission to his father. There was a lot he could not say, and, while he expected that his father might guess his own extended role, the elder Calasti would not ask, and Lisor would not volunteer that information. To do so would be damaging.

Glea seemed to know without asking that he was there, but he was pleasantly surprised by her pulling another girl, just slightly younger than Glea herself, to meet him. This could be none other than the sister he'd been told about. He knew that she'd been through rough things; Lady Night had informed him that the girl had spent more than two moons in the slaver's camp, and two years on the streets before that. He was determined to help her feel at home as easily as he could. After embracing Glea tightly, assuring her that she was missed in the heavens, he turned to Daneea and bowed, then drew her into a hug. "It is a pleasure to finally meet my new sister."

Daneea blushed and looked down, "I still find that almost frightening, having brothers and sisters, all of whom are much older than me. Even the oldest of my nieces and nephews are older than I am."

Lisor laughed, "Ask Leah about the difficulties there, she might be better able to help you adjust to them. For she's your aunt, and likely less than a decade your senior, while our father has more than eighty years to his name."

He glanced at Glea, "I take it you've been helping her learn her way around, at least? I'm sure Kiera has been insisting on proper clothing for her, and likely plying her with more food than she knows what to do with."

Glea laughed, "You know Aunt Kiera too well, Papa. Do you need me to send for Grandfather? I know you can't spend too much time here."



Lisor merely reached down to the daggers at his waist, focusing a burst of familiarity through them, a sense that, while most sacred swords would not recognize, he knew his father could sense. "Father will be here shortly, I think. I have my own way of contacting him, even without Arandel here."

Ushering the two girls into the dining room, Lisor took out an item he'd been working on the past few days while his energies recovered. In truth, it had been started before that, as a possible gift for Glea, but he realized it might be more appropriate gifted elsewhere. It was a small bracelet, wide enough to fit around Glea's wrists, but designed so that the wire could be tightened around the wrist. It was made of a bluish wire, something that he had never found outside of the heavens, and wrapped to form an open C shape. Wrapped within were beads of various stones, sparkling brightly. He took it out and reached over to take Daneea's wrist. "I think this should go to you, Sister. I know you've probably never had anything nice of your own, and it's more than time that you should." He fitted the wrapped wire around her wrist and tightened it, so that the wire ends almost touched.

Daneeea looked up, surprised, both by the craftsmanship and the gift. "Thank you. You're right; I've never had anything like this. It feels so different, having something beautiful."

Lisor tousled her hair for a moment and grinned. "You'll likely have more than that soon enough, but I thought it a reasonable gift to give someone who likely helped Glea through a very bleak time."

"That she did, from the stories I've been getting," a warm voice spoke from the doorway. Lisor rose in a rush and moved forward to bow to his father.

"I have yet to hear those stories, though no doubt she will tell me when she's ready. But I know that you need to know what I learned, my part in things as they happened. And that before the messengers from Atil can get here."

Lord Tainen moved over to his usual chair and shifted StarSinger to his lap. "It would indeed help. I have little doubt that you've had your hand in some of what happened, though Glea said it was not you who helped her fight in the camp. Which is surprising."

Lisor lowered his head, staying standing for the moment. "The situation did not allow for me to have a free hand in what needed to be done. Mostly because, despite my position in the heavens, I am known as your son, and if I had acted as I wanted, it could cause more deaths that I did not wish to cause."

Lord Tainen studied his younger son. If he could tell where Lisor was avoiding the truth, he did not indicate it. This was one of those times when he might be grateful for the limits on truth sense. "Speak to me what you can of what happened. Your knowledge will aid me in deciding what must be done."

"Very well. It was determined, partly through my own actions, that the guards were being ordered to avoid arresting Toyurasan slavers as they picked up children in the marketplace, even when those children clearly had families of their own. A bit of misdirection led me to locate a councilor who seemed involved, and scrying from that point revealed that the orders he was passing on came directly from Lord Mercian himself. Which is where I determined that my own actions must be curtailed in the matter.

"Han Lo worked the other angle, speaking with the other Toyurasi, and gathering information. He located someone he expected was heavily involved in the upper levels of the agreement, and, with the aid of another Sikal, retrieved an item that allowed him to use kevada to determine the highest levels of the plot. It was clear there that the Tetsu Clan of Northern Toyurasi was involved, all the way to their highest leaders.

"Because of the delicacy of this mission, I discussed the situation with Lord Vythen, who sent one of his to act on behalf of the Council of Gods. Each and every one of the five planned deaths was dealt by one in the name of Vythen. You will find, when the messengers arrive, that there is indication of this. There is no cause, therefore, for war between Akhshar and either Toyurasi or Atil."

Lord Tainen rubbed at his jaw, then nodded, "Thus Akhshar's honor is preserved, for none can say that we acted, even to correct a grave violation of treaty between the tribes and the cities. When you return to the heavens, send my gratitude to Lord Vythen. His actions may have been much to my city's benefit. The information you have given agrees with what I already have from Glea, who indicated that a Toyurasan noble implicated Lord Mercian directly, and claimed relation to the Tetsu. I had no reason to doubt her words, though her memory of what he said was clouded at that time by the pain he had put her through. There need be only one more thing to test, for the scrying has been done on blade and collar from Glea's imprisonment. Your mother speaks warily of the wand that Glea acquired, one that was apparently used against her. But Alezra cannot identify the nature of the power without testing it."

Lisor nodded; the magic of Toyurasi was much different from the western magics. He'd seen that much over the years. "You would need to test its effects on a living creature? I can understand why you would hesitate, even with those imprisoned in the city. For there is too great a chance of doing unintended damage, and Railah will not permit that."

Lord Tainen nodded, "That is my observation, too. But I think we need proof of what it does."

Lisor nodded, then bowed. "Glea can restore me, should there be any ill effects. I would allow such a test upon myself."

"I cannot ask that of you, though, you are correct, Glea would be able to restore you, and easily."

"I can volunteer, Father. But we would need Mother to verify the action when it is done. If she is here, I am ready to test it for you."

Alezra had just walked into the doorway of the dining room a moment before, and nodded, "I should not be surprised to see you volunteer for such. It will give us the proof we need, should any question Glea's ability to tell her story completely. With your grandmother and myself, and Glea at need, you should not be overly harmed, especially as Glea said it was merely a lesson in pain, rather than harm. But, it would allow us the proof that will keep Glea's own name clear. If you are prepared, we can go into the sunroom. My workroom is too small for all of us. And your father must witness the effects."

Lisor flashed a wry smile. "I think it best that I do this, for then I will truly know the value of my daughter's sacrifice, and the reason that Jirel asked for this aid. I will come."

They filed into the sunroom, and Lisor planted himself, with feet apart, guessing from the indication that it was an instrument of pain, that he might need stability. When Mialar joined them, he looked at his mother, then indicated the wand. "It's best now, while I'm prepared."

There were no words that Lisor could imagine to describe the feelings that he experienced when the wand was lightly tapped against him. There was pain, on many different levels, and it did not vanish when the wand was withdrawn. He silently shook his head when Mialar lifted her golden gaze for healing. He wanted to see how long the primary effect was, and he knew he could handle it, though it was excruciating. It was almost five minutes later that he managed to straighten back up and meet his mother's gaze. "I'm not sure how Glea handled that, for I truly didn't want to, not once it had started. It's mostly gone now, but I don't think I'll ever forget it."

Mialar stepped forward, inundating him in the soft glow of her healing gaze while he tried to put it into words. She spoke before he could. "She has your stubbornness, and the defenses of her divine heritage. It might well have been worse for you, for you were a mortal for most of your life. Alezra, did you get the information you needed from this? I would not have you hurt another with it, if there is no reason."

Lady Alezra set aside the wand, "I know how it works now, and what it actually does to its victims. I can validate Glea's story completely, for I could see every ache and throb within Lisor as he bore up under the magic. The tribes and cities must know of the danger that the Toyurasi pose to our

people. Perhaps with this lesson so easily seen, there won't be another betrayal as Lord Mercian committed, at least not soon."

Lord Tainen stepped forward, drawing Lisor into an embrace. "You have a great deal of bravery, son. And a willingness to provide services beyond what is asked of you. With the work that you and Glea have done, you have given us a chance to protect the rest of the desert. I will not detain you longer, should you need to return to the heavens soon. I will send to Sharlan, where I likely will find Han Lo, with further information on the plots of the Tetsu. Do not forget to show my gratitude to Lord Vythen, for he has ensured that my city remains free."

Lisor laughed, his mind shaking the echo of pain long enough to appreciate his father's covert sayings. There was little doubt that Lord Tainen had guessed at what he'd done to ensure the safety of the city, but he would not question the answers he'd been given, especially as Lisor had made it clear that the messengers themselves would know of the assassin wearing Vythen's colors. "I have only done what I needed to do, Father. But I should return to the heavens. There are things I have learned that I will need time to understand fully. Glea is welcome to stay here as long as she feels she is needed, though my Lady and I will be grateful when she returns to us. Take care of my sisters, all of them."

Lisor extricated himself from his father's arms and went to hug both Glea and Daneea again. "I'll be back again once I've had a chance to think things through, Sister. I hope that you learn that we really do care about you, all of our family. You're a Calasti now, and that makes you important to us."

Daneea managed a smile, realizing how similar in manner Lisor and Glea could be, at least when dealing with family matters. "Thank you, Lisor. Not only for accepting me here, but for making Glea such a good friend."

Lisor chuckled and stepped back. "I will visit soon." And he was gone. His duties to Jirel were complete, and he knew that Glea would return to the heavens once she was ready. He would not rush her.