

CITY OF LIGHT
Book Three of the Caliel Cycle

By
Adam Lee

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Adam Lee

PROLOGUE
To Meet a God

It was a cool, golden morning. Winter had not yet lifted its grip on the world of Caliel, but there was a lull in the cold this day, and gray skies had parted to reveal a mirror-clean blue that hinted of spring. Sunlight, molten gold mixed with azure, glittered off the wind-ruffled surface of the Esshen Sea in a fire of rays. The air was crisp, pleasantly brisk, and the gulls had come out of their nests to enjoy the fair weather. They rose in circles from the chimneys and rooftops of the city of Ral Vraxan, built atop the mountain of Sharax that dominated an island in the center of the Esshen Sea. Their cheerful, raucous squawks promised more good weather to come.

In his bedroom, Raine Destin sat on the bed and looked out the window at the circling gulls. It was more pleasant than contemplating his new room; he had a hard time believing he would be sleeping there for the next ten years.

That's just because you haven't finished moving in, he told himself. It used to be a storeroom, for Vraxor's sake. It wasn't supposed to look lived-in. Once you unpack, it'll be just like home.

But he had trouble convincing himself of it. None of the tapestries or portraits had arrived yet, and the walls were bare gray stone. Crates containing the few belongings he had felt it necessary to bring were stacked against one wall. The rug had not arrived either, and the stone floor was cold underfoot, even through his slippers. The only piece of furniture was his bed—and that didn't even have a mattress yet, he was reminded as the frame creaked beneath his weight.

Out in the hall, he could hear the bustle of servants carrying crates into the palace. *Mostly Leah's things, he thought wryly. By the true god, three days since the Choosing and they're still coming. How much more could she need?*

However, Raine's apartment troubles had nothing to do with how much Leah had to move in. The palace overlooking Ral Vraxan had never had to accommodate both a Sovereign and her First Councillor before. When they had moved in, there had been a scramble to find rooms for him. In the end, a few converted storerooms were the best anyone could do.

Thinking about his new rooms, and everything that went with them, was making Raine's mood worse. He returned to watching the gulls.

They look so free, he thought as the white-winged bodies soared above Ral Vraxan's cathedrals. They glided on the updrafts, hardly even flapping their wings.

He was not sure whether to envy them. *I may not be overjoyed about my new job, but it's what I wanted. Isn't it?*

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Vraxor's mercy, he suddenly thought, by the time my term is up, I'll be almost thirty years old. Half my life will be over. And for what? I didn't want this job. I should stop fooling myself about that. I only took it because I wanted to be with Leah... No! I couldn't leave her to do it alone, he corrected himself. She's my friend and I can't abandon her when she needs me... needs my help, that is.

Besides, I remember the injustices I saw while I was competing for the Choosing. Nobles who live in wealth and peasants who live in squalor, and the latter ruinously taxed while the former are hardly taxed at all. But this will be my chance to make everything right. Just think how much good I can do. The thought cheered him, but only slightly.

His thoughts drifted to his parents. He had not spoken to them since the Choosing; he assumed they were still furious at him for accepting a job that made him subordinate to Leah.

I wonder if that will last for ten years, he thought half-seriously, glad for the respite from their badgering him. But I doubt it. More likely, soon they'll realize I'm still in a position to win them wealth and power. Then they'll start trying to control me again, sending me all kinds of helpful "suggestions"... if they don't just move in with me.

With a small start, he remembered Myrren. *When she gets back from Shael, she'll probably expect me to be in Ral Ardent. I should send a messenger to my old apartment to wait for her, to tell her where to find me.*

A voice interrupted his reverie. "Raine!"

Leah of Arlavan, the Sovereign over all of Vraxor's lands, stood in the doorway. She smiled at him, a perfect white curve of teeth, her green eyes lively and bright against her freckled skin. A strip of cloth tied her long black hair back in a ponytail. She wore an ordinary white robe, but made the simple garment look regal.

He jumped up off the bed. "What is it?"

"Come on!" she said. "The *sen'vrax* have another lesson for us."

Belatedly, Raine noticed a priest of Vraxor behind her. It hovered just above the floor, the trailing fringes of the hooded red robe that covered its entire body brushing the flagstones.

The priest's cowed head rose. Beneath the hood, there was no face, only a dark void.

—The last lesson— it said. Raine did not hear its voice with his ears, but inside his head. It was a rasping, hollow noise, like something that might have come from the throat of a corpse. —After this, you will be prepared to take on the full range of duties—

Both of them had been selected for their political experience, so remedial lessons in governing were unnecessary. Nevertheless, in the last few days the council of priests had been lecturing them on the minutiae of running the country. It involved a lot more work than Raine

had expected; he knew the priesthood made most of the actual decisions and had not thought the Sovereign was responsible for so much. It made him doubly glad he was there to help Leah.

Floating ahead of them, the priest led them through the corridors of the palace. In truth, the Sovereign only lived on the opulent upper floors. The fortress-like lower levels, and all the catacombs below, were the domain of the priests. From that stronghold, the red-robed servants of Vraxor issued their decrees that shaped the lives of every citizen of the country of the dark god. The Sovereign was mostly a ceremonial position, Raine knew, a figurehead chosen to oversee the minor details of governing that the priests did not want to concern themselves with. Nevertheless, the position did carry considerable prestige and no small degree of real power, even if it was rarely invoked in practice.

The palace was vast, and Raine had not yet explored all or even most of it. The priest took them on an unfamiliar route: down dimly lit hallways, through unmarked doors, and up several flights of stairs. After a time, he realized that they were headed to the highest floor. He had never been to that level.

The last staircase was a spiral that wound up around the inside of a tower. Narrow slits in the stone walls let in shafts of sunlight. At the top was an imposing door, made of something dark black and glassy smooth that was neither metal nor stone. Vraxor's trident was embossed on the door, and slashing across it were carved lines of jagged, angular script in the demons' tongue, the tongue of the priests.

Raine and Leah waited on the landing while the priest studied the door. It reached into a pocket of its robe and withdrew a heavy skeleton key, holding it clasped in a sleeve so that not even a trace of its hands could be seen. It inserted the key into what seemed like just another of the carvings in the door, but then turned it and the *thunk* of hidden bolts shooting back could be heard.

—Come— their guide said, swinging the door open. It was almost a foot thick, Raine noticed, but it moved as if it were weightless.

“Pardon, *sen'vrax*,” Leah asked, speaking what was on Raine's mind as well, “but where are we going?”

The red-robed figure regarded them with its faceless gaze.

—Today— it said at last, —you will meet Lord Vraxor—

Without any further explanation, it floated off into the corridor beyond the doorway. Raine and Leah trotted after it, exchanging confused looks.

What lay beyond the door was... different. The levels where the Sovereign lived were ornamented as befitted a ruler, constructed of fine white and gray marble and decorated with ornate wall hangings, tapestries and standing mirrors. However, the hallway that now greeted them resembled the austere lower levels where the priests dwelled. It

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was dark black stone, somber and imposing like the entrance to a crypt. Brass sconces lined the walls at regular intervals, each one holding a small, flickering globe that radiated cold blue light and cast eerie shadows.

And there was dust, Raine noticed as they followed the hooded form, a thick layer of dust on the floor. The air was dry, musty and slightly cold, like the air in a subterranean cave that had long since forgotten the light.

There were footprints in the dust: many layers of footprints, more than Raine could count, many trails overlaying each other. Each successive set of footprints was slightly fainter than the one above it, as the slow, patient settling of dust gradually erased them all. The most recent one was nearly as sharp as if it had been made the previous day.

By Vraxor... Raine thought as he and Leah walked after the priest, creating two new trails of footprints. The dust stirred in restless drafts as they passed by. *Does someone come up to this place only once every ten years? How many sets of footprints are there... how many new Sovereigns have come this way?*

The hallway ended at another heavy black door. There were no lines of script carved into this one, only Vraxor's trident embossed deeply into its surface.

The priest got out its key. All of a sudden, Raine remembered where they were going, and anxiety flooded him. *After all this time, to meet a god! I'm going to see Lord Vraxor! How many people ever get that opportunity? I wonder what he looks like... what he sounds like... I wonder everything, come to think of it.* He glanced over at Leah, who looked equally awed. She caught his gaze and gave him a smile.

The priest inserted its key in the lock, turning it one way then the other, in what Raine did not doubt was a precise pattern. It withdrew the key, and there was a clicking, ratcheting noise. More bolts shot back, and the door swung open.

Beyond was a single, small room, barely larger than a mausoleum. Its ceiling was a shallow pyramid, coming to a peak just high enough for a man to stand under. A brass torch stand in each corner glowed with cold, flat blue light that sent shadows scuttling. Line after line of angular script in the demon tongue covered the black stone walls, from floor to ceiling, lining every inch of the room. In the center of the chamber was...

...a coffin.

Raine and Leah stared at it. It was a black sarcophagus, unadorned except for one thing: the trident symbol again, formed of red gemstone, set into the material of the casket. Its lid was closed, and looked too heavy for any four normal men to lift.

The two of them exchanged perplexed looks, but the priest did not hesitate. It bowed deeply to the casket, then began chanting prayers

in the demon language. The harsh, rasping words echoed inside their heads in a long litany. Instinctively, they bowed down and followed the priest's lead, repeating the prayer along with it. Raine recognized the phrases. They were the most basic prayer he knew, the first one any schoolchild learned: *Lord Vraxor, your almighty hand shelters me, and your eye watches over me always. With you at my side, I shall not fear death, nor the forces of light, nor any force in this world, yea, for my faith in the one true god is as armor, shielding me against all enemies. I serve Lord Vraxor with my very soul and to the utmost depths of my being, faithfully keeping the commandments and abiding against the glorious day of his coming, when he shall return and lead us all to victory, when his true servants shall be rewarded with life everlasting and the infidels scourged from the earth to writhe forever in flames.*

They finished the prayer and straightened up. The priest turned to them. Somehow, its faceless gaze looked expectant.

Realization slowly dawned. Leah was the first to speak. She raised a trembling hand, pointed and asked, "Is he... I mean, is Lord Vraxor... in there?"

—Yes—

Raine stared at the coffin. *This doesn't make sense...*

"We are afraid we do not understand, *sen'vrax*," Leah said slowly, as if she scarcely dared to speak.

—He sleeps. He rests, gathering strength, until the day of his return, when he shall lead us to victory and dominion over all of Caliel—

"He... sleeps?" Leah said. "I mean... we don't actually get to see...?"

—No. No mortal eye may behold Lord Vraxor until he once again walks this world—

"When will that be?" Raine asked. He was not sure whether to be disappointed and curious or terrified of what lay within that coffin. If the lid were opened, he did not know whether he would look inside or run from the room.

—No mortal knows the hour. Yet the day draws nigh, as foretold in the scriptures—

"How long has he been asleep?" Leah wanted to know. "I mean... if he's asleep, how can he be watching over us? How can he hear our prayers?"

—Do not concern yourself with that— the priest said gruffly.

—The sleep of the one true god is not as the sleep of mortals. Rest assured that he is with us always. Now come— it added, before either of them could ask any more questions. —You have been granted the honor accorded to each new Sovereign. You have a nation to rule. Your tenure begins today—

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The healer Karah looked out the window at the street below and sighed, shaking her head. Beggars in ragged clothes lined the crowded avenue, imploring passersby for a coin. Their cries mingled with the city noise and the fresh breeze blowing on her face.

She was a young woman, fair-skinned, but the dark lines etched at the corners of her eyes made her look older than she was. Her face was just on the pretty side of plain; her skin was the color of porcelain. Her hands were delicate, her fingers slim and dexterous. They could have been a noblewoman's hands, if not for the calluses from the hours spent with mortar and pestle and the other tools of her trade. She wore simple white clothes and only one concession to jewelry: a brass pendant in the shape of a curling leaf, hung on a thin chain around her neck.

New sounds interrupted the crowd noise: a shrill whistle, rough voices barking orders. She glanced down again. A column of uniformed men in white and tan was pushing its way through the crowds. The beggars scattered to avoid the patrol, even the scarred, rough-eyed ones that looked more likely to mug pedestrians than beg from them.

With a sigh, Karah closed the shutters. She hoped no one would resist. The last time someone had tried, she had worked for hours to heal him.

Reluctantly, she descended the stairs to the first floor of her house, which served her as a shop. The front room's walls were lined with wooden shelves, which were stocked with glass jars and bottles containing liquids and dried leaves. More bundles of leaves hung in nets from the ceiling. Behind the wooden plank laid across two barrels that served as a counter, there was a curtained-off door to the back rooms where she mixed and blended her remedies.

Those rooms were currently occupied, though not by her. On plain white pallets lay half a dozen men, some with limbs in casts or bandages and poultices dressing wounds. Others did not appear to be hurt, but were simply grubby and desperate-looking, sitting or leaning hopelessly against the walls.

As she stepped off the staircase, one of the latter type approached her. He peered at her with desperate gratitude from a grimy, stubbled face.

"Mistress Karah," he said deferentially, "me and the rest of the boys... We just want to say we're real thankful for everything you've done for us. We're trying to find jobs, but no one in this city will hire us. We wish we could pay you back for this—"

"That's all right, Javen," she said gently. "I don't need money. You can live here as long as you want, until you get back on your feet."

He nodded rapidly. "Thank you, Mistress Karah," he said. "Gods bless you."

The bell over the door tinkled, and she brushed past the curtain into the front room. Two men in worn gray and brown clothes had come

in off the street. One of them had a hand clutched to his side and leaned heavily on the other.

Karah was immediately there. “What’s wrong?” she said, quickly but with professional cool. “What happened?”

“Riots in the street, miss,” explained the unwounded man. “We was just going about our business, when someone threw a stone—”

She went behind her counter, looking through the bottles. “I’ll do what I can. Are there internal injuries? Are any ribs broken?”

A sharp click came from behind her. Slowly she turned around. The “wounded” man was no longer staggering, but standing upright. He had drawn a loaded crossbow from beneath his coat and was pointing it at her. The other man leered, a glint in his eye. He was missing several teeth.

“We don’t want to hurt anyone, miss,” he said in oily tones. “Don’t give us a hard time. We just want your money and we’ll let you be.”

“Please, good men,” she said desperately. “I’m only a healer. I hardly have any money, and I need it to treat my patients. There are wounded people here.”

“Sorry to hear it, miss,” the robber said. He nodded to his companion. “Shoot her if she screams. I’ll get the cash.” He pushed Karah aside and turned to her shelves, carelessly sweeping several jars off to shatter on the floor.

After a moment of fruitless rummaging, he turned to her. “Where do you keep the money?” he demanded.

“I told you, I don’t have any—”

“I don’t care!” He lunged forward, grabbing her tunic, and pulled her face close to his. She flinched from the stench of his breath.

“Where is it?” he demanded. “Don’t hold back on us or we’ll have to take something else. You wouldn’t like that, would you?”

She looked sadly back at him, shaking her head.

Then there was a *crack*.

Her hands moved in a blur, catching the robber’s wrist and twisting. His arm buckled with that noise like a splintering green plank, and he staggered back, suddenly white-faced with pain. Even before he could respond, she shoved him backwards as she hooked one of his ankles with a foot, and he flailed and toppled to the floor with a crash.

All this happened in a split-second. The robber’s companion reeled in shock, then his face set as he lowered his weapon at her.

But Karah was still in motion. She put her hands on the counter and vaulted over it in one smooth motion, and her sandaled foot struck the second robber hard in the throat. He retched and stumbled backwards, and as her feet touched down on the floor, she leaned to the side. The second robber’s hands convulsed and closed on the trigger, the crossbow went off with a snap, and the bolt flew past the healer’s cheek

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and buried itself in the ceiling.

She looked around at the damage and sighed. Kneeling by the second man's side, she took the crossbow from his hands, tossed it aside, and put two fingers to the base of his neck. After a moment, she shook her head sadly.

The first man had crawled away and was pressing up against the wall, cradling one arm in the other, his face ashen with pain. Karah approached him, and he whimpered and tried to scabble backwards. But she only took his broken arm, feeling it gently. At last she straightened up and turned to the shelves. The burglar relaxed slightly as she pressed a wooden splint to his arm and wrapped bandages around it to hold it in place. Still, he watched her warily, uncomprehending.

"The bone will need to be set," she said. "I have other work to do, but I'll get to it by tonight. If you need a place to stay, there are spare cots in the back room."

The robber stared at her, as if he did not comprehend what she was saying. Then his eyes widened in wonder. Without taking his gaze from her, he slowly got to his feet and backed away, disappearing through the curtain. Karah watched him go with a pitying look, then retrieved a broom and dustpan from the corner and began to sweep up the broken glass.

Adam Lee

Chapter 1
City of Light

Sunrise had come to the world of Caliel. Golden dawn raced across the landscape, sweeping back shadows and flooding the earth with color. As the stars faded and the sky lightened from black to pale gray to pink, the land returned to life. In a hundred cities, towns and villages, people rose from their beds to meet the new day.

As night fled around the curve of the world, a city was revealed at the northwestern end of the continent. It was a great metropolis surrounded by tilled farms, a plain of alternating squares of green and black cut by roads that radiated outward. To the southeast and northeast, the grasslands and farms rose up into misty mountain ranges.

But the city overawed the landscape. A forest of ivory-white towers rose gracefully from the earth like pillars supporting the heavens. The city sprawled at the base of the towers and spread out from there, an orderly grid of buildings whose colorfully tiled roofs sparkled adobe red or silvery blue in the sun. The sunrise glowed on the spires, gilding them in a halo of shimmering brightness. It was a city of light.

In her inn room, Myrren Kahliana flung the book she had been reading aside. It bounced off the floorboards and landed fanned out, crumpling its pages. "I've had it with this," she said angrily.

She was a girl of seventeen years, almost eighteen now, but something about her face made her seem indefinitely older. At the moment, it was screwed up in an expression of frustration, which detracted from a slim, delicate prettiness. Her eyes, however, were her most startling feature. With irises of luminous violet, they might have been out of place in any other face as otherwise human as hers, but on her they fit. They were part of her, part of her bearing.

"With what?" her companion asked.

Myrren sighed and slumped back on the bed. "With everything. Shial, we've been here almost three weeks and we've found nothing. Not a trace, not a whisper. I'm starting to wonder if we're looking in the right place."

Her friend Shial Al'enn lay on the other bed, which was pushed up against the opposite wall of the cramped little inn room. Shial was an elf, one of the people who dwelled in the vast forest of the Shaelwood far to the south. Like most members of her race, she had sharp, angular features, bright green eyes and hair the color of autumn leaves. Her belly was swollen in a late stage of pregnancy, and she lay heavily on the bed, letting it support her.

"You said it yourself," she said. "They came here. To Palidia."

"That's what I thought," Myrren admitted. She got up and went over to the lone window. Letting the fresh breeze bathe her face, she peered out at what lay beyond: the pristine white towers and tiled

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rooftops of the capitol city of the lands of the god Nimrod, deity of healing and light.

“At the time I was so sure. But I might have heard them wrong, or they might have planted a false idea in my head so I’d run off chasing... chasing shadows. Oh, Vraxor, I never thought of that before. They could be anywhere in Caliel by now.”

Shial shrugged. “If they’re not here, there’s nothing we can do. We don’t have any way to track them down.”

“I suppose you’re right. But I don’t want to imagine what’s going to happen if I was wrong. They have to be here! I only wish there was some sign, some clue. Just so I’d know I wasn’t wrong. I’d feel a lot better then.”

“We could talk to the city authorities. You’ve seen how many patrols are out in the streets. *Someone* in this city must have seen something, if they’re really here.”

Myrren sighed. “Shial, we’ve been over this before...”

“I know. And I agree with what you said. But what do we have to lose?”

“That isn’t the point. Why try if we know it’s going to fail? No one will believe us. What do we say? That we’re looking for demons from the beginning of time? Ask if anyone’s seen shadows that walk by themselves? They’d think we were mad.”

“We don’t have to be so specific. We could just ask if anyone’s seen anything unusual.”

“That won’t be enough for them. They’ll ask questions. They’ll want to know why we want to know. It won’t work. I won’t have it, Shial!” she said angrily. “We’ll just have to try something else.”

The elf shrugged. “It’s up to you.”

Myrren sat down heavily on her bed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it,” she said apologetically. “Forgive me? I’m just frustrated. I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

“It’s all right,” Shial said wearily.

“It is a good idea,” Myrren conceded. “This city is too big for the four of us to search it. But we’d have to ask for help in a way that didn’t make them suspicious, and I can’t imagine how to do that.”

“You mean the three of you,” Shial said mischievously.

“What?”

“The three of you. Or the five of us. Either way,” she said, patting her belly, “I’m afraid I can’t be much help...”

“That’s not important,” Myrren said immediately. “You need to take care of your child. Kail, Rahze and I will do the searching. We’ll find the *senkata*. If they’re here to be found.”

The latch clicked. A young man dressed in blue stood in the doorway. His hair was dark brown, his eyes a bright shade of cobalt blue. His freshly shaved face made him look younger than he was. A

sword hung from his belt, with a blunt edge and tip, made of a curious metal with a dull silvery-blue luster. Around his wrist he wore a bracelet of thin braided vines, twin to one Shial wore. He smiled as he looked at the two of them, but especially Shial.

“Good morning, love,” he said, crossing the room and kissing her. “How are you, Myrren?”

“Not good,” she said sadly.

“Myrren is worried, Kail,” Shial explained. “She thinks we may be looking in the wrong place.”

“Where else would they be?” Kail asked.

“I don’t know,” Myrren said. “But it’s been weeks and we haven’t found anything.”

“Can you sense anything?” Shial asked him. “Any shifts in the balance? Just so we know we’re not chasing a false trail?”

The young Atma Knight closed his eyes and tilted his head slightly, as if listening to a distant sound.

“Nothing,” he said, “except a vague shift very far to the east. But that’s not unusual. I never could sense the *senkata* that way, not even when one was standing next to me.”

“There must be something we can do,” Myrren said despairingly. “Anything besides having to go to the authorities.”

“Why don’t Rahze and I go?” he suggested. “We’re Atma Knights. They may hold what we say in higher regard.”

“I’d prefer not to. Not unless there’s absolutely no other way. You haven’t heard anything today, have you?” she asked with desperate hopefulness.

He shook his head. “I’m afraid not. All I’ve heard is that Hadmet was having nightmares all night. Personally, I think it was indigestion.” The proprietor of their inn was a swarthy, heavysset man from the south, a recent immigrant to Palidia, with a penchant for *very* spicy foods. Myrren had tried a stew he had made once and had been in agony for hours.

“Rahze is already downstairs. Let’s get breakfast and ask him,” Kail suggested. “He may have another idea.”

They got up from their beds. Kail hovered by Shial’s side, but she irritably waved off his assistance and made her way downstairs without help.

The inn’s ground floor was an octagonal room, its walls smoothly fitted planks of light-colored pine wood. Shafts of sunlight slid in through small, high windows and converged on the circular bar in the center of the room. A brick fireplace occupied the north wall, and in the south wall, a pair of swinging doors led out onto the dust and bustle of the street. There were no other patrons except for Rahze el’Dax, Kail’s former master, who sat by himself at a table in a corner.

The Atma Knight wore his usual black traveling clothes, faded

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to a slightly lighter shade of gray by the dust of the road. His skin was dark as well, not coal-dark, but the bronzed shade of the southern tropical lands. The blood of dark elves, those outcasts shunned by the other inhabitants of the Shaelwood, ran in his veins. His heritage showed in his face, in the keen planes and lines of an elf's bone structure, and in his keenly alert green eyes.

He offered them a nod of greeting as they sat down with him. He was sipping from a mug of steaming liquid—probably, Myrren thought, that bitter stuff that all the Atma Knights seemed to enjoy.

“Myrren, Kail,” he acknowledged them. “How did you sleep, Shial?”

“Well, thank you,” she said politely.

Shial and Kail's unborn child, Myrren knew, was the fulfillment of an Atma Knight prophecy. It foretold a “daughter of Shael” would appear in her hour of greatest need and bear a child whose destiny was to save the Atma Knights from some terrible fate. Shial had, indeed, met Rahze and Kail in her hour of greatest need—dying from the poison of a demon hunter known as a *sethar*. Not trusting in fate, Rahze had brought her and Kail, then his apprentice, together through skillful manipulation. At first both of them had been furious, but they had since forgiven him, acknowledging that he had done nothing more than fan flames that had already existed. Now married, Kail and Shial were happy together, but the knowledge of the prophecy still hung quietly over them.

As they sat down, a stout man with bushy black hair and olive-dark skin emerged from the kitchen and came over to their table.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,” he said with cheerful friendliness. “What may I get you? I have prepared a new blend—a recipe entirely of my own devising. Would any of you care to try it? It is quite excellent. Lady Myrren, I know you enjoyed the last dish I devised. You will surely enjoy this one even—”

“No thanks, Hadmet,” she interrupted him. “Just our usual.”

The innkeeper was crestfallen, but nodded and went back into the kitchen.

Kail grinned. “What's wrong, Myrren? Didn't you enjoy his cooking last time?”

She grimaced. “Easy for you to say—you didn't try it. My mouth was on fire for half the afternoon. I must have drunk a river and it didn't do any good.”

“Water does not help,” Rahze said coolly.

“Rahze,” Shial said, “Myrren is worried. We've been here three weeks and there hasn't been a hint of the *senkata*. Is it possible we're looking in the wrong place?”

“Only Myrren can tell us that,” he said.

Myrren shook her head. “I *was* sure of it, but the more I think back, the less sure I am. I just wish there was even one clue, so we'd

know we're on the right trail. There's too much city to search."

Rahze nodded, taking a sip from his mug. "I agree. I sent word to Cyrene this morning asking if any Atma Knights could be spared to help us in our search."

"In the meantime," Shial suggested, "I still say we contact the authorities."

"Eminently reasonable," Rahze agreed.

"I don't want to do that," Myrren insisted. "They'd think we were mad."

"A small risk," the Atma Knight said. "It is imperative that we find out what the *senkata* intend. At most, Cyrene will only be able to send a few Knights. If we can convince the authorities to help us, we will have the entire city on our side."

"If? There's no chance. Why should we try if we already know we won't accomplish anything? We're foreigners. We shouldn't draw attention to ourselves. If this were Lord Vraxor's lands, we'd be lucky to have escaped notice this long."

"Palidia is not Vraxor's country. If you wish, Kail and I can go to the city council alone. They may accept the word of two Atma Knights, but even if not, they will not know your name."

Myrren still did not like that idea, but could not think of an objection. "It would be a waste of time," she said, weakly. "We'd be better off spending our time searching. We should cover as much ground as we can."

"Let's wait one more day, then," Shial proposed. "If we haven't found any news by tonight, let's go to the authorities."

"At least another week," Myrren countered.

"Three days," Rahze said, and she gave in. "Fine. But I don't like it."

"If we find the *senkata* this way, it'll be worth it," Kail said.

"If we find them," Myrren agreed despairingly.

"Take heart, Myrren," Rahze said. "All is not lost. The balance of the world is unshaken; Vraxor lives. We still have time to prevent them from doing what they set out to do."

But how can we possibly do that? she wondered silently. *Only the Atma Knights' weapons seem to be able to kill them, and that's only a small advantage. They're older, smarter, faster, far more powerful, almost invulnerable... and they have the Dark Heart. Even if we find them, what will we ever do then?*

They ate breakfast—eggs, sausages and bread, all fried; Myrren had never seen Hadmet prepare anything not drowned in grease—and prepared for the day's search. Shial, who could not participate, returned to her room to rest. While the stablehands prepared their horses, Rahze doled out coins to each of them from his inexhaustible money pouch.

The city's streets were a bright bustle of light, noise and dust. A

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streaming crowd of people, dressed in a raucous array of colors and styles, filled them from one side to the other. There were hawkers in colorful clothes and beggars in worn, patched garb, whose cries and pleas formed an undercurrent to the city noise. On either side of the road stood tall, narrow houses of white stucco and roofs of tile, pressed together so tightly the alleyways between them were barely wide enough for a person to pass through. The inner city's soaring white towers gleamed in the background against a sky of clear blue.

"Meet back here at noon," Rahze directed them.

Myrren chose a direction and rode off, away from Rahze and Kail. Even mounted on their horses, the Atma Knights were soon swallowed up in the crowd. She took a last glance back at their inn to fix its position before she turned down a side street.

The street she had chosen led west, toward the border of the city. As she rode, Myrren reflected. *The priests always told us that Palidia was an unholy place, full of sin, depravity and squalor. I never imagined how right they'd be. From far away, this city was so beautiful, so bright, but from up close...*

As she rode toward the city limits, Palidia took on a distinctly different feel. The bright profusion of colors faded to gray and brown, and the crowd noise died out into a sullen, expectant silence. The streets were still crowded with people, but most of them were foreigners, hostile-looking, hollow-eyed. Grizzled old beggars and angry-faced youths lounged in the doorways and watched the violet-eyed girl ride by with looks of suspicion.

Myrren supposed they were from the tent cities surrounding Palidia. They had had to pass through huge refugee camps of dusty tents and crude hovels to get into the city proper. It was a matter of mild curiosity to her, but finding the *senkata* was her only real interest.

However, she noticed something strange. None of the beggars bothered her; none of the wary-eyed people would meet her gaze. When she looked at the toughs squatting in the doorways, they hurriedly glanced away. This had been happening to her since their arrival in Palidia, and she did not understand it.

She put up with it for a few more blocks, then decided she had had enough. She purposely glared down at the crowd, and when one man flinched, she leaped down from her horse and grabbed his shoulder before he could get away. "Why did you do that?"

"D—do what, mistress?"

"You're afraid of me. You flinched when I looked at you. Why?"

"I— I didn't—"

"Yes, you did. Tell me why!"

"I—ah—I—" The man seemed embarrassed, or terrified. He kept his gaze fixed on the ground. "Forgive me, mistress, but where I

come from..."

"Yes?"

"...where I come from, eyes like yours are a, uh, a sign of—"

"Of what?"

"Of evil," he said in a rush. "A mark of evil. Not, uh, I mean, I'm sure that—"

"Where do you come from?" she asked calmly.

He looked at her for just an instant. Then he pulled free of her hand and vanished into the crowd.

Myrren looked after him with a scowl, then climbed back up onto her horse, shook the reins harshly and rode off.

She picked a street she had never been down before. Most of the buildings were in a state of disrepair, their paint flaking and faded. The street was almost empty, though the sidewalks were lined with people who watched her ride past with flat, emotionless expressions. None of them, of course, would meet her gaze.

The place, Myrren realized, was a ghetto. The shoddy buildings were all of recent construction. All those unwashed, hungry faces had the same ethnic traits. The snatches of language and chatter in the air were in the same dialects.

She was glad when she finally found an inn. Beggars lounged around its steps, but none bothered her as she hitched her horse to a post, pushed open the swinging doors and went inside.

The common room was dark, smoky, low-ceilinged. Only thin cracks of white light leaked in around the shutters. Two dozen pairs of eyes in the gloom turned to watch as Myrren walked in. She could feel their gazes, but was not disturbed by them. *If any of these thugs want to try me*, she thought with a secret smirk, *they'll be in for a surprise*.

She sat down at the bar, and the innkeeper came over. He wore a smudged white apron and was cleaning out a glass with a rag. A native Palidian, he was not well-fed, but neither did he have the flat, desperate look of many of the foreigners and refugees who filled his bar.

"What do you want?" he asked.

He did not look like the kind who would talk for free. "The house special," she said.

The innkeeper seemed surprised. Judging by his clientele, it had been a long time since anyone had ordered anything but cheap ale. He fished beneath the bar and came up with a small shot glass, into which he poured a splash from a bottle of dark green liquid.

Before he could move off, she caught his arm. "I'm new to this city."

"I can see that," he muttered, looking her over. His gaze flickered to her eyes, but it held no fear, only curiosity.

"I'm looking for news," she said. "Anything unusual, anything out of the ordinary. I don't mean about politics or the nobility. I mean

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anything really strange.”

The man looked puzzled. He was evidently used to being tight-lipped until he knew the value of the information he possessed, but he plainly did not understand this.

“I haven’t heard anything,” he said gruffly. “Nothing like that, at least.”

“Nothing at all?” she pressed him. “It could be anything, even the ramblings of a drunk or a madman. People having strange nightmares. A sudden sense of fear in broad daylight, for no reason. People feeling like they’re being watched. Especially anything about shadows that move.”

He was even more perplexed now, but shook his head. “No. I haven’t heard anything like that. Why do you ask?”

“That’s my business,” she said coolly.

The innkeeper shrugged and started to move away, but again she caught his arm. “Tell me...”

“Yes?”

“Is there any other news? Just in general, I mean?”

This was more his territory. He hesitated, but after all, she had ordered an expensive drink.

“Well, there’s Vraxor’s land...”

“What about it?”

“This is just what I heard, mind... but there are rumors out of the east that say it’s broken out in civil war. Something to do with the succession.”

Myrren could not help herself; she burst into laughter. The sound was unexpectedly loud in the cramped gloom, and several pairs of eyes swiveled to her.

“Sorry,” she chuckled, recovering herself. “Take it from me, that one isn’t true. Say, though—do you know who won?”

He shook his head. “No one seems to know that.”

She shrugged, feeling a brief disappointment. *It doesn’t matter. One way or the other, he’ll be waiting for me when I get back.* “All right. Is there anything else?”

“Nothing much... just politics as usual. There’s the famine and the exodus, but you must know about that.”

“No, I don’t. I’ve only been in this city a few weeks. What famine? What exodus?”

He laughed nervously. “It doesn’t matter how long you’ve been here. I thought everyone in this city knew about it. It’s old news.”

“I haven’t been keeping up with the news. Tell me about it.”

“It’s been going on for months. Food supplies out of the eastern nations—the agricultural ones, near the Cordillen—suddenly dried up. You didn’t know?”

She shook her head. He went on, “No one knows why. There

are all kinds of rumors: war, plague, drought... But they're just rumors. No one seems to have any real news. But the upshot is this exodus. That grain used to feed half the nations between Shael and the Cordillen, and now it's dried up. People are pouring into Palidia to find food. It's not that we can't feed them. There was plague a few years back, a lot of people died and there's land just waiting to be claimed. The problem is the people"—he lowered his voice—"who come to the cities. This one and the others. Hungry, desperate people, as many races and faiths as you'd care to mention, all pressed up against each other. Things are tense. There's been crime, riots... poverty everywhere and ghettos springing up," he added in an even lower whisper.

"Like a keg of powder waiting for a spark," Myrren said, absorbing this. "Very well. Thank you for the information."

She glanced down at her drink, sitting untouched on the bar, and picked it up.

"No, wait!" the barkeeper said in a strangled voice, but she swallowed the contents of the glass in one gulp and set it down.

"What?"

He stared at her. "Do you know what you just drank?"

Myrren licked her lips. "Not bad. Kind of minty."

"I've seen men pass out after drinking what you just did," the man said, amazed.

"It's never bothered me," she said with a shrug. "How much do I owe you?"

"S—seven coppers," he said weakly.

She dug into her money pouch. There were not enough copper coins, but Rahze had given them silver as well. She fished out one of those and tossed it over.

The coin landed on the bar with a ringing noise. Even Myrren was amazed at how quickly the room went quiet. Every eye watched the glittering silver coin spin, wobble and fall. The barkeeper snatched up the coin, shoved it into a pocket of his apron and pulled out a handful of coppers, which he thrust at her. His hand was shaking.

She accepted the coins. "Is there a problem?"

"No... no. Not at all."

"In that case, I must be going. Thank you again for your help." She rose and headed out, throwing a bright square of sunlight into the room as she pushed open the doors.

Several men got up unobtrusively from their chairs and slipped out after her.

Myrren squinted into the sun as she emerged from the tavern. She found her horse and began to untie its reins—and a large, hairy hand landed on hers.

She looked up into a scowling face. The thug's expression was

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grim, pitiless. Three more seedy-looking men just like him surrounded her.

She stared into his eyes. He flinched, but did not back off.

“Is there a problem?” she asked with dangerous innocence.

“No, lady,” the man said. “But you seem to have some mighty fine coinage for this part of the city. There are some unsavory types around here. Carrying that much money could be dangerous.”

His other hand slid free. He was holding a rusty but sharp dagger.

“We thought,” he went on, “that we’d take it off your hands for you. Hand it over and you won’t get hurt.”

“Don’t do that,” Myrren said calmly.

Even the hardened thug was taken aback. “Don’t do what?”

“This.”

“And why shouldn’t I?” he sneered.

“You’ll be sorry if you do.”

All of them roared with laughter. Myrren glanced around, but most of the other people on the street had wisely made themselves absent. The few that remained paid the unfolding scene only mild interest, as if they saw it every day. They probably did, she thought.

The robber leaned forward. Meeting her defiant violet stare, he touched the flat of his knife blade to her neck just under her chin. The metal was cold against her flesh.

“I will, huh?” he said with a grin. “Then make me sorry.”

Myrren reached out, not with her arms, but with her thoughts. The world seemed to fade into the background, becoming an afterthought to a higher reality: the reality of magic, that living force that pervaded everything. She could sense it—not with any of her normal five senses, not in any words she could describe. But the closest analogue might have been hard, dusty red, the magic of the paving stones under her feet, and below that the deep, molten fire of the earth; hints of sun, earth and rain magic in the fresh spring breeze; ethereal air magic, stroking her face like beads of cool quicksilver.

She opened herself to it. Heat surged into her, a heady, spreading burn that started at her feet and rose to fill her body. She let it rush in to fill her, then reoriented her perception on the physical world. Time stretched elastically, then contracted and snapped back to normal.

It had all taken less time than a heartbeat. The robber’s knife was still touching her neck. *That one first*, she decided. She pictured what she wanted to do, and the cauldron of fire flowing through her body collapsed, pouring into the image to imbue it with reality.

Wind first, a sudden sharp wind that would strike the leader as suddenly as a thunderclap, blowing him away before he could even think to use his weapon. Then flames to lash at the others like whips, at their hands, at their faces. And if they resisted, she readied her most potent

weapon: darkfire, the bolt of death that only followers of the demon-god Vraxor dared to use; a black flame colder than winter's heart, that ate away like acid at body and soul. If the robbers did not run, she would consume them. Perhaps whether they ran or not. She tensed her will and readied herself to unleash the power.

A shrill whistle rang out over the street. The robbers hesitated, and it sounded again. The leader pulled his knife away. "You got lucky," he snarled, then they pushed past her and ran.

A phalanx of men was approaching, an ordered line of soldiers in white and khaki uniforms. None bore weapons more substantial than oak truncheons, but the crowds melted away at their coming. Unsavory-looking toughs ducked into doorways or side alleys; window shutters slammed shut. In moments, the street was empty except for Myrren and the soldiers. The leader of the squad, a mounted lieutenant dressed in gray, rode up to her.

"Are you hurt, miss?" he asked.

Bemused, Myrren touched a hand to her throat. "No, I'm fine. Thank you."

"You can draw magic, miss?"

She realized she still held the power that she had been about to use on the bandits. With a flick of her will, she pushed it away. The tingling magical heat expanded into the air around her, then dissipated.

"Yes, I can."

"Do you know those men?"

"No. They tried to rob me."

"They've robbed three people in the past few days. And they killed one. There's a warrant for their arrest. You're lucky that you weren't hurt."

"They wouldn't have been a threat to me."

He nodded. "That was a lot of power you were holding. You would have been justified, but be advised: Palidia has laws prohibiting the use of any destructive magic by civilians, except for self-defense."

By civilians? Can some of the people in their army use it? Well, he could tell when I was drawing. Probably just the officers.

Aloud she said, "I see. Thank you for your help. Tell me, have you heard of anything unusual happening in this city? Not just ordinary crime. I mean anything *strange*."

The lieutenant was nonplussed. "Miss?"

"Never mind." She swung up onto her horse. "Good day to you."

As she rode off, she glanced over her shoulder. The lieutenant unrolled a scroll and held it out. He could indeed use magic; his voice boomed over the street when he spoke.

"By order of the citizens of Palidia, we have come in search of four individuals who stand accused of the crimes of armed robbery and

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murder. If any of you are sheltering these fugitives, give them up now or face justice along with them!”

The street remained silent. No one responded. The officer nodded to his men, who split up. Truncheons in hand, they entered into the buildings lining the street.

Only one for each building? Myrren thought in amazement as she rode away. *If any of them does run into those robbers, he'll be cut to pieces. How does justice ever work in this city? The sen'vrax said Palidia was populated by fools and madmen. Maybe they were right.*

Adam Lee

Chapter II
Longing

A hot, dusty day of searching dragged by. Myrren visited half a dozen districts; she lost count of how many gloomy taverns she went into, how many hollow, hungry faces she saw. But no one knew anything, not even with copper and silver to loosen their tongues. Innkeeper after innkeeper shrugged his shoulders at her. After a while, they all blended into one.

She returned to Hadmet's inn at noon for a brief lunch with Shial and the Atma Knights, then went back to scouring the streets, but her efforts were in vain. By the time she abandoned her efforts and returned in dejection for the night, it was growing dark.

Palidia took on a different aspect at night. As darkness fell, the daytime traffic evaporated and the streets cleared with surprising speed. Inns and other buildings shuttered their windows, and the towers of the city rose ghostly against the stars.

In the common room of Hadmet's inn, the fireplace had been stoked up. The flames licked and snapped, casting bright flickering light on the walls. Olive-dark, swarthy men filled the room. Drinking from foaming tankards and consuming, apparently without any ill effect, bowls of dark reddish stew of the kind that had floored Myrren, they laughed uproariously and thumped their mugs in approval as they took turns telling loud, boastful stories. Hadmet seemed to know all of them, and joined in the festivities in between hurrying from table to table with plates of food.

At a table in the corner, Myrren, Shial, Rahze and Kail sat eating their own dinner. It was a stew of meat and peppers that was the least spicy thing their innkeeper had on the menu, but it still burned Myrren's throat like fire with every bite.

But for once, she barely noticed it. She wished they could find the *senkata* by themselves; she wished they had more time to do it. Most of all, she wished she had not given in. She did not want to go to the city council. The worst thing was that she knew it was a good idea and her objections were irrational, which frustrated and depressed her even more.

In all the time we've been here, our combined efforts haven't searched a tenth of this place, it's so big. We haven't even gotten to the inner city yet, never mind most of the outlying districts. We'd need a year to search it all ourselves. That thought only made her feel even more helpless. The task confronting them seemed daunting, insurmountable.

Reaching for a plate, she bumped the table, and there was a metallic clink. She pulled back her sleeve: there was a golden bracelet around her wrist, its lustrous metal lifeless against her skin. She had

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become so used to her wedding band's weight that she had forgotten it was there.

I almost forgot I was married at all, she thought guiltily. I don't want to be here. I miss Raine, I miss my home, and I just want this to be over with so I can go back to him and lead a normal life!

Shial noticed what she was doing. "Myren? Is everything all right?"

She sighed, laying her hand on the table. "It's just... I don't know..."

Suddenly, a burst of anger overtook her. The bracelet felt confining, like a shackle. "I can't stand this anymore. I want it off. How do you take it off?!"

She pulled on it, but it was too small to slip over her hand. The metal was seamless, one piece.

"Be easy, Myren," Rahze said, reaching across the table. She gave him her wrist, and the Atma Knight took the bracelet in one hand. He ran his fingers along its circumference and settled on two spots on opposite sides of the bracelet. He squeezed, and it sprang open into two identical semicircles which fell from her wrist.

"Press two locations along the same diameter and it opens. Touch the halves to close it again."

With a mumbled thanks, Myren took the two halves of the circle. She felt worse, not better; as if she had been unfaithful.

She linked them around her wrist again. As the two halves touched, they merged again into a seamless circle. Wearing it did not make her feel better, either.

"Is something wrong?" Shial asked. "What is it? You can tell us."

She sighed. "Thanks, Shial, but no thanks. I just need to be alone for a while."

Pushing her barely touched plate away, she stood up. "Excuse me," she said, and headed for the stairs.

The darkness and solitude of her room helped, but not enough. Try as she might, she could not sleep. Instead, she lay wide awake, feeling sorry for herself.

Myren lost track of time, but eventually the door clicked and she heard the floorboards creak under Shial's soft footfalls. Her friend did not realize she was awake, and she did nothing to dispel that illusion. She lay there, eyes shut, and listened to the rustling as Shial changed into her nightgown and got into bed. More time passed, and the elf's breathing changed, becoming softer and more regular.

Sleep, however, continued to elude Myren, and she finally concluded it was hopeless and got up. Trying to move stealthily so as not to wake her friend, she crossed the darkened room and went to the window.

The towers of Palidia, ghostly pale white, rose towards the stars. All three of Caliel's moons were out, and if she looked closely, she thought she could detect the faint tri-colored shadows cast by each spire. Mostly, though, she simply rested her arms on the windowsill and let the night breeze bathe her face.

The city looks so empty at night, she thought. So lonely.

The cool air felt like tears. She realized her own eyes were brimming, blurring her view of the city slumbering under the stars. She wiped the tears away, but more came.

I miss my home, she admitted to herself. More than anything, I just want to be back there.

Then she heard a sound, so faint it was barely audible. It came to her out of the dark, blending with the gentle sigh of the breeze. It was the sound of someone crying.

And it was coming from her friend's bed.

"Shial?" she asked. Her voice seemed loud in the stillness.

The sobbing stopped. A voice, soft and timid: "Myrren?"

"It's just me. I'm awake," she said. She went over to the elf's bed and knelt down at her side. "What's wrong?"

She glimpsed Shial's face in the dark. "I... I'm sorry. I didn't think you were up... I didn't see you there."

"I couldn't sleep," Myrren explained. "Why are you crying?"

"It's nothing, really," her friend insisted, but there was a tremor in her voice.

"It didn't sound like nothing. You can tell me. What's wrong?"

Shial took a deep breath. "Well... it's just that..." Her voice wavered; she exhaled, almost a sob, and wiped her eyes. "I miss Shael!"

"Oh, Shial," Myrren said sadly, taking her friend's hand. "I'm so sorry."

After five years of wandering the world, Shial had returned last winter to her home forest, the vast and wild Shaelwood, where she had planned to marry Kail. She had found her family in the city of Caer Shamine, but her joy at being reunited with them had quickly turned sour when she realized her mother adamantly opposed her marrying a human. After a furious struggle as Shial and her mother fought for the townspeople's support, Shial had finally won out—only to see her wedding disrupted at the worst possible moment when the *senkata* came for Myrren. Many of the village people had been killed, and Caer Shamine's furious Druids had banished Shial from the woods for the rest of her life. For a dweller of Shael, exile was a fate worse than death.

Nevertheless, the worst part for Myrren was that the *senkata* had gotten what they had wanted. They had brutally invaded her mind, stealing the knowledge they had come for—the secret of activating the ancient weapon known as the Dark Heart—and fled to Palidia, where she had come in pursuit. She still had nightmares of that awful moment

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when one of the shadow demons had rooted through her memories. But she recognized that her friend's fate was scarcely better.

"It—it wasn't your fault," Shial said, holding back tears.

"I'm still sorry, please believe me. If there was anything I could do to undo what happened..."

Shial squeezed her hand back and mustered a faint smile. "You would. I know." She reached out and hugged her. "Thank you, Myrren."

Her voice took on a reflective tone. "I was dreaming I was back in Shael. In Shir Brae, where I grew up... in my family's old home. It was breakfast time, and I was coming down the stairs... like I used to do when I was little, but I was grown up... and I smelled my mother's cooking, saw my brothers waiting at the table for me... and the trees..." She dissolved into tears again.

Myrren stayed by her side until she regained control. "I'm sorry," Shial said faintly. "It's just, these past few nights... I've been dreaming of them all the time. It's so hard."

"These past few nights? How long has this been going on?"

"Since we left Caer Shamine," she admitted.

Vraxor's mercy! It's been over two months... almost three now. She's been crying at night the whole time, and I never noticed? By the true god, I have my mother's blood... I'm supposed to be able to tell what people are feeling! Not that it's ever done me any good.

Aloud she said, "That long? Why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't want you to feel bad," she confessed.

"You should have told me. You can't hold things like this in."

"I know. It's just..." She took a deep, shuddering breath.

"Never being able to go back... Having to spend the rest of my life outside the woods... I couldn't deal with it. I still can't."

"You were away for five years."

"I know. And I never forgot Shael in all that time. The only thing that kept me going some days was the thought that I *would* return eventually."

"Surely you can go back. I mean, the Druids of Caer Shamine may have banished you, but they can't keep track of everyone in the woods. They'd never know."

"No. It wouldn't work. If I did that, I'd have to live somewhere else... I'd never get to see my family. And I couldn't just move into a new community, anyway. Shael doesn't work like that. I'd be an outsider... People would want to know why I had come. They'd ask questions, and if someone found out... No. No, I can't risk that."

Shial sighed, on the edge of breaking down. "I can't believe I'm never going to go back. This whole thing is like some sick dream... one I keep waiting to wake up from. But I won't, will I? Oh, Goddess, this really is real..." She started to cry again.

Myrren did not know what to say. She reached out and held her

friend, and Shial returned the embrace gratefully. Even as she cried on Myrren's shoulder, though, thoughts were whirling in Myrren's head. *Vraxor's mercy, I thought I was the only one who felt this way. But I'm not alone... I'm not the only one who misses her home. We're wasting our time, trying to search every inn and alleyway by ourselves. We can't go on like this anymore. It's time we found help.*

As dawn spread across the rooftops of Palidia, Myrren descended to the inn's common room. The Atma Knights were already up, sitting at a table in the otherwise empty room and drinking from two mugs.

"I've changed my mind," she said as she pulled up a seat.

Rahze raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

"We're not accomplishing anything trying to search the city by ourselves. We need to go to the council and ask for their help."

He nodded, apparently unconcerned with what had prompted her change of mind. "Very well. Kail and I will—"

"No," she interrupted. "I'll go with you, Rahze. Kail, you need to stay here."

The young Atma Knight leaned forward. "Why?"

"Shial needs you. You have to go to her."

"Is everything all right?"

"No," Myrren said, "but it will be. She has something to tell you. She needs to get it off her chest."

Kail looked confused, but rose and headed for the stairs when she nodded encouragingly.

She turned to Rahze. "Are you ready to go now?"

"In a moment," the Atma Knight said, draining his cup, "I will be."

They set out a short time later, riding down the dusty, clamorous streets of Palidia. This time, they were not headed toward the outlying ghettos, but toward the center of the city, the oldest districts where Palidia's greatest marvels lay in wait. Myrren felt a touch of excitement. She had never been to the inner city before.

The streets were little different at first. Colorfully dressed crowds packed the dusty cobblestones from one side of the road to the other. Hawkers in striped cloth cried their wares and drab-colored beggars pleaded for coins from the edges of the moving river of people.

However, as they neared the inner city, the vista changed. The streets widened and became less crowded. The beggars and peddlers grew scarce, then disappeared entirely. The road underfoot was no longer dusty, but paved with broad, flat stones of clean white.

Myrren was not sure when they crossed into the inner city proper, but the change was soon obvious. There were plazas now, broad squares of dazzling white where roads intersected. There were fountains

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that spurted water in jets; misty rainbows appeared where the sun shot through the spray. There were lush, broad-leaved shade trees that lined the streets, some with colorful blossoms.

And there were towers, no two alike. Some were wide pillars with terraces and balconies jutting from their sides. Others were slender spires that seemed impossibly thin for their size. Most were bright white, but a few were of pink stone with the luster of pearl, or dark silvery-blue glass that refracted the sunlight blindingly. All soared to heights Myrren would not have believed possible. They were taller than the mightiest trees of Shael. She craned her neck, but could not see the tops of them.

“How do they build them so high?” she asked in wonderment.

“A great deal of magic is involved,” Rahze said.

The people of the inner city were not beggars or foreigners, but native Palidians, dressed in garments of white and tan, who sat at the edges of the fountains or rested under the trees. Those who were walking seemed to be in no hurry to get anywhere; many walked in groups of two or three, engaging in spirited conversation. All seemed serene and happy, especially compared to the chaos and bustle of the outer city.

Myrren asked about it. “Many of these buildings are academies,” Rahze explained. “Palidia is world-renowned for its schools of thought. They study everything, from the arts of war to abstract philosophy. Especially, they study magic.”

It really is beautiful, she thought, and it looks peaceful too. But in the outer city, there's crime, riots, hunger... Why don't these people do anything about it? What good is being happy when you're surrounded by so much misery?

The road widened into another open plaza, the largest they had come across so far. In the center of the plaza stood a building—a temple. A wide staircase of white marble steps led up to its facade, where a large double door was recessed behind a row of pillars supporting an overhanging roof, which in turn rose up into a great dome that glittered blindingly in the sun. People were coming and going in every direction.

Myrren tried not to stare. All around the plaza, there were statues of wise-looking men standing on pedestals in various poses of thought. Some were white marble, while others were dark iron or copper with a green patina of age. Pigeons and sparrows flocked around the square, in search of bread crumbs thrown by passersby.

They hitched their horses to a post in front of the great building. As they climbed the staircase toward the doors, Myrren asked, “What is this place?”

“The seat of power of the city,” Rahze said. Two bearded men in ivory robes and sandals passed by in the other direction, arguing animatedly. “Where the people's council of Palidia meets.”

She nodded thoughtfully. She knew that Vraxor's lands were governed by a council of priests; it made sense that Palidia would be

ruled the same way. *But I wonder why it's called a "people's" council.*

Rahze, with his dark bronze skin and simple black traveling clothes, and Myrren, with her violet eyes, stood out among the crowd, but no one challenged them as they passed through the great double doors.

Beyond the doors was a long gallery, paralleled on either side by two rows of columns. Skylights set at regular intervals cast squares of sunlight on the floor. More statues, smaller than the ones outside, stood in niches between the pillars.

At the end of the gallery was a long, shallow stairway, which they climbed to find an oak-paneled door. This one was closed, and a bored-looking clerk stood next to it, behind a podium.

"Name and residence?" he asked them.

"Rahze el'Dax and Myrren Kahliana," Rahze said. "We are not citizens. We are lodged at the Olive Grove Inn in the western district."

Myrren expected the clerk to rebuff them, but he only made a few marks on a scroll and motioned them to the door.

Rahze nodded at her, so she turned the brass handle. The door swung open onto a balcony, surrounded by a carved stone railing, overlooking a vast audience hall. More pillars stood around the edges of the huge room below, soaring up past the balcony to support the ceiling which, Myrren realized, was the enormous dome she had seen from outside—but on this side, it was transparent like glass. Beyond lay blue sky, fleecy clouds and the dazzling bright disc of the sun. More balconies like the one they stood on ringed the edges of the room, overlooking the scene that lay below.

It looked like a courtroom. At the back were many rows of people sitting in chairs; at the front was a tall bench of polished wood, behind which nine men sat in judgment. Between the two was an open space, where an elaborate mosaic of a compass rose was set into the floor. A speaker stood there, arguing his case before the ruling council of Palidia.

More people sitting in chairs filled every balcony, including the one they were on. Myrren and Rahze found seats and listened.

The current speaker was preaching in fiery, impassioned tones. "The flow of immigration into our fair city must be stopped! These foreigners bring new traditions, new customs... new religions. If we do not impose quotas, they will swamp us and worship of Nimrod will be forgotten! We cannot allow this. For the good of Palidia, our blood must be kept pure! We cannot be diluted by the people of foreign lands who do not have our education, our wisdom."

The council members seemed unmoved. "New ways may bring benefits," one of them reminded the speaker. "We must not fear change. The alternative to progress is stagnation."

The council members looked... ordinary. *They're not priests,*

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Myrren thought in surprise. *They don't even look like nobles. What are they?*

As the speaker began a new tirade, she leaned over to Rahze and whispered to him, "How is this country governed?"

"Palidia is a democracy," the Atma Knight said.

"A what?" Myrren had studied various forms of government back in Ral Ardente, under her tutor Tellern, but had never heard any such word.

"The people rule themselves," he explained. "The country is divided into districts. Every few years, an election is held. In each district, candidates nominate themselves, and every educated adult can cast a ballot for whomever he feels is most qualified. The candidate who gets the most votes takes office and becomes the representative of all the people of his district. All the representatives then come here, to the capitol of Palidia, and assemble into a congress where they govern the country. Laws are created or repealed by a majority of all the representatives."

"Wait. The people... They rule themselves?"

"That is correct."

"How do they... I mean, how do they know what to do? Who tells them?"

"No one tells them. They themselves are the leaders of the nation. Most of them have previous experience—it is not unusual for one person to win the same office several times, if he has proved himself competent—and virtually all of them have been educated at one of Palidia's academies."

"But how do they know what laws to pass?"

"Whatever is needed to ensure peace and stability. Candidates are often ordinary people who notice a problem and build a platform around it, campaigning on a promise to pass a law to fix that problem, or to repeal one that is causing it."

"That sounds like they just work by trial and error."

"One might say that." Rahze shrugged. "Representatives who do not prove themselves adept at recognizing what needs to be done are quickly voted out of office."

"But... but..." Her head was spinning. "What if they make mistakes?"

"Then they must correct them. Forums such as this one are for precisely that purpose. Anyone may come before a committee of the representatives and voice a grievance."

"That's no way to run a country," Myrren protested. "Just stumbling along by trial and error? That would never work! The country would collapse!"

"It has worked for a very long time. Palidia is a thriving nation."

“I don’t understand. They let *ordinary people* make all the decisions? The commoners shouldn’t rule over each other! That’s the nobility’s job!”

“Palidia,” the Atma Knight said implacably, “has no nobility.”

“But how could they not? How could they stand that? I couldn’t. If someone was going to rule over me, I’d want it to be someone higher than me, someone born for the job.”

“You would not find much agreement here. The people of Palidia find the concept of a hereditary ruling class abhorrent.”

“What if these... these representatives... abuse their power? They’re just ordinary people. They can’t be used to handling it. It would corrupt them. They’d never willingly give it up.”

“They are not dictators. They have law-making powers delineated by the country’s constitution. They serve their terms, and when those terms are up, if they do not choose to run for office again, they simply return to their homes.”

Myrren slumped in her seat. *The priests were right. Palidia is an insane place. The people, ordinary, common people, ruling each other? That couldn’t possibly work! I mean... it seems to be working... but it couldn’t! It just can’t!*

She could not get over her astonishment. She knew that not every country was ruled like Vraxor’s lands were—but this? Shael, with its organized anarchy, had been strange enough, but this was utterly foreign to her.

By Vraxor... ordinary people ruling each other, she thought with a disbelieving shake of her head. No matter how far I travel, Caliel always has surprises in store for me.

The petitioner on the floor finally finished his tirade. The council members thanked him for presenting his views—far too politely, Myrren thought; the man had practically been foaming at the mouth—and he sat down. The court clerk called another name, and the next petitioner came to stand before the council.

People came in turn to present their cases. Some had minor concerns: a man complained about poor drainage on his street, an elderly couple wanted taxes lowered, and a young woman pleaded for clemency for her imprisoned fiancé, whose case the council members agreed to look into. However, most of them were there to speak on immigration. A woman griped that slums were springing up around her house. A couple complained that their room had been burglarized by a foreigner. A man asserted that noisy foreign neighbors were keeping him up all night. Some were more chilling, like the first speaker. Myrren listened to angry speeches about how quotas needed to be imposed, gates shut, crime and poverty strictly cracked down on. A few argued vociferously to impose martial law, even to expel all non-citizens. The council members listened with equanimity, occasionally commenting but mostly remaining silent.

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Their expressions were neutral and gave nothing away; Myrren could never tell what they thought or whether they agreed.

There were a lot of people on the list before them. They sat there for several hours before the clerk called their names. “Myrren Kahliana and Rahze el’Dax!”

Rahze rose smoothly from his seat. Myrren followed him down a narrow spiral staircase and out onto the main floor of the council chamber.

The room seemed much bigger from down here. The eyes of the council were on them, along with all the spectators in the balconies and in the seats behind them. Most were ordinary citizens, but a few were dressed in ceremonial uniforms of white and gold blazoned with ribbons and medals, apparently members of the military.

Myrren felt suddenly self-conscious, but it was too late to back out now. She tried to follow the example of the Atma Knight, who seemed unperturbed by the watchful gazes of the crowd.

“Good members of the council of Palidia,” he introduced himself, “I am Rahze el’Dax, of the Order of the Atma Knights, and this is Myrren Kahliana, of Ral Ardente.”

A faint murmur ran around the room. Myrren heard “Atma Knight” several times, but she heard “foreigner” and “Vraxor” as well.

“We have come,” he went on, “with news relevant to the national security of Palidia. If openly disseminated, it could cause panic and otherwise add to the troubles of this nation. I would therefore like to request a private audience.”

Myrren sighed inwardly with relief. *Thank you, Rahze.*

“Your request is denied,” one of the council members said, and her heart sank. “All citizens of Palidia have the right to hear this news. Let them do with it what they will.”

“Very well,” Rahze said calmly. He paused before going on, and Myrren glanced around. The vast audience hall seemed even bigger; the ceiling soared to dizzying heights, and the space around them seemed to have pulled away so that the spectators were looking down on them from a great distance. The council members’ faces were implacable, ready to weigh whatever they said and judge them accordingly. She tried to calm herself.

“We have come to this city,” he began, “in pursuit of a menace that threatens all of Caliel: an ancient race of demons created by the elder gods. They call themselves the *senkata*. They fought against the armies of Shayna, Vraxor and Nimrod in the Godswar, and were defeated and locked away from this world. But they have escaped their imprisonment. We first encountered them far in the east, and for several months we have followed them, from beyond the Cordillen to the forests of Shael, and now to here. For some weeks we have been searching this city, but we have been unable to find them. Therefore, we have come to

request the help of Palidia's government in doing so. They are incredibly dangerous beings, able to kill with a touch and immune to all ordinary weapons and most forms of magic. We are confident that the citizens of Palidia will recognize the threat and assist us to defeat it before it is too late."

Myrren winced with an almost physical pain. Other than the Dark Heart, he had left out nothing. A part of her, a small part, saw the sense in this. *If he tried to hold back, the council would think we were being evasive. They'd ask more questions, worse ones, and they probably wouldn't help us. Best that he tell the whole story and get it over with. But did he really have to say so much?* another part of her protested. *They'll think we're insane! Couldn't he have skipped over just a few details?*

He finished speaking, and she waited helplessly for the explosion, the incredulous cries, the laughter and the scorn.

Then, after a moment, she realized it was not coming.

She could not believe it, but a murmur of interest was going through the room. Several of the council members were nodding thoughtfully. Some others were darkly silent, but there was no laughter, no mocking cries. Then, to her utter amazement, one of them leaned over the bench and said to Rahze, "What do you recommend we do?"

If the Atma Knight was as surprised as she, he did not show it. "Until they show themselves," he said calmly, "there is little that can be done. I suggest that the city's defense forces be put on heightened alert, however, and placed on the lookout for any unusual events."

"Would you say they were a threat to the citizenry of Palidia?" the same one asked. "One that needed to be stopped, no matter the cost?"

"Most definitely," Rahze agreed. "They menace all the world."

That council member sat back, nodding smugly. It seemed, Myrren thought, as if they had given him exactly what he wanted. *But that doesn't make sense. There's no way he, or anyone, could have been expecting this. No one even knows about the senkata, besides us!*

"Very well," he said. "The people of Palidia are grateful for your warning. We shall see that appropriate steps are taken. Next!"

As the clerk called the next name, Myrren and Rahze walked off the floor—it was a relief to get out from under those probing looks—and headed out. As they left the audience chamber, though, she glanced back, and a pair of eyes caught her own. On one of the balconies, a man in military garb, a white and khaki uniform with gold tassels on the shoulders, was glaring down at them. She quickly glanced away, but she could feel his gaze on her back as they departed.

As they left the building and emerged into the day, however, that baleful gaze was forgotten, replaced by a wild exultation. Myrren burst out laughing as they walked down the broad staircase.

"We did it!" she said jubilantly. "We got their help. I don't

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believe it!”

Rahze nodded solemnly. “We did.”

“I should have taken Shial’s advice sooner. I don’t believe they listened! I mean, our story seemed so outrageous... Rahze?” The Atma Knight’s expression was unusually grave, even for him. “Is something wrong?”

“I do not know. Perhaps.”

“What do you mean?”

“I had not expected such easy acquiescence. My word as an Atma Knight may carry some weight, but not that much. Perhaps I am looking for subtleties where there are none... but I believe we may have unwittingly become involved in some political matter.”

That thought darkened her newly lightened mood. “I don’t understand...”

“The currents of politics always run deep. That is as true in Palidia as it is anywhere else in the world. We may have obtained the help we need, but I suspect we have also agreed to pay a price for it.”

“But we didn’t agree to anything like that.”

“Not explicitly. But if I am not wrong and there is a price, it will make itself known to us soon.”

Sobered, Myrren unhitched her horse. As they rode away, she took a long glance back at the council building. The light of afternoon was beginning to redden, and the slowly deepening sun glittering off the great white dome looked much more sinister.

When they returned to their inn, the sun was sinking into the west, painting the towers of Palidia with red and orange. With Rahze trailing behind, Myrren climbed the stairs to her room, ready to collapse on the bed. When she pushed the door open, though, Shial and Kail were lying in each other’s arms.

She immediately drew back. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right,” Shial assured her. Her eyes were reddened, and she had clearly been crying, but she sounded more in control of herself, more peaceful.

They drew apart and sat up. “Thank you for telling me, Myrren,” Kail said.

“Yes, thank you,” Shial agreed, snuggling close to Kail. “Thank you so much. I owe you.”

Myrren flushed. “You’re welcome.”

Suddenly, there was a loud crash from downstairs. The thunder of many feet drummed on the floor.

Another crash, a slamming door, and faint sounds drifted up: Hadmet’s voice, hurried and apologetic, and another voice, harsher. None of the words could be made out, but the tone was clear.

The thunder of booted feet sounded again, this time on the

stairs. Before they could react, the door burst open. Men in white and tan uniforms wielding pikes flooded into the narrow space, half a dozen in the room and more out in the hallway. Their faces were grimly set, like soldiers ready for battle. Pike blades pointed at the four of them, forcing them back until they were pushed up against the room's rear wall.

"What's going on here?" Kail demanded, a hand on his sword hilt, but none of them answered. He started to draw it, the soldiers' grips tensed on their weapons, and he quickly took his hand away. He stayed where he was, though, returning their hard looks and shielding Shial with his body. Rahze remained calm, studying the soldiers with a thoughtful gaze.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor, more stately, less hurried. Two of the soldiers stood aside as an officer entered the room.

He wore a white and khaki uniform, decorated with golden tassels on the shoulders, and carried a ceremonial bronze scimitar in a scabbard at his hip. He had the face of a policeman: flat, grim, determined, like a bloodhound that would never give up once it had scented its quarry. He had the light complexion of a native Palidian, but his look was one of barely contained fury. Myrren recognized him. He was the man she had seen as they had left the council's audience chamber.

"Do you know what you've done?" he demanded.

"I believe," Rahze said placidly, "that if you plan to arrest us, Palidian law requires you to tell us your name, your rank and what we are charged with."

The man scowled at Rahze. "Lord Captain Ravidel Shand," he snarled, "commander of the civil defense forces of the city of Palidia."

Myrren took a moment to absorb that. She knew Palidia had both an enlisted military and a force of civilian police. *Rahze said there was going to be a price*, she thought with a sinking feeling. *But what did we do? We didn't do anything wrong!*

"And the charges?"

"Don't quote the law at me," the man snapped. He made a cutting gesture, and the soldiers moved in, hemming them in even more closely. "You're in no position to make demands."

Again he looked them over. His gaze settled on Myrren, and she saw him pause as he noticed her eyes. His brows lifted in puzzlement, but he quickly dismissed the matter.

"You should know something," he said darkly. "My job isn't easy. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's people who make it more difficult." His expression darkened, and his men's hands tightened on their weapons. Myrren flinched back, pushing against the wall, as the blade of a pike pricked her chest.

"You," Shand growled, "—all of you—have just made my job a *lot* more difficult."

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Chapter III

The Burden of Leadership

Across the world from Palidia, on the other side of the continent, there was a country as dark and brooding as Nimrod's lands were bright and beautiful. It was isolated from the rest of Caliel by an enormous mountain range called the Cordillen, a wall of towering, snow-capped peaks like a seam in the earth. Within its borders, there were volcanic lowlands and coasts that burned with tectonic activity; there were gloomy swamps and forests the color of fire. There was beauty there, but it was an austere beauty; there was life, but it was adapted to these lands, as sharp-edged and pitiless as they were. And there were cities, carved out of the stone, forged on the burning coasts, built on the banks of black rivers—cities built by a people determined to find a living in this bleak place. There were filthy slums of the utmost poverty and noble estates of the utmost elegance. There were soaring cathedrals where a terrible red-robed priesthood ruled by fear. It was the country of Vraxor, the dark god, who even in his sleep cast a shadow across half the world.

In the very center of Vraxor's lands was a great sea, the Esshen Sea. Linked by rivers to the major seas both north and east of the continent, it was a hub of travel and commerce for half of Caliel. And in the center of this sea rose a mountain, the mountain of Sharax, a dormant volcanic peak that thrust up from the water like a black-gauntleted fist aimed at the sky. Though it had not erupted in centuries, some days the sides of the mountain were warm, and ominous rumblings could be heard.

Small merchant towns were built at the base of Sharax, on the narrow strip of land where the mountain met the water. However, they were mere afterthoughts compared to what dominated the island. On a plateau near the summit of the peak was a great city, a fortress city, whose lights glowed out on dark nights like the flame of a single candle. It was Ral Vraxan, the capitol of all Vraxor's lands. And higher even than the city, on the very peak of the mountain, was a combined temple, palace and fortress capped with a great black dome.

From this place, the ruling council of the priests extended their decrees across the land. It was there as well that the Sovereign lived, a ceremonial ruler chosen by the priests once every ten years to govern the land in Vraxor's absence. The last Choosing had occurred the previous winter, and a young woman named Leah from the powerful House of Arlavan had been selected. To the surprise of almost everyone, her first act after being crowned had been to appoint her primary rival for the position, Lord Raine of House Destin, to a new position, First Councillor, just a step below the Sovereign herself.

At the summit of Sharax, at the highest level of the palace on

the peak, Leah of Arlavan stood on a wide balcony of gray marble, looking out over Ral Vraxan and the sea beyond it. The sun was beginning its descent towards the horizon where sea met sky, and blood-red streaks colored the water. The shadows of dusk were lengthening.

A call from behind her. "Leah?"

She did not respond.

Again: "Leah!"

There were footsteps on the stairs. With a stifled sigh, she turned as Raine Destin, her First Councillor, stepped out onto the balcony.

"Leah, I was looking all over for you. Were you here all this time? We have an audience with Lord Teccan from Ral Ardenite in a quarter-hour. And there are those grain harvest reports we have to review..."

"Tell me, Raine," she interrupted. "Do you think this is worth it?"

He paused in his itinerary, confused. "What?"

She gestured at the vista beyond the balcony. "This. All of this."

"I don't understand."

"When we were chosen, I had such high hopes," she said wearily. "I thought we could do so much good. And look at what we've accomplished—nothing. Two months of sleepless nights, stagnation, the squabbling among the Voices, nobles who fight every reform tooth and nail. And no help from the priests at all. Did you think it was going to be like this?"

She had a point, Raine had to admit. The job was turning out to be much harder than he had expected. He knew the Sovereign was a figurehead ruler, and he had expected the priesthood to make most decisions for them. But it was not working out that way.

Since the visit to Vraxor's sepulcher, the priests had remained aloof. They had retreated into the bowels of the citadel, only occasionally making cryptic proclamations. Acolytes had been conducting the church services for weeks, and Raine and Leah had been left to run the country by themselves. The workload was heavy even shared between them, which made Raine doubly glad he was there to help her.

"I didn't think it would be easy," he said truthfully. "Are you all right? Do you want me to reschedule the audience?"

"No, don't. I'm all right. Just depressed."

"Depressed? That isn't like you, Leah. Normally when you're depressed, I find you downstairs losing yourself in work—not up here brooding."

"I know," she sighed. "I just needed to be away from it for a little while. And I realized it's been so long since I've seen the sky. I

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wanted some fresh air.”

“I understand,” he assured her. Coming up behind her, he began to massage her shoulders.

Eyes closed, she relaxed and sighed under his ministrations.

“Mmm... You always know how to make me feel better, Raine.”

“What are First Councillors for?” he asked wryly.

She laughed. “I knew I picked you for a reason. I’ll be all right.” Straightening up, she took his hand. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s go to that audience.”

Lord Teccan was angry.

“Inconceivable!”

The three of them were in the palace’s audience chamber, a large hall of black stone. The ceiling curved upward into the great dome that capped the building. Narrow slits of skylights let in shafts of sun that converged on a spot in the center of the room, where Vraxor’s trident symbol was set in mosaic into the floor. At one end of the room rose a circular dais, where there stood a throne of dark black iron. Leah sat on this throne, looking every bit the queen in her regal garb, while Raine stood at her side.

If Lord Teccan was impressed, however, he did not show it. The nobleman from Ral Ardente, a weathered, rangy man of fifty years, stood on the floor before the dais and glared at them. Wings of gray streaked his hair, and his eyes, set into a stern, craggy face, were dark with anger. Other than the three of them and the two guards that stood at the door, the cavernous chamber was empty, and their voices echoed in the drafty space.

“Come, come, Lord Teccan,” Leah cajoled him. “This is a simple request. The people working on your estates are taxed to exhaustion already. Another increase may cause them to riot. All we are asking is that you lower taxes enough for them to make a living.”

“Never!” he said angrily. “I’ll never do it! I need the money.”

“To send your daughter to boarding school?” Raine asked skeptically.

“Yes! I promised Lara every advantage, every luxury. She will have the education and the upbringing appropriate for a young lady at the best academies in the land!”

“You must weigh that against her safety and your own,” Leah said coolly.

Like a queen addressing a subject, Raine thought in admiration.

“Your subjects cannot pay what you ask,” she went on. “If they are exhausted from working all day to raise money, they will have no children. Or they may move away, to another nobleman’s estates. Either way your source of income will eventually be cut off. And that is the best case,” she added ominously. “If they riot, harm may come to you or your family.”

"If they riot," he snapped, "my personal guard will put them down. I am their lord. They will do as I say or suffer the consequences."

"Would it not be easier to prevent that from coming to pass?"

"That is irrelevant. I made my daughter a promise and I will not break it! I will do as I wish with the land that I own!"

"Lord Teccan," Leah said sharply. "You forget who you are addressing. I am the Sovereign over all Lord Vraxor's lands. I have tried to be reasonable with you, but if you force me, I will command you to—"

"Sovereign," the lord scoffed. "You? You are a child. A figurehead. You have no authority over me. My daughter is older than you are, but I do not take orders from her, and I certainly will not take them from you!"

"You are dismissed," she said coldly. "Go now. Or must I show you just how much authority I have?"

He scowled. "You cannot tell me what to do. When the *sen'vrax* order me to, I shall lower taxes. Not until then!" He shoved between the guards and stormed out into the corridor.

As soon as he was gone, Leah slumped on the throne with a sigh. Raine made a dismissive gesture and the guards departed. He put a hand on her shoulder, but she did not respond.

"If it were just him," she mumbled, "I could deal with it."

He knew what she meant. Lord Teccan's response was typical of the nobility. No one recognized their authority; most flatly refused to take orders from anyone except the priests, let alone a Sovereign so much younger than them. And as much as Raine hated to admit it, there was nothing they could do about it. In theory, the Sovereign could call in the military to force a disobedient nobleman to obey. But the army was already stretched thin trying to keep the peace in the country, and tensions were high. To call them in to clash with a noble's own private guard—Raine did not want to think about what the repercussions would be. He knew they would be catastrophic.

Leah yawned and rubbed her eyes. He felt bad for her; he knew she had not had much sleep in the past few days. Nevertheless, she rallied and asked him, "All right, what's next? A nap, I hope..."

"No such luck," he said. "A council with the Voices."

She groaned, but wearily lifted herself from the throne. "All right," she said, taking a deep breath. "Let's go."

On a lower level of the palace was another great chamber, this one shaped like a fan. Tapering rows of seats all faced a dais at the narrowest end of the room. Most of the seats were empty, with an occasional observer or minor noble occupying some. A table in front of the dais was taken up by a dozen middle-aged noblemen. They were already bickering with each other, and their argument did not subside when Leah and Raine walked out onto the dais to face the room.

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She waited for a moment, but they did not stop squabbling. “Good men, please!” she called at last, and they grudgingly settled down into silence.

Leah raised her face to address the whole chamber, and began the ceremonial greeting. “My nobles, I ask for your wisdom. Advise me, guide me, and do not lead me astray. Lift up your voices to me, so that I may hear one harmonious chorus rising above all else.”

The Voices looked at her, then dissolved back into squabbling.

“Good men, *please!*” Leah called. “I need your reports. Lord Malgen, what is the state of the harvest?”

A nobleman sitting at the end of the table gave his neighbor a sour look and spoke reluctantly. “Late winter frosts have damaged many crops in the prime growing lands of the north. Our harvest this year will be greatly reduced. We may need imports to make it through the summer.”

“Your recommendation?” she asked.

“Order farmers to replant the damaged crops now. It will mean more work for them and a second harvest in late autumn, but the risks of letting the land lie fallow are higher.”

“It will be done.” She turned to another Voice. “Lord Nekis, how is the state of our treasury?”

“Low, my lady,” the man, a sallow, skull-faced noble, said direly. “I recommend raising taxes.”

Leah sighed. “I’ve been doing my best to avoid that. Anyway, it’s not the rate that’s the problem, is it? Too many nobles send away the tax collectors. We need support from the *sen’vra*x to collect what we’re owed.”

“That is correct,” Lord Nekis confirmed with a grim nod.

“Will our treasury last? At least for another month or so?”

“Perhaps. It may be enough. Then again, if we need the money to pay for grain imports, it may not be.”

“Wait!” a third Voice, Lord Sanche, spoke up. “We cannot afford imports! What about the military? If our treasury goes to buy grain, we will not be able to pay them. If the *sen’vra*x are cloistered and are not there to maintain discipline, there could be desertions, insubordination... or worse! And a strong military presence is critical right now. Tensions are running high; rebel activity along the Burning Coast has flared up. We must pay our soldiers before all else, even if it means some commoners will starve!” Lord Malgen shot him a dark look, which he returned.

Leah put a hand to her brow in an agony of indecision. She swayed slightly, and Raine thought she would fall. However, before he could move to her side to catch her, she recovered and straightened up.

“We’ll buy food first,” she directed. “As little as we can get by with. I’ll cut the military’s pay if necessary.” Lord Malgen shot Lord

Sanche a triumphant smirk. “How are conditions on the western border?”

Lord Sanche glowered at Lord Malgen. “Quiet, lately,” he said sullenly. “The nations along the Cordillen have been subdued. Not even the usual skirmishes and guerrilla raids.”

“I’ll pull guards away from the border, then, and redistribute them. Where do we need them most?”

“We are already stretched thin across the Cordillen,” Lord Sanche warned. “It would be dangerous. If we were invaded from the west, we would be almost defenseless.”

“It must be done,” Leah said flatly. “Where do we need reinforcements the most? Where in the land is the situation most volatile?”

Each Voice volunteered a suggestion, all at once; Lord Sanche was vehemently against redeploying any border guards, while Lord Nekis warned of desertions. They rapidly devolved into arguing again.

“Quiet!” Leah snapped, bringing them all to stunned silence. She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. “I’ll send out a decree ordering the nobles who owe taxes to pay them. The redeployment will take place. You’ll decide for me where the soldiers freed up will be most effective. I want a consensus decision tomorrow. And for once don’t argue! What other issues are there?”

Again they all spoke at once. “...plague outbreaks in the west...”

“...two mine shafts collapsed in Ral Ferad...”

“...Lord Fanchen’s sons are ready to go to war to decide who will inherit their father’s estate...”

Leah listened to the cacophony, trying to take it all in at once, then erupted. “Enough! You’re the Voices—advise me! Meet in committee tonight and draft solutions to these problems. I want a list of all of them, with proposed solutions and all their possible benefits and drawbacks, ready for me tomorrow morning. We’ll meet again then. Get on it!”

She turned and stalked off, Raine in tow. The Voices were already arguing ferociously by the time they left the room.

Raine moved in to support her as they walked down the corridor, but she shook his arm off. “Thank you, Raine,” she said wearily. “It’s all right. I’m fine. Just tired. I can’t stand them...”

“That was a productive session,” he noted, truthfully. “We don’t usually get so much done.”

She only sighed.

“Look,” he suggested. “I think we both need some rest. It’s been a hard day. Why don’t you go up to your room and relax? Get some sleep. I can have dinner sent up.”

Leah smiled weakly. “That’s the best idea I’ve heard all day.” Impulsively, she hugged him. “Thank you, Raine. Just for being here for

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me.”

“You’re welcome. It’s what I’m here for,” he said seriously, hugging her back.

“I still appreciate it,” she said warmly, her face buried against his chest.

An acolyte rounded the corner and hurried toward them. It was a human, which was rare; most of the priests and acolytes were demon breeds. Dressed in a severe black robe, he had a bulletlike face and a shaven head.

As the acolyte approached, Leah drew away from Raine and stood up straight, every inch the Sovereign once more. The man bowed to them.

“Lady Leah, Lord Raine, an urgent message for you,” he said. “A Demon Rider has just arrived with pressing news.”

They looked at each other and sighed. “Take us there,” she commanded.

The acolyte led them off through the winding passages of the citadel. Innumerable side passages branched off from the corridor they followed, most leading into darkness.

As they walked, Raine tried to place their position on the mental map of the building he was developing. He did not know where most of the side passages led, but he did have a general idea of the route they were taking, which he was proud of. The priests’ citadel was a huge, bewildering maze of corridors. There were tunnels and catacombs beneath it that honeycombed the mountain, comprising at least as much area as the building proper, probably more. In the slightly more than two months Raine had lived there, he had not explored more than a small fraction of it.

By Vraxor, it’s going to take my entire ten-year term just to see every room here, let alone know where every passage leads. He had heard that it took at least thirty years of training to become a priest, which had always seemed far too high to him. He had wondered how much there could possibly be to learn that it took thirty years. Now he thought he knew. *Most of that time, he thought half-seriously, is probably spent learning the layout of this place.*

They passed a branch that Raine recognized, a corridor that sloped up and off into darkness, guarded by statues set into niches in the wall. That corridor, he knew, led to the highest level of the citadel—the one they had been brought to on the first day of their tenure, the dark sepulcher where Vraxor himself slept.

The sight of the passage gave Raine a guilty thrill. Since that first day, he had gone back several times—alone. He wanted to see the sarcophagus again, though he did not know whether it was to pray in its presence, simply sit and look at it, or something else, something he dared not even think about to himself. He could not get back, however. The

first time he had returned, he had found the door locked. He did not know where the key was, and did not dare ask.

They passed that branch by, but their route took them steadily higher. Finally they reached a familiar staircase. At the top was a chamber with walls of rough, natural stone, as if it had not been fully chiseled out of the mountain rock. The floor, by contrast, was made up of smooth black and gray tiles. One wall was open to the outdoors, and a wide balcony overlooked Ral Vraxan. It was where Raine had found Leah before, the aerie where Demon Riders arrived with messages.

One was there now, a rider wearing black leather armor and leggings, holding the reins of his mount. Raine was fascinated; he had never seen a Demon Rider's mount up close.

The creature perched on the balcony resembled a huge bat, large enough for a man to sit on its back, and indeed was set up with a saddle and bridle for that purpose. However, on closer inspection, the similarities were only superficial. In the center of its forehead was a faintly green orb that resembled an eerie eye. Its true eyes were tiny black pinpricks, almost totally blind. It did not have skin either, Raine realized, but scales. On most parts of its body they were dark black, unnoticeable except for a slight oily sheen. On its wings, however, they were larger and faintly luminous, the same shade of green as its weird eyelike organ. He thought it was more reptile than bat—a suspicion which seemed to be confirmed when a long, forked tongue licked out of its mouth, tasting the air.

Leah strode up to the rider. "I am Leah Arlavan, the Sovereign. What news?"

He bowed to them. "Lady Leah, I come with urgent news from the south. The rebels launched a surprise attack. They broke through a defensive line and captured the garrison at Ral Pentathe."

Raine and Leah exchanged an alarmed look. *That garrison was one of the last defensive lines between the hills and Ral Axen. By Vraxor, if they get much farther, they could take the city itself!*

"How long ago?" Leah asked.

"Several hours, lady. I came as quickly as I could."

"Thank you," she said perfunctorily, and turned to the acolyte. "Summon Commander Melius. Tell him to meet me in the war room immediately."

"As you wish," said the acolyte, bowed and hurried off.

A few minutes later found them in the palace's war room, a chamber of dark, foreboding stone. Three of its walls were decorated with tapestries in black and red. The fourth was hung with a ceremonial shield which bore, in colored lacquer, the image of a flower twining around the blade of a dagger—the emblem of House Arlavan, Leah's family. In the center of the room was a long table, piled high with a jumble of maps and scrolls.

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Leah swept some of them aside to clear a space and sat down, slumping with her head in her hands. “Tell me, Raine,” she said. “What do you think? Should I redirect some of our forces in the west? What Lord Sanche said was right... We’d be almost defenseless.”

“I agree with that plan,” he said seriously. “But I don’t think it goes far enough.”

She blinked. “Far enough? What do you mean?”

“I think we should withdraw all our forces west of the Cordillen.”

“All of them? But we control Corondor, Eilen, a few other cities... Are you suggesting we give them up?”

“Yes. It’s obvious, Leah. We’ve overextended ourselves. We can’t afford to hold on to them—we’re having a hard enough time just trying to keep the peace here without keeping captured cities under control too. You know as well as I do that we’re losing men and supplies to terrorism, guerrilla attacks... It’s a drain on our resources that we don’t need. The fortified passes through the Cordillen are still there. If we withdraw to those, we can protect ourselves with much fewer men and not have to worry about retaliatory attacks.”

She frowned. “You’re right, Raine. I never thought about it that way. What about the benefits of holding them, though? Right now, we have an early warning if anyone tries to attack us from the west; we’d have more time to prepare our defenses. We’d be losing that.”

“It’s not important,” he said. “The Cordillen is a good enough defensive line all by itself. Besides, no one is going to attack us from the west for a long time. We have no enemies right now, except maybe those countries we’re currently holding—but we’ve forced them to disarm and disband their militaries. It will be years before they can even think of coming after us.”

“I suppose,” she admitted. “But people will be upset if we just give up that land. The way Warde Kahliana conquered it—he cut a swath through three nations. We’ve never had a military success like that in all our history. If we withdraw now, we’d be giving up territory we might never get back. People will be *furios*.”

“You can’t please everyone when you’re Sovereign,” he said.

“I know,” she sighed. “I just wish I could please *some* people. Everyone seems to hate me no matter what I do.”

“I think you’re doing an excellent job,” he assured her. “With a little help from me, of course. You’ve hardly started your term; there’s bound to be a learning curve. But all the other Sovereigns did all right. I bet we can do even better. Your name is going to be in the history books some day.”

“I don’t doubt that,” she said sadly. “But for what? Will I be remembered as the Sovereign who let Lord Vraxor’s country disintegrate?”

“Everything will turn out all right,” he promised her. “Anyway, you can’t worry about public opinion. You have to do what’s right for the nation.”

“I guess you’re right,” she agreed. “Yes. You are right. We need those soldiers here, and those cities we’re holding aren’t doing us any good anyway. I’ll give orders for them to be pulled back first thing tomorrow. Wait—Raine, what if the priests object...?”

“They’re still cloistered. I don’t think they’ll object.”

“I meant afterwards,” she said uneasily. “They have to return sometime.”

“Worry about that when it happens. We need those soldiers now.”

A man entered the room, coming to attention and saluting when he saw Leah. Surprisingly young for the high rank he held, although older than either of them, he had a blocky, solid build, a square jaw and medium-length dark hair, and wore a crisp military uniform.

“I came as you instructed, Lady Leah,” he said deferentially. “Why have you summoned me?”

“We have a problem, commander. The rebels in the south have captured Ral Pentathe.”

Commander Melius nodded grimly. “I feared that would happen.”

“What do you recommend we do?”

He strode to the table, swept some maps aside and pulled out one of Ral Axen and the surrounding coast. It had been marked with ink to show the positions of the rebels and the army; over the past few weeks, the blue lines that represented the rebel forces had been steadily pushing forward, while the red lines representing the military formed an ever-shrinking ring around the city.

“The garrison at Ral Pentathe contained magical weapons that must now be in their hands,” he said. “It will be very difficult to dislodge them. To say nothing of the danger Ral Axen is now in.”

Leah nodded. “How strong are our forces in the area?”

“Not strong enough, I’m afraid. The rebels know that territory well. They strike, then disperse and hide in the hills when we counterattack. Our forces have been ground down and demoralized, their weapons are inadequate, and there’s plague in their ranks. They’re hardly in shape to defend, much less to mount a counterattack.”

“We’ll need reinforcements, then,” she said briskly. “The rebels have made too many gains; we need to stop this before it gets any worse and stamp them out. Commander Melius, I need you to deploy as many soldiers as quickly as possible.”

“I’m sorry, Lady Leah. I cannot.”

“—we’ll need to— What?”

“I cannot do what you ask,” he said patiently.

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“You can’t? Why?” she demanded.

“I have received no orders from the priests.”

“Well, you’ve received orders from me! Do it!”

He shook his head. “It could be done, but I would have to issue a call to reserves, mobilize reinforcements from all over the land, stage forced marches to the area, then go on the offensive and engage in a bloody, costly series of battles. Such things are not done without the priests’ approval.”

“The *sen’vrax* are secluded,” Leah protested. “They haven’t been seen in weeks. There’s no time to wait. If the rebels advance much further, they could take Ral Axen.”

“I’m sorry,” Melius repeated. “But I didn’t make it to general by acting on my own initiative. If I undertake such a large campaign without the priests’ permission, I could be stripped of my command. Or sent to the altar. I won’t take that risk.”

“What if the rebels capture Ral Axen and kill everyone there? What about *that* risk?”

“The men already there to defend it will have to hold out,” he said implacably.

“That’s insane!” she cried. “You just said they were unfit to fight!”

“But they may be able to hold their position. However, it doesn’t matter. If the rebels were on the brink of conquering Ral Vraxan, I still wouldn’t move without the priests’ permission. No offense, Lady Leah, but I’ve dealt with the *sen’vrax* a lot longer than you, and I know how they think. They don’t reward initiative, ever, no matter if good comes of it.”

“There are innocent people in harm’s way!”

“I realize that,” he said. “My hands are tied. There’s nothing I can do.”

“I gave you an order!” she said hotly. “This is insubordination!”

“No. It would be insubordination to move my forces without orders from the priests.”

“Don’t force me to relieve you of your command,” she threatened him. “I can order your subordinates myself.”

He shrugged. “If you must. But I will not move without the priests’ orders, and neither, I suspect, will they.”

Leah was almost sobbing with helplessness. “You *will* move your forces! You have to. I command it!”

“I am sorry,” he repeated.

“I’ll tell the priests of your disobedience. What do you think they’ll do to you then?”

“I don’t know. But I’m willing to balance that risk against what I *know* they will do if I move without their orders.”

“You’re dismissed!” she cried. “You’re relieved of your

command. Get out!”

Before he reached the door, Raine reproached him.
“Commander Melius.”

The general looked warily at him, but said nothing.

“This is a special circumstance. The priests are secluded and not speaking to anyone, and you are not protecting your people. When they return and find out what has happened, they may also punish you for inaction. Are you willing to risk that?”

Melius looked steadily back at Raine, but did not answer. He went out into the hall, shutting the door behind himself.

Leah glared after him; then her lip trembled, and she collapsed into Raine’s arms, sobbing.

“There has to be *something* we can do!” she wailed. He had no reply, only held her and comforted her.

An acolyte appeared, easing the door open. “There is a visitor for you, Lord Raine,” he said.

Leah lifted her head. “Tell him we’re not accepting any more—” she snapped, then hesitated. “What?” she said, just as Raine blurted out, “For me?”

They exchanged a look. The Sovereign got many callers, but so far the First Councillor had not had any.

“Show him in, whoever it is,” he said warily, and the acolyte hurried off.

As soon as the acolyte had gone, Leah rested her head on Raine’s shoulder and cried. He patted her reassuringly on the back, not sure what to do. “Sshh,” he assured her. “It will be all right.”

He was still holding her when he heard the door creak, but he paid no attention to it—until he heard a voice. A familiar one.

“You two seem to have gotten along well in my absence,” it said. The speaker’s tone was wry, amused, with a hint of dark humor Raine recognized.

They both started. Raine let Leah go and turned around.
“Arvis!”

The Morin was leaning against the doorframe, with arms crossed and a smirk on his face. He wore the clothes of a commoner, black and gray and soft brown, but his face, the haughty, chiseled countenance of a nobleman, made them seem as ornate as a king’s robe. Only at a casual glance would people mistake him for a human being, however. His skin was pale white, his face and frame gaunt. A human with that appearance would have been on the edge of death, but dark, demonic vitality suffused his eyes—like two stones of onyx, iris as black as pupil—and his grin.

“Arvis, where have you been?” Raine asked. “I haven’t seen you since we were chosen! I forgot all about—that is, I mean—”

“Do not concern yourself with it,” the Morin, Myrren’s

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surrogate parent and Raine's erstwhile bodyguard, said with a dismissive wave. "You would not have been able to find me if you had looked."

"Where were you?"

"Making preparations," Arvis said vaguely.

"For what?"

Arvis ignored the question. "What has the priesthood been doing?"

"They've been secluded for weeks. We've barely heard a thing from them," Raine said.

The Morin nodded grimly. "A bad sign, but I expected as much."

"What were you making preparations for?" Raine persisted.

"I cannot say it here."

"Why not?"

"The priesthood can hear everything that is said within these walls."

"They can?" Raine said anxiously. "Are you sure about that?"

He had not said anything inside the citadel he would not have preferred the priesthood to hear, but it was still a shock to learn they had been listened in on for the last two months.

"Yes," Arvis said flatly. "Under normal circumstances, at least. If things are as you describe, they will not be actively paying attention. Nevertheless, there are a few words that will alert them and draw their attention if spoken. I cannot say those words here. Suffice it to say that there are dark clouds on the horizon, and when the storm hits, I intend to be prepared."

Leah had been watching the Morin warily. Now she spoke, and her voice was half threatening, half frightened. "None of that explains anything. Why have you come here? Why now?"

Too late, Raine remembered Leah's last meeting with Arvis. The last time the three of them had been together had been before the Choosing, in the house of the Arlavan family, at a ball being thrown by Leah's grandfather. Raine had gone in defiance of his parents' wishes, to warn Leah of an assassin they had sent after her. As it transpired, the assassin had switched sides, and would have killed Raine but for Arvis' intervention. The Morin had been of the opinion that Leah had been responsible for this, and would have killed her himself if Raine had not forbade him to do so.

Arvis ignored her tone. "Do not concern yourself. I am not here to harm you," he said dismissively. "Any grudges between us are in the past. I am merely here to help Raine," he added wryly, "who seems to have a talent for getting himself into situations he cannot get out of alone. If I must help you to help him, so be it."

"Why should I believe you?" she said suspiciously.

The Morin shrugged. "Believe me or not, I do not care. But do

not call the guards. I intend to stay here until I have done what I came to do. They would not be able to force me to leave, and it would be a waste of perfectly good guards.” He grinned, exposing a flash of short, sharp teeth very like fangs.

Leah flinched and shrank away from the Morin. Raine put a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry. He said he wouldn’t hurt you and I believe him.” She did not look reassured, but he turned back to Arvis anyway. “So what have you come to do?”

“To check up on you, of course,” Arvis said dryly. “You seem to be doing an adequate job in spite of the priesthood’s seclusion. The nation has not yet collapsed.”

“We’re holding it together,” Raine said wearily, “but only just. We need the priests’ authority to back us up. Without it, there’s nothing we can do. Nobles won’t pay their taxes. Everyone ignores our orders. Our treasury is almost empty. And the rebels are closing in on Ral Axen and Commander Melius won’t move in reinforcements.”

Arvis chuckled. “It is too bad Warde resigned his commission. He would have been willing to commit the military to backing up your power, and he commanded his men’s loyalty absolutely. And he would not have hesitated to move without the priests’ orders if necessary. He always told me Melius was a decent officer, but he had no initiative.”

“None of which helps us now,” Raine said gloomily. “There isn’t anything you can do, is there?”

“Regrettably, no. You must work out your own problems. I may have some suggestions, but I have no power to help you; that is not what I came for.”

“Wait a minute,” Leah said. “You were going to be a priest once, weren’t you? I thought you had influence with the priesthood. Raine told me so. You can convince them to come back and help us.”

Arvis shook his head. “Whatever influence I had with the priests is gone. In fact, it would be unwise even to reveal my presence here to them. At last word, there were factions within the priesthood calling for my death. I have no reason to believe they have relented, and if they find me, the others may allow them to do it in exchange for other concessions.”

“Why would they want that?” Leah asked, curious despite herself.

“I was told more of matters within the priesthood than any other outsider who has ever been given that privilege. Many of the priests believe I was told too much. They fear that I will reveal dangerous information to people who should not know it.”

“Like us?” she asked sardonically.

“Yes,” Arvis said without missing a beat.

“I’m the Sovereign! Why shouldn’t I know?”

“The fact that they do not deem *you* worthy of knowing it,” the

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Morin said darkly, “may give you some idea of how dangerous this knowledge is.”

“Are you going to tell us what it is?”

“No. Not until it becomes necessary. There is nothing you can do, and it will only cause you needless worry. That is not why I came.”

He pointed at Raine. “I came here for you.”

“For—for me?”

“Yes. To protect you.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Raine said, laughing weakly. “I mean—I’m already in office. There aren’t any assassins after me anymore. And I’m living in Ral Vraxan, in the priests’ citadel, with the acolytes and the Sovereign’s own personal guard... What do I need to be protected from?” Arvis’ steady black gaze did not waver, and he shifted uncomfortably under it.

“Those things did not protect this place once,” the Morin reminded him.

Both of them flinched. Raine remembered, and he knew Leah remembered even more vividly, the time the citadel had been attacked by—he still did not know what they had been. Creatures out of nightmare, things like living shadows that walked through walls and were impervious to magic, and whose touch cut like razors. They had interrupted one of the tests for the Choosing, killing many priests and bystanders, then stealing the recently recovered Dark Heart and fleeing to parts unknown. No one had ever heard anything more of them after that, and the holy relic had never been recovered.

“But—when that happened—” Raine said, fumbling for words. “I mean—you weren’t—didn’t do any good either. Are you—are you saying those things are going to come back?”

“No. I do not believe so. My point is that even this place’s defenses are not invulnerable. That is why you need my protection. The time will come when you will be glad of it.”

“What if I decide I don’t want your protection?” he asked, put off by the way Arvis was talking down to him.

The Morin fixed him with a stare. “That would be a very unwise decision.”

To his surprise, Leah put a hand on his arm. She looked shaken, but her voice was firm. “Raine... I think Arvis is right. We can use all the protection we can get, and... I believe he’s serious when he says he wants to help. I think you should accept his offer.”

Raine knew when he was beaten. He said nothing more as the two of them went about planning for him.

“I will need an excuse to remain in this place,” Arvis said, businesslike. “Something that will give me access to come and go as I wish. And not too conspicuous; no public positions. I would prefer that as few people as possible know that I am here.”

Leah frowned. “That doesn’t leave many options. An acolyte or a servant... but I don’t think you would fit in,” she added hurriedly when she saw him scowl. “Hmm... what else is there? Nobles at court come and go all the time, but they’d recognize a new face... especially one like yours. Military commanders and the Voices have their own quarters, and they don’t have to go to court or be seen in public if they don’t want to, but I’m sure you wouldn’t...”

“That will do,” Arvis suddenly said. “The Voices. You can appoint me to that position. I will not stand out; tell them you chose me as a private advisor. It will be believable, in light of your troubles. And it will be the truth. I was one of them once.”

She started. “A Voice? You?”

“Yes. Under Lian Destin for a brief time, and the Sovereign before him for longer.”

She shook her head, amazed. “Very well... I’ll issue the decree appointing you to the Voices. That’s one of the few things I *can* do without anyone arguing,” she said sourly.

“Trust me,” Arvis said ominously, “you will face much worse before your tenure is over.” He turned to the door. “I must go. I have preparations to make. I will be back soon.”

Raine spoke up. “Arvis, wait.”

He paused, one hand on the door handle. “Yes?”

“I just have to know... Why did you come back at all? Your vow to protect me ended with the Choosing. You know you don’t have any further obligation.”

“I know that,” Arvis said impatiently.

“So why are you still protecting me?”

He paused, giving Raine a long, steady look. “Do not question your blessings,” he said at last, and pulled the door shut behind him.

Leah glanced after him with a mixture of fear and admiration. “You should be thankful to have a protector like him,” she said slowly.

“I am,” Raine said, somewhat awed himself. “Sometimes.”