

SWEET SURRENDER

Leena smoothed his cheek with her hand, and Taurin let a deep sigh escape his lips. Her touch was like an angel's kiss. His body burned, and it wasn't from the heat or the energy he'd expended. He burned with desire for the beautiful woman nurturing him. His gaze scanned her face. Her expression, full of concern for his welfare, moved him deeply. Looking into her eyes, he thought he had never seen anything so pure in his entire life.

"Leena," he murmured.

"Yes?"

She stood on the edge of her bunk to be eye level with him. He reached out a hand to cup the back of her head. Her hair felt like spun silk, and his resolve evaporated. He'd been able to push away from her at Hathers Beach, knowing it wasn't right for him to steal kisses regardless of their legal relationship. But now he drew her toward him until his mouth hovered inches above hers.

The words escaped his lips before he could stop them. "I want you."

KEEPER OF THE RINGS
By Nancy J. Cohen

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Keeper of the Rings

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CHAPTER ONE

"If we don't start soon, I'm going to faint. Dear deity, what if I trip over this thing when we're called to the dais?"

Leena adjusted her royal blue robe with trembling fingers. Unaccustomed to its length, she grimaced at the sight of her satin slippers peeking out beneath the hem. She couldn't believe she'd earned the privilege of wearing the sacramental vestment.

Karole patted her shoulder. "You'll do fine. You always appear so well poised."

Leena met her friend's gaze. "Today is different. My father is in the congregation, and I don't want to embarrass him. And where's my brother? It's unlike Bendyk to be late."

"He could be seated with your father in the Inner Sanctum. They're not allowed back here." Karole swept her arm in a broad gesture encompassing the Robing Salon. Their fellow initiates stood around fidgeting like lower school graduates.

"You're right." Leena placed the ceremonial headdress over her head of blond hair.

Soon she and her newfound friends would become official members of the aide corps that served the Synod, the ruling body of priests on Xan. They awaited a signal from Dikran, the Arch Nome, who would begin the annual Renewal service. At its completion, Leena would assume her honored role as a Caucus delegate.

Her pulse raced with excitement. Ever since she was a child, she'd wanted to learn more about the Apostles who had established the religion of Sabal on her world. Her father, a high-ranking Candor, had inspired her interest in archeology by his study of ancient religious texts.

Growing up beside a crumbling ruin had sparked her imagination as she thought about

life in days of old. Where had the Apostles originated? They'd established the magnificent reign of Lothar, their god, and then vanished. Why did they leave, and where had they gone?

Craving knowledge of her forebears, Leena realized the Synod held the key to wisdom. The ecclesiastical leaders were privy to secrets known to no one else. Joining the Caucus was the swiftest route to enlightenment.

A solemn bearded figure marched into the room. Planting himself firmly in the center, he peered around at the young initiates, waiting until everyone fell silent.

"It is time," Zeroun intoned.

"Holy waters." Leena's knees quaked. "I can't believe we've made it this far. May Lothar guide us."

"You're supposed to be near the front." Karole prodded her. "Get in line."

Leena wiped her sweaty palms against her flowing robe. Not even her graduation from archeological college had made her this nervous. Was it because Malcolm was in the congregation?

Her wealthy neighbor had been after her hand in marriage for several years now. Lately Leena had been inclined to accept, mainly for the security he could offer. She felt mildly affectionate toward him, but something made her hesitate.

Lining up behind the others, she tilted her chin in the air and marched forward with Zeroun in the lead. Leena had been in the cathedral-like Inner Sanctum many times during the past six weeks of training, but it hadn't prepared her for the sea of faces that greeted them in the cavernous hall.

She took a seat along with the nineteen other initiates in the front row that had been reserved for them. The members of the Synod filed in, claiming their spaces on the dais.

Arch Nome Dikran sat on a throne-like chair, wearing his gold robe with the dignity that befit his eighty years. A towering headdress covered his head, and it was much more resplendent than the simple ones Leena and her friends wore.

She may not care for formal dress, but because her father held a high position, she was accustomed to elaborate affairs.

As she settled the robe about her legs, she wished for the comfort of the breeches and short-sleeved shirts she wore on her archeological digs. There was no pretense when you scoured a site for ancient treasures.

Malcolm didn't approve of her career. He would expect any wife of his to stay at home and manage his household. Leena had plenty of experience in managing her father's property, having done so ever since her mother's death five years ago. That tragic accident had given her brother his true calling.

Good Lord, where was Bendyk? She craned her neck, searching for her brother's familiar face, but she didn't spot his blond head anywhere in the crowd. Returning her attention forward, she mentally checked off the dignitaries on the dais.

Sirvat, the most prominent woman on the Synod, looked stiffly proper in her white robe tied with the gold sash of office. Magar sat beside her, his eyes twinkling beneath a crop of white hair. Karayan, a family friend, caught Leena's eye and smiled. Flushing, she looked down at her blue robe, eagerly anticipating the moment when she would be given the gold cord signifying her as an ordained servant of Lothar.

She shifted impatiently, watching Dikran rise and approach the podium. His shuffling gait proclaimed his age, but his dark eyes were sharp as they pierced the crowd like orbs of glowing embers. The service began with a hymn praising Lothar for his beneficence.

“We come here today before the face of our deity, the miraculous Lothar,” Dikran spoke into a microphone. “Together in worship, we sanctify our existence and praise Lothar, ruler of Xan. Who is like unto you, O Holy One, majestic and awesome in splendor? Who can compare to your generosity? Let the name Lothar be hallowed unto the world for all time. Let his name be glorified and exalted although he is beyond praise, because he is so mighty and powerful.”

The congregation raised their voices in a hymn, and Leena’s song joined them. The familiar melody brought her the same calm serenity as it had throughout her life at similar services. Renewal was a time to recall one’s past deeds, one’s joys and triumphs, one’s tragedies and sorrows, and to look ahead to the new year with reborn hope.

“May this new year bring us peace, joy, and exaltation.” Dikran raised his arms toward the vaulted ceiling. “May you bless us, O Lothar, with plentiful rains so our crops may grow bountiful and our fields be fertile. May our rivers flow and our lakes remain unblemished.

“We count on you, O Holy One, to maintain our land and to provide us with your blessing that keeps us from ill health. May our redemptive labors make us happy and our struggle for purity not fail. Let us toil at our work to the best of our ability. Blessed is the vision of holiness that exalts us from on high.”

Leena joined in a series of responsive readings. Her heart opened to Lothar and his generosity to her people. Truly they were blessed to have such a wonderful god looking out for them. He provided them with fertile soil with which to grow adequate foodstuffs. Xan was a rich, bountiful world. The lakes and rivers teemed with fish. The land blossomed with fruit, and the air was pure and clear. Truly, what more could anyone want?

Zeroun got up and exchanged places with Dikran. Minister of Religion, Zeroun’s presence was powerful, the hunch of his shoulders indicative of his forcefulness.

“Praised be Lothar who unifies all creation.” His eyes pierced the congregation as though he would read their souls. “May the Holy One fill our minds with knowledge and our hearts with wisdom, and praise those who labor to bring harmony to our world. The new year should be a fruitful one for us. Be gracious, O Lothar, and treat us generously. Be our teacher and guide.” He raised his hands toward heaven.

As the choir began to sing, melodious music filled the clerestory. Leena’s heart soared with faith and love for Lothar. *Please help me clear my father’s name*, she prayed. *I know the answers are here in your Holy Temple. I vow that I will find them before the next Renewal.* The communion of those around her filled her with comfort and peace as she followed the service.

“Let us bend in humility before Lothar.” Zeroun bowed low, his headdress dipping. “Let us give praise unto the one who established our land.”

“May the Holy One be gracious and bring us peace,” the congregation intoned in unison.

“As the new year begins, so is hope reborn in us,” said Zeroun. “Lothar has been resting after the toil of the harvest, but now is the time for Renewal. We must blow the sacred horn to awaken our god from his rest so the life cycle may begin anew. Behold the vessel for summoning Lothar.”

Karayan, Minister of Justice, and Eznik, Minister of Labor, rose and approached a set of immense carved wooden doors at the rear of the Grand Altar. Uttering incantations, they reached out to draw the doors apart in front of the awed congregation.

Leena held her breath. The sound of the horn was more than a symbol for ushering in the new year. It summoned Lothar, and when he awoke, he reset the climatic cycles of Xan for another year. Without his beneficence, her world would revert to the wild, untamed fury of the past. No one ever wanted that to happen. It would mean the end to civilization as they knew it.

Renewal was the pinnacle of all the seasonal holidays.

“Show us the horn,” Dikran shouted as he faced the rear.

Karayan and Eznik drew the doors apart, and a collective gasp went up from the congregation.

Emptiness yawned from within the richly lit interior.

“Dear deity,” Leena whispered. Where was the sacred horn?

Dikran had a stunned look on his face, while the other members of the Synod wore horror-stricken expressions. Dikran cast a quick glance at Zeroun before indicating the doors should be shut.

Stepping forward to the podium, he raised his hand to signal the choir. A trumpet always played after the horn to reflect the holy voice. Now the trumpet player began a haunting melody that reverberated throughout Leena’s soul. When he finished, the congregation remained mute.

Dikran, his expression stony, spoke into the microphone. “Our opening of the holy chamber this year was symbolic. The sacred horn, after so many years of continuous use, has required a cleansing in sacramental water. We have blown the trumpet in its stead. It is Lothar’s will that this be done. Hear us, Holy One, and awaken from your rest.”

He raised his hands toward the congregation. “Bless our people and grant them freedom from sickness and sorrow. Let us love our neighbor as ourselves, walk humbly with our god, and convert our thoughts into faith and our words into good deeds. And so we say, Mahala.”

He beamed pontifically. “And now, it gives me great pleasure to call upon our initiates. These young people are dedicating their lives to serving the Synod. By their faith, they serve Lothar and thus you, the people. Treat them with the respect due their station. You may step upon the dais.” He gestured to the trainees with an imperious wave.

Holy waters, it’s time. Leena trembled as she made her way to the elevated platform. On the dais, she faced the congregation in line with her fellow initiates. One by one, Zeroun called them by name. He gave each candidate a lit candle and a gold sash signifying their station. Holding their candles, they repeated the words they had rehearsed.

“We pledge ourselves to serve the members of the Synod in good faith, with loyalty, dedication and compassion, and in so doing we pledge ourselves to you, O blessed Lothar. Praised be the power that brings us peace and prosperity. Praise Lothar, who sanctifies us all. Mahala.”

They blew out their candles to denote the end of the Renewal ceremony. The congregation remained in place while Dikran, the Synod members, and the new Caucus filed from the sanctuary to head for the reception hall.

A huge feast had been prepared, for Renewal was a happy, joyous occasion. Lothar was awakening. He would provide for them for another whole year, a year free from ill health, a year blessed with bountiful fruit and produce of the land.

Leena’s heart soared with joy as she followed her robed companions through the nave toward an archway at the rear.

Someone planted a hand on her shoulder in the reception hall. He whirled her around and planted a firm kiss on her lips.

“I’m proud of you.” Malcolm flashed her a grin that showed his white, even teeth.

Leena scanned his handsome features. His brown eyes reflected warmth and something more when he looked at her.

“Thank you,” she murmured, pleased by his sincerity. “Have you seen Father?”

“He’s over by the refreshment table. Can I get you a drink?”

“Yes, I’d like that.”

She glanced around for Karole, wanting to introduce her friend to Malcolm, but couldn’t locate her in the crowd. People stood about in clusters, drinks in hand, chatting and laughing. Friends and relatives had come from miles away for this special occasion.

Most people attended religious services in their hometowns or at the regional worship centers, but guests of the elite were invited to participate in services at the Holy Temple, and such invitations were highly coveted.

Leena wondered where Dikran had gone. She wanted to put in a good word with the Arch Nome for her father. But Dikran was nowhere in sight, and neither were the top members of the Synod. Where had they gone?

Dikran should be here to give his blessing to the bread so they could eat. But it was Jirair, Minister of Agriculture, who offered the prayer. A moment of doubt overwhelmed her as she recalled the stunned looks on Dikran’s and the others’ faces when they noticed the horn’s absence.

Had it really been intentional that the horn not be here for Renewal, or was this a surprise to the Synod that Dikran had hastily covered up? They were certainly experts at cover-ups, as she well knew.

Malcolm interrupted her thoughts by returning with a cup of fruit punch.

“Thanks.” She gulped the drink down, her throat dry.

“What’s the matter? You look worried.”

She lowered her voice. “The sacred horn... do you really think it’s being cleaned? This seems an odd time to be doing a chore like that. We need the horn blown for Lothar to reset the cycles.”

Malcolm raised an eyebrow. “Are you calling Dikran a liar?”

Leena’s heart skipped, because it *was* Dikran’s veracity she questioned. Fortunately, she was saved from a response by her father’s arrival.

“Congratulations, my dear.” Cranby embraced Leena in a huge bear hug. He was a large man, and his crimson robe of office made him even more imposing.

“Thank you, Father.” Sliding back, she gazed at him with loving affection.

Gray sprinkled his blond hair, receding from a high forehead. Years of grief over the loss of his wife had dulled a set of blue eyes similar to her own. Clearly a pressing matter weighed heavily on his mind as he regarded her with an anxious expression.

“Have you heard from your brother?”

“He’s not here? I tried to contact him earlier, but communications to Amat were out. I can’t imagine what might have happened. He should have arrived by now.” Her stomach churned. It was unlike Bendyk to be so late.

Malcolm raised his hand. “I’ll go make inquiries. Amat is located at Seacrest Bay?” At Leena’s nod, he hastened away.

“He’s a fine young man.” Cranby eyed her carefully.

Leena lowered her lashes. “I’m still not sure about him, Father.”

His look grew stern. “You’ve achieved a great deal for a woman of twenty-five years, daughter. Now it’s time to think about your future.”

“I’ve just been admitted into the Caucus. My immediate future is here.” Her heart sank, knowing where this conversation was leading, but she tried to head him off regardless.

“Do you hope to be promoted to Docent, as do many of your peers?” Cranby pursed his lips. “I hadn’t known you to be so religiously inclined.”

Leena guarded her expression. Her father didn't know the true reason she'd joined the Caucus, and it was best he remain ignorant. Otherwise, he'd warn her against her course of action.

She didn't mean to stir up trouble but meant to uncover the truth about her religion's origins to quell the doubts in her heart. Leena wasn't the only one questioning the faith. The Truthsayers protested rule by the Synod. They demanded reforms, claiming Lothar was a false god created by the priests. The spate of recent weather disasters gave solidity to their words and shook the credibility of their religion.

The Synod proclaimed Lothar was angry at the people and punished them for their doubts, but Lothar was normally a god of compassion and mercy. There had to be some other reason for the climate changes on Xan, something only the Synod knew. That was another item of information she hoped to discover.

Her father shook his finger at her. "Mark my words, not another Beltane will pass with Malcolm and you unpledged. I shall speak to his father myself. It is still within my authority to troth you a husband, miss, and so I shall."

She lifted her chin. "I don't want a husband right now. I have too much to do in my new role."

"Nonsense, that's just an excuse. You dilly-dally too long, and this indecisiveness is unbecoming in a lady. You'll lose the young man if you don't snare him now."

"I'm not ready."

"You'll never be ready at your pace." He glowered at her. "No more arguments. The matter is settled."

Leena bit back a retort as the Minister of Justice bore down on them.

"Cranby, my old friend." Karayan slapped a hand on Cranby's shoulder, then vigorously shook both his hands as was the custom. "How good to see you again, and what a thrill to celebrate your lovely daughter's success." His pale grey eyes swung to Leena, expressing approval.

"I'm looking forward to serving the Synod." She smiled warmly. Karayan had always supported her father, even during his censure.

Karayan gave a slight bow. "You honor your family by your service." He tilted his head at Cranby. "I understand your son Bendyk is earning a name for himself as a missionary. We have word that requests are pouring in from the villages for his counsel. If he keeps going at this pace, I see him being appointed soon as a Docent. Where is the young man?" Karayan glanced around. "I thought he was supposed to join us today."

"Bendyk never got in. I called Amat earlier but couldn't get through." Leena adjusted her headdress, which had begun to tilt. The heavy piece made her temples ache. When could she get away to change into more comfortable clothes? Probably not until this reception was over.

Karayan's eyes widened. "Did you say Bendyk was in Amat? We've just received word that there's been a terrible disaster at Seacrest Bay. A tsunami struck last night. There have been casualties, and a rescue effort is underway. I'm uncertain of the details."

"Dear Lord." Leena's knees quivered. "Bendyk was supposed to leave last night. I hope he made it out."

Karayan laid a hand on her arm. "The Synod has called an emergency meeting to deal with the tragedy. Come with me."

She gave her father a brief kiss and hurried after Karayan. Muttering a quick prayer that her brother would be found safe and unharmed, she followed Karayan through the maze-like

corridors of the Palisades complex.

CHAPTER TWO

The night before, Bendyk headed for the town council meeting in Amat. He hoped it wouldn't take long. He'd planned to leave earlier to make the Renewal ceremony at the Palisades, but as dusk rapidly approached, it didn't seem his departure would occur anytime soon.

Wellis, the village priest, had requested his presence. Now, as he sat across from the older man in the living room of his oceanfront bungalow, Bendyk fingered the medallion hanging from his neck.

"I fail to understand your meaning when you say people are straying from the Faith." He squared his shoulders. "The turnout at the service this morning was phenomenal."

"That's because the villeins are putting on a pretense of piety for your benefit." Wellis wagged his finger. "They're afraid you'll report to the Docent about their indiscretions."

Pursing his lips, Wellis felt he should know his flock better than any representative from the central authority, such as Bendyk Worthington-Jax. He'd sent for help, realizing the situation could get out of control. After all, on whose head would the wrath of Lothar fall if he failed? His own, of course. But the golden-haired missionary, despite his zeal, had found nothing amiss.

It wasn't Bendyk's fault, considering how fearful the villeins were about retribution. The blasphemous talk circulating throughout the town was bound to bring dire repercussions. Wellis had hoped Bendyk would inspire a renewal of faith and, indeed, the service he'd conducted this morning had been exemplary. Perhaps his visit had done some good after all.

Bendyk faced him across a table laden with fresh fruit and nuts. The young man quirked an eyebrow. "Don't forget it's tithing time. The tax collector is here, even in the midst of Renewal celebrations. That's enough cause for heightened tension."

Wellis gave him a weary smile. "Not in this case. We've been fortunate to have the same agent each year. She counts in our favor and exacts a toll of ten percent on less the amount actually produced."

Bendyk's eyes darkened to a shade of indigo. "You mean this agent reports an inaccurate count? Why, that's a criminal offense."

Wellis leaned back in his chair, relishing the warm salty breeze blowing in from the open windows. His bungalow, a short distance from the ocean, stood on stilts like the rest of the houses by the shore. Further inland, other dwellings rose along a gentle slope that footed the Jerrise mountain range.

His congregation enjoyed a simple life living off the bounty of the sea and their industries of ropemaking and small boat construction. No one had enough revenue to fuel an investigation, so he didn't see any harm in telling Bendyk of the tax agent's favoritism.

"It appeases people," he said with a shrug. "There's enough grumbling about laws that don't take into account the needs of individual districts."

Bendyk scraped a hand through his short, wavy hair. "That's not true. The Docents are responsible for making adjustments. If they rule unfairly, you can appeal to the Candor."

"The Candors are concerned mainly with their own wealth. Things have gotten out of

hand.”

Bendyk shot to his feet. “My father is a Candor. He’s always judged his people fairly and considered their needs.”

“Cranby is an exception.” Wellis regarded him with shrewd eyes. “Do you deny that dissatisfaction with the Synod’s power is growing? Aren’t your services widely in demand in an attempt by local priests, like myself, to stem this tide of disloyalty?”

“It is the work of the Truthsayers.” Bendyk’s jaw clenched. “They seek to undermine the Faith and establish anarchy in its place.”

Footsteps sloshed outside, and Wellis held up a hand to silence his guest. “Hush, here comes the village council. I have summoned them to hear your advice. Go easy, young man. Your fiery tongue does you well in sermons but not in debate.”

At his signal, Bendyk hastened to open the door. Five older men, the village leaders, shuffled in. To his surprise, a young woman accompanied them. Possessing a willowy frame, she moved with the gracefulness of a forest *lyier*.

Bendyk’s surprised gaze swept from her pretty face to the short cropped black hair that dipped inward toward her chin. The thrust of her jaw hinted at a stubborn streak, and her unorthodox style of dress confirmed it. Shocked, Bendyk peered at the skintight breeches she wore and the dark green sweater with its revealing neckline.

“I hope I meet with your approval,” she said in a sarcastic tone as he continued his blatant stare.

Startled, Bendyk’s gaze flew up to meet hers. Blazing amber eyes, like two torchlights in the dark, glared back at him.

“I’m Bendyk Worthington-Jax, representative of the Saballic Order of Missioners.” He offered her a slight bow.

The woman stretched out a hand. “I’m Swill Braddock.”

They exchanged a firm handshake. Her palm was small, fitting into his larger hand like a ball into a catcher’s mitt. He liked the weight and warmth of her.

“Swill?” He shot her a questioning glance.

“You got a problem with that?” Her brows furrowed in anger.

Clearly this woman took any remark as a challenge. Bendyk was amused. He’d never met anyone as bold and brazen as she before.

“What are you doing here? Surely you’re not on the town council.” She didn’t fit in with the other robed members with their dignified miens and conservative dress.

“I’m the tax agent. It’s time for the tithing count.”

“You’re the one? I hear your counts are favorable to the villeins.”

She cocked her head. “Perhaps.”

His eyes fired righteously. “Dishonesty is a sin.”

“It all depends on who’s in the know.” Smiling sweetly, she brushed past him and joined the others, who were already seated around Wellis’s oval table.

“Come Bendyk, sit down,” said Wellis.

“Why are your feet all wet?” He gestured toward the trail of water the visitors had left from the door to the table.

“The tide is washing in,” spoke one white-haired gentleman. “It’s higher than normal tonight.”

“Aye,” said another. “I don’t remember it coming up this far in recent years.”

“Never mind.” Wellis indicated Bendyk. “Our guest has to leave for the Palisades soon,

so let's begin our discussion. We asked for Brother Bendyk to serve our village because we've heard rumblings of discontent lately. During his sojourn here, he noticed no such problem. Of course the villeins are afraid of incurring retribution should they loosen their tongues."

"Indeed." An older woman leaned forward. "Ever since the hurricane that devastated the Rockmount Islands and the tornado on the Ruas Plains before that, people have been questioning Lothar's actions. Why would our Lord bring such retribution on his people? He's always been gracious and merciful. Why does he deal us such catastrophic blows now?"

"It is because of this Truthsayer movement." Bendyk hunched forward in his seat. "Those who protest rule by the Synod would leave nothing but chaos in its place. Our laws were put here for a reason, and we must abide by them to please Lothar. Health care, education, and housing are provided for everyone. I don't understand what the Truthsayers want instead."

"They want freedom to control their destiny," spoke Swill in a low tone.

All eyes swiveled in her direction, and Bendyk became aware of the seductive pull of her presence. She sat across the table from him, but every nerve in his body stood at attention when she directed her gaze at him. Those eyes, round as dew drops, could draw a man into their depths without any effort, and Bendyk found himself eager for her next word.

"People don't like having no choice over where they can live. If someone wants to move from one village to another, he has to submit an application. Populations are strictly regulated. It's unfair, and people are tired of having a central authority making these decisions for them."

"There is a reason for every law." Bendyk tapped his finger on the table. "A town's population is limited so it doesn't overgrow the needs of its citizens. The cities of old were rife with problems: poverty, crime, lack of sanitation. Lothar placed limits on a town's populace for that very reason.

"In smaller villages, people are loyal to each other. They care about what happens to their neighbor. In large cities, no one has any concern for what's going on next door. I believe the ruling is a wise one. These Truthsayers are just trying to stir up trouble any way they can."

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "And what do you know of their beliefs anyway? What right do you have to report a false count on the tithe? I should turn you in for your dishonesty."

"Be my guest." She lifted her chin, her eyes defiant. "The people I serve are happy because I let them keep more of their own produce. Why give it to a central authority that doesn't even care what happens here?"

"You speak blasphemy." Bendyk slammed his fist on the table. A strange banging echo caught his attention, only it wasn't an echo. It was a rhythmic thump-thump that sounded from somewhere below the house.

"What's that?" One of the elder councilwomen half-rose from her seat.

Wellis's face darkened. "It must be the empty oil drums banging together beneath the foundation. That means the water has risen to nearly the level of the steps outside. That's not good. We'd better take a look to see what's happening."

Bendyk hastened to the outer porch, not wishing to get too close to the woman named Swill. What an unusual name. But then it went along with her strange manner of dress, short cropped hair, and abrupt manner. He didn't know what to make of her. Clearly she was a rebellious sort, yet he found her oddly attractive. He was aware when she came outside; he could almost feel her hot breath wafting on his neck. He didn't glance in her direction, merely kept his gaze turned out to sea.

What he saw made his heart leap in alarm.

It was dusk, and the lights from town lit up the heavens with a soft golden glow. Out to

sea, he could still discern the outline where the horizon met the darkened sky, but it was the water by the shore that disturbed him. It had receded, exposing the seabed. Several beachgoers who'd been observing the sunset rushed out to delightedly pluck wet seashells from the newly exposed sand.

"What in the world?" Bendyk had never seen a phenomenon like this and didn't know what to make of it.

Behind him, Wellis sucked in a breath. "Dear Lord. A big sea is coming. We must flee!"

Swill swung her wide gaze on him. "Do we have time to reach our riders?"

"We can try." The priest waved them on.

Water sloshed about their legs as they rushed toward their vehicles only to find them jammed together by the latest wave. With cries of dismay, the group turned as one, ran across the yard of the nearest house, and charged inland away from the rising water.

Bendyk's heart raced as he charged toward higher ground. A dull rumble sounded, like a distant train. It grew into a monstrous roar. Glancing over his shoulder was a mistake. He nearly stumbled at the sight.

An incoming wall of water rushed toward the village center. It must have been easily over six feet tall.

Seconds later, the wave crashed into town with brutal force. Brilliant blue-white sparks marked the impact as the wave shorted out electrical circuits. Loud explosions accompanied the destruction of buildings.

A brief greenish arc flashed through the sky. Bendyk's jaw dropped. That meant the wave had reached the power plant at the south end of the bay. Sure enough, the entire area plunged into darkness. But it wasn't so dark that Bendyk couldn't make out the terrifying wall of water surging in his direction.

Loud booms announced the sound of walls being crushed and buildings being demolished as the wave progressed. Swill screamed as the tower of water descended upon them.

The wave lifted Bendyk and swept him inland. He submerged, and his pants leg caught on a piece of debris. Holding his breath, he tugged with a desperate edge until he broke free.

He kicked to the surface and gasped for breath. Fallen beams, broken furniture, and heavy appliances rushed past, bumping into him and threatening to drag him under again.

He heaved himself onto a wood plank that floated past as a terrible sucking noise reached his ears. His heart pounded. The water would be returning to its home, taking everything with it out to sea.

People fought the current along with the swirling debris. Some rode on the tops of their houses; others clung to treetops. Some people swam, but everyone screamed in terror.

A body swept past, and Bendyk's gut lurched in sudden recognition. Letting go of the plank, he swam with the current, grabbing Swill by the shoulder and flipping her over to raise her face out of the water. It was difficult to support her while they were both swept along, but he managed to keep both their heads up. She had a gash on her temple, but she was breathing, and that was all that counted.

As the water ebbed back to shore, his feet touched solid ground. Bracing his legs against the remains of a stone wall, he prevented them both from being pulled out to sea. He spotted one of the town leaders wedged with an arm trapped under a fallen tree. Of the other council members, he saw none.

Collapsed cottages, downed wires, concrete rubble, and smashed vehicles collected near the shore. After the sea subsided, people lucky enough to have survived began to stir and call

out. Frantic parents searched for their children. Children wept for their missing parents. Husbands and wives sought absent spouses, and the first rescue efforts began.

Not one residence remained standing. The center of town yawned as an empty, dark hollow. In the ocean, heads bobbed in the heaving water as those swept out to sea struggled to stay afloat.

Bendyk laid Swill on the ground and examined her wound. As he touched her skin, her eyelids fluttered open, and she gave a soft moan.

“Do not move,” he told her, annoyed with himself for noticing how her sodden clothes clung to her body. He knelt at her side, ignoring the discomfort of his own wet shirt and trousers. “You’ve been injured. How bad does your head hurt?”

She stared at him, her amber eyes wide. “I’m dizzy. What happened to the others?”

“The tsunami demolished everything. I saw only one member of the council. I don’t know if anyone else survived who was in that meeting. I don’t understand.” He shook his head. “This region hasn’t had waves like this in hundreds of years. It must be a sign of Lothar’s wrath. Wellis admitted the people were harboring doubts. This must be Lothar’s retribution.”

Sighing, he surveyed the sorry scene about him as people wailed for missing relatives and their destroyed homes.

“Perhaps as a result of this tragedy, the villeins will confess their sins and give themselves to the Lord.”

Swill brushed his hand off and sat, her limbs trembling. “Is that all you can think about? Your stupid religion? People here need help. Where are the healers? We need lights. No one can see anything.”

A cool breeze raised the hairs on his arms. “We’ll get chilled in these wet clothes. We can’t help anyone in this condition. We should find shelter.”

“We need to help these people.” Swill attempted to rise but stumbled and would have fallen if not for his intervention. She swatted him away. “I can manage by myself, thank you.”

“I think not.” He gripped her around the waist. Rather than protesting, she leaned against him.

Bendyk considered how long it would take for word to reach the outside world about what had happened. For now, he had no way to contact Leena. She’d be worried when news of the tsunami reached her.

But even if he could find a means of transportation, he’d choose to stay. The survivors might wish to express their gratitude to Lothar, and Bendyk knew he should be the one to lead them in prayer.

Holding onto Swill’s slim waistline, he hoped he could convince her to join them.

CHAPTER THREE

Kolb and Voshkie were engaged in a heated argument when Leena entered the meeting chamber of the Synod.

“We need to assemble an emergency response team,” Kolb insisted.

As Minister of Health, the lean, thin-faced gentleman was responsible for the worldwide network of trained healers. While Lothar’s lozenge, which everyone swallowed each year at the festival of Mystic, would prevent disease, injuries still required the care of skilled personnel.

“The expense would not justify such as alarming action.” Voshkie, in charge of commerce, constantly railed against people’s demands for a broader choice of consumer goods.

In the short time she’d been there, Leena had assessed the attitudes of most Synod members, and Voshkie’s dislike of materialism was well known. The black-haired woman led an austere life, setting an example for those who wished to emulate her.

In contrast, Sirvat, in charge of the Treasury and the other prominent woman on the Synod, dressed with more attention to detail. Sirvat wore her thin red hair coiffed beneath veils and hats. Her manner of dress was stylish, but her reed-like figure did nothing for her womanliness. Her unsmiling mouth and the permanent frown on her face bespoke of her frustration as a spinster of fifty-two years.

Sirvat’s green eyes, pale as a frozen sea, flickered briefly in Leena’s direction. Seats were arranged around a central table in concentric circles. The members of the Synod had the first tier of seats, directly against the table. Behind them were the aide corps. Leena found a seat next to Karole and sat as unobtrusively as possible.

“I trust you are discussing the tsunami at Amat,” said Karayan, settling his robes as he took his chair. “Missionary Bendyk was last known to be at that location. Has anyone heard from him or have news of survivors?”

“Communications have not yet been established,” said Lendork, Minister of Communications. “In any event, that’s not why we are gathered here.”

“Ah, yes.” Karayan’s gaze lit. “We have a much more pressing matter that needs our attention.”

With those words, all eyes turned to Dikran, who sat silently at the head of the table. Nodding for the door to be shut, Dikran spent a few moments in silence, peering at each one of them, including the new members of the Caucus.

“We have a grave matter before us.” Despite his age, Dikran’s voice retained its forcefulness like when he was giving a sermon. “The sacred horn is missing.”

The Caucus gasped in unison.

From the looks exchanged among the Synod, it appeared as though they already knew, Leena surmised.

“I’d claimed it had been taken out for cleansing to avoid panic.” Dikran leaned forward. “Sooner or later, questions will be raised. We must find the horn as soon as possible.”

“But what happened to it? Where is it?” Zeroun’s dark brows drew together. “This whole matter is an abomination.”

Dikran raised a hand for patience. “No one has access to the sacred closet,” he said, referring to the small chamber in which the horn was kept. “Except for us. That can mean only one thing as far as I am concerned.” He paused, eyeing each one of his ministers. “One of *you* has stolen the horn.”

Cries of outrage sounded throughout the room. Leena glanced with fright at Karole. By all that was holy! One of the Synod had taken the horn? But why?

Her doubts rushed back, and she stared at Dikran, her mouth hanging open, waiting to hear what he would say next.

“This is absurd.” Karayan jabbed a finger in the air. “You are accusing one of us of being a thief?”

Dikran nodded solemnly. “I see no alternative. Only the fourteen of you plus myself have access to the Inner Sanctum. The horn must be returned.”

Dear deity, Leena thought. What would happen if it was not found? Truly the trumpet was insufficient to awaken Lothar. He needed the special frequency of the sacred horn. And if he did not awaken, their climactic cycles would not reset.

Rains would not come during the winter. And what of the lozenge? Lothar provided it every year at Mystic. If they didn’t partake of his bounty, sickness could devastate the land.

“We are now in the final cycle of the year,” Dikran reminded them. Lothar timed his renewal to begin in Fearn, the winter season. “If we do not find the horn within the next three months, other disasters of even greater magnitude will occur. It must be found. Unless, of course, one of you wishes to return it immediately.

“If you do not wish your identity to be known, place it in the sacred closet when no one is about. Further questions will not be asked. But if the horn isn’t recovered by this time tomorrow, we will launch a thorough investigation.” He paused. “I assure you, every piece of information that was ever known about you will be uncovered.”

Silence descended upon the room like a tomb while Leena’s mind reeled with possibilities. No horn to awaken Lothar? No resetting of the weather cycles to keep their climate on a steady course? No lozenge to prevent ill health?

Surely disaster would befall them.

Dikran dismissed the gathering with instructions that they should reconvene in the same place at the same time the following day if the horn had not been returned. Meanwhile, the Caucus was to assume their duties immediately.

To Leena’s disappointment, she had been assigned to Zeroun, Minister of Religion. She had hoped she would be with Karayan since he was her father’s friend, but the artifacts she had been studying were the property of the religious order. It was logical she should be assigned to the Department of Religion.

She trailed Zeroun to his offices in another section of the Palisades. Each department had its own wing. Civilians performed the clerical functions. By being in the religious hierarchy, Leena became a personal aide to Zeroun. With the privileges accorded to her status, she could attend his private meetings, sit in on Synod councils, and carry out his direct orders.

Marching into his office, he sat behind his desk chair while he indicated for her to take a seat opposite. His close-set ebony eyes pierced her like an avenging angel. Dark thick-slashed eyebrows converged into a frown as he stared at her sternly and reviewed her duties.

His thin compressed lips and hawk-like nose completed the image of a man who would let nothing stand in the way of his goals. Even the puffs of black hair rising up behind his ears and flanking his receding hairline proclaimed his staunch aggressiveness. Disciplining his body

as well as his soul, Zeroun maintained an athletic figure, an accomplishment for a man of sixty-four years.

Leena trembled in her seat as she listened. She wanted to ask him what he had done with the artifact he had confiscated from her but was afraid to mention it for fear of being disciplined. Zeroun was vehement in his faith, and he allowed for no dissension. Those who talked against the faith were even known to have disappeared, if not being outright banished to the pagan Black Lands.

Of his role in her father's censure, she was unclear. Cranby had never talked much about the incident, but she knew it had greatly disturbed him. Rather than face banishment, as would have been the punishment for one of his station, he had chosen to renounce his words and submit to a year of penance as was his due. Knowing her own background was less than exemplary, Leena scurried to obey Zeroun's commands.

It was a relief to retire to the dormitory-like quarters she shared with the other female initiates at the end of the day. They ate their evening meal in the dining commons and then were free for the rest of the evening. Everyone was eager to discuss recent events, and so the time passed quickly.

Leena's father came by and gave her the good news that Bendyk had contacted him and was safe and would be arriving within the next forty-eight hours, having made plans to take the first transport out. In the meantime, he was busy helping with rescue efforts in the village.

Leena tried to discuss the matter of the missing horn with her father, feeling she could confide in him if no one else, but Cranby didn't seem to want to hear her news. He waved his hand, brushing off her report as though it were nothing more significant than a schoolgirl's tale.

"I would advise you to keep your ears open and your mouth closed. If you do as you are told," Cranby said, his eyes skittering away, "your efforts will be rewarded."

Karayan was more sympathetic, listening to her fears and worries and reflecting them with his own. "Indeed, this is a grave matter," he told her when they encountered each other in the corridor the next morning. His handsome solid features brought her a measure of comfort as he gazed at her with an open friendly expression. "Dikran checked this morning, and the horn still is not in its proper place. I'm going to recommend that you be allowed to investigate."

"Me?" Leena gaped at him, open-mouthed.

He laid a hand on her shoulder and smiled. "You're the only one among us who has knowledge of these ancient artifacts. With your dedication and energy, you're the perfect choice to lead an investigation. The new members of the Caucus can aid you."

Leena stared at him. A stickler for propriety, Karayan always presented a well-groomed appearance, from his carefully-styled brown hair to his manicured fingernails to his personally-tailored frock coats and trousers.

As Minister of Justice, he supervised the higher courts led by the Candors with the same enthusiasm that he exhibited for his favorite hobby of art collecting. Leena was impressed by his air of quiet confidence. She had visited his estate and knew he managed his affairs with the same meticulous detail as his own appearance. At fifty-eight years, Karayan was one of the youngest members of the Synod, and also one of the most energetic. Leena glanced down, and her eye caught on the large gold pinkie ring on his left finger.

"I shall do my best to follow out any instructions I am given," she murmured, aware of her father's admonition.

Dear deity, how can I be in charge of finding the horn? Dikran and the others won't agree. I have no status here, no power. I'm just a simple aide. Why would they choose me?

As Minister of Justice, Karayan should be in charge of any investigation. But when the Synod and the Caucus met later, Dikran had his own opinion.

“The thief is one of us.” The older man’s voice shook with distress as he glared at his colleagues. “Whoever leads this investigation must check into our backgrounds.”

“Exactly.” Karayan rose and brushed off his robe. “This requires a two-pronged effort. We need someone here at the Palisades to investigate each one of us, but we also require another party to search for the missing horn. It is my recommendation that Leena Worthington-Jax be put in charge of this investigation. Her life’s work has been to study the relics of our past.”

All eyes turned in her direction, and Leena felt like sinking through the floor.

Karayan continued. “Her brother Bendyk is a missionary with an exemplary track record. We need an objective person to check into our backgrounds while Leena pursues the missing horn. Why not select Bendyk to work with his sister?”

The Synod voted, and Leena and Bendyk were chosen to work together. They’d each get a letter authorizing them to seek whatever help or counsel they’d need.

Stunned by the responsibility assigned her, Leena strode down the hallway later barely aware of her surroundings when she heard her name mentioned. She flattened herself against the wall beside a partially open door to eavesdrop.

“How can you let Leena take charge of such an important matter?” Zeroun demanded. “She’s a danger to our faith. We only invited her to join the Caucus so we could keep an eye on her.”

Leena gasped. Was this true?

“She has the background to verify the horn’s authenticity,” replied a muffled male voice. “As an expert on the carvings left by the Apostles, she’s familiar with the symbols etched onto the horn’s surface. No one else has the equivalent expertise.”

“I suppose you’re right. The Truthsayers may try to prevent her from recovering the horn. They’d like nothing more than to destroy our credibility. It would serve their purpose if the holy relic was never found.”

“Perhaps they stole it in the first place.”

“Maybe Leena is one of them. She asks too many questions. Let’s keep a sharp watch on her.”

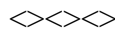
A rustling noise indicated the speakers were about to depart. Leena slipped inside the next open doorway, waiting until she heard their footsteps pass.

Trembling at what she’d overheard, she considered the repercussions. Zeroun didn’t trust her, yet she came under his authority as a member of the Caucus.

Not anymore, she reminded herself. He was subject to her scrutiny same as the others.

His words about the Truthsayers gave her pause. Maybe they *were* involved in the theft. They claimed Lothar was a false god the priests had created to bolster their power. Without the horn being blown, Lothar would not reset the climactic cycles. Disaster would ensue. She envisioned a society torn by anarchy. Her world must not come to that. She had to find the horn, but the awesome responsibility made her quiver with dread.

“Bendyk, come quick,” she whispered. She needed her brother to start the investigation, for who else could she confide in?



Hours later, Bendyk finally arrived. After he exchanged greetings with their father and

Karayan and filled them in on the latest news, he retired with Leena to a private corner of the dining commons.

“Many people were lost in the tsunami.” Dark circles showed under his eyes. “I did what I could to help, but there is still much more to be done. At least communication has been restored.”

“I’m just so glad you’re here.” Leena basked in the warmth his presence brought her before informing him of their recent assignment.

He stiffened. “What? The sacred horn is missing?”

“Hush! Lower your voice.”

“What do you mean, I have to check into the backgrounds of the Synod members?”

Bendyk leaned forward. “Why me?”

Leena gave a harsh laugh. “That’s what I’ve been asking myself. You’re not attached to the Synod. You can pursue this with an objective mind.”

His blond eyebrows furrowed. “I’ll have to examine their individual records, background checks, financial records. I can’t do it alone.” He tilted his head. “When I was in Amat, I encountered a local tax agent, a woman named Swill Braddock. She’s supposed to be a whiz at finances. Maybe I could request her for my assistant.”

Leena noticed the gleam in his eyes. If she didn’t know better, she thought her brother looked forward to seeing this woman again.

“And you met her how?”

“She helped out after the disaster. She’s a forceful woman who knows how to get a job done and yet can sympathize with the common folk. I hope she’ll agree. Did I mention she can be very opinionated?”

Leena grinned, eager to meet this paragon. “We have a meeting with the Synod to discuss strategy. You can mention bringing her into the fold at that time.”

At their next gathering, the Minister of State addressed Leena after a round of subdued greetings.

“You’ll need protection,” the seventy-year-old, silver-haired gentleman told her. “The Truthsayers may try to stop you from recovering the horn, or your search could take you into dangerous territory. Our representatives may not always be available to render aid. I know a man who’s perfect for the job if he’ll agree.”

Magar supervised relations among the different districts. His twinkly blue eyes and ready smile engaged her trust. Responsible for entertaining visiting dignitaries, he made his preference clear for fine wines and dining by his portly figure and rolling gait. A casual dresser, Magar favored comfort over formality. He presented quite the contrast to Karayan, who always dressed in a perfunctory manner.

Leena wondered who Magar meant to ask to accompany her on what could be a perilous journey. She wasn’t aware of anyone who could defend her in the manner Magar intended. Her people were a peaceful race. Few had experience in combat or aggression, although it seemed the Truthsayers leaned in that direction.

“Who is this man?” She’d prefer going with someone she knew. It would make for a less awkward situation.

“His name is Taurin Rey Niris.” Magar scratched his arm. “He has the experience you’ll need.”

“Where can we find him?” Karayan cast her a protective glance.

Leena was grateful for his presence. It was the closest thing to having her father there.

She wished Cranby would attend these meetings, but she'd seen his diffident manner around the members of the Synod and despised his cowardice. He humbled himself before them, and it only served to humiliate her family.

She wondered again why she and Bendyk had been chosen to find the horn as tendrils of dread tickled her spine.

"I'll provide that information later." Magar's voice hardened. "Leena, have you thought about where to begin your investigation?"

Leena understood that he didn't want the others inquiring too deeply into the background of this man named Taurin and wondered why. Who was the fellow? Where did he come from? Where would she have to go to ask for his assistance?

Sirvat spoke up. "If the horn has been stolen, it's very likely passed through Grotus's hands."

Leena's eyes widened. Grotus was a renowned dealer of stolen artifacts. Suspected to have a worldwide network of smugglers, he'd evaded prosecution so far to the annoyance of the authorities. If someone had stolen the horn for money, it would very likely go to Grotus first. He seemed as good a place as any to start.

She shrugged. "Very well, I will seek out the help of this Taurin Rey Niris, and then we'll travel together to see Grotus." She'd need the man's protection if what she had heard was true, that Grotus lived on an isolated island fortified with defenses.

She had no idea how she would get herself admitted to see him, let alone why he would share information with her. But she would worry about that later. First, she'd better see if this Taurin fellow was willing to help her. She agreed that it could be dangerous for her to travel alone. The Truthsayers posed an ever present threat, and who knew what other peril would find her?

As she and her brother said their goodbyes—he on his way to contact Swill, and Leena en route to find Taurin—her brother regarded her solemnly.

"I am less than thrilled about you traveling the globe with a stranger." He stroked his jaw while eyeing her.

"We don't know if he'll agree to help. If he refuses, I'll call you, and we'll revise our plans." She lifted her eyebrows. "And you'll have to let me know if this tax agent agrees to work with us. It would be useful to have a financial expert on our side."

Bendyk nodded. "Have you thought about a motive?"

"Maybe one of the Synod needs money. You'll find out when you check their records. Otherwise, I could ask Father if he has any ideas." After so many years in the service of Sabal, her father might possess knowledge of priestly secrets that could prove useful.

"I don't think we should tell him what we're doing." Bendyk's mouth turned down. "Promise me, you'll call as soon as you make contact with this man Taurin."

"Of course. I'll let you know what happens."

"If he agrees to your proposal, you must not travel with him in sin."

Her breath hitched. "What do you mean?"

"Traveling alone with a strange man, Sister. Have you no notion of the harm that would befall your reputation?"

Leena laughed. "We have no such strictures in our society."

His face pinched. "This is not Beltane, when coupling is encouraged and trial marriages take place. If you are allowed such freedom, your future plans may be jeopardized."

"Oh," she said, catching his drift. "You mean Malcolm? He need know nothing about

this.”

“And what if he finds out? Do you think he would take it lightly that you were traveling around the country with an unattached male?”

“If he hears my reasons, he’ll understand. At any rate, he’s not supposed to know anything about this mission.”

Bendyk glowered at her. “Let’s hope your suitor doesn’t learn about it from anyone else. Call me the minute you and Rey Niris reach an agreement.”

“*If* we reach an agreement.”

His expression turned sly. “I shall see to it that you behave with propriety. Leave the matter to me.”

Her brother could be a pompous ass sometimes, Leena thought. Nonetheless, his words filled her with misgivings. Just what did Bendyk have up his sleeve?

CHAPTER FOUR

Leena drove her sleek red rider along a rural road flanked by rolling green fields and wooded hillsides. Ospreys swooped and soared over a broad stretch of brown stubble, the remains of a recent grain harvest. Their graceful bodies were stark white against the muted earth tones.

The Blenheim region was one of the most fertile in Celia, the province that housed the Palisades in its central hub. This area supplied a bounty of fresh produce, milk, and cheeses savored around the globe. Magar's estate was close by, his family being one of the largest landholders in the area. Leena hadn't realized Taurin resided in the same locale and was surprised Magar neglected to mention it.

Glancing at the paper with his written directions on the seat beside her, she noted that the turn-off to Taurin's place should be coming up ahead. Sure enough, it was just around the next bend. She followed an oak-lined private road that ended in a circular driveway. Stopping her rider with a squeal of brakes, she shifted gears and turned off the ignition.

An attractive, tidy house faced her, and beyond it were cultivated fields. Was Taurin a farmer, and if so, what did he raise? Her curiosity climbed a notch as she examined his home.

A trimmed yard spread out in front like a brown-tinged carpet, the grass obviously too dry. Bordering the foundation of the house was a rounded evergreen hedge. A short flight of steps led up to a wraparound porch on which sat a couple of cushioned lounge chairs, a small table, and various potted plants.

The one-story dwelling was painted pastel blue with white shutters edged in a scallop design, giving Leena an impression of neatness and simplicity which appealed to her the way a home-cooked meal would appeal to a frequent traveler.

The quiet, still exterior of the house greeted her as she emerged from her vehicle. Unseasonably warm autumn air struck her like a blast from a furnace. Glad that her gown was made of a lightweight silk, she climbed the few steps to the portico.

No one responded to her loud knocking.

Buggers, Taurin must have gone out. The driveway held no other vehicles besides her own.

Taking an appreciative sniff of the rich, earthy scent coming from the freshly-plowed fields, she was startled at a sweet fragrance that drifted into her nostrils. Following her nose, she trailed around to the rear of the house to stare at row after row of brilliantly-colored flowers.

Taurin Rey Niris grew flowers? She pictured a rural farmhand and couldn't conceive of him protecting her from danger. The thought conjured laughter from her throat.

This hadn't been a good summer for farmers with the hot and dry weather, but Taurin looked to have done well. Was the difficult climate a result of Lothar's wrath at his people's unfaithfulness, as the Arch Nome proclaimed, or could it be another sign that something was deeply wrong on her world?

Squinting in the bright sunlight, she decided to return to the house before her shoes became encrusted with dirt. The shade of the porch beckoned to her, so she climbed the steps,

approaching a back door.

A glimpse in a window showed her that the small gold circlet covering her head had become tilted. She straightened it along with the attached blue veil that matched her elegant gown. She wore her hair loose, preferring a freer style in defiance of propriety, which demanded that unwed females fix their hair in a modest upsweep.

Beyond her reflection, Leena' gaze fell on a pile of books visible through the window. She could just make out the titles. Her curiosity piqued at noting they were archeological texts.

Disregarding her sense of caution, she pressed her nose against the pane to get a closer view. She surveyed a broad tile counter holding woven baskets with yellow onions, polished red pomes, potatoes, and green stiglers. The baskets were arranged in rows like the flower beds outside. Not a dirty dish was in sight. Was Taurin so tidy, or did he have a housekeeper? Even his kitchen utensils hung with an eye to precision.

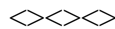
Then again, what made her think he lived alone? She'd gotten that impression from Magar, but maybe it was wrong. And if not, what kind of man would live in isolation, raising flowers and studying archeology texts?

She strolled to another window to search for more clues as to the man's puzzling nature. She spied a living area, a cozy room with a stone fireplace and couches you could sink into and—what were those—drawings? Yes, it appeared as though Taurin was working on something. An easel stood in a corner.

So now she had a flower farmer with aspirations of becoming an artist. But wait, those figures on his sketch struck a familiar chord.

She stepped to the side, and her ankle banged against a solid object that crashed to the ground. Dear deity, she hadn't seen the flower pot. Bending her knees, she gathered the broken pieces from among the spilled dirt then heaped them in a pile. She straightened, flushing with guilt. Now Taurin would know for certain someone had been snooping around.

Brushing off her hands, she headed toward her rider, deciding she'd return later. In the meantime, she was thirsty and could use something to eat. On her way through the town, she'd noticed a pub. It would be a good place to get a snack while seeking information.



The dimly-lit interior of the pub was a welcome respite from the unusual heat of the late-afternoon sun. Leena stood just inside the doorway so her eyes could adjust. Straight ahead was a polished mahogany bar with gleaming brass trim. Glasses hung on racks overhead, and behind the bar were bottles and kegs in differing sizes.

The tantalizing smell of sautéed onions drifted into her nostrils from a dining room off to the right. A few of the tables were occupied. A young couple claimed one corner. They were fancily dressed as though they were visitors like herself. A family with three noisy children occupied another table. Roughly-dressed farmhands hunkered down at the far end, drinking ale and chatting in loud tones.

Leena strode to the bar to place her order.

"I'll have a glass of claret, and I'd like to see a menu, please."

The bartender, a large burly fellow with a shock of red hair, complied.

As he handed her the menu, Leena smiled sweetly at him.

"I'm looking for a man named Taurin Rey Niris. Would you know where I can find him? We have something urgent to discuss."

The bartender looked her over. His eyes widened when he noted her telltale gold circlet. He leaned forward with a conspiratorial grin.

“Rey Niris sits in a booth yonder.” He nodded at a dark corner. “Be cautious of that one, your honor.”

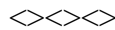
Leena stifled a smile. Obviously he didn’t know the proper form of address for a Caucus member. “Why should I be?”

The bartender’s face closed, and he withdrew to pour her a glass of red wine. “Just heed my words.”

Leena accepted the glass and a menu and sauntered toward the shadowed nook. With his back to a wall, the man facing forward was barely visible in the gloom. No wonder, she thought, clearing her throat as she approached.

Rey Niris was swathed totally in black, including a covering wrapped around his head. The cloth shaded his eyes so she couldn’t read his expression, but she sensed an air of tension about him. His broad shoulders hunched forward, as though he were ready to spring up at a moment’s notice. She could imagine his eyes darting toward the entrance, searching for the first hint of a threat. But what threat could there possibly be in this peaceful village?

If he turned out to be the man she sought, how could she convince him to assist her? He appeared much more formidable than she’d expected. Nearing his table, she muttered a quick prayer to Lothar for guidance.



Taurin noticed her the moment she stepped through the door. Backlit from the sunlight streaming in the entrance, the woman appeared a vision of loveliness. If Taurin were a religious man, he would have heard the music of angels accompanying her presence. A mass of golden hair floated about her head like waves of spun silk, framing a face with features as fine as porcelain. He couldn’t see the color of her eyes, only that they were large and round as she peered about the room. Her body, slender and curvaceous, was encased in an exquisitely-styled gown that was cinched at the waist and flared out in a skirt that drifted about her ankles with each graceful movement.

What was a woman of her obvious wealth doing here?

He watched while she exchanged words with the proprietor. Holding a glass of red wine, she approached in his direction. As she got closer, he realized she wore the gold circlet and blue veil that signified a Caucus disciple. Her eyes matched the royal blue of her gown, and he could only stare in awe as she stopped in front of him.

“Good and welfare, brother. I’m looking for a man named Taurin Rey Niris. Are you the one I seek?”

Her voice, sweet and musical, rang in his ears like a spirit calling him to worship. She inspired idolatry, he thought, gazing into her eyes.

He couldn’t let her know how strongly she affected him. “What is it you want?” he asked bluntly.

“I have a proposition to make.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Leena Worthington-Jax.”

“You’re in the religious order.”

“So I am. Look, are you Rey Niris or not?”

At his curt nod, she placed her glass on the table and took a seat. Taurin shrank further back into the shadows so she couldn't read his face. "I have no interest in anything you have to offer. Who sent you here?"

"Just listen, will you? I need your help, but this is something we should discuss in private." Her hands trembling, she took a sip of wine.

Was she afraid of him, or did she fear his refusal to help her? Taurin couldn't possibly imagine what she wanted or who had encouraged her to approach him. Necessity had forced him to keep a low profile since his arrival, and he'd succeeded in keeping mostly to himself except for occasional excursions into town. Why, then, was she here? What did she want? And who had put her on his trail?

Curiosity overwhelmed his better judgment. "There's a room upstairs. I'll ask the owner if we can use it."

Leena followed him toward the bar and was gratified when the owner agreed. Taurin stood aside so she could pass and precede him up the steps. She brushed against his arm, the contact eliciting a shiver. The man presented such a dark imposing figure. She could barely make out his face under the covering that swathed his head.

Upstairs, they entered a private dining room that reeked of stale liquor. Taurin had ordered a drink brought up from the bartender, and they waited in tense silence until it was served. Bright lamp lighting gave her a glimpse of his steel gray eyes and the shock of black hair that curled onto his forehead.

A forbidden thrill warmed her blood, but she pushed it aside to focus on her mission. His aquiline nose and firm jawline proclaimed him a man of character. Hopefully his sense of honor would prevail, and he'd agree to help her.

They took seats opposite from each other at a small round table. Taurin gulped down a few swallows of his ale.

"What I'm about to tell you must not leave this room." She leaned forward. "You will not reveal a word of it to anyone. Swear it upon your sacred honor."

He quirked an eyebrow. "You have succeeded in arousing my curiosity. I swear that whatever words we exchange here will go no further."

"Someone has stolen the sacred horn, and it has not been blown at this year's Renewal ceremony. We are facing disaster if it is not recovered by the month of Fearn. I have been assigned the task of retrieving the horn, and I need your help."

His gaze darkened. "Absolutely not."

"Magar told me to ask for your assistance."

"He did, did he?" Taurin didn't sound pleased.

"My quest is dangerous. The Truthsayers could be involved, and they might try to stop me from succeeding. Magar said you're the only one who could provide protection."

"What else did he say?" With a jerky movement, he brought his glass to his lips and finished his drink.

"Very little," Leena admitted.

Taurin scraped his chair back and stood. "I will not be involved in the affairs of your kind."

"What do you mean? Everyone will be affected if the horn isn't blown, even you. Your crops will wither and die, and your farmland will languish. If you assist me, you'll prevent that from happening."

"Sorry, you'll have to find someone else. I'm not your man."

She opened her mouth to make an angry retort, but a loud commotion erupted downstairs. Raised male voices yelled over a couple of heavy thuds. The sound of glass breaking reached her ears.

Without so much as a backward glance in her direction, Taurin thundered down the stairs into the dining room, where workmen were engaged in a brawl.

Leena gasped as Taurin threw himself into the fray. In a flurry of well-placed kicks and punches, he subdued the combatants within minutes. They lay sprawled around the room, staring at him in fear and wonder.

“Fighting is not to be tolerated,” he announced in an authoritative tone. “You will make reparations to the owner of this establishment. Is that understood?”

The men nodded their agreement, their expressions making it clear they feared a reprisal should they refuse. Clenching his fists at his side, Taurin hovered over one cowering miscreant, as though wishing the fellow would lash out at him so he could react in violence once again. A shudder racked his body as he straightened himself upright. Without another word, he stalked toward the door and departed.

“Wait!” Leena rushed outside, but when she emerged into the sunlight, he wasn’t anywhere in sight. She glanced at the riders parked along the curb. One was just pulling out, and as she tried to identify the driver, the vehicle roared away.

Cripes, that had to be Taurin. Now she’d have to make a repeat trip to his farm. Raking her fingers through her hair, she strode toward her rider, hoping he’d go directly home.

The violence she’d seen unleashed in the pub made her heart race and dread pit her stomach. It was truly a sign that people had strayed from the Faith. Hardly anyone ever fought on Xan, even when intoxicated. It wasn’t their way of life and defied Lothar’s teachings. Change was in the wind and it didn’t bode well for her world.

Taurin had jumped into the fight without so much as a second thought. That demonstration of his skills proved he could serve as her protector. The man was no gentle flower farmer.

Dressed in black with tension emanating from every pore, he appeared more like a warrior of storybook fame than a simple farmhand. His choice of occupations and hobbies intrigued her. The different sides of his personality didn’t mesh, making her wonder at his origins.

His farm occupied a corner of Magar’s huge estate.

Was he a tenant farmer, offering part of his produce to Magar as rental payment? Or was he a freeholder, owning the land himself? She couldn’t conceive of their relationship and resolved to question Magar about it at the first opportunity.

Her stomach grumbled, and her glance strayed to the timekeeper. No wonder! It was six o’clock, and she’d missed having an afternoon snack.

She detoured by a local market to purchase a loaf of crusty bread, a hunk of cheese, and some bottles of cider.

After putting her purchases into the back seat of her rider, she slid in front and turned on the ignition. A warning light glowed red on the dashboard, but Leena ignored it as she had on her way into the village. She’d take care of it tomorrow; today her business was too pressing.

She approached Taurin’s house, intending to plead her case again and leave. His windows were open, letting in a fresh breeze. With the sun’s descent, the air began to cool. Soon it would soon be dark. If the man agreed to help her, she’d return tomorrow to further their discussion.

She gathered her bundle of groceries and marched toward his front door. The door swung wide at her summons.

“What do you want?” Taurin scowled at her. “I thought I made it clear that I would not help you.”

He’d removed the cloth swathed about his crown, and a riot of black curls covered his head. Angry slate gray eyes slammed into hers with a fierceness that took her breath away.

“I brought some food. May I come in?” She used her sweetest, most beguiling tone of voice, but it didn’t budge this man. He stared at her unmovingly.

“Go away,” he said, about to shut the door in her face.

Leena wedged her foot inside. “We haven’t finished our discussion.”

“Indeed, we have.” The hunch of his shoulders told her he would resort to force to remove her if necessary.

“I told you Magar sent me,” she inserted hastily, hoping the name of his neighbor or landlord, whichever it was, would influence him.

Taurin hesitated, and Leena snatched the opening. “I see we have similar interests.” She nodded at his easel propped in a corner. “I’m an archeologist. My background and experience are why I’m the one assigned to find the sacred horn.”

“An archeologist?” He studied her with renewed interest. “Perhaps you should come in.” His voice softened ever so slightly. He stood aside while she brushed past, bundles in hand.

Leena’s breath came short. He presented such a dark, menacing aura that she trembled in his presence. But her mission was too important for her to be awestruck by the man. She needed his help, and she’d get it any way she could.

She aimed for his kitchen, where she plunked down her packages and unpacked the contents. “I brought bread, cheese, and cider. Would you like some, or have you already eaten?”

“I haven’t had the chance yet. Your repast is welcome.”

“You could get me some plates and a knife. I’ll cut this cheese into wedges.”

He complied, observing her as she busied herself with nervous fingers. The man totally unsettled her. She felt like an intruder in his home, and he undoubtedly resented her presence.

When she’d completed her preparations, she whirled around, her gown swishing at her ankles. She smiled bravely and offered Taurin a plate of bread and cheese.

Without uttering a word of thanks, he took it from her, helped himself to a mug of cider, and sat at the polished wooden table. She took a seat opposite and examined at him openly. His irises were a dark shade of smoky gray. Something greenish flickered inside them whenever a shadow crossed his face. Fascinated by the dancing lights in his eyes, she didn’t realize she was staring until he glanced away. His gaze roamed from her circlet to her wavy hair to her breasts and then lifted.

“Does your mate know you have come on this errand?” he asked with an implacable expression.

Leena quirked her eyebrows. “I have no mate.” Why would he ask such a thing?

“You’re a member of the religious order, meaning you follow strict directives. Your loose hair denotes your married status, although you don’t wear a ring.” He indicated her left hand.

“Oh, you wonder why I wear my hair loose? I prefer the style.” She gave a defiant grin then sobered. “My presence here in no way threatens my reputation. Bendyk, my brother, knows I have come. So do the members of the Synod.”

She took a bite of bread, wondering if he disapproved. She couldn’t read his face to

determine his opinion. The bread was crunchy on the outside, but soft inside, and it melted on her tongue.

“Tell me about the missing horn.” He popped a chunk of cheese in his mouth and chewed.

Leena’s skin prickled. She was alone in a house with a strange man whose violent nature had just blatantly been demonstrated. Magar wouldn’t have sent her if he didn’t trust the fellow, though. She squirmed in her seat, half-fascinated by Taurin and half-wary.

“The horn could only have been taken by someone with access to the Inner Sanctum. That points to one of the Synod members. My brother Bendyk is looking into their backgrounds. Financial strain could indicate a motive. Meanwhile, you and I can contact Grotus, a dealer in stolen artifacts, to see if the horn has passed through his hands. Or if he has it, we’ll offer a ransom.” She leveled her gaze on him. “I am prepared to give you a substantial sum for assisting me.”

Taurin took a large draught from his mug of cider. “I have not agreed to help you.”

He couldn’t conceive of this fragile female meeting with Grotus by herself. He had heard of the man, and Grotus was not the sort Leena should encounter alone, if she was even able to procure an audience with him.

“I have my farmlands to tend,” he said, denying the flame of desire that sprang up unbidden from his core. That wistful look in her sapphire eyes tugged at a soft spot in his heart.

“Your crops are not doing well. If the horn is not blown, how will your fields prosper?” Her lips pursed. “This drought will worsen, and your blooms will die. Nothing can grow in this heat spell. Do you not wish to see Lothar awoken from his rest?”

“Lothar be damned.” He knew her god was not responsible for the climactic cycles, at least not in a direct sense. He didn’t understand what was happening on this world, but it wasn’t his job to find out either. He just wanted to live in peace, undisturbed and unmolested. He had been through too much horror to seek violence again. This was his haven, and he had no desire to leave it.

“I’ll take my chances like everyone else.” His firm tone challenged her to refute him.

Leena’s fingers tightened around her mug handle. “Don’t you care that people are going to get sick and die if Lothar’s lozenge isn’t made available in the month of Mystic? People are facing sickness and hunger, not to mention these unnatural weather disasters causing havoc around the world.”

She leaned forward. “My brother Bendyk was just in Amat on Seacrest Bay. It was hit by a tsunami. Scores of people died, and many others were injured or lost their homes. Do you want this to continue? You’re being given a chance to help. I can’t do it alone.” Moisture flooded her eyes as a desperate edge entered her tone. “I trust Magar sent me to the right person.”

Taurin didn’t answer. Magar knew his talents very well. Indeed, he was the only person in this entire region who could protect this woman from trouble, but by involving him, Magar put them both at risk.

Damn, what was he to do? Shoving his chair back, Taurin stood and paced the kitchen, dashing a hand through his unruly dark hair. So she was an archeologist, was she? Maybe she could help him interpret the secrets he’d kept hidden all these years.

Leena’s gaze radiated sympathy. “Look, I’m sure I can get the Synod to send someone to tend your farm if that’s your main concern.”

True, Taurin wouldn’t want to see all the work he’d put into the place gone to waste. He’d toiled long and hard to make this piece of land prosper, and the flowers he grew were

important to a significant someone in his life. He didn't want to disappoint that person by not being able to make his monthly shipments.

"Let me show you something. Wait here." He disappeared through the doorway into the living area then returned a moment later holding his sketch from the easel.

Leena rose, her skirt swaying about her ankles. "Where did that come from?"

"I've made a study of these symbols. Since you're an archeologist, perhaps you can interpret them for me."

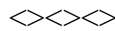
"I'm afraid I am unable to help. Those are similar to the inscriptions that mark the ancient ruins around the globe. No one has been able to decipher them. I suspect they're messages left us by the ancient Apostles. I'd like to learn where they originated and why they left." She gave him a pointed glare. "So will you help me in my quest or not?"

"All right," he muttered reluctantly, "but I would like someone to work the fields in my stead."

"I'll make arrangements. I need to return to the Palisades to pack." More sure of herself now that he'd agreed to assist her, she regarded him with a determined gleam. "How long of a journey is it to Grotus? Do you know anything about him?"

"Not much."

"I'll ask Sirvat for details. She's the one who suggested his name to me. Sirvat is in charge of the Treasury," Leena explained. "Anyway, I'd better leave now. I'd like to get back before it's too dark."



Taurin didn't make a move to open the door for her or render assistance. He stood on his porch as still and silent as a statue, his expression stony. Leena wondered how far they would have to travel to reach this Grotus person and hoped it wouldn't be a long trip. Certainly her brother Bendyk's concerns were justified. How could she go on such a journey with someone so disinterested in her welfare?

It was worth any peril if she could recover the horn.

She keyed the ignition, but nothing happened. The engine didn't turn over, nor did the headlights come on.

Oh, no. She pounded the steering wheel in frustration. The recharger must be dead, and all the stations would be closed. She couldn't get it fixed until tomorrow. Now what?

Biting her lower lip, she supposed she could call Bendyk to pick her up, but it would be an hour and a half drive in the dark. She hadn't noticed any hostelry nearby either.

Taurin sauntered over and peered through the open window. "Having a problem?"

"My charge is drained." Leena felt foolish. She'd never ignored a warning indicator before, and now look what had happened. Once emptied, the circuit chamber needed hours to renew.

"The nearest station is closed. You'll have to wait until morning to request assistance." Taurin stared implacably at her as though unwilling to burden himself with her difficulty.

With an annoyed frown, Leena stepped from the rider. "I'll call my brother. He'll come and get me."

But when she messaged him, Bendyk wasn't at the Palisades. He must have left to seek the help of the Swill woman.

Leena turned to view her host with trepidation.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bendyk remembered Swill saying she'd be going home from Amat to spend her earned leave time with her family. The town of Kameron-by-the-Knoll was located in one of the most desolate, uncomfortable settings he'd ever set foot in. Having arrived by special air transport, he'd hired a ground vehicle to take him to her address, which Sirvat had supplied. As a tax agent, Swill's job came under the Treasury Department.

The town was at the heart of a dustbowl, where dried weeds tumbled through the streets on a breath of hot wind. Digging for scaly grubs was the main industry, according to the rental agent. The grubs, considered a food delicacy in certain parts of the world, commanded a high price. However, the cost of living in such a place discouraged all but the most solitary souls from pursuing the trade.

Swill's parents owned a squat tan house in a sparse development that ran up a hillside. Cactuses and hardy weeds provided the only greenery in sight, while the sun blazed overhead. Hopefully he wouldn't have to stay long. The pilot had orders to wait for him at the airfield.

He rang the doorbell and waited on the front porch.

Shuffling footsteps approached from inside the house, and then the door was thrust open. "Yo! Who be you, young 'un?"

"Good and welfare, brother." Bendyk took a step back.

The smell of spirits hit his nose, and from the bloodshot eyes of the stout man facing him, Bendyk would say he'd been drinking. The man's plaid shirt hung loose over a pair of baggy pants, and his work shoes were encrusted with dirt. He reeked of liquor and sweat, making Bendyk force himself to smile politely.

"I'm Bendyk Worthington-Jax, servant in the Sabalic order of Missioners." He fingered the medallion dangling at his chest. Because he worked among the people, he could wear clothes of his choosing. The medallion signified his station.

"So?" Clearly unimpressed, the fellow scratched his balding head.

"I'd like to see Swill if she's home."

"Swill? You're here to see my daughter?" The man's face broadened into a grin, exposing yellowed teeth.

Krimas, Bendyk cursed under his breath. This was Swill's father? No wonder she had such a tough attitude.

"Come in, good sir." Braddock led the way into a living room holding faded secondhand furnishings. He raised his voice. "Swill, get in here! You have a visitor."

Swill appeared in a hallway and stood stock-still at the sight of Bendyk. His gaze swept over the rust-colored top that barely bound her thrusting breasts and her white shorts that halted mid-thigh. Inadvertently his glance slid down her shapely legs.

Another woman with a worn, tired face and wearing a soiled apron entered the room, diverting his attention, but apparently Braddock had noted the appreciative look in his eyes.

"Gemma, this young man is here for Swill," he told the woman who Bendyk assumed was his wife.

Her mother rushed forward to shake both of Bendyk's hands in greeting. "Oh, I'm so glad she's found someone."

Bendyk flushed in embarrassment. "I'm not... I mean, I need her to come with me." He dropped his arms to his side.

"Of course, but first you'll have to tell us how you two met. Royce? Now you won't have to worry no more about Swill finding a man. She's gone and gotten herself a beaut."

Royce Braddock gave a loud belch. "About time it is, too. Let's go mix up some drinks to celebrate while the lovebirds greet each other."

"Pa," Swill said, "I think Bendyk may be here on business."

"Nonsense, he's got eyes for you, girl. You've got a good thing here." Braddock winked. "Give him a proper greeting now."

He staggered after his wife into another room, leaving them alone.

"Well?" Swill faced him with her hands on her hips. "Are you here to arrest me?"

"Arrest you?" Bendyk stared in astonishment. "Whatever for?"

"For misrepresenting the tithing count. That is why you're here, isn't it? You reported me to your superiors, and they sent you to bring me in?"

Bendyk saw the flicker of fear in her eyes quickly hidden by a mask of defiance. "I'm here to bring you back to the Palisades because I need your help with a special project."

Doubt crossed her expression. "What? You need *my* help?"

"That is correct." Stepping forward, he took her hands in his. The contact sent delicious tingles up his arms. "I cannot tell you the details now, but your interviewing skills and financial acumen are exceptional. I need to conduct an investigation and require your talents."

She moved back, withdrawing her hands as a wary look came into her eyes. "What's in it for me?"

"An increase in pay and the knowledge that you're doing the people a service. That is important to you, isn't it?"

Her chin tilted upward. "Everyone needs a break. I do what I can to help."

"So I've noticed." He couldn't help his sarcastic tone, knowing how she didn't play by the rules. Unlike her, he chose to live with restrictions, believing discipline strengthened the spirit. He wondered at the state of her soul that she mocked their laws.

"This isn't about anything religious, is it? Because if it is—"

"I can't give you the details now. You'll have to trust me."

"Trust you?" Her eyes chilled. "I'd just as soon throw myself into a kougarr pit."

"Dammit, just agree, will you?" He didn't have time to argue. Why couldn't she conduct one conversation without introducing an ounce of antagonism?

Her lips compressed. "I don't like to be told what to do. I've had enough from my Pa in that regard. Sorry, find yourself another assistant."

Bendyk regretted his outburst of temper. He constantly strove to control his emotions and prayed for tolerance many times. But her irreverence annoyed him beyond reason.

"Very well, then I shall have to assert my authority. If you don't cooperate, I'll inform Sirvat of your conspiracy with the villagers about the tithing count. You'll all be punished."

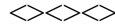
"Bastard." Her eyes glittered. "I'll make you regret this."

He gave her a sexy grin and lowered his voice to a purr. "Then I'll look forward to your retribution."

She howled with frustration as he turned toward the door, intending to wait outside for her to join him. What was it about this woman that so intrigued him? By all that was holy, she

irritated him, but she also stirred his blood. Be careful, he warned himself. Look to your soul, or she'll steal it like she did Lothar's tribute.

He exited the house, resolving to offer a special prayer asking for forgiveness. His thoughts of Swill were far from pious, and that indicated a sinful weakness of his spirit.



Leena looked so downcast after switching off her comm unit that Taurin couldn't help feeling sorry for her. If only her eyes weren't so large and such a unique shade of azure, he wouldn't feel so threatened. But her presence endangered him because his nerves were so acutely tuned to her.

She wears a circlet, he reminded himself. She's pledged to serve Lothar.

"What does your brother do?" He wondered if her sibling was also a member of the Caucus.

"Bendyk is a missionary. He's very dedicated to the principles of our religion. He must have left to seek help from that woman he met in Amat."

"Too bad. Now you're stranded here." He stepped forward until their bodies nearly touched. Her cloying scent pervaded his nostrils, tempting him to do something wicked.

He dare not risk losing control.

"I can drive you home. Leave your rider key here, and I'll take your vehicle to the station in the morning."

"I'm sorry to be such a burden, but I appreciate your help." After retrieving her cloak from the rider and handing him the keys, she followed him to his vehicle.

Taurin held the passenger door open for her, his loins stirring as she gracefully slid inside, folding one long leg after the other.

He forced away the unwanted surge of desire that held him in its powerful grip and pulled a dark cloth from his pocket to swathe about his head. He couldn't risk the woman seeing his eyes at night.

In the driver's seat, he started the ignition then set off, rushing along the winding country roads to make the trip as brief as possible. The black painted rider had a low-slung design which made it hug the road like a tightrope walker.

Beside him, Leena clutched her seat, pressing her lips tightly together.

"Can't you slow down?" She gave him a sideways glance.

Taurin noted her pallor. Without commenting, he eased back on the accelerator.

"I'll get a ride out here in the morning. It's best if we don't delay our journey. Will that give you enough time to get ready?"

He nodded, displeased at the idea of visiting Grotus. He had a feeling Captain Sterckle might have sold his bibliotomes to the unscrupulous artifacts dealer. Sterckle could even have told Grotus about him. Was the danger involved worth the possible rewards? He sought only two things in life: peace for his troubled soul and knowledge of his origins. The first he'd already achieved, but Leena could help him obtain the second.

He was well aware of the danger her presence posed. Her delicate beauty and unattached status offered a temptation he could barely resist, but she was off limits to a man like him. Leena's station forbade her from associating socially with a mere farmer, and she must never discover his true background.

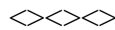
Magar had sworn him to secrecy in exchange for giving him the small plot of land he

called his own. He was obligated, upon his honor and for his safety, to remain silent. But that wouldn't prevent him from learning what the symbols carved into Xan's ancient ruins meant. If Leena didn't know, perhaps they could find out together. Those inscriptions were linked to his heritage. By deciphering them, he might discover his destiny.

Yes, the time had come for him to emerge from his secure cocoon. Magar was sending him on this errand, which meant the situation was critical. The personal danger to himself was minimal compared to what threatened Xan. And yet, as he sped his vehicle through the darkened rural roads, he had the feeling they'd merely touched the tip of an iceberg.

An even greater threat loomed, one that none of them could fathom in its immensity. The signs were there: the missing horn, the Truthsayer movement, the weather changes. Xan was plunging inexorably toward disaster. Would he and Leena be able to stop the forces of evil from overwhelming her world?

Where he came from, they'd already won. Taurin had sworn he wouldn't let the same thing happen here.



Bendyk and Swill arrived back at the Palisades late that night. In the morning they held a strategy council with Leena, who took an instant liking to Swill, noting the rebellious gleam in the girl's eye. Leena smiled warmly and grasped both her hands in welcome.

"I'm so glad you've agreed to help my brother," she said. Bendyk had told her Swill was twenty-one, four years younger than herself, and two years younger than her baby brother.

The young woman wore a wraparound skirt and sweater, more conservative garb than Leena would have expected from Bendyk's earlier comments. Swill gave her an appraising onceover, as though Leena wasn't what she'd expected either. Leena wore her long hair loose in defiance of the custom, and she lacked the righteous airs her brother possessed.

"I didn't agree to anything," Swill confessed, slipped her hands free. "Your brother blackmailed me into coming here."

Leena cast a startled glance at Bendyk, whose eyes shone with amusement. "Oh? Would you care to elaborate?"

He shook his head. "It's a private matter between Swill and me. We'll do fine together," he asserted confidently.

Swill muttered an expletive, then apologized to Leena. "Sorry. I forget I am in a holy place."

Leena suppressed a grin as she studied the fine contours of the girl's face and the upward tilt of her chin, which indicated strength of character. Her blunt haircut and unadorned clothes showed that comfort and practicality were more important to her than the mores of society. Clearly Swill must offend her brother's sense of propriety!

Her gaze swung to Bendyk, whose eyes hadn't lifted from Swill from the moment they'd all stepped into the room. Leena wondered at his interest. What had occurred between the two of them to make Swill have such antipathy toward him?

Bendyk appeared entertained by the girl's attitude. She thought about her father who had been wishing they would both settle down. Bendyk was young yet; he had time to seek a mate. But Leena had often wondered how he would find a woman who appealed to his sense of moral righteousness. She'd always thought the daughter of a Candor, someone like herself, would attract him, but it appeared instead that this rebellious young woman might have captured his

attention.

Leena grinned broadly until her brother snapped, "What do you find so funny?"

"Nothing." She shrugged. "Let's discuss how we're going to keep in communication with each other. I've asked Sirvat to join us so she can give me further instructions about locating Grotus, and Karayan said he would stop in also. Have you partaken of your morning meal yet?"

"Aye," Bendyk said. "We had breakfast delivered to our apartments earlier this morning. I'm not sure where we should begin our investigation either."

"It's too bad we can't ask Father to advise us."

"Tell me about this Taurin fellow."

Leena's expression grew thoughtful. "He's very strange."

Before she could say another word, Karayan marched into the room, greeting each one of them, including Swill to whom Bendyk introduced him.

"Good and welfare, children." Karayan beamed at them all. "Have I interrupted your discussion?"

"Leena was just telling us about Taurin," Bendyk told his father's friend.

Leena nodded. "The man has agreed to help me, but he wishes for someone to tend his farm while we are gone."

"His farm?" Karayan lifted an eyebrow. "Where does he reside?"

"He raises flowers down at Lexington Page," she said, indicating the nearby town. "Isn't that where Magar has his estate?"

"Yes, it is. If you recall, Magar is the one who suggested I approach Taurin."

"Indeed." Karayan's brow furrowed. "What else did you find out about this fellow?"

"He lives by himself. He has an interest in archeology. I saw some sketches of the carvings I've been studying, but I'm not really sure of the reason for his pursuit of the subject. My mention of being an archeologist seemed to sway him in favor of accepting my proposal."

"Did he say where he came from?" Karayan asked.

"No. He told me nothing about his background. The man is a skilled fighter. He broke up a brawl in the town pub. I feel he is the right choice for a protector, but it will be difficult traveling with him. He has a taciturn nature and reveals little about himself."

Karayan's face took on a troubled look. "I don't know if I am pleased by your words or not. Your safety is our prime concern. How do we know we can trust this man?"

"Magar recommended him," she reminded him. "The Minister of State would not have sent me to someone untrustworthy."

"What is your destination?" Bendyk cut in.

"Sirvat still needs to give me that information," Leena answered. "I believe I hear footsteps outside. Maybe that's her coming now. Swill, could you please open the door?"

Sirvat, her thin red hair coiffed above her head, walked in amid a swish of white robes. "Karayan," she snapped. "What are you doing here?"

"I was just looking after these young people's welfare," he stated amiably, flicking a speck of imaginary dust from his tailored frock coat. Aside from religious ceremonies, he preferred his own style of dress to ecclesiastical garb. In contrast, Sirvat liked to flaunt the embellishments of her station.

"Our conversation must be private." Sirvat gave him a meaningful glance.

"In that case, I was just leaving." Karayan offered her a mocking bow, then turned toward Leena and Bendyk. "Message me if you need any assistance, children. I am always available to help you."

“Good and welfare,” Bendyk cried as Karayan stalked out.

“This is your brother?” Sirvat asked.

Leena hastened to introduce him and Swill, realizing Sirvat hadn’t had the chance to meet them before.

“Where are you going to start your investigation?” she queried Bendyk.

“Perhaps we should look into the Treasury funds,” he said mildly, watching for her reaction.

Sirvat stiffened. “My department can undergo any kind of scrutiny. You’ll find our record-keeping is exemplary.” Her eyes narrowed at Swill. “Haven’t I seen you somewhere before?”

A smile quirked the corners of Swill’s mouth. “I work for your department, your honor. I’m one of the tax agents.”

“Ah, I thought you looked familiar.”

Leena cut into their conversation, hoping to get the information she required. “Taurin Rey Niris has agreed to accompany me on my journey. What can you tell me about Grotus? Where can I find him, and what makes you think he might have the horn?”

“I have no idea if he has the horn,” Sirvat confessed, “but I believe he’s the best person to ask. If anyone stole it for money, it would have crossed through Grotus’s hands by now. And if not, perhaps his agents possess useful information. You can always suggest a trade,” she said, a sly look coming over her face.

“What do you mean?” Leena asked.

“If Grotus has not heard the horn is missing, you’ll have valuable information to offer him. In return, there are things he might know that you could find of interest.”

“Such as?”

Sirvat shrugged. “That’ll be for you to find out.”

Leena peered at her suspiciously. Sirvat appeared to know more than she was willing to tell. It would be interesting to see what Bendyk’s investigation uncovered. “Where do I have to go?” she said, curiosity taking hold.

Sirvat reached into a pocket in her voluminous robe and drew out a piece of parchment. “Come.” She strode to a table and unfolded the document, which turned out to be a world map. “We can provide air transport for you to Port Donner, located here.” Sirvat pointed to a spot on a coastline in a subtropical region halfway around the world. “From there, you’ll have to find a means to cross the Tortis Sea to the Black Lands.”

Leena gasped. Those who defied the Faith were banished to the Black Lands, and since they didn’t worship Lothar, the region lacked his protection. She had never dreamed that her quest would take her into such a wilderness.

“There is commerce between Port Donner and Garu, the southernmost village in the Black Lands,” Sirvat went on. “Transport should be available between those two points. You may have greater difficulty traversing the land mass. The Black Lands, as you can see, is one of the largest islands on Xan. With an area of over three hundred thousand square miles, its terrain varies from rugged, snow-capped mountains in the central portion to hot and humid coastal lowlands.

“Many rivers and streams flow down the mountain slopes and cross the lowlands. The largest river, called the Kile, has a broad swampy delta. Steep mountain ridges, grassy plateaus, and deep forested valleys cover much of the interior.”

Leena swallowed hard. Missionaries had gone into the area to convert the native tribes, as

well as to counsel the dissidents, but their reception had been hostile. Indeed, some of them had never been heard from again.

“It is said Grotus resides on an island in this archipelago.” Sirvat indicated a series of dots in the Pavian Ocean, located off the northern coast of the Black Lands. “No one knows his exact location. You’ll have to find some means to reach his island, assuming you’re able to pinpoint it. Grotus must have his own secret method of transportation because his movements are untraceable. Be cautious when you make inquiries: Anyone attempting to search for Grotus’s hideaway has vanished.”

“Vanished!” Bendyk exclaimed. “What do you mean?”

“He guards his privacy as a *langmuir* does its den. It is impossible to get close to him. As you know, there has been an ongoing theft of artifacts from holy sites around the world. We suspect the smugglers are linked in a worldwide network reporting to Grotus, but no one has been able to determine their methodology.

“Unscrupulous collectors would pay anything to get their hands on these valuable objects, which is why I am sending you to Grotus to search for the horn,” she added. “It is a dangerous journey. Even if you managed to reach his island, he might have you killed.”

Her cool jade gaze focused on Leena. “Take your circlet along to convince Grotus of your identity, but keep it hidden during your voyage. If the Truthsayers get wind of your mission, they’re apt to try to stop you. It would be best if you travel incognito.”

“But how would the Truthsayers know what she’s doing?” Bendyk waved his hand. “Only the members of the Synod and the Caucus, along with Swill and I, know of her assignment.”

“One of us stole the horn, remember?” Sirvat’s eyes blazed. “I don’t trust anyone in this place.”

Brother and sister exchanged glances. Leena was fast learning she had no one to turn to except her own brother. How sad indeed that her world’s leaders couldn’t even be trusted. For that matter, how did Sirvat know so much about Grotus? Her detailed descriptions were odd unless she’d had the smuggler investigated by her Treasury department.

Sirvat brushed a wisp of red hair off her stern face. “After you’ve seen Grotus, message me immediately. I’ll do what I can to aid you in your return journey. Dikran said he wishes for you to report back to the Palisades when you have finished this task.”

Their chances for success seemed slim, and Leena’s spirits sank. “What if we fail to obtain news of the horn? Grotus may know nothing about the theft.”

“True, but once he learns it’s on the market, he may pursue the horn himself. You can keep an eye on each other.”

CHAPTER SIX

Once they were alone, Leena smiled at her brother. "I like Swill. She seems to have a sensible head on her shoulders. She'll give you good advice."

Bendyk grimaced. "If she talks to me. In your presence, she acts polite, but when we're alone, she barely speaks."

"Do you insult her with your religious dictates?"

He stiffened. "I merely comment on the moral standards applicable to our society."

Leena snorted. "No wonder she resents you. Go easy, and you might find her more likable."

Bendyk put a hand on her shoulder. His eyes, as deep blue as her own, held a serious expression. "I'm worried about you. Your journey is dangerous, and you travel with a stranger. I don't like the tone of this mission. It is I who should be going on that pursuit. I am used to traveling and meeting with all types of people."

"But only I can identify the horn. What if someone produced a counterfeit and tried to ransom it back to the Synod? The horn is inscribed with the same carvings I have been studying. It is an amazing piece," she told him. "There is nothing else like it on our..." Halting abruptly, Leena bit her tongue. She had almost said there was nothing else like it on this world. What had she been thinking to nearly blurt out such a thing to her brother?

It was the same type of observation, made about the ring she'd found in the ruins on her last dig, that had gotten her into such deep trouble with Zeroun. No one was allowed to question the teachings of Lothar, or to speculate about where the Apostles had originated. To even conceive that they might have come from another world was to doubt their divinity.

She'd tried to interpret the inscription on the ring's thin band. It was the same sequence of symbols she'd seen on the walls of ancient ruins and on the horn, but now she didn't have any more success than in the past. Taurin's sketch displayed the same markings, she reminded herself, vowing to learn more about him at the earliest opportunity.

"What type of clothes should I take on this trip?" she wondered aloud.

"You're liable to run into savages in that untamed land."

"Perhaps I should take my archeological garb."

Bendyk stared at her in horror. "How dare you think of such a thing? Wearing breeches goes against your womanly nature. It is unnatural, Sister. You'll take your gowns lest this Taurin fellow thinks you're a loose woman."

He's probably right, Leena thought, but still she would pack a couple of her outfits into her valise just in case. Perhaps some of her tools as well.

And so it was that several hours later she was packed and ready to depart. Dikran, the Arch Nome, summoned her for a final audience.

"I wish you to report directly to me upon your return." The old man shook a finger at her.

"Yes, your eminence." Leena was dismayed by the distressed look on Dikran's face. He must be terribly shaken by recent events, and now he could trust no one among his senior counselors.

She pitied him because age had claimed his strength, and he no longer had the power to command his people with the rigid authority that was required. Zeroun might do well in his stead, but she feared that under his dominance, oppression would rule the land.

There was no easy solution, except for her to find the horn and bring the situation to rights. The dissension and uprisings were for people like her brother to eradicate. Her job remained within the archeological realm, and for the first time a sense of excitement filled her veins. This would be the ultimate adventure, and the recovery of the horn, her greatest find. She must succeed!

She bid farewell to Dikran and hastened through a series of elegantly-appointed chambers to the exit. Bendyk waited for her in a rider outside, her luggage already secured in his trunk.

"I'm looking forward to meeting your escort." He squinted in the sunlight. "If he doesn't measure up, I won't allow you to go with him."

"Nonsense," Leena scoffed. "Who else will protect me? I've witnessed with my own eyes his prowess as a fighter. His violent nature doesn't thrill me. Nevertheless, he has been chosen for this mission. Where is Swill?"

"She has already begun to audit the Treasury records. I plan to meet with her later this afternoon. Since you have agreed, I used our authority to enlist the aid of the Caucus in running background checks on each Synod member. I will supervise those efforts myself."

"Be cautious. One of them is a thief, who won't want his perfidy to be discovered. There could be danger for you at the Palisades, even though it may be less evident than the road I travel."

"Understood." A frown creased his forehead. "It disturbs me that I won't be able to contact you."

She laid a hand on his arm. "I promise I'll message you at the earliest opportunity."

The drive took an hour and a half, and Leena enjoyed the breeze that blew in from the open rider windows. Bendyk's vehicle was a sedate, forest-green sedan. Like Voshkie, Minister of Commerce, Bendyk didn't believe in conspicuous consumption. Modesty was his byword, and he had looked with disapproval at the two huge suitcases she'd brought along.

"You told me to pack my gowns," she had reminded him.

"Yes, but you've brought enough for months of travel."

Leena shrugged. "Who knows how long we'll be gone?" Inwardly she quivered at his words. For all she knew, they could be true, and she dreaded spending so much time in Taurin's taciturn company.

Taurin obviously was expecting them. As soon as their vehicle pulled into the driveway, he flung open his front door.

"You must be Bendyk," he told her blond-haired brother, shaking both his hands in greeting. Taurin's muscular build was barely concealed beneath a belted black longshirt and a pair of hip-hugging trousers. "I took your sister's rider in for servicing this morning and got a lift home. Perhaps you can retrieve it when the work is done, since Leena and I will be gone."

"I'll take care of it," Bendyk agreed.

As Taurin handed him the receipt from the station, Leena cast a surreptitious glance at the tall, darkly handsome man. She was pleased to find his head uncovered by the cloth he favored. Recalling that he'd only worn it in the tavern and the darkened interior of his rider, she wondered at its purpose. Unencumbered, Taurin's striking features commanded her attention.

"I go on this journey with your sister because I hope to learn the answers to questions similar to hers," Taurin told Bendyk, a steely expression in his gray eyes. "I know little about

your god or this missing horn but will do my part in helping to find the holy object.”

Bendyk pounced on his words. “What do you mean you know little of *our* god? Do you not worship Lothar?” Disapproval rang in his tone.

A half-smile twisted Taurin’s countenance. “I have my own beliefs, or lack of them. What I feel is irrelevant to our mission.”

Bendyk’s hair glinted gold in the sunlight. “Indeed, your beliefs have relevance. I won’t allow you to travel with my sister in sin. There’s only one option. I will see you both wed ‘ere I go.”

“What!” Leena cried.

“Normally a trial marriage may only take place during Beltane, but exceptions can be made. I have the authority to make such a decision. I repeat, Sister, you will not travel with this man in sin. I will marry you, and when you complete your mission, the vows can be annulled. They need be in name only, but it will legalize your companionship.”

Taurin’s face darkened with fury, and the menace looming from him was like a huge thundercloud blotting out the sun. “This is absurd. Let’s get on with our business. We must leave immediately.”

“We have a flight to catch in forty-five minutes,” Leena reminded her brother. “We cannot waste time.”

Bendyk’s hand clasped her arm. “I insist on this, Leena, or I’ll tell Father what you’re doing.”

“So what? It would only spoil my chances of marrying Malcolm.”

Taurin’s ears perked up. “Malcolm? Who is that?”

“A man she will be wed to come next Auden,” Bendyk said. “Malcolm will understand the circumstances once your role in recovering the horn is explained, but he would never forgive you if he learned you traveled with a stranger under immoral conditions.”

Leena’s heart twisted with indecision. At the moment she didn’t care what Malcolm thought about her, but she had been considering accepting his proposal. She’d messaged him and her Father to let them know she’d be away on ecclesiastical business without going into any details. Malcolm had wanted to see her to discuss a date for a formal betrothal, but she’d put him off.

Facing him upon her return would be easier if she didn’t have to rationalize her situation. She and Taurin had no idea what arrangements they would have to make in traveling together. It would be convenient if she could say he was her husband, although the notion was extremely distasteful.

Slowly she raised her eyes. The dark expression she saw on Taurin’s face brought a shiver to her spine.

“It would bring me a measure of comfort,” she told him quietly. “My brother is empowered to conduct the ceremony. We shall be wed in name only, and you will have no further obligations when our task is finished.”

Meeting his gaze, she swallowed hard, afraid he would reject her offer, but the man stared at her with an odd light in his peculiar gray eyes.

“All right,” he said. “I agree. But like all good wives, you must obey my commands thereafter.”

A beatific smile lit Bendyk’s face. “That’s a fair agreement.” He hated his part in this deception, but he wouldn’t want it said that he let his sister travel with a strange man in an improper fashion. This was the best solution, as he saw it. “Where do you come from?” he asked

Taurin, hoping to learn more about the man about to become his sister's temporary mate.

Taurin's gaze skittered away. "I'm from Iman."

Bendyk nodded. He knew of the remote region even though he'd never traveled there himself. That would explain the man's abrupt manner.

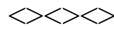
He performed the marriage ceremony with haste in Taurin's living room. When it was over, Bendyk glanced around with interest. Sketches were everywhere, ink drawings of inscriptions that he assumed were copies of symbols from ancient ruins, as Leena had stated. Taurin did appear to have an interest in archeology as evidenced by books on the subject lying about the room. The house was kept in a meticulous fashion, and Bendyk approved of the man's cleanliness and tidy habits.

Taurin had only one valise. Bendyk put it, along with Leena's luggage, in the trunk of his vehicle. He would drive them to the airfield and then return to the Palisades to pursue his own investigation.

Leena sat in front beside him, as though afraid to be near Taurin, who'd climbed into the backseat without a word. At the last minute, Taurin had decided he didn't need anyone to tend his farm in his absence, and Bendyk realized he didn't want anyone snooping around his place.

He'd have to come back and make inquiries as to Taurin's relationship with Magar. Taurin's piece of property seemed to occupy a corner of Magar's estate, but it wasn't fenced off, which normally would be the case if Taurin owned his own land. Maybe he'd find out why when he checked into Magar's background.

He should also send inquiries to Iman, where Taurin claimed to originate. He'd like to know more about this man whom Leena could now call husband. He glanced at his sister, noting her impassive expression. He worried for her safety, although he felt Taurin could protect her and keep her from harm. He prayed to Lothar for the success of their mission, and he was still praying when Leena and Taurin's flight took off from the airfield thirty minutes later.



Taurin sat stiffly in a seat beside Leena. They were alone in the aircraft cabin, the vessel having been commissioned for their private use. The crew was up front, behind a cockpit door.

He noted a self-service refreshment center located toward the rear and a rack filled with magazines and books. None of them appealed to him. As Leena sagged back on her cushion and closed her eyes, he stared out the window at passing clouds.

How had he fallen into such a predicament? Leena's attitude seemed impious compared to her brother's serious intensity, yet here they were as man and wife. His heart thudded at her proximity. She looked too lovely by far, with her blond hair streaming over her shoulders and the ruby-red gown hugging her curves. Her scent reached his nostrils and his body responded.

How had he let himself become responsible for her? She was dedicated to the service of Lothar, and he, an unholy soul, had been put in charge of her protection. He could barely contain the lust that percolated beneath his surface in her presence. How would he protect her from his own desire? Demon's blood!

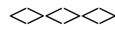
He had never been so surprised as when her brother made his proposal. Too stunned to argue, he had merely let the trial marriage take place. Usually, Beltane lasted for a month, but some trial marriages continued for years.

He didn't expect their farce to go on for long. Annulments were common after the handfast ended, and doubtless his bride would apply as soon as their mission finished. In the

meantime, he'd have to keep his secrets close. His young wife would be repulsed if she learned the truth about him.

Raking a hand through his hair, he shifted his position. The flight was supposed to take eleven hours, with a refueling stop along the way. Without a moving picture to entertain them, it would be a long journey indeed.

Aware that he and his bride had to work together effectively if they hoped to succeed in their task, he broached a subject he knew would interest her.



Deep in the bowels of the Palisades, a revered member of the Synod discussed their mission using a scrambled messenger system.

"They are heading for Port Donner," the Synod member told the person who'd answered the line. "Leena and Rey Niris seek an audience with Grotus. They must not return. Do you understand?"

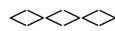
A chuckle sounded at the other end. "Of course. It is best if the horn is not recovered."

"Never mind the horn. Leena knows too much. Make sure they're intercepted when you pick up their trail."

"Your will shall be done, your honor. Hail to the cause!"

The Synod leader terminated the communication, smiling grimly. The orders would be carried out, and the threat from Leena would be eliminated. The leader would keep an eye on her brother, and if he posed a problem, the young man would be disposed of as well. Their plans had already been set into motion, and no one would be allowed to interfere.

Glory will be mine! Soon all of Xan will bow before me. Lothar's time is nearly over, and my reign is about to begin.



"Tell me more about the missing horn," Taurin said to Leena after she'd blinked open her eyes.

Leena glanced at Taurin with relief as he posed his question. Her nerves were taut, the unexpected wedding ceremony having taken its toll, especially after Bendyk had said he would enter the marriage into the ecclesiastical books to make it legal. She trembled at the thought of being with this taciturn man in the days and nights to follow.

"You already know the horn's function," she replied. "It's needed to awaken Lothar. I had a chance to examine the horn once. It horn is made of a strange material—a creamy, almost translucent color. Have you ever been to the Holy Temple during Renewal?"

"No, I have not." Taurin glanced away so she wouldn't see the eagerness in his eyes.

The description of the horn intrigued him. The substance sounded similar to the entwined rings he wore as a band around his right arm, hidden under his clothes where no one could see it. When separated, the three rings served as a baby's toy. They had been left with him when he was abandoned by his parents, and the gang leader who'd taken him in had let Taurin keep them. Spinning the rings had been one of his favorite pastimes as a child on Yllon. The musical notes had delighted him, and there had been few joys on that violent world.

It wasn't until he was older that he'd learned how they fitted together into a wide bracelet. Viewed as a single band, the symbols carved into the material became evident. Taurin

realized those symbols were significant when he saw them engraved onto books hidden in the repository on Yllon. Those same carvings had shown up on Xan, and it was one of the reasons why he'd settled here. He hoped to learn more about his heritage and how the two worlds, total opposites in nature, were linked.

“What do you know of the symbols carved into the horn?” He kept his tone neutral.

Leena gave him a small smile. “They represent a repetitive sequence. I haven't been able to decipher what it means. There are many things I don't understand about our past that I would like to learn. The horn is made of a substance unknown anywhere else on Xan. And so is the ring I found on my last excavation.”

As soon as the words left her mouth, she realized she'd made a mistake. Hopefully he wouldn't catch her on it. But Taurin was sharp.

“What ring?” He glowered at her.

Leena bit her lower lip. “I'm not supposed to talk about it.”

“If we're going to be working together, you have to tell me everything you know,” he said glibly, aware of the secrets he was keeping from her.

Leena sighed. It probably would be best if he knew her background. “I uncovered a strange circular object at my last dig. It was made of the same pearly substance as the horn, which I recognized at once. I reported it to my superior, who in turn told Zeroun. He impounded it, saying it was important for the security of the land that we keep this find under wraps.

“It was after that incident that I received the invitation to join the Caucus. I realized Zeroun didn't want me to report my find to anyone else, and I wondered why. What was the significance of the object? Where had it originated? Where had the Apostles come from? They must have brought these materials with them. Why did they establish the rule of Lothar and then leave?”

She shook her head in confusion. “I wish I had the answers. I feel they would help us deal with the weather disasters that are plaguing us now. I don't believe they're due to Lothar's wrath. Something isn't right.”

She debated informing him about her father's deviation from the Faith but decided it wouldn't be in her best interest to do so at this time.

Taurin pressed his lips together as she repositioned herself. Her slender hands folded one on top of the other in her lap, and he quelled the surge of desire that rose within him. How would he tolerate being in such close contact with her in the weeks ahead?

“How did you get interested in archeology?” he said to distract himself.

She shrugged. “I've always been fascinated by Xan's history. We lived near a ruin where I grew up, and I explored the site. I love the excitement of digging for secrets of the past. What gives you an interest in the ruins, Taurin? Why do you have sketches of those symbols all about your house?”

His expression shuttered. “I'm merely interested. Look, here comes one of the crew.”

Leena glanced up. No one came from the cockpit, but a moment later, the door opened and out strode the co-pilot to offer refreshments and see to their comfort.

How did Taurin know the man would be coming?

She accepted a fruit drink and a snack and waited until the crew member returned to his duty before turning back to Taurin.

“Tell me, what made you decide to raise flowers for a living?”

Taurin munched on a handful of nuts. “I owed someone, a baker who befriended me.” His face took on a wistful look as he spoke. “The man did me a great service, and I wished to

repay him. I remembered the candied flowers he used on his sweet breads were extremely expensive, so I decided to raise edible flowers myself. I send him a shipment every month, and the others I sell on the free market.”

His expression relaxed into a smile. “It’s quite a lucrative business. There aren’t many other flower farmers who grow edible blooms.”

“I would think not,” Leena agreed. “And do you pay Magar with produce as well?”

“Magar?” Taurin arched his dark eyebrows.

“I noticed that your property abuts his estate, and I was wondering if you rented from him.”

“No,” Taurin said bluntly. “I own my piece of land.”

Leena fell silent, realizing he didn’t wish to talk about his relationship with Magar. Still, it puzzled her. There was something going on between the two, but this wasn’t the appropriate time to make further inquiries. Besides, Bendyk was working at the other end. He might find out more about Magar and his relationship with Taurin.

“You have no woman,” she blurted out.

Taurin nearly choked on one of the nuts. “Does that disturb you?” He wished he couldn’t smell the tantalizing scent of her perfume.

“It must be a lonely life, tending the farm by yourself and living in a small town.”

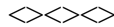
Taurin’s lips pursed. “It’s what I’ve dreamed about, the peace and harmony. That’s what I’ve sought my whole life, and I finally found it. Until now.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

He sat rigidly in his seat as she let fatigue overwhelm her, and her head drifted onto his shoulder. Honeyed tresses trailed across his chest, their fragrance as sweet as the blossoms in his garden. With trembling fingers, he touched a lock, relishing the silken feel of her hair as it rippled through his fingers. She breathed softly, her breasts rising and falling with each respiration.

His gaze drifted down the length of her gown. She was perfection, not only in body, but also in spirit. She was devoted to her god and loyal to her people. Intelligent as well as beautiful, she'd make a fabulous mate for a man. If only he could hope for a union with someone like her. But it was an impossibility. She was too good for him, too pure, never mind their difference in stations in life. She would be horrified if she learned his true background.

He'd spoken of peace but now that peace was threatened. The harmony throughout Xan was on shaky ground. Dark forces marched across the land, and Taurin feared their evil. He'd grown up with it and had cast it away, and now it was inexorably creeping in his direction again, drawing him into the darkness.



Leena's senses sharpened as she awakened. With sudden clarity of thought, she realized her head was leaning on Taurin's shoulder. It was a remarkably comfortable position, but a too familiar one. Despite her being able to call him husband, she wished to avoid personal contact between them. His slightest touch had the power to unnerve her, and she regarded that as an improper response on her part.

Clearing her throat, she straightened and smoothed down her dress. Her motions seemed to discomfort Taurin, who'd been sitting with a rigid posture. Abruptly he got up and strode toward the rear of the aircraft, where the restrooms were located.

Leena ran a hand over her face. The man was so dark and imposing, yet she experienced such a forbidden stimulation in his presence. He'd only left her for a few moments, and already she felt bereft of his company. It was with relief that she watched him return and settle into his seat.

Edging herself away from him, she smiled shyly. "Will we be landing soon?"

"We have an hour left before the layover." Taurin averted his gaze so he wouldn't have to look upon her rumpled hair and the sleep-laden heaviness of her eyes.

They devoured a light meal before landing, spent a couple of hours on the ground while the plane refueled, and then resumed the flight. The rest of the trip passed easily as Leena told him what she knew of each Synod member.

They finally arrived at Port Donner on the afternoon following their departure.

Outside, Taurin gathered their luggage and surveyed the scene. The small airfield was not frequented often, and theirs was the only plane in sight. According to what the pilot had told him, outcasts from society were brought here and then taken across the Tortis Sea to the Black Lands,

where they spent the rest of their lives in exile. No one else ventured far from here except for some merchant ships, which made regular runs to Garu for trade and mail.

“I’ll find us a ship,” Taurin told Leena after a driver transported them to the wharf. “Perhaps we can sail around the eastern tip of the Black Lands to the archipelago.”

Leena nodded, excited by the idea. It would be much better if they didn’t have to cross the width of the Black Lands. Her eager gaze scanned the bustling waterfront scene. Masts and spars from sailing vessels reached toward the sky like outstretched fingers. Mountains of goods were piled high on the dock. A surging crowd of sailors, tradesmen, and fishing crews toiled laboriously, oblivious to the heat and humidity that caused perspiration to trickle down her face.

She longed for a cooling ocean breeze, but dark clouds lumbered overhead. A heavy stillness filled the air, which stank of fish. Distant rumbles of thunder sounded, and she feared it would rain before they found transport.

“Wait here with our luggage while I make inquiries,” Taurin ordered.

Marching off, he strode along the pier, stopping at each ship until he found a captain willing to accept passengers.

Captain Riez picked at his rotting teeth while contemplating Taurin’s request.

“The facilities ain’t much,” Riez told him, “but you can jine us if you’re able to pay.”

“How much?” Taurin asked wryly.

“Fifty chekels each, and I only got one cabin.”

“What do you mean, *one* cabin? We require two staterooms.”

“I thought you said you was married.”

“Well... er... yes, but the lady requires extra space for her dressing room.”

“One cabin; take it or leave it.” Riez spat into the water.

“We’ll take it,” Taurin said hastily. “Is there someone who can help us with our luggage?”

The captain gave a short, raucous laugh. “Sorry, brother. We ain’t sailin’ for another two days. You’ll have to put up in town if you want to ship out with us.”

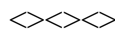
“Two days! You didn’t say that before.”

“You’re not going to find anyone else to take you. I’ll need a cash deposit.”

Taurin saw the avarice glinting in the captain’s jaundiced eye. “Very well.” He pulled a ten-chekel note from the wad in his pocket and handed it over. “Here you go. Is there anything else I should know?”

“Our grub ain’t the best, so if you want to bring any of your own chow aboard, you may want to visit the village market ‘ere you board.”

“Thanks for the advice.” Taurin tilted his head in acknowledgement, turned on his heel, and left.



Leena amused herself while waiting for Taurin’s return by watching the frenzy of activity on the wharf. Huge cranes off-loaded bins labeled with the popular Chocola Company’s logo from several vessels. Brawny workmen loaded bags of mail, crates of canned goods, and bales of fabric onto container ships along with machinery parts and medical supplies.

As the laborers caught sight of her standing by in her finery, they gave her lecherous stares that made her pray for Taurin’s quick return.

At his approach, her heart sank. His face wore a darkened scowl. By all that was holy,

now what was wrong?

"I booked us a passage, but the ship doesn't sail for two days. We'll have to find accommodations in town until then."

Leena's brows arched. "Where do you expect to find a hostelry here?" The town was nothing more than a cluster of taverns, warehouses, and small businesses catering to the marine trade.

"We'll ask in one of the taverns," Taurin suggested. "I'll take my case and this one of yours. Can you manage the other?"

"Of course." She'd carried heavier loads on her archeological expeditions.

Glancing with dismay at her pristine gown and low-heeled pumps, she yearned for her work clothes. With a resigned sigh, she lifted her valise and accompanied Taurin across the cracked and uneven pavement, careful to watch her footing.

He halted in front of a tavern, its open doorway allowing the raucous din from inside to penetrate the street. The scent of liquor wafted to her nostrils, mingling with the stench of garbage from a bin at the corner, and she wrinkled her nose in distaste.

"What are you doing?" she asked, curious when Taurin pulled from his pocket the familiar black cloth that matched his trousers.

"It may be dark inside. Wait out here until I assess the situation." He swathed the cloth around his head so that his eyes were shadowed.

Leena squinted in the bright afternoon sunlight that was rapidly becoming obliterated by the clouds. A salty gust blew into port, heralding rain.

"Why do you cover your head like that?" She couldn't read his expression under the hooded cloth.

"I choose this garb for my... security. "It is necessary when the light is dim enough to cast shadows or when it's dark."

"But why?" she persisted, wondering what possible effect the darkness might have upon him.

Ignoring her question, he strode into the tavern. It wasn't long before Leena heard a commotion ensue from within. A few moments later he sauntered outside, his clothes rumpled and disorderly.

"You may enter. I've rented us a room upstairs."

"In *there*?" Leena cried, horrified. The place appeared to be a den of impropriety, and she dreaded entering the foul-smelling interior. He must have noticed her hesitation because his voice softened with his next words.

"I will see to your safety," he said reassuringly. "Pretend you are my dutiful wife and follow me directly to our room."

Our room? Leena swallowed hard as she obeyed, picking up her bag and trailing after him with her head bowed.

Were they to share a room here and a cabin on the ship as well? In truth, they were man and wife, but in name only. Surely Taurin didn't expect her to perform her wifely duties, did he? Her brother had made it quite clear this marriage would be annulled after their mission was over. Taurin couldn't be thinking in that vein. He must have rented the only accommodation available, or else he was simply seeing to her safety.

And for that I'm grateful, she told herself, entering the smoky, dimly-lit interior that reeked of liquor. Men in rough garb stared at her as she passed by, her head lowered. She'd never felt more glad for Taurin's presence than at this moment. His shoulders seemed broader

than she remembered, his body taller. Dressed as he was, all in black, he appeared as menacing as a demon. A loud clap of thunder sounded from outside, as though Nature agreed with her. Surely none of these men would dare offend Taurin when his very being emanated danger.

Feeling less than brave herself, she followed him up a flight of stone steps and into a cramped, musty bedchamber. Dear deity, were they to spend the night in here together?

Her gaze swept the wide bed with its tattered coverlet and alighted on a dented bureau and a small table with a couple of chairs. Off to the side was a door to the lavatory. Electrical appliances were noticeably lacking.

“Where are the lights?”

“I don’t think this area has electricity.” Taurin set their suitcases in a corner. “We’ll have to use that oil lamp on the table and the candles on the bureau. Those will suffice.”

No electricity? This situation is rapidly deteriorating.

She swallowed a sense of dread. “Where are we going to sleep?”

“That bed looks comfortable enough to me.”

“But, you can’t expect me to... you and I can’t...” Leena sputtered, unable to complete her sentence.

“If you would rather sleep in the chair tonight, madam, be my guest, but I for one intend to get a good night’s rest. I’ve ordered a meal to be served in our room. Thereafter, I intend to scout the town to learn what I can of our destination. We may need more supplies.”

“What about the ship that is supposed to take us there?” Leena strolled inside the room. “Did you ask about sailing around the tip of the island to reach Grotus’s place?”

“Unfortunately, I couldn’t find a ship’s master willing to charter us a boat, nor does anyone go elsewhere other than Garu on the Black Lands. I was lucky enough to find us the cabin space I did.”

Leena hadn’t been impressed by the condition of the ships in port so she didn’t press him for a description. “How long will it take to cross the Tortis Sea?”

Taurin shrugged. “Could be three or four days, depending on the weather.”

“That long?” Leena stared at him. She’d thought it would be an easy crossing.

“Look, you either take the breaks or you go back to your sanctuary at the Palisades and let me handle this.”

Leena drew herself upright. “I’ve been in worse places on digs. Perhaps I should change out of this gown and into my work clothes. That might convince you that I don’t need your protection.”

“Oh, no?” Although she couldn’t see his shadowed face, she could imagine him quirked his eyebrow. “Would you care to venture downstairs by yourself and see what happens?”

Leena shuddered. “I didn’t ask to be put in this position. You’re being unfair.”

“Am I?” He sauntered closer, and she could almost feel the powerful warmth from his body as he neared. “Do you expect your faith in Lothar to get you through the days ahead?”

“Of course I do. Don’t you?”

“I believe in myself, Leena Worthington-Jax. No one else will look out for me. I would advise you not to rely on any supernatural entity to come to your assistance.”

“How dare you mock Lothar!” She clenched her fists. “He’s watching over us to see to our safety.”

“You are wrong,” Taurin said quietly. “It is I who sees to our safety.” *Although who is going to keep you safe from me is anyone’s guess.*

She moistened her lips and his gaze followed her movements. Cosmos, he would be hard

pressed to keep his distance from her this night.

Turning away, Taurin stared out the window as the first splattering of rain hit the panes. The room darkened, and he hastened to light an oil lamp. A soft glow filled the room, casting shadows into far corners.

“Why don’t you sit down?” He gestured toward the bed. “You’re hovering about like a nervous mother hen.”

Leena’s blood boiled. How could she endure a night with this man? He didn’t even trust her enough to uncover his head before her. Seething inwardly, she did as he suggested, testing the edge of the bed against her weight. The mattress sagged.

“What do you believe in, Taurin? Are you a heretic?”

“I told you, I believe in myself.” He sank into one of the chairs while the fury of the storm raged outside.

Flashes of lightning and cracks of thunder rent the air. Inside their room, away from the storm, a momentary sense of security pervaded the atmosphere. He wished he could pull the cloth from his head and gaze directly at her, but it wouldn’t be advisable in the dimly lit room.

“I grew up in a violent society.” The words spilled from his tongue before he could stop them.

“Oh? I thought you came from Iman.”

Taurin didn’t comment. “We had to scrounge for survival, and existence was brutal. We learned to trust no one, to rely on no one except ourselves.”

“What a cynical attitude.” Leena glanced at him from beneath her long lashes. “I pity you, Taurin. Without faith, your life holds no meaning. No wonder you live alone.”

“On the contrary, I believe life must be lived in the here and now, and it’s what you make of it. I choose to live the way I do.” He rose abruptly. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll check on the delivery of our meal.” He stalked out, closing the door none too gently behind himself.

Leena sat on the bed, her hands folded, contemplating their conversation. Taurin didn’t believe in Lothar, but could he possibly be aligned with the Truthsayers? He hadn’t said anything about going against the Synod or their structure of government. He appeared to want to live his own life in peace, regardless of his or anyone else’s beliefs.

She should be able to trust him as long as he did his job of protecting her. And that was why he’d come along, wasn’t it? Still it troubled her that he didn’t believe in the Faith.

How could anyone not bend their knee before Lothar, who provided them with such blessings as a fruitful land and a temperate climate? And what about Lothar’s lozenge? Did Taurin partake of it, even though he didn’t acknowledge the source?

Troubled, she went to her luggage to see if her tools were intact. They might have need of them, because who knew what dangers faced them at the Black Lands?

This trip was folly. How would they ever cross that wild territory? Would they be able to locate Grotus’s island even if they made it to the other side? How would they get there, and would Grotus agree to see them?

She rubbed her throbbing temples. They had too many obstacles to overcome.

Lothar, please help us! Please let us succeed in our mission.

Taurin returned shortly thereafter, followed by the proprietor, who set them a decent table and delivered their meal. After he left, Taurin and Leena sat facing each other. Taurin’s head was still covered with the cloth, but she could see his stormy gray eyes.

“We must pray,” she chided as he reached for a piece of bread.

“I’m hungry.” Taurin tore a chunk off the crusty loaf.

“Please, we must thank Lothar for his bounty.”

He couldn't resist the pleading look in her eyes. Again, he was reminded of her similarity to his image of an angel—not that he believed in them. Golden blond hair floated about her shoulders like strands of gossamer silk. The color of her gown accentuated the startling blue of her eyes.

Taurin's gaze traveled along her arched brows, down along the bridge of her nose, and lingered on her slightly parted pink lips. A sudden urge to take her in his arms and kiss her nearly overwhelmed him with its intensity. Hastily he stuffed the bread into his mouth to suppress his unwanted desire.

Tears sprang into her eyes at his blasphemy. “You have insulted Lothar! Now we shall be punished.”

“Don't be absurd. You'd better eat or the food will get cold.”

Leena closed her eyes and prayed for their absolution. “Please forgive him,” she begged Lothar. “He has strayed from the faith that I know is in his heart. He must believe in you because he raises your beautiful creations for a living,” she said, meaning his flowers. Surely, he acknowledged the importance of the elements. “It is you who provides the sun and the warmth, and the moisture for us, O Lothar. We thank you for your bread and sustenance and your generosity in the past. Please stay with us on this journey, and forgive this man for his digression.”

Dear deity, she sounded just like Bendyk. She didn't want to turn into a moral activist like him. Opening her eyes, she was dismayed to see Taurin chomping away, obviously enjoying the meal without any regard for her feelings.

Eating in silence, she avoided looking Taurin directly in the eye. Upon completion of the meal, her hand inadvertently brushed his when they straightened the table. A delightful tingling sensation assailed her fingertips, and she snatched her hand away.

“I'm heading out to scout the premises,” Taurin said gruffly. “Don't leave this room.”

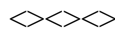
The storm had ended, but a faint pattering of rain still hit the roof. She had no desire to go anywhere and longed to make herself comfortable in the soft bed.

“Be careful.” She figured the characters around here would just as soon beat and rob him than let them pay their own way.

“Don't worry, no one will come near me unless I approach them first.”

His tone of voice was so menacing that Leena shuddered. Yet after he left she couldn't make herself feel glad about his absence. She busied herself rearranging the items in her suitcases until fatigue overwhelmed her. She took off her gown and spent a few moments washing up before donning one of her simple nightdresses. It was made of a thin maille fabric and came to just below her knee. The short-sleeve top was comfortable and allowed her ease of movement in her sleep.

She crawled into bed, neither caring that the mattress was too soft and lumpy nor that the sheets appeared somewhat soiled. It was a haven for the night, and she sank into blissful repose with barely another thought.



Hours later, Taurin entered the room. The oil level in the lamp was low, and he could scarcely make out the shapely form lying in the bed. Quietly, he stripped off his clothes down to his briefs and slid between the sheets. His bones were chilled, but his throat still burned from the

liquor he'd consumed downstairs.

He'd gained valuable information, but all that he'd learned fled from his mind as the warmth from Leena's body penetrated his senses. His loins surged with an answering heat, and he tensed with the need for release.

Tossing and turning, he tried to find a comfortable position, but Leena's soft breathing and tantalizing scent continued to torment him.

In a frenzy of desire, he leapt from the bed and paced the room until his muscles relaxed to the point where he could settle down. But as he approached the bed, his gaze fell on her bared shoulder, which peeked out from under the blanket that she'd thrown back. His glance slid along the edge of her thin shift. Demon's blood, he'd never sleep tonight!

CHAPTER EIGHT

And so it was when Leena awoke the next morning, her gaze lit upon Taurin sleeping in the chair. Poor dear, she thought. He looked so different in repose. His face was relaxed and his manly jaw was surrounded by early morning stubble. Dark eyelashes fanned his cheeks like black bristles arranged in a half moon shape. His hair, tousled from his restless movements, lay in an unkempt manner across his forehead.

Besides removing his head cloth, he'd removed his clothes and lounged merely in a short, snug pair of briefs.

Leena swallowed as she stared at his strong body, mesmerized by the sight. The man fascinated her, and she longed to touch him, to explore his hard muscles and rugged angles. Chastising herself, she decided she'd better stop gawking and get dressed. But as soon as she stepped from the bed, his eyes popped open and he straightened, instantly alert.

Leena halted, blushing beet red as she stood in front of him in her thin ivory-colored shift. "I was just going to get dressed."

Taurin gave her a slow, lazy smile. "By all means, go ahead." His hooded gaze made her body tremble.

"Do you have to look at me so... so...?" Leena faltered, unable to finish her sentence. The blaze of desire she saw in Taurin's eyes shook her to the core.

He's aware of me as a woman. By all that is holy, what do I do now?

Taurin watched her with an unfathomable gleam in his smoky eyes. Aware of his perusal, Leena yanked the first gown she could reach from her valise and rushed into the lavatory.

How could she go on like this, sharing a room with the man when every glance, every movement he made caused her to tremble like a foolish schoolgirl?

That would be all right if they could observe the proprieties, but it was impossible to do so under current circumstances. *I will just have to make the best of it*, she decided, pulling the bright yellow gown over her head.

She brushed out her hair until fine waves spilled over her shoulders. It suddenly seemed important to present herself in a most feminine way, unlike with Malcolm whom she always wanted to shock by wearing breeches. Leena had no desire to earn Taurin's disapproval. Indeed, she thrilled to that heated look in his eyes when he gazed at her.

Giving herself a final admonition to behave with decorum, she reentered their sleeping chamber.

"By Lothar, what are you doing?" She gaped at Taurin.

"I am exercising. It should be obvious." He performed sit-ups on the floor. His muscles rippled with each movement and a sheen of sweat covered his body.

Leena's mouth went dry. "You can't do that here."

"Why not, wife? I always exercise in the morning. Get used to it."

"But... but we have to say our morning prayer."

"You say the prayer. I'm working out."

Too shocked to make a retort, Leena turned towards the eastern side of the building,

facing the rising sun. She prayed to Lothar for a peaceful day, ending her worship with a silent meditation. When she'd finished, she spared a glance at Taurin, who was now running in place. His bare feet thudded on the floor. Thanks be to Lothar, he had put on a pair of black trousers.

"Do you not partake of any of the ritual prayers?" Her brows furrowed at the notion that she'd wed a heathen.

"I told you, I don't pray to anyone."

"But how can you not believe in our god? Lothar provides us with the lozenge that prevents sickness and moderates our climate. Why do you not offer him thanks for his graciousness?"

Taurin stopped his efforts, his face taking on a thunderous expression. "Look, you have your beliefs, and I have mine. Don't intrude on my life."

Leena stiffened. "I beg your pardon. Have you forgotten that we are wed?"

"In name only, and as soon as this journey is ended, I intend to have our vows annulled."

He turned away and grabbed a clean shirt from his open suitcase. Then he marched into the lavatory and slammed the door. Leena sank miserably onto the edge of the bed. How would they ever get along when their personal philosophies were miles apart?

She'd never thought about what it meant to respect someone else's right to his own beliefs, because nearly everyone Leena knew worshiped Lothar. It had always been that way through recorded history, at least as she'd been taught.

Without Lothar's rules of order, chaos would reign. Her god's commandments held their society together. The Truthsayers proposed to establish a separate government, but she didn't see how they could detach governing the land from Lothar's laws.

These are matters Bendyk deals with every day. I commend him for his work. Truly, I'd rather be spending my time at an excavation site. At least one dealt with concrete topics in the field of archeology.

When Taurin came out of the rest room, she asked him if he'd learned anything interesting during his tour last night.

He nodded, drops of water glistening on his damp hair.

"We'll need a guide to cross the Black Lands. The best route is through one of the valleys. We'll have to see who's available when we get to Garu."

The other things he'd learned, he would keep to himself for now. They'd find out more when they got to the Black Lands. If his suspicions were confirmed, he'd have her pass the information along to her brother.

In the meantime, they had a day to kill before their ship left on the morrow. He'd obtained a few extra supplies, and early the next morning they could visit the market to shop for groceries. But for now they were free.

"Did you bring nothing but those gowns?" He swept his hand in broad gesture.

Leena gave him a startled look. "I brought along the outfits I wear on my archeological digs, breeches and short-sleeve tops."

"We have a free day today, so I thought we could spend it at Hathers Beach. It's south of here, and within easy walking distance."

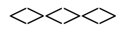
He'd had rare opportunities to spend time at the shore. Such a frivolous activity was unheard of on his world, and here he'd been too busy establishing his farm to engage in leisure pursuits. Sitting on the beach, gazing out to sea, seemed to him the ultimate relaxation.

He'd looked forward to sharing the experience with Leena, but after their conversation this morning he had his doubts it would be so pleasurable. If she kept expounding on her faith

like her brother, he'd be tempted to clamp a hand over her mouth and toss her into the waves. He'd just have to steer the conversation in another direction.

He studied her fair, unblemished skin. "You'll be too hot in your gown. We'll buy you something new to wear at the marine shop, including a hat to shade your face."

Leena didn't know what to make of his suggestion. Spend a whole day at the beach with Taurin? The idea titillated her in a wicked sort of way. Wondering if she was making a serious mistake, she followed him from the room and into the hallway.



On the beach, Taurin watched Leena as she tested her feet in the water. She wore a short tan tunic, which they'd found in the marine shop. He'd suggested she buy a couple of extras for their journey. Tunics were less cumbersome than her long gowns and would make traveling easier. He stared at her long, shapely legs as she faced the water, soaking her feet in the sun-kissed surf.

Removing his shirt, he enjoyed the warmth from the sun's rays penetrating his skin, but it was nothing to what he felt as he watched Leena. Every movement she made bespoke grace and good breeding. His loins stirred, and he yearned to take her into his arms, lower her onto the soft sand, and taste the outlines of her body with his lips.

No doubt, she's thinking of her god, he thought ruefully. Xan was a beautiful world, and those who lived here were truly blessed. Perhaps there was a Creator who had designed the perfections of life. Certainly the flowers he grew indicated a higher intelligence at work. The brilliant colors, concentric circles of the petals, and uniqueness of the different varieties couldn't have developed from random evolution, could they? Is that what he believed in—that all things came to be from the fortunes of Nature? Or was there something more?

He'd seen that Lothar gave comfort to those who believed in him. He couldn't explain where the lozenges came from, except that they materialized in a sacred receptacle in each regional worship center during Mystic. The people attributed this miracle to Lothar. Nor did he know who controlled the weather satellites stationed in orbit around the planet, which he'd seen during his approach. Was it the hand of god or the hand of man at work?

One thing was for sure: only Dikran and the members of his Synod knew the answers.

Leena knelt down and splashed water on her face. Taurin observed her, wishing he could believe as she did. It would make life easier to feel you were not alone. His journey through life thus far had been a hard one. He'd earned his peace and harmony, thanks to his own personal resources. But who knows? Maybe someone was guiding his destiny. Unfortunately, Leena couldn't be part of it after their assignment was complete.

His yearning for something he couldn't have saddened him, and to shake off the mood, he decided to go for a swim. Exercise would get his mind off his dark thoughts. After stripping off his pants, he strode toward the water in his swim trunks. A moment later, he plunged into the ocean, his strong strokes taking him past Leena toward deeper waters. It felt good to plow through the waves, the vigorous exertion energizing him.

As he emerged onto shore, Leena was sitting on the blanket he'd obtained, a wide-brimmed hat shading her face. As he towed himself off, her admiring eyes drank their fill of him. Slowly her gaze roamed from his hairy chest downward to where his wet shorts clung to his hips. As though her mouth had suddenly gone dry, she grabbed for one of the water bottles they'd brought along and gulped down several swallows.

Taurin plunked himself down beside her. “Your arms are getting burned. Shall I apply lotion?” He couldn’t help wanting to touch her and used the first excuse he could find.

“I can manage.” Leena reached for the tube.

“Let me do it.” Taurin snatched it up first and squeezed a line of white creamy substance onto his fingertips.

Leena closed her eyes as his touch on her hot skin sent spirals of delight along her nerve endings. His smooth hands trailed up and down her arm, rubbing in the lotion. Even when she was sure the sunscreen must be fully applied, he continued to caress her skin. Both his hands moved to her shoulders as he gave her a light massage.

“You’re too tense,” he murmured, his low voice seducing her into a curious languor.

He kneaded deep into her muscles, and her body relaxed into a pliant state, like putty being molded. His practiced fingers knew just where to apply pressure or lighten the touch. A small cry of pleasure escaped her lips when he tickled the back of her neck. Never had she imagined that a man’s hands could feel so wonderful.

She opened her eyes and half turned so she could gaze into his face. The desire that blazed in his eyes made her breath come short. Her mouth parted, and before she knew what was happening, she was being swept into his arms, his mouth descending upon hers with crushing force.

Her mind reeled with the incredible sensations he created within her with his sensual movements. His kiss had a desperate edge to it as he slanted his mouth over hers again and again. Then he was pushing her back on the blanket, covering her body with his, his kisses becoming more urgent.

Taurin moaned her name, and her heart thudded faster. The weight of his body pressed her down, and the mere strength of him rendered her senseless with wanting. She snaked her arms around him until her hands splayed on his bare back. By the Faith, she could feel his muscles rippling beneath her fingers. Leena had never craved a man’s touch before, but now she longed for him to move his hands across her body, touching her in all the places that burned with fire.

Taurin’s mouth moved with the desperation of a man consumed by thirst. When his tongue plunged inside her mouth, she jerked beneath him, startled by the unexpected action. After she grew accustomed to his exploration, she hesitantly reached out with her own tongue. The swirl of sensations drove her to a frenzy she didn’t understand.

Suddenly she felt a release, and when she realized his weight had lifted from her body, she opened her eyes, knowing her disappointment would be evident.

“Forgive me. I never meant for this to happen.” He hovered above her, his eyes dark with remorse.

Leena swallowed. “Please don’t offer apologies. I got carried away, too.”

“Well, it won’t happen again.” Taurin stood abruptly, brushing sand from his body. “I wouldn’t want your brother’s disapproval to greet us upon our return to the Palisades.”

Leena could imagine Bendyk’s reaction. She flushed with embarrassment at her wanton behavior.

Nonetheless, Taurin’s riot of ebony hair, piercing slate gray eyes, and powerful physique presented an overpowering masculinity that she found difficult to resist. Truly their journey was fraught with danger, her own interest in this man being the foremost threat.

As they packed their belongings, Taurin kept his distance from her. Nor did he touch her again as they went into town to catch a quick meal at a café hidden away on a side street. Only

when they were back in their room did he address the subject that caused such tension between them.

“I cannot sleep beside you,” he confessed, “or I’ll be sorely tempted to take you into my arms. I’d better stay in the chair again tonight.”

Leena quivered at his words. He desired her, and yet there were too many gulfs between them to yield to passion, even if she were willing. Sadly, she nodded her agreement and then changed the topic of conversation. Again that night he went out, leaving her alone, and she fell into a troubled sleep.

The next morning when she awoke, the smell of liquor lingered in the room. *He must have gone drinking*, she thought. *Did I cause him to do that?*

He faced her with a stony expression. “I’ve hired a porter. He’ll bring our cases to the dock. Meanwhile, I ordered breakfast to be prepared for us downstairs.”

“I must perform morning prayers.” She clasped her hands together. “Do you care to join me?” Her tone was hopeful, even though she knew he would refuse.

“No, I’ll meet you downstairs.” Without a backward glance, he stomped out.

With a sense of trepidation, Leena followed Taurin to the market later for provisions and then to the ship he’d hired to take them to the Black Lands. The wharf bustled with workers, and the scene was similar to the one that had met their eyes the day they had arrived.

Leena’s mouth gaped when she saw the ship, named the *Predator*. A two-masted sailing ship, her hull was painted black and her bulwarks white. The two masts were square-rigged, and the bowsprit stood out like an *elgar*’s antler. The rigging rose high above, with the sails secured while the ship was moored.

A man with a shuffling gait came out to greet them as they stepped onto the deck. His unshaven face held a permanent scowl, his dark eyes a hostile glare.

“I am Captain Riez. Welcome aboard. Haddock will show you to yer quarters.” He gestured to a thin fellow with a gray beard and tattered clothes.

The man hunched over the deck pounding some kind of material between the planks. At his master’s signal, he hastened over.

“Show our passengers to their cabin.” Riez smiled broadly, showing his crooked yellow teeth like a crocodile might before devouring its victim.

The crewman indicated an entry that led below. Wrinkling her nose in distaste, Leena followed him, with Taurin bringing up the rear. They climbed down a set of steps and entered a narrow dark passageway with a low ceiling. A door stood on each side, with another door at the far end. Haddock opened the door on the left, indicating a space so small that Leena thought her closet at home must be bigger. A stench of rot permeated the air, and she drew back, affronted.

“This is unacceptable. I can’t be confined in there!”

Haddock spit into a corner. “It’s my understandin’ there ain’t no other ship to take you where you want to go.”

“Never mind.” Taurin brushed past her. “We’ll manage.”

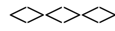
Leena forced herself to step inside. A couple of bunk beds rested against one wall. On the opposite side was a sink. A small partition concealed the toilet. A built-in chest on the bulkhead wall was the only other item of furniture.

“This is it? Are there no other cabins available?” She stalked outside and yanked on the door opposite. It was locked and so was the one farther down the passage.

Captain Riez showed up, his face darkening. “If you wish to jine us on this voyage, you will follow orders.”

“We are guests,” Taurin said quietly. “Not crew members.”

Something in his voice must have warned the captain, because he gave Taurin an oily smile. “Of course, Brother. And we hopes you and the lady will enjoy yourselves. Chow is at five o’clock this evening. To reach the galley, go back down the passageway and up the steps to the waist of the ship. On the other side is a companionway that’ll take you there.”



At the evening repast, Leena and Taurin met the other crew members, as well as two passengers, who had joined them at the last minute.

Taurin turned to Captain Riez. “I thought you only had one cabin available.”

Captain Riez sat at the head of the warped wooden table, his hand on a mug of ale. His eyes gleamed with avarice. “Your fellow passengers were in desperate straits. They’re clergy—how could I refuse them?”

The captain introduced the pair as Brother Aron and Sister Bertrice. Taurin examined the man and woman wearing medallions identifying their membership in the Order of Missioners. The medallions bore the antler-like design representing the branches of life that Lothar sustained. A few of the crew members, a scurvy lot to be sure, wore similar pendants made of simpler materials, showing they followed the Faith.

Brother Aron led them in the evening prayers. He was swarthy-skinned and dark-haired, with high cheekbones. The woman beside him had platinum hair, hazel eyes, and a long nose that gave her face a stern expression. A pair could never look more incongruous. From the richness of their garments, Taurin assumed they’d paid Captain Riez well for their berths.

“What brings you to the Black Lands?” Leena asked them.

“We plan to contact some of the native tribes,” Sister Bertrice answered amiably. “There remain many unconverted heathens on the island.”

“Isn’t it dangerous for missionaries to go there? The exiles may bear a grudge against the Ministry of Religion.”

“Lothar will guide us,” said Brother Aron. He slurped a spoonful of brownish glop that the cook called stew.

Leena ate very little, coveting the cheese and bread she and Taurin had stashed in their cabin. She’d eat later; those items were much more appealing than this repast.

She kept her gaze averted from the crew. They were an uncouth lot, scruffy and ill-dressed, with one exception: the newcomer who had replaced an injured sailor just before the ship set sail. He wore clean clothes and had neatly combed hair along with an alert expression.

Taurin, too, studied the crew while he devoured his meal. He’d hoped that when they were aboard the *Predator* he could relax his guard, but that wouldn’t be wise. Any one of the crew members could be a Truthsayer or a paid spy for the Synod member who’d stolen the horn. He couldn’t trust anyone except Leena.

“I’ve heard tell the best way across the Black Lands is through the central valley,” he said to the captain. “We need to reach the northern coast. Have you advice on how to get there or who we can hire as a guide?”

“Don’t go into the central highlands,” Captain Riez said, chewing on a soggy breadstick. “Tribes in those mountains exist who’ve never seen an outsider. You go in there and you won’t come out.”

“What about the lowland areas?” Leena asked, remembering Sirvat’s instructions. “Is it

possible to go around the island on the outskirts?”

Riez shook his head. “Too swampy. You’re crazy to cross through, but the valley following the river is yer best bet.”

Taurin leaned back in his chair, a casual look on his face. “I also heard the Chocola Company has an interest on the island.” His steely gaze met Captain Riez’s rheumy eyes, which skittered away at the contact.

“That so?” the captain muttered.

“I saw a lot of crates at the wharf.” Taurin hunched forward. “From what I learned, beans are grown at plantations on the island and crated across the Tortis Sea by ship. From there they must go to a processing center. There are very few flights out of Port Donner. Where do those crates go?”

“They travel by rail, if you must know. And, yes, the Chocola Company does own plantations in the Black Lands. But it won’t do you any good to stick your nose into that business.”

His tone held a warning that Taurin didn’t miss. Chocola plantations in the Black Lands? Who worked there: the exiled dissenters? Who oversaw the operation and made sure it ran smoothly? And how could the Chocola Company have gotten permission from the Ministry of Religion to use the land for this purpose? Or did it come under the Ministry of the Interior?

He’d like to investigate, and if his information proved useful, Leena could pass it along to her brother. Somebody was fattening his pockets with the proceeds, and the trail could lead all the way to the Synod.

He voiced his opinion to Leena later as they strolled on deck, and she agreed they should pursue the matter.

Night had fallen, and myriads of stars gleamed overhead. Leena gazed upward in rapturous delight. Never had she seen so many stars in the sky! Even though her hometown didn’t produce much of a glow, the effect dampened the view of the heavens. Now, at sea, she gazed with awe at the twinkling dots of light.

“Have you ever wondered what those stars are like?” she asked Taurin, pointing upward. His head was swathed once again in the cloth, so she couldn’t read his expression, but his face tilted toward the darkened sky like hers. “Do other worlds circle them, and do they harbor life? Has Lothar’s presence visited them, or is ours the only planet blessed by his bounty?”

Taurin’s posture tensed. “Would you be shocked if you learned there was life on other planets?”

“I don’t think so. That ring I found in the ruins, and the horn, are constructed of the same type of material. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen on Xan. Either the Apostles constructed items using a process unknown to us, or else they brought this material from somewhere else. Perhaps up there.”

She rolled her eyes toward the heavens. “They came out of nowhere, established the order of Sabal, and then left. Where did they go? Back to where they’d come from? And if so, do you think they’re watching over us from somewhere else?”

His mouth curved downward. “Let’s hope not, because they wouldn’t like what they see.”

“Amen. People are losing faith, and it bodes ill for our world.”

She rested a hand on the rail just as Taurin’s head jerked up. With a cry of alarm, he grabbed her by the shoulders and shoved her to the deck, throwing his heavy body atop hers. Something crashed by with a deafening roar and splashed into the sea.

“What was that?” Leena’s heart thumped wildly.

“Someone tried to knock us overboard. Here, let me help you up.” He assisted her to stand then scanned the rigging on the foremast. He discerned a figure making a hasty descent along the ratlines.

“Stay here,” he ordered.

He charged after the shadowy figure, but the person scuttled below before Taurin could reach him. Likely they’d been betrayed by a traitorous Synod member. Now he would really have to watch their backs.

Hearing a soft footfall from behind, he whirled, his muscles tense, but it was only Leena.

“Who was it? Did you see?” Her eyes were round with fright.

“No, he was too fast. Let’s return to our cabin.”

Back in the confines of their quarters, Taurin climbed to the top bunk and stretched himself out. Leena sat below on the lower bunk, her head ducked.

“I’d say the best bet is the new crew member.” Taurin’s voice, low and rumbling, came from above.

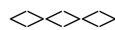
Leena’s nerves reacted to the richness of his tone and his close proximity. Alone in the stateroom with him, she became aware of every breath he took, every movement he made. His presence made it difficult for her to formulate her thoughts, but for the sake of their mission, she made the effort.

“Didn’t Captain Riez say the regular crewman had an accident before sailing? It was awfully convenient that this man was available.”

“I’ll ask him a few questions tomorrow,” Taurin determined. “It’s likely he’ll make another attempt. If I’m not with you, stay in this cabin with the door locked. Understand?”

Leena was about to sputter a protest, but she acknowledged his concern. “As you wish.”

A long silence ensued. Leena could tell Taurin was awake by his restless movements and the erratic sound of his breathing. She wondered if he worried about the success of their mission. They had so many obstacles yet to overcome. At least they wouldn’t have to face them alone.



Taurin lay on his back, his arms folded and hands under his head as he gazed at the low ceiling. Every fiber of his being was aware of Leena’s lovely shape lying on the bunk below. The scent of her perfume tantalized him, and he heard the rustle of her gown as she changed positions. Demon’s blood! How he’d like to roll off his bunk and sweep her into his arms.

Her image danced before his eyes, tormenting him. When they’d entered the cabin, the light from the flickering oil lamp had cast her in an ethereal glow, and he felt as though she were his personal angel, come to soothe his soul from its torment. But the sweet torture she brought him was even worse. He craved to touch her, to smooth his hands over her exquisite body, to run his fingers through her golden waves of hair. But he could never have what he wanted.

Shifting to his side, he squeezed his eyes shut, hoping to erase her image from his mind. *You can’t have her.* Those words haunted him until he finally fell into an exhausted sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

The next morning when they were walking on deck, Leena noticed the crew seemed edgy. Her stomach, queasy ever since they'd set sail, rebelled as increasingly tumultuous waves rocked the vessel. Wondering if a storm was brewing, she decided to ask Captain Riez while Taurin questioned the new crew member.

Ignoring Taurin's orders for her to remain in their cabin, she located the captain who was downing a quick meal in the galley. She breezed in through the open hatchway, her billowy yellow gown floating about her ankles.

"Good and welfare, Captain. I was just on deck and noticed the crew going about their duties in a grim silence. The sea is rough this morning, and the sky has a peculiar yellowish tinge. Is anything amiss?"

The captain, unshaven and wearing clothes that hadn't seen soap in a fortnight, grimaced at her.

"We're entering Fool's Quadrant. The passage isn't always safe."

"Not safe?" Leena's voice cracked. "What do you mean?"

"The water can thicken."

"I don't understand. How can water thicken?"

"It has something to do with the growth of microbes." Riez scratched his ample belly. "The sea turns to the consistency of glue. Eventually the water liquefies again, but it ain't good to be stuck here in the meantime."

"Why not?" Leena asked, fearful of the answer.

Stuffing a forkful of mashed tubers into his mouth, he gave a furtive glance at the cook, who stood by listening to the exchange. "The flying lungfish, Sister. They'll swarm a man." His voice lowered. "I've never seen one, but I've heard tell they have suckers on their tentacles. The things secrete an enzyme that can dissolve a man's flesh."

"We wouldn't be here if we wasn't steered off course last night," the cook blurted.

Startled, Leena glanced in his direction. The portly fellow wore a stained apron that sported several hairs from his graying head.

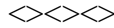
"I means what I says, lady. That new crew member, Sprawls, he was on duty last night. He didn't know his charts too well, did he?"

The captain nodded grimly. "Now it's too late to circle around Fool's Quadrant. We have to go through. I just hope we make it without any trouble."

Leena hastened away, eager to find Taurin to share her news. She wondered if he had found that fellow Sprawls and was even now questioning the man. But as she searched for them, neither was visible.

A sense of unease enveloped her as she strode across the deck. The strong breeze whipped her hair about her head. Salt spray stung her face. The planked flooring rose and dipped beneath her feet in tune to the high swells, and she gripped a section of railing to steady herself.

Shouts and curses rang down from above. She twisted her neck to gaze upward, and her jaw dropped as she detected Taurin's lithe body silhouetted against the sails.



Taurin chased the crew member, who had fled upon his approach. It seemed the man hoped to lose Taurin by scrambling into the rigging, but Taurin had no regard for his own safety. He'd started after him immediately. He wasn't able to shimmy up the mast like the crewman, so he climbed the shroud, using the ratlines as a ladder.

The main mast towered above the deck, supporting four levels of sails, and the crewman had already attained the topsail. Taurin reached up, grasped the lowest deadeye, and hauled himself atop the rail. He stretched as far as he could into one of the middle shrouds, grabbing a ratline to ease his climb. He needed to pull with his arms as well as boost himself with his legs. Line by line he proceeded.

Glancing down, he saw the deck of the ship grow smaller and smaller. Leena's bright yellow dress stood in contrast to the rolling green sea. He felt as though he were climbing into the clouds. He neared the crewman, who'd paused to rest at the trestle tree just below the top gallant spar. Every muscle in his body ached from the exertion. His heart pounded in his chest, but he didn't stop for even a momentary respite.

He kept on going upward, ratline by ratline, cursing as his hands grew slippery and his senses reeled. Halting with the rigging inches from his face, he let his breathing slow.

"You come any closer and I'll throw you off," said Sprawls, one arm wrapped around the mast.

"You tried to knock us overboard, didn't you?" Taurin shouted. A sudden wind blew up and whipped his hair into his face.

"Aye, that I did. And I'll see to it that you and your lady don't reach the Black Lands. I've got me orders."

"Orders from whom?"

Taurin lurched upward, hand over hand, vowing to get closer still. As he reached the height of the crewman, he noticed the gleam of metal in the man's hand just as Sprawls thrust his arm out. Taurin kicked with his foot, slicing the knife from the assassin's hand. The weapon arched downward and away.

With a growl of rage, the crewman launched himself in Taurin's direction. The two men grappled wildly as the lines flapped around them.

"Who sent you?" Taurin's hands tightened on the man's throat.

"That's no concern of yours." The words came out as a choking gasp.

"I think it is."

Taurin squeezed harder, and the man's face turned a dark shade of red. Sprawls loosened Taurin's grasp with a vicious kick.

"Once I get rid of you, I'll take care of the lady. Neither one of you will leave this ship alive."

The uppercut to his jaw caught Taurin unawares, and he reeled from the force of the blow. His grip on the line was the only thing that saved him from slipping off and falling to the waves below.

Sprawls took advantage, pummeling Taurin about the head and face. With a roar of rage, Taurin lashed out, striking his adversary with a glancing blow in the ribcage. Fury filled his veins, and he felt a maniacal urge to throttle the fellow until he was dead.

Before he could give in to his bloodlust, the ship dipped. With a howling scream, the

crewman lost his grip. Flung off the rigging, he fell to his death in the depths below.

Clutching the mast, Taurin swayed in place, his muscles trembling, his hands on fire. Sweat dripped into his eyes, blinding him. He waited until the wind cooled his fury, then he contemplated the hazardous journey down.

As the ship rocked against the strengthening waves, he clung to the rigging and began his descent. The horizon tilted and dizziness assailed him, but he forced himself to place one foot below the other. Sails filled and smacked against him, at times nearly smothering his breath. Leena screamed his name from below. Finally, he reached the mainyard and climbed down the remaining distance to the wooden deck.

His rubbery knees collapsed once he felt a solid surface beneath his feet.

“Taurin!” Leena rushed over to him. “Are you all right? I’ve never been so scared in my life.”

Taurin glanced at her, wonder in his eyes. “You care about what happens to me?”

“Of course I do.” She grabbed his elbow and helped him to stand.

“I’m all right.” He shook her off and rubbed his aching arms. “It’s been too long since I’ve practiced rope-climbing.”

“Listen to this.” She told him what she’d heard in the galley.

He nodded. “Sprawls admitted his orders were to keep us from reaching the Black Lands.”

She bowed her head. “Only the Synod members knew we were going on this mission. You know what that means.”

“Aye, someone betrayed us. We’ll have to be doubly cautious from now on. Either the traitor sent his own assassin after us, or he tipped off the Truthsayers about our purpose and Sprawls was one of them.”

“We’re safe for now.” She gave him an assessing glance. “Let’s go below. You’re fatigued from your exertions.”

Taurin let her fuss over him in their cabin. She brought him a drink and a cool cloth for his forehead. He didn’t feel the need to lie down but was too glad for her ministrations to refuse. He’d never had a woman care for him before.

Having been raised by one of the dominant gangs on Yllon, he’d had no real parents. Baker Mylock and his wife were the only ones who’d ever shown him kindness.

Leena smoothed his cheek with her hand, and Taurin let a deep sigh escape his lips. Her touch was like an angel’s kiss. His body burned, and it wasn’t from the heat or the energy he’d expended. He burned with desire for the beautiful woman nurturing him. His gaze scanned her face. Her expression, full of concern for his welfare, moved him deeply. Looking into her eyes, he thought he had never seen anything so pure in his entire life.

“Leena,” he murmured.

“Yes?”

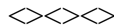
She stood on the edge of her bunk to be eye level with him. He reached out a hand to cup the back of her head. Her hair felt like spun silk, and his resolve evaporated. He’d been able to push away from her at Hathers Beach, knowing it wasn’t right for him to steal kisses regardless of their legal relationship. But now he drew her toward him until his mouth hovered inches above hers.

The words escaped his lips before he could stop them. “I want you.”

Leena’s eyes widened. Her body trembled, but instead of pulling away from him as he’d expected, she parted her lips and tilted her face upward. “Kiss me, Taurin. I want to be close to

you.”

With a cry of exultation, he smashed his mouth onto hers.



Leena thought she'd never experienced anything more heavenly than the press of his mouth on hers. His kiss was deep and passionate. She'd been so afraid for him on deck that she had to be closer to him to reassure herself of his safety.

Standing on tiptoe so she could meet him more fully, she thought kissing him was more rapturous than anything she'd imagined. Malcolm's feathery touches were mere polite formalities in comparison. When Taurin kissed her, she felt consumed by a hunger too intense for words, and she never wanted him to stop.

His arm wrapped around her shoulder in a protective embrace. Closing her eyes, she gave in to the ecstasy of the moment, relishing the feel of his mouth on hers as his lips moved frantically, expressing his need. He desired her! The wonder of it took her breath away. But it shouldn't be his arms around her, it should be Malcolm's.

Guilt ate at her consciousness, giving her pause, so that when his hands roamed toward her breasts she jerked away, stricken with remorse.

“No!”

Taurin's eyes darkened to a slate-gray. “Why not?” He heaved himself into a sitting position and then jumped down so he stood facing her directly. “I want to touch you, Leena. Kissing you isn't enough. I want to have all of you.”

Her heart thudded wildly in her chest. By the Faith, how handsome he looked, with his dark swirl of hair curling onto his forehead and his piercing gaze. “I'm not yours,” she reminded him. “Our marriage is in name only.”

She might wish it were otherwise, but too many obstacles precluded their staying together. Not that she was considering such a possibility! Malcolm still waited for her, and although he wouldn't necessarily expect her to be a virgin, he might rescind his offer if he learned the circumstances of her journey. He certainly wouldn't be pleased if he suspected she and Taurin had coupled during their sojourn abroad.

“It would dishonor us if we consummated our union without an emotional commitment,” she added. Her voice came out stiffer than intended but she felt an explanation was necessary.

Taurin's mouth thinned. “Of course. Your brother wouldn't approve, would he?”

She inhaled at his scornful tone. Before she could utter a reply, he'd spun and stormed from the cabin.

“Taurin, wait!” Too late, he'd already gone.

Perhaps it would be best to leave him alone. In retrospect, she shouldn't have let him kiss her again. She'd responded with shameless abandon, but she couldn't help it if her limbs weakened and her breasts ached for his touch whenever he was near. The only solution was to maintain a safe distance from him. Once their mission was over she'd resume her station in life, and that didn't include socializing with men like Taurin.

The ship's motion quieted a short while later, and she went on deck to see what was happening. She found Taurin, along with some crew members, staring out to sea.

Her breath hitched. “What is it? What's wrong?”

When she glanced at the water, her blood ran cold. It had thickened to the consistency of gelatin and entrapped the ship in its viscosity.

“We’re stuck.” Taurin gave her a disdainful glance.

Captain Riez, who was worriedly conferring with his men, called out to her. “Ye’d better go below, miss. You don’t want to be caught here if the flying lungefish attack.”

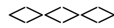
Before she could heed his words, a giant sucking noise erupted off the port bow. Leena shrieked as the sky filled with scores of fluttering wings. Dozens of flying bodies hurled themselves at the crew member standing on the forecastle deck, engulfing him so completely that he couldn’t be seen. His screams could be heard, however, blood-curdling shrieks that were quickly silenced. When the swarm flew away, a murky puddle remained on the deck, all that was left of him.

The creatures soared into the sky and then veered downward in a spiraling turn, heading back toward the ship.

“Take cover!” Taurin shoved her toward the companionway.

She screamed as they charged past, crowding another crew member, who howled in terror. The captain shouted orders as the crew scurried to obey him.

Leena stepped backward in an effort to flee and forgot the open hatchway in the center of the ship’s waist. For an instant, she teetered on the edge. Panic swelled as she flailed her arms and was unable to catch her balance. She fell, toppling into empty space. Something cracked her on the skull. White-hot pain exploded in her head and then all went dark.



Taurin’s breath caught in his throat as Leena vanished. He charged forward, his fingers fumbling for a grip on the ladder that led down into the cargo hold.

When his feet touched the bottom, he probed the darkness until he felt her soft form, limp on the floor. His heart hammered as he felt for her pulse. A weak, erratic beat brought him a measure of relief, but she needed treatment.

After a moment his eyes adjusted to the dark, and he could see as clearly as though it were daytime. With a grim smile, he noted that if she could see him now, she’d be frightened by the glowing luminescence of his eyes. It was the reason why he swathed his head in cloth—so no one could see that he wore the demon’s sign. A gash on the side of Leena’s head showed him what had rendered her unconscious.

Carefully, he scooped her up into his arms and climbed the ladder onto the waist of the ship. The siege from the flying creatures continued as he hustled into the passenger quarters and entered their cabin. Gently, he placed her on her bunk. As he was doing so, her eyelids fluttered open, and she moaned with pain.

“Don’t move. It’s my turn to take care of you now.”

Taurin took the same cloth that she had used on his forehead and moistened it with cool water. Then he tenderly cleansed her wound.

His touch sent shivers through Leena’s body. She reminded herself of her vow not to let him get close to her again, although it wasn’t necessary. He seemed to be doing his best not to look at her face and tended her wound in an impersonal manner. But then his hand wandered to stroke her cheek.

“I’m sorry.” His eyes, full of contrition, met hers.

“It was my fault. I shouldn’t have let you... I mean, I could have stopped...”

Taurin put a finger to her lips. “Hush. It’s not necessary to explain. We both enjoyed it, but it shouldn’t have happened. Let’s leave it at that.”

He cursed inwardly at the hurt look in her eyes. He had never wanted to possess a woman as much as he wanted her, but it was impossible. Why waste his time with someone he couldn't have? Even if she agreed, she was too good for him, and the life she was meant to lead was far different than his.

Pretending to freshen the cloth, he walked to the sink so she wouldn't see the longing in his expression. Honest intimacy with a woman was something he could never have. It would frighten her if she knew his true nature. Some of it showed already, but she didn't know the whole of it. She'd be repulsed if she knew the rest.

Squeezing out the rag, Taurin returned to her side, ministering to her wound until her throbbing eased. Screams and cries came from above, and Leena shuddered.

"What if those creatures get all of them?" Her frightened gaze snagged his attention. "We'll be left alone."

Taurin couldn't think of anyone else he'd rather be stranded with, but he didn't believe that would happen.

"The water should be liquefying soon, then we can get underway again. If you'll be all right here by yourself, I'll go out and take a look."

Leena grabbed for his hand. "Don't leave me."

Taurin saw the furrows on her brow and smiled briefly. He could tell what she wouldn't say aloud, that she was more concerned for his safety than her own comfort.

He patted her shoulder. "Wait here. I won't be long."

After Taurin left, Leena shut her eyes and relaxed her muscles. The blow to her head had drained her energy.

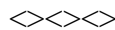
She must have fallen asleep because when she came to her senses, the ship was rocking, which meant they were moving again. Thanks be to Lothar! The danger was past.

She tried to sit up, but her head swam dizzily. Taurin walked in at that moment and cried out in alarm.

"You've been injured. Lie down."

Leena lowered herself back onto the mattress, touched by his concern. By all that was holy, how she wanted him, even with the ache in her head. She glanced away, not wishing for him to see the yearning on her face. It was disconcerting having him so near, but it was herself she doubted. She had never been a weak woman, and yet around Taurin her willpower disintegrated.

With a heavy grunt, he heaved himself onto his bunk and lay down. Leena listened to his movements, wondering if she could bear for them to be parted once this mission ended. First things first, she told herself. Tomorrow they'd reach the Black Lands, and then they would see where their assignment led. The attack from the flying creatures might seem mild compared to the dangers ahead.



The approach to the Black Lands was a delight from Leena's viewpoint. At first a shadowy shape on the horizon, the island grew larger as the *Predator* sailed toward land. Soon verdant green slopes and mountainous rises became visible. She leaned against the rail, a breeze tossing her hair about her head as Captain Riez maneuvered the ship into a wide harbor.

The wharf area was a morass of squalor, but the forested mountains rising behind promised a land of lush beauty. As the ship approached the dock, a frenzy of activity energized

the pier. Vendors, traders, and stevedores prepared for the new arrival.

Once the mooring lines were secured, Captain Riez assigned a porter to assist the passengers with their luggage. As soon as they stepped upon the pier, they were left to fend for themselves.

The missionaries stood beside Leena and Taurin, bewildered looks on their faces as they observed the bustle going on around them.

“I understand you’re heading into the interior. Perhaps we can share a guide.” Brother Aron peered at Taurin. The richness of his cloak made him the object of envious stares.

“What’s your destination?” Taurin’s hand shaded his face. The tropical sun blazed overhead, momentarily blinding him.

“We intend to contact the native tribes and teach them the ways of Lothar. I have a map of sorts that we can follow.” He withdrew a document from a pocket in his long-skirted garment and showed it to Taurin.

Leena addressed Sister Bertrice. “Aren’t you afraid to approach the primitive tribes? Some of them might never have seen an outsider before.”

Sister Bertrice smiled benignly. “Lothar will protect us.”

Taurin and Brother Aron hurried off on their errand to find a guide. While Leena waited for their return, she watched workers on the dock distribute the ship’s stores. Brawny men loaded bags of mail, containers of food, medical supplies, and sundry goods onto trucks belching foul-smelling fumes.

None of the smaller vehicles appeared to be motorized. The only private conveyances were simple carriages or carts drawn by *enixes*—strong, proud beasts known for their easy domesticity.

Trucks carrying sealed crates stamped with the Chocola Company’s name rumbled onto the wharf. An operator drove out a large crane and began hoisting the containers into the cargo hold of the *Predator*.

“I understand that motorized equipment is vigorously guarded on the island.” Sister Bertrice nodded at the crane. “Those in exile might build boats, you know.”

Leena glanced at her. “The waters are patrolled. Even if some of the inhabitants did make it off the island, they’d be intercepted.”

Leena knew that those who were sent here rarely received a reprieve. Their fate was to live out the rest of their lives on this large island, their only company being fellow dissidents or primitive natives from the interior.

“Do most of the . . . ” She almost said *prisoners* but guarded her tongue. “Do most of the people who come here reside in the lowlands?”

“Along the coast and at the foot of the mountains.” Sister Bertrice patted the bun at the nape of her neck as though to ascertain her hair was still properly bound. Her hairstyle gave her face a severe look, and her eyes when she studied Leena held no hint of friendliness.

Leena had little time to ponder Sister Bertrice’s puzzling demeanor because Taurin and Brother Aron returned, accompanied by a white-haired gentleman whose pompous swagger was undercut by his faded, worn clothes. If exiles did not receive packages from home, they were dependent on charity. For the first time, Leena wondered at the harsh penance prescribed by the religious order for those who disagreed with their tenets.

Lothar’s grace and compassion were absent from this place. Although the island was lush with greenery and boasted a pleasant climate, its watery boundaries were the same as prison walls for the people entrapped here. Modern technology was lacking, no doubt because people

might convert sophisticated items of machinery for their own use. It was a harsh existence, she acknowledged, staring at the ramshackle wooden buildings that faced the pier.

Realizing this fate might have been her father's had he been exiled here, she felt a rush of gratitude toward Karayan for speaking on his behalf. A year of penance, no matter how unpleasant, was much preferable to a lifetime in this lonely place. Renewing her vow to see her father totally exonerated, she studied the new arrival.

"Ives will be our guide," said Taurin, introducing the man. "He says our best route is to follow the lowlands to the east and then cut across the island through the main river valley."

Leena gazed at him in dismay. "It'll take days without any motorized transport."

Taurin pursed his lips, clearly displeased with the prospect. "We have no choice. Ives will take us to a place where we can stay for the night. We'll get an early start tomorrow morning so we can cover a longer distance."

Ives helped them load their luggage onto his cart, a large conveyance drawn by four spirited *enixes*, who snorted and pranced as they waited for their passengers to board. A wooden bench seat lined the inside perimeter. Leena and Taurin took seats together; Sister Bertrice and Brother Aron sat opposite them.

Ives climbed onto a raised platform in front, gripped the reins, and uttered a cry that spurred the beasts forward. They galloped through town, raising a dusty cloud in their wake. Shortly thereafter, they veered down a trail alongside a marsh that stank of sulfur and rotting vegetation.

Leena held onto the seat with one hand and her hat with the other. She was glad Taurin had insisted she wear the forest green tunic he'd bought for her in Port Donner. Sleeveless with a scooped neckline, its shorter length would keep her cool in this heat.

The cart jostled and rose beneath them as they rushed along the bumpy trail. A salt-laden breeze refreshed Leena's face as they progressed. After about an hour of driving, they stopped to share a drink from a jug of water provided by their guide and to eat a snack of fresh *karanas*, a soft yellowish fruit that peeled easily and filled her stomach.

The cart lurched ahead as they resumed their journey, turning inland toward the foothills. Scrub brush grew in profusion along the hillsides, but there weren't many tall trees. Leena felt the ride was rockier than the voyage on the ship. If she'd thought being on land would be easier, she'd been mistaken. The contents of her stomach heaved as the cart bounced beneath her.

"What are we going to do once we reach the other side of the island?" she shouted at Taurin, her voice carried by the wind.

His black hair blew wildly about his face, but she caught the instant warmth of his eyes as he responded, an enigmatic smile on his face. "Don't worry, I have a plan."

CHAPTER TEN

Leena slid along the bench and gratefully sank against Taurin's solid chest as he wrapped his arm around her. Brother Aron's gaze fell to her exposed legs, making her uncomfortable, while Sister Bertrice gave her a disapproving frown.

To avoid looking at them, she closed her eyes, letting her body melt into Taurin's contours. She forced herself to focus her thoughts on their goals rather than on the jostling ride and the unpleasant couple sitting across from them.

After what seemed like an interminably long period of time, when dusk was falling and Leena despaired of ever reaching shelter for the night, they turned down a path heading west onto higher ground. Towering trees shaded the road. They appeared to be cultivated rows, going back some distance. Their large oval leaves were bright green and tapered.

Taurin straightened to gaze at the fruits dangling from the trees. Brown pods hung from the branches, ripe for harvesting.

A frown creased his brow. "This must be one of the Chocola Company's plantations. How did they get property rights when the Black Lands are prohibited territory?"

Leena didn't answer because they approached a two-story brick mansion. A bright glow from within welcomed them as the front door swung open and a dark-haired young man stepped outside.

"Ah, Ives. You've brought guests for tonight?" The well-dressed fellow regarded them with interest.

Ives introduced them, twisting his hand nervously. "I hope you don't mind our unexpected visit, Master Alber. But you always said to bring outsiders your way."

"Indeed I did, Ives. Indeed I did." Alber rummaged in his pocket and tossed a few coins to the older man. "You can find your meal in the common house. I'll take care of our guests."

He ushered the missionaries, Leena, and Taurin inside. After snapping orders to several servants, Alber led them into a furnished library.

"Would you care for some wine?"

"I would appreciate a glass." Taurin accepted a crystal goblet filled with a rich burgundy. He took a sip then tilted his head. "I thought commerce was prohibited in these parts. How did your company acquire land here?"

"We have our resources. Our operation is known only to a few." Alber gave a conspiratorial grin that reminded Leena of a cat about to devour a mouse. "I trust you will not reveal our presence on this island to anyone else."

"But who authorized it?" Leena persisted.

The missionaries could care less, she noted. They circled the room, perusing the texts lining the bookshelves. She accepted a glass of wine gratefully. Her throat was parched, and the tart liquid eased her thirst. She surveyed the room, her gaze alighting on several statuettes and other objets d'art. None were of exceptional value but at least Alber had an eye for aesthetics.

"How we got approval for this facility doesn't concern you." Alber's gaze chilled. "The Chocola Company is a major industry on Xan, and certain allowances have been made to

increase productivity. Keep in mind that processing the chocola beans creates jobs, and so does the distribution of our product. Chocola is a commodity enjoyed by everyone. Why not use the richness of this island for such a rewarding purpose?"

"But where do you get workers?" When Leena saw the smirk on Alber's face, her eyes widened in understanding. "You employ those who are exiled here."

Alber twirled the ruby liquid in his goblet. "I wouldn't say *employ* is the correct term. I offer a trade: they provide me with their services, and I give them food and shelter. It's an amiable exchange."

"Slave labor." Taurin spoke half under his breath but she heard him.

They exchanged glances, both of them having the same thought. Only someone at a high level could have skirted regulations concerning the Black Lands. Authorization had to have come from one of the ministers. That meant someone was lining his pockets with revenue from this place. Leena would instruct Bendyk to investigate.

"Do you have a line to the mainland?" she asked their host.

Alber gave her a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "I'm afraid direct communications are forbidden. We conduct business via a system of mail boats and freighters. It works well for us, madam. We wish to keep things that way."

Leena didn't like the warning note in his voice and neither did Taurin. Taurin's body tensed as he gave the man a dark scowl that would make a lesser man quiver in his shoes.

"Can we discuss the rest of our journey?" Taurin spoke gruffly, as though realizing that if Alber wanted to detain them, he had only to give word to his servants.

"We haven't considered the payment for your accommodations yet." Alber's grin broadened.

"Ives said nothing about us having to pay you."

"You travel in luxury, my friend. Surely you can share some of your bounty with those who are less fortunate."

Taurin glanced around, a sardonic look on his face. "Your place doesn't appear to be lacking in comfort."

"No, but you forget I have to maintain a work force. That costs money. Any extra contributions I can obtain aides the cause. Thus I take in visitors when they arrive."

"How many visitors do you get?" Leena viewed him curiously. She'd had no idea that people could come and go from this island. How were the dissenters kept in line?

"Representatives from my company come by on occasion, and sometimes other guests pass through." Alber didn't elaborate, but Leena was liking the man less and less.

"How much did you have in mind?" Taurin demanded.

"Oh, I'd say a hundred chekels for each of you should do. And twenty-five more each for your meals. That's a total of five hundred chekels."

Sister Bertrice, who'd been listening off to the side, snorted with derision. "We don't carry that kind of money, Brother."

"I'm sure your friends would consider sharing their wealth." Alber kept his gaze fixed on Taurin.

"And if I refuse?" Taurin's mouth thinned.

"We have other accommodations available in the common house. You can join the rabble there."

The man's meaning was clear. If Taurin didn't pay, they'd be imprisoned with the rest of the work force. In that case, their chances of leaving the island were almost nil.

“Very well.” Taurin consented with a shrug.

They’d better stay on guard throughout the night, Leena thought, lest the rest of their funds be taken by force.

So it was that after a generous repast, the four guests acquired comfortable suites on the second floor.

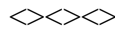
The evening passed without incident, and after morning prayers early the next day—Alber apparently followed the teachings of Lothar—and a simple meal, the travelers started off on their journey once again.

To their pleasant surprise, Alber supplied two riders: open-air vehicles with a transparent shield in front to provide wind protection and huge tires to allow passage through difficult terrain. Each rider had seating for four plus storage space in the back.

Ives and the missionaries took the lead in one vehicle, Leena and Taurin following behind.

“Have a safe journey.” Alber waved from the front stoop.

The missionaries raised their hands in farewell, but Taurin didn’t give the man the courtesy. Leena surmised that he hadn’t appreciated Alber’s extortion last night nor the secrecy about the company’s operations. She wished they’d been able to contact her brother. Hopefully, Bendyk had gained more answers than she and Taurin.



Bendyk and Swill were making slow progress. Swill had nearly completed her examination of the Treasury records but was dissatisfied with one of her findings. Each month, exactly on the thirty-fifth day, someone made a collections deposit into the Receipts account in varied monetary amounts. Sirvat claimed this was a miscellaneous category for income that didn’t fit into any of the other classifications.

Feeling she was being misled, Swill had demanded a more detailed explanation and was told to consult Magar; his department was responsible for the revenue.

Meanwhile, Bendyk was looking into Sirvat’s personal background by interviewing her acquaintances. He’d found out she lived a rather frugal life and kept a quiet residence in one of the larger towns where her family resided. Her penchant for traveling had taken her to some of the more exotic locales on Xan. Apparently she traveled alone but “met friends”, as one of her neighbors said.

Bendyk wanted to tell Swill what he’d discovered and was waiting for her in their shared office one afternoon when Karayan and Zeroun stormed in.

“How is your research progressing?” Zeroun’s tone was as sleek as oil.

Bendyk stared at the man’s darkly-complected face. “Well enough, thank you. Did you come to see me for a particular reason?”

“Don’t get your hackles up, my boy.” Karayan casually examined one of his manicured fingernails. As usual, he wore an impeccably tailored frock coat and a pair of matching trousers. “You know, you really should learn to control your temper. It isn’t suitable in a missionary and a disciple of Lothar to be so turbulent.”

Bendyk stifled a retort, knowing he was right. He’d always had to struggle to keep his volatile emotions in check. Praying for serenity hadn’t helped him thus far. He feared it was a state he would never attain, and he envied Leena’s sense of inner peace. Where in tarnation was Swill? She was late for their conference.

“Did you learn anything more about Rey Niris?” Karayan inquired.

Bendyk answered him with a smile. Now he knew why they had come to see him. “Perhaps.” Leaning on his elbows, he steepled his hands on his desk.

“His residence is located in the same town as Magar’s estate, is it not?” Zeroun demanded.

“Aye, and so what if it is?” He wanted to look into the matter himself but hadn’t had time. After he was finished investigating Sirvat, he’d start with Magar.

Karayan and Zeroun had other ideas. “Did you see his home when you took Leena to him?” Karayan asked. “What was the fellow like? Was he eager to go on this quest?”

Bendyk rose. “I believe my sister and I are the ones in charge of this investigation, gentlemen.”

“Yes, but we are concerned for Leena’s safety,” Karayan said. “Zeroun and I are going to take a look around Rey Niris’s place. If you want to come, you’re welcome.”

“How did you get the location?” Bendyk narrowed his gaze suspiciously. He didn’t think Magar would share that information so readily.

“We have our sources.”

Pretending to adjust his shirt, Bendyk considered his options. Better to go along with them than have them snoop around on their own. “When are you leaving?”

“Right now,” said Karayan. “Will you join us?”

“Very well.”

Hastily, Bendyk scribbled a note for Swill, explaining the circumstances of his departure. Fingering the medallion hanging over his tan longshirt, he followed the ministers outside.

The drive into the countryside seemed to take little time as he sat in the rear passenger seat, lost in his own thoughts. Before he knew it they were turning down the private drive that led to Taurin’s tidy house. Zeroun’s white robe, cinched at the waist with his gold sash, fluttered in the breeze as they emerged from the rider. The weather had cooled, but rain had not yet come, and Taurin’s fields lay fallow. After walking about the grounds, the trio climbed onto the porch that wrapped around the exterior.

“You know,” Karayan mused, a thoughtful gleam in his eyes, “I believe this piece of land is considered part of Magar’s property. He showed me the boundaries once, and I could have sworn this plot was included.” He looked over the fields that eventually ended in a forest, beyond which, Bendyk had learned, was Magar’s family residence, a large mansion by most people’s reckonings.

Zeroun peered into a window. “I’d be interested to learn where Magar met this Rey Niris gent.” His gaze fell on something in the interior that made him cry out. “What is that? Karayan, come here!”

The two men huddled together, staring through the windowpane.

“An archeology text,” Karayan muttered. “And those drawings.”

“Magar said the man fights like a warrior.” Zeroun spread his hands. “Where do you suppose he’s from? No one around here possesses such skills.”

“Magar is concealing his knowledge of this man,” Karayan concluded. Turning his gaze to Bendyk, he fixed the young man with an intense glare. “You’ll have to learn what Rey Niris’s purpose is here. Magar would be the best source of information.”

“I’ll question Magar when I’m ready.”

“It can’t be soon enough. If you won’t interrogate him, then I will.”

Bendyk raised a blond eyebrow. “I said, I’ll handle this.” His quiet but commanding tone

should leave no doubt in their minds that he'd assert his authority if necessary.

During the return drive to the Palisades, his brow furrowed in thought. Zeroun sat stiffly in the front, morosely silent. Karayan drove faster over the winding roads than Bendyk would have liked, but he said nothing, immersed in speculation. He wondered if he should pursue his investigation of Sirvat or interrupt it to question Magar. He'd like some answers from the man.

Feeling uncomfortable with the lack of information they had on Rey Niris, he didn't deem it wise to acknowledge the bonding ceremony he'd performed between Leena and Taurin, though he'd duly registered the event in the village ledger.

Returning to his office, he found Swill at her desk reviewing her notes. She glanced up as he entered, a guarded expression clouding her face.

"I need to discuss my findings with you." She spoke in a low tone as though wary of being overheard.

"Sorry I'm so late. Zeroun and Karayan set off to snoop around Rey Niris's place, and I thought it best if I accompanied them. How about joining me for dinner?" He was weary from the unexpected trip but wanted to compare notes with Swill.

Swill had never yet accepted an invitation from him, although he tried every day. But this time she seemed to have a change of heart. Maybe she noticed the lines of fatigue etching his face or the concern in his eyes, because her demeanor softened. When her face relaxed, she became attractive and Bendyk felt himself drawn to her. Theirs was supposed to be a business relationship, and yet he found himself curious about her personal life. His interest was acceptable; missionaries were not expected to remain celibate. Indeed, mating was encouraged within the religious order, not that he had any intentions in that regard!

"Do you propose to eat in the dining commons?" she asked.

Bendyk's eyebrows shot up. She was actually considering his offer? "Er... no. I thought we might try a new café that's opened up in town. The chef specializes in roast game. It's a quiet place, and we can talk there undisturbed."

"That sounds fine."

All thoughts of work fled Bendyk's mind when they were seated in the restaurant at a small table with a white cloth and a votive candle in a cobalt blue glass holder. The decor was provincial and cozy, with a fire lit in a stone fireplace to ward off the chill of the evening.

Taking a sip from his glass of white wine, Bendyk let his eyes feast on Swill. She wasn't taken to wearing feminine frills; her style of dress was simple, almost rebellious. But Bendyk was getting used to her ways and found her viewpoint to be refreshing. She wore a burgundy blouse with a low scoop neckline and a long black skirt. Around her neck hung a string of beads. An inexpensive piece of jewelry, it provided a splash of color that complemented her healthy tanned complexion. In the muted candlelight, her amber eyes glowed like polished topaz gemstones.

"Let's talk about you," he suggested. "It's a far more interesting topic than the Treasury records or Sirvat's background."

"Me?" Swill blinked.

She didn't like to talk about herself and had hoped to continue their work discussion in more comfortable surroundings. But the atmosphere was intimate, more so than she'd expected, and it discomfited her. Bendyk was a handsome man when his righteous airs didn't pucker his face and tighten his jaw.

The way he looked at her now made her limbs go slack, and a warm feeling settled into her stomach. A shock of blond hair crossed his forehead, contrasting with the deep blue of his

eyes. He'd removed his cloak and sat facing her in a fawn-colored longshirt that did nothing to hide the wide set of his shoulders and his broad chest.

She wondered what he did to stay in shape; so many of the priests she had known had grown flabby from years of indulgence. But Bendyk was young. He had his career ahead of him, and it struck her that he might be aiming for a position in the very Synod they were investigating.

She resented the way he'd recruited her to this task, but after beginning work, she had realized its importance. Bendyk and his sister had a weighty responsibility on their shoulders. She admired the way he bravely forged ahead, assuming the leadership role as though he were born to it.

"I'd rather learn more about you." She hid her shyness by taking a hasty swig of wine.

He smiled, an even, white flash of his teeth. "You don't like talking about yourself, do you? I've seen where you live. You've accomplished a lot with your life so far. Why did you take the job you did? Was it for the travel, or do you just like helping the villeins during your tithing counts?"

She lifted her chin. "I like to help people who don't have the same advantages as others. But I also needed to change my environment. You met my parents. The atmosphere at home is stifling. It seemed like a golden opportunity to get away."

"For how long are you planning to keep your position?"

Swill glanced away, her long lashes like crescent moons against her cheeks.

"Well?" he urged, aware of her hesitation. What dreams did she harbor? What hopes had she for the future?

"I want the family I never had," she spoke in a low, tremulous tone. "I'd like a small house in a quiet neighborhood with several children running about and a man who makes enough of a living to support us. That's all I've ever hoped for. It's not very modern, is it?"

Bendyk was touched by her sad, wistful expression, the more so because she'd shared part of herself with him. He'd never expected someone with such an abrasive personality to confess her dream of being a housemate. This side of her was totally unexpected, and Bendyk found himself warming to her even more.

"Is that so?" He gave her an admiring glance. "Perhaps we share the same ideals."

"What do you mean?" Her startled gaze flew to his face. "I would have thought you'd want to advance up the ladder of the clergy, perhaps to become a Docent or even a Candor like your father. Or maybe you have your eye on the Synod."

Bendyk quirked an eyebrow. "I always thought that was the route I'd take, at least after I entered the calling. Before that..." His words trailed off, and his face closed in painful memory.

Swill reached her hand across the table, closing her palm over his. Bendyk gazed at her, taking strength from the warmth of her skin. He made tiny circular movements in the palm of her hand with his fingers.

"Before the accident, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life. I was spoiled, having always gotten what I wanted. A particular ambition hadn't come to me then. If I hadn't been so rushed, I might not have driven that night, but..."

His voice faltered, and he couldn't go on. How could he tell her about the night that had changed his life, the night Mama had died and he would have embraced death himself, if it hadn't been for Lothar's intervention. He'd pledged himself to Lothar for saving him and now was following the vocation that allowed him to assuage his guilt.

He downed the rest of his wine, awash in memories he'd rather forget—that horrible night, the snow falling outside, the drive on the dark, winding road, the steep hill, and the icy

surface. If only he'd let his mother drive instead.

A shudder racked his body, and he squeezed his eyes shut to block the images haunting his mind.

"Bendyk?" Swill's voice roused him from his reverie.

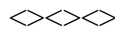
"I don't want to talk about it."

"Fine, but I'd like to listen whenever you're ready."

She changed the subject, aware she'd stumbled onto a painful topic. The realization that she wanted to help Bendyk struck her with a blast of irony. Bendyk, a missionary, had set his purpose in life to help others. Yet he appeared to have a deep need within himself for solace.

Swill had never thought of herself as the nurturing type. She'd struggled too hard to meet her goals to think often of others, except for the villeins she aided. She'd never allowed herself to become personally involved, afraid that emotional entanglements might make her vulnerable. She'd had enough pain throughout her childhood and had meant to spare herself any further anguish.

But seeing Bendyk's world-weary face made her want to comfort him. It was a new feeling for her, almost like a springtime bud growing on a bush and about to burst into blossom. Did he have this effect on everyone else, or was she the only one? He truly did have the power to inspire and to change one's outlook. And such a personality was usually evident in men destined for greatness.



Leena settled back in her seat, enjoying the caress of the warm breeze on her skin. The rider jolted and bounced over the rocky road. A canopy of tree branches provided shade, cooling the air.

"I hope Bendyk is having more success than we are," Leena told Taurin as they headed inland. "Hopefully we can confer with him once we finish this part of our mission. How do you propose we reach Grotus's island?" Worry nagged at her over the prospect.

"I know a way. Trust me. I've brought along some of the supplies we'll need, and we can salvage the rest."

The lead vehicle turned west toward higher ground, the route punctuated by tall, leafy trees and a profusion of wildflowers whose perfumed scent weighed heavily in the air. Splashes of pink, orange, and orchid-colored blossoms lined the paved roadway. Taurin's eyes took them in appreciatively. He'd bet there were some exotic specimens here that would flourish in his garden. Too bad he didn't have time to look around.

After a while they stopped to get drinks from the cooler in the back of the missionaries' rider and snacks from the provisions Alber had provided. Taurin wondered why the plantation owner had been so accommodating when he didn't want them to reveal the Chocola Company's investment in the Black Lands. Did he trust them not to reveal their knowledge, or did Alber plan to silence them through other means? Taurin was surprised the man hadn't offered a bribe, but that could be expensive for all four of them. He decided to be on the alert just in case.

His precautions proved wise when, two days later, his party found themselves abandoned on the trail. They were high in the mountains, and their guide, having stopped the journey to take a break, suddenly vanished. Since the road didn't appear to be well-traveled, Taurin deduced their route had been chosen for nefarious purposes. He said as much to his companions.

"Native tribes are supposed to reside in the interior," he warned them. "I'm not so sure

we should have gone in this direction.”

“I did think we were heading too far west.” Leena wrinkled her brow. The air at this elevation was cooler. She folded her arms around herself, glad she’d brought along the work shirt and breeches she wore.

“Which road should we follow?” Sister Bertrice indicated a fork in the road ahead.

One branch led down the mountainside toward what Leena imagined was the valley they’d been advised to follow. The left-hand trail veered upward in slanting, dangerous curves. At least they’d filled their fuel tanks recently, but if they took a wrong turn, they’d risk running dry. Then they would have to proceed on foot.

She glanced at her two suitcases in the rear of their vehicle, realizing how ludicrous it was to have brought so much luggage. One of the bags held a backpack with her archeological supplies. If necessary, she could stuff a few outfits in there.

“We’ll take the road heading down.” Taurin signaled the others to board their vehicle. “If the river’s there, we’ll know we’re on the right track.”

“I’ll send a prayer to Lothar that he may guide us,” Brother Aron shouted.

Taurin rolled his eyes. “Do as you wish. Maybe it’ll help.”

Slowly they started down the decline, a thick wood on either side obstructing their view. The hill rounded out into a flat run. They were halfway along when the woods seemed to move straight into their path. Behind the lead vehicle, Taurin came to a screeching halt. The missionaries turned toward him and waved their hands frantically.

Facing them were scores of natives, their brown bodies plastered with a covering of leaves. Their headdresses contained several antler-like twigs along with colorful feathers. Streaks of paint adorned their cheeks and foreheads. The warriors glowered at the unexpected visitors—or *were* they unexpected?

“He knew we’d go down this road,” Taurin mumbled. “Ives knew these people were here and would stop us. He led us into a trap.”

Leena’s eyes rounded in fear. “He’s obviously following Alber’s orders. Do you think many visitors to Alber’s plantation disappear this way?” Looking at the warriors surrounding them, primitive spears pointing in their direction, she shuddered.

A fierce-looking warrior stepped forward and nudged Taurin with his spear, indicating he should get out of the vehicle. He did what he was told, realizing it was useless to resist when they were so outnumbered. He motioned for the others to copy his action. Babbling amongst themselves, a group of natives began ransacking their supplies while Taurin and the others were herded away at spear point.

Her heart hammering in fear, Leena stumbled over dry roots and rocks underfoot as they were forced to march through the woods. The scent of rich, earthy humus mingled with the aroma of evergreens, but she was too frightened to care about her surroundings. Could these savages speak Xanese, the standard language? If not, how would they communicate? Their dialect was incomprehensible to her.

“Can you understand them?” she whispered to Taurin, who strode beside her. Whenever they had to cross a particularly difficult stretch of territory, he held her elbow to assist her. She was grateful for the comfort of his presence and wondered if they’d have any chance for escape.

“I have no idea what they’re saying,” Taurin replied, his face grim.

They seemed to walk for hours. By the time they reached the encampment dusk was falling, and Leena was nearly sobbing with exhaustion. She felt ill from hunger and thirst, though they’d been given drinks of water along the way, and her muscles ached from exertion.

Feeling like a zombie, she obeyed without question when they were directed to enter a small round hut built of mud bricks with a thatched roof. There was one slitted window for ventilation, but it was high up and didn't provide much light when the door was shut and sealed. Enclosed by darkness, despair overwhelmed her and she sank to the ground, covering her face with her hands.

Taurin took out his cloth and quickly swathed it about his head so his eyes would be screened. His hearing picked up a conversation outside the thick walls of the hut, but he didn't understand the language and couldn't make out what was said. They're probably deciding what to do with us, he thought ruefully. The situation didn't look good.

If necessary, he'd use the blaster secreted on his person. Magar had forbidden him to bring any objects of violence when he'd offered Taurin sanctuary, but being used to fending for himself, Taurin had slipped in the weapon unnoticed. He'd kept it locked in a cabinet in his house, but this mission had necessitated its removal. As Leena's protector, he deemed it his job to give them every advantage, and Taurin admitted that it gave him a measure of reassurance to feel the weapon strapped under his pants' leg against his calf.

The air outside had grown quite chilly by the time they'd reached the encampment, but the inside of the hut seemed warm. Peering around, Taurin noticed a grating in a far corner from which steam arose.

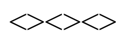
"Look at that," he said to the others. "Where do you suppose these people found a source of heat?"

Leena raised her head. "There could be a hot spring nearby that they tap via a series of conduits to their huts. It would mean they're more intelligent than we thought."

"We'll have to see what happens next before formulating a plan for escape." Taurin strode to Leena's side and lowered himself to a spot beside her. A covering of hay provided soft cushioning over the cold dirt floor.

Brother Aron stood firmly in the center of the hut, peering at them. In the gloom, it was difficult to read his expression. "We must pray for deliverance." He folded his hands in front of his robe.

"You do what you want." Taurin wrapped an arm around Leena's shoulder and drew her close. If they were to stay here for the night, he needed the comfort of her body. Apparently she appreciated his gesture; she snuggled closer, giving a soft sigh of pleasure. His arm tightened around her involuntarily. He'd get them out of this, one way or another.



The first rays of sunlight piercing the room brought Taurin to full wakefulness. The air was cool and crisp, and he realized the steam had been turned off for the night. Leena was still asleep, leaning against his shoulder. Her golden tresses streamed over her bosom. Her sweet womanly scent and the quiet sounds of her breathing made him wish they were alone, but the missionary couple snoozed across from them in the tiny hut.

Gently he roused her, unable to keep his lips from brushing hers in a tender good morning kiss. She smiled up at him, her eyes dewy. Glancing at the missionaries to make sure they were still asleep, he pressed his mouth to hers with greater urgency. She responded eagerly, moving her body so that she molded into his angles. He held her closer, his need escalating, the desperation of their situation driving him to seek the oldest comfort known to mankind.

His mouth slanted over hers again and again as he sought solace in her sweetness. When her hands roamed his broad back, he moaned with pleasure before thrusting his tongue into her

mouth. She took it greedily, playing with him, her own need evident in the tautness of her nipples against his chest that he could feel through the fabric of her blouse. By the stars, he'd like to take her right here and now, regardless of who was watching!

A loud throat clearing told him that someone else was awake. Releasing her reluctantly, he glanced across the hut's interior, his eyes meeting Sister Bertrice's disapproving frown.

Footsteps approached from outside and the door was flung open. A bright stream of sunlight poured inside the hut. Brother Aron awoke noisily, muttering a prayer. A native woman who was too afraid to look into their faces brought them a simple meal of gruel and water.

As they ate, Leena surreptitiously studied Taurin. He'd removed the cloth from his head and looked magnificently handsome with his thick ebony hair and clear gray eyes. She'd awakened once during the night and had glanced up at him.

She thought she'd seen a faint glow coming from the front of his face, but because his head was swathed in the cloth she couldn't be sure. This morning, when he woke her with a kiss, there was enough light in the hut for her to see him clearly.

Her mouth still burned from his kiss and the pleasure of it brought a hot flush to her face. She'd been disappointed when he drew away, but they couldn't very well continue with Sister Bertrice looking on.

Flinching from the brightness, she followed the others outside as they were led to an outhouse. Then they were prodded, again at spearpoint, to follow a troop of native tribesmen clothed in furs and shell necklaces, their faces streaked with paint. Huts similar to theirs dotted the hillside.

Apparently, they'd come quite a distance the day before. The elevation made her breath come short, and her exhalations steamed from the cold. They were led along a wooded trail toward a shady grotto bordered by crumbling stone pillars and other structures familiar to Leena.

"By the grace of Lothar! It's a ruin." She glanced excitedly at Taurin, whose face wore a look of nonchalance.

Her heart thumping wildly from their discovery, Leena's fear evaporated in her excitement. She wished they could explore, but they were driven in front of a rectangular, flat stone, which had the ominous appearance of an altar. Forced to kneel in front of it, she gazed in dread at the ornately feathered tribesman who stood facing them.

The tribal leader's features were fierce, his movements menacing as he raised his staff above their heads and muttered incantations in a strange language. Circling tribespeople chanted and swayed rhythmically, their voices rising into a shrill crescendo.

A stone pillar stood behind the altar. At its rear, Leena caught sight of a lazy stream, and her ears picked up the sound of gurgling water intermingled with a strange sucking noise. When the rising sun reached the top of the column, a ray pierced forth with sparkling radiance, and she noticed what hadn't been visible before—a round, faceted crystal embedded inside the stone column. In the direct light of a sunbeam, the crystal began to glow, and the sound of the stream changed from a happy bubbling to a hissing boil.

"Holy waters!" she exclaimed, startled.

"The crystal appears to provide some kind of energy," Taurin remarked.

Brother Aron, who stood slightly off to the side, pointed. "The water is divided. Part of it siphons off below."

"I'll bet this is the source of their heating system." Leena glanced at Taurin when he didn't respond.

His expression was harsh in the dappled light penetrating the grotto, the angles of his face

gaunt. Dark stubble covered his jaw, and circles shadowed his eyes. Having focused only on his sensual attractiveness after he'd kissed her awake, she hadn't realized how tired and worried he must be.

The tribal leader muttered at them angrily, and a thrust of spears indicated they were to remain silent. Pointing at Sister Bertrice, he shouted instructions to several of his followers. They advanced upon her and, ignoring her screams, seized her by the arms and dragged her to the altar, where they forced her onto her back. The tribal leader withdrew a long curved dagger from his belt and held it above the shrieking missionary while the tribesmen restrained her arms.

"Dear deity, they're going to sacrifice her." Leena clapped a hand to her mouth.

"Not if I can help it." Taurin realized the time had come to play his hand. He went for his weapon, but just then a cloud drifted across the sun, dampening the light.

Purposefully, he stared straight at the tribal leader, whose eyes widened as the true nature of Taurin's vision was revealed to him. The dagger dropped from his hand onto the stone ledge at the floor of the altar. With a shriek of terror, he turned on his heels and fled.

The tribesmen, following his example, dropped their spears and wheeled away as though pursued by demons.

The cloud broke, and as the sun brightened the sky, Leena frowned in puzzlement. "What happened?"

Sister Bertrice sat up and rubbed her arms, a dazed look on her face. Leena hastened forward to assist her off the sacrificial altar.

"Something frightened them away," Taurin said mildly.

"They were looking at you."

He shrugged, unwilling to give an explanation. "We don't have time to analyze their rationale. I suggest we get away from here."

"Correction!" called Brother Aron, who'd been standing behind the rest of them. "Sister Bertrice and I will escape. You and your lady will be viewed as unfortunate sacrifices to the native tribes. You shouldn't have wandered so high into the mountains."

Taurin spun around to find Brother Aron pointing a blaster at his chest. "Where did you get that?" he said, his voice dangerously quiet.

"Never mind. If you believe in a god, I suggest you pray to him now. And you, madam"—he nodded toward Leena—"may request Lothar to receive you."

"Receive me! What do you mean?" Stunned, Leena watched Sister Bertrice take a stance by Brother Aron's side, an evil sneer on her face. Surely the two didn't mean to kill them and leave them here? "Why are you doing this?"

Brother Aron smirked. "I have friends in high places who don't want you to succeed on your quest. My instructions were to intercept you and see that you met a fatal end. So be it." He raised his weapon.

Taurin's muscles tensed. "Who sent you? Surely you can tell us before we die."

"Wodeners don't betray their sources. Prepare to meet your maker."

As his finger twitched on the trigger, Taurin threw himself into a flying leap that landed him a kick at Brother Aron's knee. Knocked off balance, the clergyman's shot went wild. A beam of red light sizzled through the air as he toppled backward. Taurin sprawled atop him, and the two rolled in the dirt, each struggling for control. From the corner of his eye, Taurin saw Sister Bertrice's skirts flying past.

"Stop her!" he shouted to Leena.

Leena charged after the woman, gasping when Sister Bertrice whirled around clutching a

knife in her palm. She pounced at Leena, grabbing her by the hair and thrusting the blade at her throat.

Taking in the situation at a glance, Taurin felt his heart pound against his ribcage. His hand scrabbled in the dirt to pick up a hefty rock.

Sister Bertrice spared a glance at her downed companion. “Stay where you are, Taurin, or I’ll kill her.”

Leena held herself immobile, afraid the dirk at her throat would pierce her flesh if she moved. “Lothar, help us,” she prayed silently.

Shouts from the village drew her assailant’s attention and that’s when Taurin made his move. He raised his hand and a rock hurtled through the air, striking Sister Bertrice clear between the eyes.

“Come on! Let’s get out of here.” He sprang to his feet.

Hesitating, she glanced at the missionaries, who lay prone on the ground. “What about them?”

Taurin gave her a glowering look. “I suspect they were with the Truthsayer movement. Let’s go; we don’t have time to waste.”

Casting aside her regrets, Leena followed him into the woods. They skirted the village until Taurin called for a halt beside a thicket of tall shrubs.

“Wait here. I’ll see if I can recover any of our gear.”

Before she could protest, he disappeared behind a stand of low-branched, leafy trees. Leena waited anxiously, biting her lip and reflecting on their close call with the missionaries—if they were, indeed, members of the clergy. It was likely they’d assumed the disguise to put themselves above suspicion.

Taurin loped into view, carrying their sacks and a few unfamiliar items. Cautious to avoid attention from the tribesmen, they didn’t speak as they descended the hill in search of their abandoned riders. When they did find them, Taurin was dismayed to see the lead vehicle had been completely dismantled by the curious natives. The one he and Leena had used was still intact.

A heap of parts on the ground attracted his attention. He threw several items into the backseat of their rider, along with the things he’d already salvaged.

“Get in,” he ordered. Taurin slid into the driver’s seat.

Soon they were rattling downhill at a rapid pace, neither one daring to look behind to see if they were being pursued. Their only thought was to reach a reasonable level before darkness fell.

“We have to avoid Alber’s men,” Leena shouted over the engine noise and the bouncing gyrations of the vehicle.

“They won’t be looking for us. Ives probably went back and told Alber we’d been conveniently lost.”

Seeing the fear reflected on her face, Taurin motioned her closer. She snuggled against him, grateful for his warmth and strength. They drove for hours, each immersed in their own thoughts. Eventually she succumbed to exhaustion and fell asleep, awakening when they finally reached the valley below.

Along the banks of a stream, Taurin stopped for a break. Wild berries and trees laden with fruit provided a meal. They happily picked their fill of nature’s bounty and quenched their thirst with cool fresh water from the stream.

“Tomorrow we’ll make a break for Grotus’s island,” Taurin said. “We need to find

shelter for tonight. It's getting late, and I'd like to secure our rider in a location where we won't be noticed. Let's move on."

Leena obligingly climbed back into the rider.

He followed a paved road that twisted in and out of various settlements, whizzing through so quickly they couldn't be identified. Coming to an offshoot, he drove up a wooded hillside to a plateau, parking at the edge of a flower-strewn meadow that appealed to the gardener in him.

"These wildflowers grow in such profusion," he remarked, stretching his legs and breathing in the crisp air as dusk encroached upon the land. "I wonder why Lothar's beneficence extends here and yet he plagues our land with drought. The people who live on this island don't follow the Faith. They were banished here because they're dissenters. If you ask me, I don't think Lothar is playing fair."

Leena glared at him, hands on her hips. "I thought you didn't believe in Lothar."

"Maybe you're convincing me there's something to believe in." Taurin glanced at the golden wisps of hair being blown about her face by the cool breeze.

At one of their stops, she'd changed behind a clump of bushes into a ruby-red gown, the velvety fabric keeping her warm against the cooler temperatures that prevailed on this side of the island.

Seeing the admiring gleam in Taurin's eye, Leena's limbs trembled. Fearing she might say or do something wrong, she turned away and walked aimlessly across the meadow. Her feet stumbled over a solid object poking from the ground.

She stooped to get a closer look, and her mouth dropped open. Dear deity! The piece of rock looked like it came from the same type of carved stone block evident at other ruins.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Taurin, look at this.” Leena knelt and used a dried twig to scrape away the dirt until she’d dug the stone from the soil.

“Can you get my supplies, please?”

Taurin brought her the sack with her archeological tools. She took a brush and gently swept away the surface grime. Years of wind and rain had taken its toll. She could barely discern the symbols.

“The Black Lands must be dotted with these ruins. Pieces could be scattered anywhere.” She sat back on her haunches to gaze up at him.

He stood by patiently, the breeze ruffling his hair. She thought he’d never looked more magnificent than now, with the setting sun emitting a tangerine glow behind him. With his dark clothes, broad-shouldered figure, and menacing aura, one might fancy he came from the demon world—except that his expression was tender as he watched her, and it melted her heart.

She ignored the wave of warmth that seduced her senses under his scrutiny. “How curious that the Synod has never mentioned these finds.”

“Outsiders are forbidden to come here,” Taurin reminded her, his voice gruff. “These ruins must not be important enough to be studied.”

“What about the crystal used by those natives in the mountains, the ones who captured us? I wish we could have examined it. The crystal may have been the source of power for the steam heat.”

“It’s too late for that now. Let’s make camp.”

Taurin instructed her to choose a likely spot, then he strode to the rider and obtained a large bundle of cloth he must have stolen from the villagers. After spreading the material on the ground among the wildflowers, he sat with Leena to watch the sun descend in a brilliant display of colors. As the sky darkened, a perfumed scent pervaded the air.

“This island is lovely,” Leena commented, while every fiber of her being sprang into awareness at his proximity. “I don’t understand why they call it the Black Lands.”

“Perhaps it’s related to the evil hearts of the men who are sent here.” He paused. “Or is it the evil intentions of the people who send them? I’m not so sure who is right or wrong anymore.”

Startled, she glanced at him. The thunderous expression on his face made her swallow hard. She hoped his fears were ungrounded, that the Synod wasn’t guilty of treachery to the people. Yet some member had stolen the horn, and in so doing, threatened their chances for survival.

The horn had to be restored to maintain the balance of society, particularly in stabilizing the climate and providing the wellness lozenge.

Already they’d learned someone in the hierarchy had permitted the Chocola Company to harvest beans on this island. That person was profiting off the misery of the inhabitants. Raking stiff fingers through her hair, Leena wished she could contact Bendyk. That would have to wait. On the morrow they’d make for Grotus’s island, and who knew what revealing discoveries

awaited them there?

In the meantime, she had to spend the night here with Taurin. It was growing cold, and she was aware of his eyes on her, his silent inquiry. By all that was holy, how could she rid herself of this restless urge she had in his presence? It destroyed her peace of mind, knowing he was so near. Daring to look at him, she gasped to find his gaze locked on her mouth.

Slowly her eyes raised to meet his smoldering gaze.

Taurin struggled to fight his attraction to Leena. The glow from the sky was backlit against her hair, making her seem as though she were lit with an ethereal aura. His gaze fixed on her mouth, her pink lips soft and full, and he longed to sweep her into his arms and lie with her upon the bed of flowers, making love. But the intensity of lust raging in his veins frightened him, and he didn't want to start something he couldn't finish. One kiss wouldn't be enough, but he dared not risk hurting her with his violent nature. Afraid that he would lose control if he touched her, he swathed his head in the usual black cloth and settled onto his side.

"We need to get an early start in the morning," he said, his tone gruffer than he'd intended. He wanted her so badly that he couldn't keep the rough edge from his voice. "Get some sleep."

Leena couldn't help feeling disappointed. For a brief moment she'd thought he was going to kiss her, but then he'd abruptly stretched out, turning away from her. Yearning for his attention, she laid down her head upon the rumpled shawl she had fashioned into a pillow and squirmed restlessly.

Every inch of her was aware of Taurin lying beside her, his head shrouded. Piqued that he wouldn't remove the cloth and share his reasons for wearing it, she tried to imagine what he might be hiding but quickly gave up the conjecture as a useless exercise.

As the air cooled, the warmth from his body seemed to mingle with hers, keeping her from getting too cold. Or was it her blood, which coursed through her so hotly at his nearness, that made her feel so warm? How could she want him when he was so unlike anyone she'd ever known? Why wasn't it Malcolm's image that sprang into her mind when she closed her eyes, instead of Taurin's menacing figure?

Malcolm represented security and familiarity, and she'd thought this was what she sought in life. Now she doubted that Malcolm could ever rouse her passions. She was fond of him, but as a close friend. Being bonded to someone like Taurin would be infinitely more exciting.

I am wed to him, she reminded herself. Lothar save me, but I'm beginning to wish he would treat me as his wife.

As soon as the thought entered her head, she chastised herself. *Shame on you!* You're nearly pledged to Malcolm. Would you dishonor your family by taking such a man as this to bed? The marriage is in name only. It will soon be annulled. And despite the freedoms allowed in their society, she knew Malcolm would expect her to be faithful.

Yet as Taurin shifted his position, his buttocks inadvertently bumping against hers, Leena couldn't help the small gasp that escaped her lips. Every bone in her body stiffened, and she held herself rigid while he regained a position of comfort. His breathing sounded ragged, as though his rest were troubled, but she didn't dare move lest she betray her desire. He must never know how much she craved his touch and yearned to feel the pressure of his mouth on hers. After a long while, she drifted into an uncomfortable sleep.

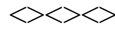
Sometime during the night, Taurin awakened to find her legs entwined with his, one arm thrown against his chest. As he shifted his position, she murmured unintelligibly. He agonized with each contact between them and slept very little, savoring the silken feel of her hair against

his arm and the luscious warmth of her body. Overhead, a myriad of stars glittered in the night sky, and cool air swept across the meadow. Taurin wasn't cold. He desired Leena until the flames of lust consumed him, heating his blood to a raging torrent.

He kept telling himself she was forbidden fruit. He couldn't have her, and it broke his heart that while she was wed to him, she was nearly promised to another. Perhaps Malcolm would reject her, and she would seek him out for solace.

But quickly Taurin discarded that notion as being absurd. Why should Leena ever come to him again? Once she was back at the Palisades, she'd resume her former life, and her position did not include associating with people like him.

Casting off his daydreams as a waste of time, Taurin tucked his elbow under his head and closed his eyes. But he heard the soft sounds of her breathing and smelled the sweet feminine fragrance that was hers alone. Sleep wouldn't come to him this night. It was his fate to live in isolation. He'd just have to isolate his emotions as well, in order to preserve his sanity.



Leena awoke to a fresh dawn, scented with the fragrance of wildflowers. With her eyes still closed, she reached out to touch Taurin, seeking reassurance from his presence, but her fingers met empty air. Her eyelids snapped open, and she peered at the rumpled blanket beside her. He was gone.

Frightened, she bolted upright, giving a cry of relief when she spotted him across the meadow, bending beside their rider. Standing, she stretched and shook out her stiff joints. Then she headed toward him.

He'd tucked his black shirt into a pair of matching trousers. His booted feet were a dark contrast to the brilliant flowers surrounding them. He appeared to be assembling a piece of machinery.

"What are you doing?" she asked as she approached.

His face brightened, and he gestured to his apparatus. "I'm building us a means of transportation to Grotus's island. I took this fan motor from the other rider, and I'd had the foresight to bring a sail from the ship. Here, help me spread the canvas."

He'd attached various ropes to different edges of the sturdy fabric. He had also removed the seats from the other rider and secured ropes to the seating platform.

She helped him spread the canvas material over the dewy grass. "I don't understand. How does it work?"

"You'll see. The weather is perfect. It's cool, and there's a slight breeze. According to what I've read, morning is the best time for flying this contraption."

"What on Xan is it?" Curiosity sluiced through her.

"A hot air balloon. It's the only means I could think of to reach Grotus's island. We can't get a boat to take us there, and the higher air currents are too turbulent for commercial flight. We should be able to make it if we remain at a low altitude."

Leena's eyes blazed. "But we don't even know where his island is located. There could be thousands of them in the archipelago."

"Have faith, madam. Lothar will guide us." He gave her a sardonic grin.

Leena's fists clenched. "You mock me, sir."

Taurin's eyes softened as he regarded her. The fiery display of her golden hair tumbling over her shoulders and the brilliance of her blue eyes made him instantly contrite that he had

taunted her.

“I’m sorry. Perhaps we should say morning prayers together. If there is any divine help available, we could use it.”

Leena gazed at him in astonishment. Had she heard him correctly? He had just agreed to say morning prayers with her? Taking advantage of the moment, she bowed her head and began her litany.

“Praise be to Lothar for all our blessings—for life, for work and rest, for home and love and friendship. May we continue to be worthy of your generosity, dear lord. As this new day dawns, we awake renewed and refreshed, inspired by your love for us and your graciousness. May our day be filled with beauty, goodness, and truth as we follow in the path of your righteousness. Mahala.”

“Mahala,” Taurin murmured, then caught himself.

Demon’s blood! If he wasn’t careful, he’d end up praying on every occasion as she did and would accomplish nothing. No, that wasn’t quite true, he told himself as he resumed his task. Leena was a qualified archeologist. Her faith was part of her, but it didn’t stand in the way of her goals, nor did it inhibit her personal growth. If anything, it gave her strength and the courage to carry on despite formidable odds. He admired her devotion but could never see himself in a similar position.

I wonder if she’ll ever give herself as willingly to a man as she does to her god, he thought. Malcolm may find out, but he sure wouldn’t.

He removed a couple of cans from his heavy burlap sack, rummaged around in the bag, and then cursed.

“What is it?” Leena’s stomach growled, reminding him they hadn’t eaten since yesterday. She pressed a hand to her middle without complaining.

“These are chemical granules normally used in mixtures for fertilizer.” Taurin’s brow furrowed in annoyance. “I forgot to bring something as simple as a can opener. I have tools that I found in the back of the rider, but they won’t do the job.”

“We have my archeological equipment. There’s got to be something you can use.” She hastened back to the blanket where she’d left her gear.

A few minutes later, Taurin was foraging through a box containing short-handled shovels, hoes, cutting shears, a small ax, a knife, string, variously-shaped trowels, tweezers, paint brushes, and assorted report forms. He chose an unfamiliar sharp-edged instrument and hacked away at the top of the can until the space was big enough for him to pour out the chemical.

“This is not the way these compounds are generally mixed,” he explained as he poured them together. “Combined in this manner, they make a volatile substance that will serve our purpose.”

After they’d gathered their belongings and grabbed some fruit for a quick meal, Taurin was ready to cast off. He fired up the makeshift burners and started pumping hot air into the fabric’s expanding envelope.

“What if the sail catches fire?” Leena asked, her eyes wide with apprehension.

“If direct heat touches it, the fabric might melt, but it won’t burn. Go ahead and step inside.”

She obeyed, hanging her arm over the edge since the space was cramped. The fabric ballooned upward. Taurin joined her on the platform and tossed off the tether lines. Their makeshift balloon began to rise. As their height increased, the meadow below got smaller and smaller.

Leena dropped into her seat and clutched its sides as their platform swayed back and forth. She wanted to shut her eyes in terror but forced them open to observe the view.

“We’ll head west,” Taurin shouted over the roar of the burners. He yanked on the blast lever to send another shot of hot air up into the envelope.

Leena turned her face away from the searing heat of the blowers. Since talking was so difficult over the roaring noise, she concentrated on quelling her panic instead. Periodically Taurin used shots of the burners to lift the balloon or maintain a steady altitude as the air cooled inside the envelope. By pulling on lines connected to the vents high in the fabric, he could release air on either side of their craft. This would rotate their direction so that their voyage became a feat of juggling between heating and venting.

As they rose toward the sky, Leena glanced around in amazement, forgetting her fear in the magnificence of the view. The volcanic origin of the Black Lands soon became evident. As they floated by the mountain ridge to the north, a white plume of smoke spewed from a still-active vent. Taurin steered clear of the higher range. Lush greenery covered most of the island except for the west coast, where lava flows had reduced the land to a black, rocky void.

“So this is why it’s called the Black Lands.” She leaned forward for a better view. Her motion rocked the platform, and she jerked back with a cry of alarm.

“Don’t move too fast,” Taurin cautioned, pulling on one of the side vents to steady their course.

Beyond the blackened shoreline was a stretch of sea that shimmered in reflection from the rising sun. Leena shaded her eyes as she peered toward the archipelago in the distance. She could barely make out the series of islands dotting the water, but they loomed larger as their craft approached. Terrified they’d fall into the water if a gust of wind caught them the wrong way, she sat rigidly in her seat.

Taurin appeared fully in control of the vessel, however, and he took a pair of viewfinder glasses from the sack at his feet. Clamping the strap around his head, he gazed out to sea through the magnifying lenses. It wasn’t until they had passed over the first of the islands that he pointed excitedly.

“Over there!”

Leena barely heard him over the intense roar of the blowers, but the animated expression on his face was self-explanatory. She rose in her seat to glance over the side. Taurin jiggled a finger, yelling something at her. Sure enough, she could make out a spot of color on one of the islands below. No doubt Taurin could see more clearly through his special glasses.

He waved at her, but she didn’t understand what he was trying to say until he yanked on one of the cords and the platform shifted. She fell back into her seat and remained there, her knuckles white as she clutched her armrests.

They’d begun their descent, and her stomach lurched as Taurin vented hot air through the top of the balloon. Their rate of descent increased rapidly. If that is Grotus’s hideaway, Leena thought, Taurin is planning to put us down right smack in the middle of it. She glanced at him questioningly, but his mouth was set in a grim line, and his shoulders were hunched as though he were deep in concentration.

The island below consisted of two mountainous humps. Nestled in the valley between them sat a palatial structure with manicured lawns and formal gardens. A natural forest, woven with streams and brooks, surrounded the estate. An approach road ran along the ravine.

They continued to lurch downward. Upon Taurin’s signal, she slung her backpack over her shoulders. Before their launch, she’d stuffed her meager belongings inside, along with her

most valued archeological supplies. Taurin did the same with his sack after removing the viewfinder glasses and replacing them in his kit.

As they veered in on their final approach, Leena surveyed the four-story mansion in more detail. It consisted of fitted lime stones and elaborate woodwork. Lush shrubs, cultivated beds of flowers, and fine specimens of cut leaf maples bordered a series of winding gravel paths.

Their imminent arrival had been detected, and armed guards rushed onto the lawn. As they briefly touched down, Taurin urged her to jump. She landed on a soft bed of grass and heard Taurin's thud beside her just before the balloon lifted and soared far into the sky.

She scrambled to her feet, trembling inwardly as guards surrounded them, weapons drawn. They wore nondescript clothes, but the hard look about their eyes told her they knew their job. Their armaments were foreign-looking devices with long barrels.

"Who are you? Why have you come here?" snapped a man with a flat nose.

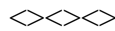
Leena jutted her chin. "I'm Leena Worthington-Jax representing the Synod. It is imperative we speak to Grotus. Our business is urgent."

The leader of the guards surveyed Taurin. "What about you?"

"I'm her escort." His tone implied they'd be well advised to regard him with respect.

A heavy silence followed, then the man said, "Follow me."

Leena's apprehension vanished, replaced by a sense of triumph. Her heart beat rapidly. News of the horn could be forthcoming! Muttering a prayer that their talk with Grotus would be fruitful, she strode ahead, chin uplifted with pride.



Bendyk and Swill finally found a moment to confer together in their office. They sat at separate desks but could easily see each other from their upholstered swivel chairs.

"One of Sirvat's neighbors said she likes to travel," Bendyk told Swill, proud of the information he'd gleaned. "Sirvat always returns in a jovial mood, wearing a new piece of jewelry. Apparently, the trinkets she brings back are unlike the usual gold pieces people wear."

"How so?" Swill tilted her head.

"The neighbor said they're embedded with polished gemstones that must cost a fortune. Sirvat's predilection for fancy jewelry isn't generally known because she doesn't wear the pieces while on duty, but the neighbor told me she has quite a collection."

"Is it possible she meets a male admirer?" Swill twirled a strand of hair around her little finger.

"It's more than likely."

Bendyk's gaze shifted from her hair to her simple sheath dress. The rust color brought out the golden sparkle of her eyes. Briefly he wondered how Swill would look with a gold choker around her neck. She didn't normally adorn herself with jewels, but he had a sudden urge to present her with a gift.

"You said there was a miscellaneous entry being made in the treasury records every month?"

Swill nodded. "That's right. When I pressed her, Sirvat admitted Magar was responsible. She said his department receives the incoming funds so we should ask him about it. She wasn't sure what the receipts represented."

"So basically what we have on Sirvat is that the treasury records check out except for that one entry about which we have to question Magar. Her personal finances are in order, correct?"

“Yes, although this matter of her traveling and coming home bedecked with jewels bothers me. That’s very unlike the woman, at least according to the image she presents.”

Bendyk lapsed into a thoughtful silence. “I propose we assign a couple of Caucus members to tail her. It wouldn’t hurt to find out where she goes the next time she takes off on one of these trips.”

“That’s a good idea.”

Swill smiled at him, and Bendyk’s heart somersaulted with joy. He didn’t understand why earning her admiration was so important to him, but somewhere along the way she’d become more than a business partner. At least he wanted to regard her in a different fashion if she’d let him. The woman fascinated him, and he found he couldn’t get enough of her company.

“What about Magar?” Swill asked, gazing at him innocently.

Bendyk struggled to focus his thoughts on their task at hand instead of on the attractive woman facing him. “I have an interview scheduled with him in the next half hour. Would you like to come?”

“Sure, if you don’t think it would upset him to confront both of us. Would you like to join me for dinner afterward?”

Bendyk gaped at her, too astonished to respond. Since their last dinner together, their relations had been fairly formal and their conversations confined to the topic at hand. Although he’d been hoping for more, he hadn’t really thought Swill was interested.

“I’d love to,” he told her, beaming. “Thank you.”

Rising, he donned a gold-lined cloak over his longshirt and trousers so that he would appear more impressive when they saw the Minister of State.

Magar was waiting for him in his spacious office. His eyes widened when he saw Swill accompanying Bendyk, but he quickly recovered his composure.

“Brother Bendyk, Sister Swill. Please, be seated. What can I do for you?”

Bendyk got right to the point. “You sent my sister off with Taurin Rey Niris. How do you know the man? Where is he from?” This matter was more important to him than the inquiry involving the treasury entry. He’d get to that subject shortly; Leena’s safety was his prime concern for the moment.

Magar leaned back in his chair, a sly smile twisting the corners of his mouth. “I met him during a diplomatic exchange. He wanted to relocate, so I said I’d help him.”

“Why?”

Magar shrugged. “We can always use farmers here, and he said he grew edible flowers. We don’t have many such growers in these parts. So I obtained permission from the Population Council for him to immigrate.”

“How did he end up on a piece of your property?”

“The man didn’t know anyone here. I offered to sell him a plot.”

“Did he pay you in cash, or is he paying you back year by year in money or produce?”

“We made a trade.” Magar’s gaze skittered away, and he shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“A trade? What sort of trade?” Bendyk was getting impatient; he sensed that Magar was evading his questions.

“Let’s say we each had something the other wanted,” Magar concluded.

“You told us the man was from Iman. I checked the census. There’s no such person listed from Iman.”

Magar’s complexion grew a shade paler. “Is that so? That’s just what the man told me. I

didn't know any different."

"Indeed?" Bendyk raised his eyebrows, glancing at Swill. "How did you know he could protect Leena? Where did he gain his fighting skill?"

Magar's lips pinched tight. "He will take care of her," he said quietly. "You have my assurance on that."

"Why is he interested in archeological symbols?"

"It is an interest of his."

"You said you met him at a diplomatic exchange?" Swill intervened, hunching forward. "Who were the parties present?"

Magar simply stared at her, remaining silent.

"We found a regular entry in the treasury records," she went on. "Sirvat said your department is responsible for the revenue. How do you explain the source?"

Magar reached for a pen, and Bendyk noticed his hands were trembling. "It's a convenient category for any extra funds that overflow our receipts."

"We'll need to examine the transactions of your department for the past few years and any trade agreements that have been documented," Bendyk said.

"I don't see why that's necessary," Magar snapped. His tremors increased, and he dropped the pen. "And now I'm afraid I must call an end to this interview." He stood up, and the look in his eyes reminded Bendyk of a frightened *dier* running before a hunter. "Besides you're wasting your time with me. You should be looking for the one who stole the horn."

"And who do you suggest we investigate?" Swill asked sweetly.

"Try Karayan. The man's too ambitious for his good. I'd watch out for him if I were you."

Karayan? My father's friend is the last one I would suspect, Bendyk thought as he and Swill left Magar's office.

Magar is just trying to throw suspicion off himself.

"I believe Magar is purposefully withholding information," he said to Swill as they walked back to their office.

"Why don't we enlist some of the Caucus aides to delve into his trade agreements for the past few years?" she suggested. "Perhaps we'll find the source of revenue that way. We could also obtain a record of Magar's movements."

Bendyk tilted his head. "I'd like to find out how he met Rey Niris. There's something going on between those two that Magar is unwilling to discuss."

Swill twisted her arm through his. "Let's have dinner and continue this investigation in the morning, shall we?"

Her familiar gesture startled him. "Of course. Where would you like to go?"

"I'll fix something in my apartment."

His ears perked up. Her apartment! Briefly he considered refusing; he wasn't sure he could behave with the proper decorum in such an intimate setting. Swill was a temptation he was finding increasingly difficult to resist. Wondering what she had in mind, his imagination soared with different possibilities, most of them erotic. A thrill of anticipation shot through him at the idea of spending the evening alone with her, regardless of the outcome.

Sister, he said to himself, mentally addressing Leena, I hope Rey Niris doesn't hold the same attraction for you or you'll be in even greater danger than that posed by our enemies. Take care, he warned her in spirit.

Drawing Swill closer, he veered down the corridor that led to the private residential

suites.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Nice flowers,” Taurin muttered as their captors took them between sculpted garden paths and up to the front portico of Grotus’s mansion.

Leena rolled her eyes. Leave it to him to comment on the gardens. She was too concerned that they meet their goal to care. If Grotus knew anything about the horn, they’d soon find out. Trembling with excitement, she preceded Taurin into a huge reception hall, ornately decorated with gilded ceilings and cherubs painted on silk-lined walls. Expensive objets d’art were displayed in strategic locations meant to provide maximum viewing pleasure.

Leena wondered if Grotus ever brought guests here and, if so, what method of transportation they used. A number of other structures had been visible outside. Presumably, some of them were guard quarters, but she had no idea what the others represented. Grotus would have to keep his own gardeners and housekeepers. Did his staff live here permanently, or were they sworn to secrecy and allowed to return home for periodic visits? If the latter was the case, how did they get off the island?

She’d seen no visible means of transportation, such as aircraft or ships, in the vicinity. So how did Grotus and his people come and go? For that matter, how would she and Taurin leave when it was time to do so?

While one of the guards scurried off to alert Grotus to their arrival, she glanced about the hall. Her eyebrows lifted as she recognized a set of bronzes by Anton Luye, a famous sculptor. She’d seen some of his pieces in Karayan’s place. Flanking the statuettes was a pair of candelabra made of sparkling silversheen.

Woven tapestries decorated the walls, but she preferred the ceiling tiles painted with scenes from ancient legends. A polished gold disk hung above a central archway. It was an artifact from the Kelloran Age, no doubt stolen by Grotus’s ring of smugglers.

Unfortunately, many people were interested in buying artifacts for their private collections. Archeological looting had been recorded since the times of ancient kings, and it continued to this day. Many sites she’d explored had been ravaged by looters. Illegal marketing of artifacts from unsupervised excavations made for a lucrative business, one that the Ministry of Religion had been unsuccessfully trying to stop.

Grotus was a kingpin among the unscrupulous dealers. Taking him out of action would ensure that historical sites were preserved for professionals to excavate. But Grotus always covered his tracks. No one had ever relayed a description of him, so she wondered what he looked like. For that matter, where did he obtain his guards and the servants who waited on him?

She and Taurin were shown into a library paneled in rich koobi nut, with a magnificent woven carpet depicting the Apostles. On a mantle above a black marble fireplace stood jadestone figurines representing Vestia, goddess of water and Demeter, goddess of the earth. Hanging between the figures was a seventeenth-century Aurin tapestry.

A globe sat in one corner behind a comfortable seating arrangement that included plush furnishings upholstered in royal blue. Bookshelves filled the walls from floor to ceiling. Her gaze lit on two statuettes carved from backen stone heralding from the Triceras Age. They provided

more evidence of looting from early tombs.

“Our host is quite a connoisseur of ancient artifacts.” Leena withdrew her circlet from inside a deep pocket and placed it on her head of blond waves. Hopefully Grotus would respect her position.

“I would expect that’s his main interest.” Taurin studied each object in the room as though weighing its potential as a weapon.

A side door opened, and a tall man strode into the room. He looked to be in his late forties. He’d pulled his black hair back into a severe ponytail and wore a multi-colored longshirt cinched at the waist by a wide leather belt. Leena recognized the jewel-encrusted buckle as a relic from the Moradean excavation site. His baggy black pants tucked into a pair of polished knee-high boots.

Her gaze riveted on his nose ring as he approached. Dear deity, it appeared to be constructed of the same creamy translucent material as the sacred horn!

“I am Grotus. I understand you wish to see me.” His gravelly voice grated on Leena’s ears. “Your unorthodox arrival has drawn my interest, otherwise I’d have you disposed of in the same manner as other trespassers. What brings you here?”

“I am Leena Worthington-Jax.” She spoke in a strong, clear tone as though unaware of the guards hovering behind. “This is my husband and escort, Taurin Rey Niris. We’re on a quest authorized by the Synod.” Leena caught the warning gleam in Taurin’s eyes but decided she could handle Grotus on her own. “We need information.”

Grotus eyed her attire with a lecherous gleam. “I have to attend to some business. Join me for dinner, and we’ll discuss this matter which you deem so important. My head housekeeper will show you to a room. I’d be delighted to have you stay overnight as my guests.”

“He didn’t give us much of a choice,” Taurin muttered in a low voice as they followed the stern-faced woman up a curved marble staircase. Leena gripped the wooden banister while wondering if they’d be allowed to roam the house. Art treasures teased her from every corner, and she longed to explore.

After showing them into a sumptuous bedchamber, the housekeeper indicated a cord by which to summon assistance.

It’s still morning, Leena thought, and they had the whole day ahead of them. Why was Grotus making them wait? Did he really have pressing business, or did he want to check into their backgrounds before dinner?

“Would we be permitted to explore the house and grounds?” she asked the gray-haired woman.

“If you wish.” The housekeeper wore a starched apron over a plum-colored dress. “I’ll have a guide escort you, say in half an hour. Will that be satisfactory? We’ll provide you with midday nourishment so you won’t go hungry.”

“That will be fine. Thank you.” Leena forced a smile.

As soon as they were left alone, she turned to Taurin excitedly. “Grotus must have raided half the sites on Xan.” She pointed to more stolen objects lying about the room. “None of this is authorized to pass into the private sector. It belongs to the Ministry of Religion.”

“Grotus doesn’t follow the rules.”

“No, he doesn’t.”

Leena glanced at the large bed in the center of the bedroom. “We should have told the housekeeper we need separate rooms.”

Taurin’s eyes darkened. “May I remind you that we are wed, madam?”

Self-conscious under his scrutiny, Leena avoided looking into his smoky eyes. He took a step closer, tilting her chin to force her to meet his gaze. Before she realized his intent, he lowered his head and pressed his mouth to hers.

Shock rolled through her, caused less by his action and more by the eagerness of her own response. Instead of pushing him away, she wrapped her arms around him and gave in to the incredible sensations spiraling within her. Her pliant body leaned against his hard strength.

As though sensing her willingness, he crushed her in his embrace, his kisses increasing in intensity.

“Taurin,” she whispered, wanting something more but not understanding what it was. She longed for a goal beyond her grasp and intuitively knew Taurin could satisfy it. His virility outshone any other man she had known. Because he was so different, he appealed to her even more.

His hand caressed her face. He brushed his lips lightly over hers and murmured her name. When his hand trailed downward, over the front of her bodice, she didn’t resist. They were alone, man and wife, and the wide bed beckoned them.

Taurin nudged her over, and she stretched out, sighing with pleasure as he settled his length beside her. His mouth never left hers. When he brought his hand to her chest, she moaned with pleasure.

“I shouldn’t let you do this.”

“You’re my wife.”

Taurin pushed her legs apart and settled atop her, smashing his mouth to hers and his hand to her breast. Leena clutched at his back, wanting to tear his shirt off so she could feel the burning flesh beneath it. She’d never known such passion before. His kisses aroused her to a wild frenzy. She parted her mouth, inviting his tongue to enter, and when it did, she met it with her own explorations.

“Lothar save me, but I want you to touch me,” she said in a voice so husky she barely recognized it as her own.

“If I go much farther, I won’t be able to stop.” Taurin’s eyes glazed with lust.

“We should be thinking of a way out of here.”

“We can think later. I want you now.”

Leena cried out when his hand slid inside her bodice and found her naked breast. Dear deity, what he’s doing to me, she thought as he rubbed her nipple, sending spirals of delight coursing along her nerves. Please, please don’t stop, she urged him silently. The muscular planes of his back rippled beneath her fingers as she held onto him as though letting go would dispel the moment.

With her eyes closed, she heard his grunts of pleasure as he rocked his hips back and forth. His bulge jabbed at her through her gown, but she wouldn’t go so far as to remove her clothes.

Taurin apparently had other ideas. Suddenly the front of her bodice fell away, and she realized that he’d unfastened her gown. By pushing her binding out of the way, he had full access to her breasts. Moaning as his hands kneaded her softness, she accepted his tongue into her mouth with renewed ardor. His hips moved atop her with increasing urgency, and his breath came in panting gasps.

A coil of pleasure sprang from within her femininity, and she was unable to stop its crescendo. Wrapping her legs around him, she cried out as an explosive release rocketed her to ecstasy. Taurin shuddered above her, crying her name, and then he lay still, his passion spent.

Stunned by what had happened, she let his weight rest upon her.

She had never experienced such incredible delight before, and she couldn't wait until the next time. She hated herself for being so weak but couldn't help it. Taurin overwhelmed her sense of reason. He's a demon, she told herself, seducing me until I have no willpower to refuse him.

He rolled off her and lay on his side, staring at the ceiling. "I'm sorry," he said abruptly.

Then he dropped off the bed and strode into the lavatory. Leena stared after him, puzzled by his gruff tone of voice. Did he regret what they'd done? Why did he speak harshly to her when she'd have appreciated a few words of kindness?

Perhaps she'd disappointed him. Tears welled in her eyes as she regretted her inexperience.

A rush of warmth washed over her as her mind replayed the feel of Taurin's body moving atop hers. His moods were unpredictable, and she should be wary of him, but she couldn't push him away if she wanted to.

Once again they were thrust into the role of man and wife, sharing a bedchamber. It would probably be wise to pretend they were a happy loving couple before Grotus. But how would that be possible when she feared Taurin's disapproval after what had just happened?

Indeed he emerged from the lavatory with a scowl on his face. He seemed almost relieved when a knock sounded on their door and their guide announced herself. Blanchette was another servant, as indicated by her manner of dress, which matched that of the head housekeeper. Only Blanchette was much younger—in her twenties perhaps, like Leena—with a sleek figure, shiny black hair, and a pretty face.

Leena ran into the lavatory to freshen up. It took her but a moment, and when she emerged, she saw Taurin had flung the door wide open and was chatting with the guide.

Blanchette's eyes narrowed when she took in Leena's expensive gown. "Grotus tells me you're a member of the Caucus. Why are you here?"

"I'll discuss my business with Grotus at dinner," Leena retorted.

She sensed the girl disliked her and wondered why. Perhaps it was because they were intruders. Grotus's staff would have to be very loyal to be trusted, meaning she and Taurin should be on their guard at all times. Glancing at him for reassurance, she was dismayed at the dark glare he gave her. She wanted to cry out, *What's wrong? Why are you angry with me?* But she couldn't do so in front of Blanchette.

Her heart sank, and a heavy weight of depression pressed down upon her. She followed Blanchette out of the room and tried to rouse some enthusiasm for the magnificent artworks displayed about the structure, but she was too aware of Taurin's silent tread beside her and the closed look on his face.

Their tour began on the second floor, one level down from their bedchamber's location. Blanchette showed them into a billiard room. Sporting and theater prints adorned the oak paneling covering the walls. Leena recognized the leather settees and chairs as styles made by the well-known Morant furniture company.

"This is an interesting piece." She pointed to a bronze sculpture of a warrior astride an *enix*. She'd seen some like it in the tomb of Antiok, a ruler from the third dynasty. This was no copy, but the authentic article, as were all of the objects she'd noted thus far.

They entered the banquet hall next, its ceiling arches seventy feet above the huge expanse of the room. Tapestries hung along the walls, interspersed with ornate wood carvings. The dining table itself was made of polished bennir wood. Seating for twenty indicated Grotus might often

have guests. Perhaps he invited his fellow smugglers for dinner, she thought wryly, again wondering how they would be brought to the island. She'd seen no visible means of transportation.

An informal dining room provided seating for eight at an oval table set with a white tablecloth and gold-rimmed dinnerware. A music room held a stand with lyrics and a magnificent grand piano. Seats were arranged as though for a concert, and vases of flowers decorated the room.

"Does Grotus play the piano?" she asked Blanchette in astonishment.

Blanchette gave her a smile that did not extend to her eyes. "He's an accomplished musician. I'm sure he'll play for you tonight."

"He appears to be a man of exquisitely fine taste."

"Yes, except for his clothes," Taurin murmured.

Leena shot him a glance of reproach, but luckily Blanchette hadn't heard, or else she chose to ignore his remark.

"He does have a wonderful eye for art," Leena hissed on their way into a salon filled with comfortable sofas and armchairs, bright lighting, and a stenciled ceiling with linenfold paneling at the side walls.

"He's a thief, and you'd do well to remember that fact."

Leena's eyebrows raised. He almost sounded jealous of the man, but that certainly couldn't be. He's probably wondering how we're going to get out of here, she thought. She was too fascinated by her surroundings to ponder the matter herself. She'd leave the logistics to Taurin, while she learned more about Grotus's operation.

"You don't see the horn anywhere, do you?" Taurin muttered on their way back up to the third floor.

"Not yet."

At their guide's direction, they glanced into a couple of unoccupied guest bedrooms, an upstairs sitting room which Blanchette said they were welcome to use, and a parlor filled with potted plants and wicker furniture. An air-filtering system cooled the sunny room, emitting a faint fragrance of orange blossoms.

Under other circumstances, Leena could easily have spent several days exploring the mansion. But finding the horn was her main preoccupation so she kept her eyes open during the tour.

"What's on the fourth floor?" she asked Blanchette.

"The servants' quarters are upstairs."

"And below?"

"Kitchens and workrooms."

"Do all the staff who work here live on the island?"

"Of course," Blanchette replied. A clock chimed in the background. "I believe it's time for midday nourishment, after which I can show you the grounds."

"That would be delightful." Leena's voice expressed her approval.

Blanchette's face softened slightly, as though she hadn't expected Leena to be so congenial. "This way please." She led them back downstairs to the small dining area.

Grotus wasn't present, but a couple of ladies were seated there. They were scantily attired in silken drapes in the bright colors Grotus seemed to prefer. Leena had noticed the curtains covering the windows in each room were garishly colored. It appeared Grotus's taste in fine art didn't extend to interior design.

Another man occupied the head of the table, his unshaven face sullen as he awaited his food. A couple of servants filled plates from a sideboard. After Leena and Taurin took their seats opposite the two ladies, the wait staff served their meals. An appetizing repast of baked cloinder fish, mixed greens, and buttered tortas tempted her palate. A glass of vintage wine accompanied the meal.

The ladies claimed to be friends of Grotus, while the man said he was a business associate. All three were close-mouthed in the presence of strangers.

As soon as Leena and Taurin had partaken of the sweet pudding offered for dessert, Blanchette showed up to continue their tour. They spent a pleasant afternoon strolling through the gardens. Taurin's face became animated as he exclaimed over the cultivated flower beds. Neither of them learned a thing about Grotus's operation, nor how he came and went from the island. Leena wondered if he already knew of their mission; he didn't seem in any hurry to find out their reason for coming to see him.

Her curiosity grew to learn what he knew of the missing horn, and it was with rising excitement that she readied herself for dinner later that afternoon. Showered and dressed, she preened before the mirror in her topaz gown. She'd only had room for three ensembles in her bag; the rest of the space was taken by her archeological tools, work breeches, and the tunics Taurin had bought her.

Taurin emerged from the lavatory, his jaw freshly shaven and his ebony hair damp. His black shirt was half open at the chest and tucked into a pair of tight black trousers that tapered into a pair of polished boots. Her gaze lingered on his manly physique.

"What's wrong, Taurin? Why aren't you talking to me?"

She was a vision in her yellow gown, with her golden hair streaming over her shoulders. Her eyes, wide and questioning, gazed at him in supplication. Taurin's heart twisted inside him, but he couldn't tell her how he really felt.

He'd taken advantage of her innocence. Nothing could be more despicable, especially when he knew nothing could come from any relationship between them. She might be the most desirable woman he'd ever met, but once they finished this mission—assuming they escaped from Grotus's place—they'd go their separate ways.

"Nothing is wrong." He stuffed his few toilet articles back into his bag in case they had to make a hasty exit.

"You're displeased with me, aren't you?"

"Displeased with you?" He glanced up, noticing her tremulous lower lip as she suppressed a flood of tears. "Why do you say that?"

"I...I disappointed you earlier. You got up and left me, and now you seem angry."

Taurin's resolve dissipated in the face of her pain. "I'm not angry with you, Leena. On the contrary, I'm so mad for you that I'm trying to restrain myself. If I had my way, I'd keep you as my wife. But both of us know that will never happen. We cannot remain together."

She pressed her lips together and averted her gaze. Likely she believed that lust drove him and nothing more.

Taurin yearned to tell her how she brightened his life, how her inner serenity provided a balm for his troubled spirit. But their union could come to naught, or else he'd have her brother's wrath to answer to and perhaps the Synod's as well.

Besides, he couldn't afford for anyone to look into his background too closely. Hopefully, Magar had been able to fend off any questions about him. Leena would be horrified if she learned his true nature. He didn't trust himself where she was concerned and strengthened his

resolve to rein in his desire.

“I may want you,” he blurted, “but you don’t need to be with someone like me your whole life. You know nothing about me.”

She took a few steps toward him, as though sensing his longing. “Then why won’t you tell me? I’d like to help you, Taurin.”

“I don’t need your help. That’s not what I require.”

“Perhaps it was a poor choice of words. I mean... I know you’re not happy.”

He squared his shoulders. “I’m very happy. I have my farm and my flowers. They bring me peace and harmony. That’s all I want from life.”

“Is it?”

Her question went unanswered because Blanchette arrived to take them to dinner.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

She hadn't even decided what to say to Grotus, Leena realized on their way downstairs. What if the smuggler decided to disrespect her authority and to get rid of them, like any other unwanted visitors to his island?

She wouldn't give him the chance. On their way into the dining room, she rehearsed what she would say to convince the man to cooperate.

Grotus sat at the head of the table. He wore a turquoise shirt encrusted with silver spangles that clinked whenever he moved, plus white linen pants pressed to perfection. Besides his nose ring, he wore two sets of earrings in both ears and a number of flashy rings on his fingers.

He smoked a rolled *mogur* root, and the pungent aroma stung Leena's throat. She coughed behind her hand as she took a seat. Taurin claimed the spot beside her.

"Where are your other guests?" Taurin said.

"I thought our conversation should be private." Grotus blew out a puff of smoke. "Would you care for an aperitif?" He rattled off a list of exotic choices. Taurin chose one, but Leena declined.

"How you are familiar with Muer's brandy?" Grotus asked Taurin, narrowing his eyes. "It's not readily available in these parts."

Taurin realized he'd fallen into a trap. Muer's brandy was made on Yllon. He knew Grotus traded with his planet, and now he'd put his role in jeopardy. "It sounded as though it would have a rich flavor."

"Ah." Grotus eyed him keenly. "What is your occupation, sir?"

"I raise edible flowers and sell them on the market."

"A farmer."

"Yes, I am."

Grotus arched an eyebrow, glancing at Leena. "You're married to this man, madam?"

Leena's cheeks colored. "Yes, he is my husband."

"Is not your father Cranby Worthington-Jax?"

He's been checking up on me, Leena thought. "That is so."

"And he gave his consent for you to marry a farmer?"

Leena felt Taurin tense beside her. "I believe our personal issues have nothing to do with our business here. We're searching for a missing artifact, one that the Ministry of Religion values highly. We are wondering if you might have heard of its whereabouts."

Grotus signaled for the first course to be served. "What kind of artifact?"

To Leena's relief, he stubbed out his *mogur* in a tray placed beside his plate for that purpose. Her throat parched, she gulped down several swallows of water from a crystal goblet provided on the table. The table settings exhibited the same discriminating taste as Grotus's art collection.

"It's a ceremonial object." She didn't intend to give away too much information. "You would know what I was referring to had you seen it."

“Perhaps a more detailed explanation would aid my memory.” His mouth curved in a malicious smile.

Leena answered with honesty. “The Synod appreciates this relic more for its symbolism than its intrinsic value. They are willing to pay a substantial sum for its return.”

“I see.” Grotus’s eyes gleamed with avarice. “I’d be happy to do business with you, madam, but I need more facts to go on.”

“If you don’t have the item, maybe you know who does.” Taurin swirled the wine in his glass.

Grotus stared at Taurin for a full moment of silence. “Would the same reward be offered for information leading to the return of this valued object?”

“A lesser payment to be sure,” Leena put in.

“I can’t say that I’m interested in money.”

Having finished his equas, steeped in a tangy cream sauce, Grotus signaled for the entree to be served. Steaming plates heaped with juicy steaks, sauteed vegetables, and fragrant crowsom rice were placed before the diners, then the servants withdrew, leaving them alone.

“Your background is in archeology, is it not?” Grotus directed a hooded gaze at Leena.

Taurin’s fists curled. He felt ignored, and he didn’t care for the treatment. Grotus was far too interested in Leena. He rubbed his leg against hers under the table, but she was too engrossed in the conversation to pay attention. His resentment flared, and he glowered at Grotus, imagining all sorts of ways he could nail the man.

Leena rattled off her professional credentials, while Grotus appeared impressed. Taurin wondered how far the fellow’s intelligence network extended. He’d probably checked up on them earlier.

A messenger scurried into the room. The scruffy youth held out a folded parchment sealed with wax.

“The source says it’s urgent, sir.”

Grotus’s face reddened. “I said we were not to be disturbed.”

“Sorry, sir, but I thought you’d want to see this without delay. Shall I wait for a reply?”

“Not now. Get out!”

The messenger scampered from the room.

Grotus slit open the envelope, frowning as he scanned the contents. Then a chuckle erupted from his throat. “A bit late, aren’t you, my little magpie?” he murmured to himself.

Leena caught sight of the seal and gasped. Why would Sirvat send Grotus a private message? The implications stunned her. Was Sirvat warning him of their arrival? How much did she reveal of their mission? How did she know where to contact Grotus when she’d claimed no knowledge of the island’s location?

Leena vowed to have Bendyk look into Sirvat’s relationship with the smuggler at the earliest opportunity. A sense of betrayal assailed her. Sirvat could no longer be trusted.

Finally Grotus looked up. “I may not have the information you want, though that might come at a later date. For now, I can offer you something else in trade.”

Leena finished chewing a tender piece of meat. “What’s that?” She considered the possibility that Grotus was toying with them, that he did know who possessed the horn and was manipulating them to his own purposes.

“I know a secret guarded closely by the Synod, but it comes at a price.”

Taurin narrowed his eyes. “What do you want? The full ransom we planned to pay for the...” He bit his tongue, catching himself just before he blurted out *the sacred horn*.

“No, no.” Grotus’s gesture swept the room. “You have something else of value to offer me. You see the kinds of objects I treasure.”

Taurin’s eyes lit with understanding. “Of course. I do have something in my bag upstairs. With your permission?”

Grotus appeared surprised, as though he’d had another idea in mind. But he motioned for Taurin to go. A moment later, Taurin returned holding a small book in his hand. As Leena got a closer look, she realized it wasn’t an ordinary book. There was no visible means to open the thing. A circular depression marred the tooled cover, but... Wait a minute. Wasn’t that inscription written in the same symbols she’d been studying? The same as those in Taurin’s drawings?

“Where did you get that?” she snapped.

He ignored her. “Grotus, does this interest you in return for your so-called secret?” He plopped the book down on the table in front of the smuggler.

Grotus’s eyes popped. “A bibliotome! I have more of these in my collection.” He stared at Taurin meaningfully.

Taurin knew where he had gotten them. “Does this one interest you?”

“You know it does. Have you learned how to open it?”

“Not yet. Have you?”

“No, I’ve not had any success.”

Leena puzzled at their exchange. She had no idea what they were talking about or where this item had originated. She’d never seen anything like it before.

“What is it you have to tell us?” Taurin said, reminding the smuggler of his obligation.

Grotus scratched his jaw. “There is an ancient temple deep in the jungles of Morasia. The Ministry of Religion has obliterated any record of its existence. Rumors say Death stalks any intruders, and even my men have failed to get past the entrance. Supposedly, the Temple of Light hides a great treasure.” He held out his hand, pointing to a large crystal ring on one of his fingers. “More of these brilliant stones. I would give anything to find them.”

Taurin leaned closer. “That gemstone looks familiar.” As recognition dawned, he turned to Leena. “Doesn’t it look like that crystal stone fixed in the pillar at the Black Lands?”

Her eyes widened. “I believe you’re right. Strange that I’ve never uncovered these before on my excavations. You say this Temple of Light holds more?”

Grotus nodded vigorously, his nose ring jiggling. “The story goes that the Temple of Light guards the secrets of the Apostles. I assume these crystals have a power we don’t yet understand.”

Leena’s eyes glittered with zeal. “How do we get there?”

Taurin stared at her. “Are you out of your mind? We’re supposed to be searching for the... you know.”

“But to find a storehouse of these crystals! They could help to unlock the secrets of the past.”

“And when you return, I might have information on this valued object you seek,” Grotus offered with a wily grin. “Come, let us retire to the library. We can have our kava and dessert in there.”

Once in the library, he drew a map from a locked desk and handed it to Leena. “Study this tonight. The path to the temple is delineated through the jungle.”

Taurin held out his hand. “I’ll take my bibliotome back now, if you please.”

Grotus clutched it to his chest. “You offered the book to me in trade, fair and square. I

gave you the map in return.” He glanced at Taurin consideringly. “Perhaps you’d like to engage me in a bout of ramagan? We could save dessert for later.”

“Ramagan? What’s that?” Leena glanced between the two of them in confusion.

“An ancient sport.” Taurin’s eyes never left Grotus’s face. “It would be my pleasure.”

“There’s a gymnasium downstairs. Follow me.”

The men turned, and Leena hurried after them. “Wait a minute. What does this game involve?”

It didn’t take long for her to find out, and she certainly didn’t like her discovery. It was a combat sport in which opponents using long sticks tried to knock the other off balance. Both men stripped to the waist, and she saw that Grotus kept himself in trim shape, no doubt with the help of the gleaming equipment in the far corner.

He paused in his warm up exercises, his eyes fixed on the strange band Taurin wore around his upper arm.

“What is that?” Leena approached for a closer look. By Lothar, Taurin’s armband was constructed of the same creamy translucent material as the sacred horn. She’d seen him without his shirt before but he must have kept this hidden.

“Now, that must be worth a fortune.” Grotus licked his lips appreciatively.

“It’s not for sale or trade.” Taurin’s chilled tone left no doubt he meant what he said.

“Where did you get it?”

“Never mind. Let’s get on with the match.”

The sparring lasted a good thirty minutes. The two opponents were well suited. They sweated and fought and finally called it a draw. Neither one could best the other. After drying himself with a towel, Taurin threw on his shirt.

“Let us retire to the salon,” Grotus suggested. “I’d like to show you my porcelain Apostles.”

Grotus continued to shower his attentions on Leena while Taurin stood by, seething. It rankled him that Leena was so fascinated by Grotus’s personal collection of artifacts that she was ignoring him. Forcing a polite smile to his face, he accepted a glass of honey ambrosia from the smuggler who glowingly exhibited his figurines to Leena. Grunting with disgust, Taurin finally moved away.

“I could use someone with your expertise on my staff,” Grotus told Leena under his breath.

“I’m flattered.” Leena cast a troubled look in Taurin’s direction. He stood with his back to them, seeming to study a tapestry on the wall. She could tell by the hunch of his shoulders that he wasn’t pleased.

“Where did your man get his arm bracelet?”

Grotus’s casual tone didn’t deceive her. His eyes shone with blatant envy.

“I really don’t know.” Discomfited, she changed the topic. “If you want Taurin and me to explore the Temple of Light, we should leave soon.”

Grotus gave a short, raucous laugh. “I’m afraid that’s not possible just yet. We still have much to discuss.” He touched her arm. “You’re quite lovely, you know, and this gown makes your hair gleam like sunlight.”

Leena took a step back. “I would like to retire if we’re to get an early start in the morning.” Grotus sounded as though he had no intention of letting them leave; but then again, he wanted them to find the Temple of Light, didn’t he?

The meal had made her thirsty, so she accepted a goblet of honeyed nectar. The drink slid

down her throat, thick and sweet.

“Think about my offer while you sleep,” Grotus said in a crooning tone.

“Your offer?” Leena felt drowsy now that he’d mentioned it. Unable to suppress a yawn, she raised a hand to cover her mouth. Grotus’s face loomed larger in front of her.

“Stay here with me.” His pale blue eyes mesmerized her. “I can offer you more than any farmer, and I’m not just talking about wealth.”

He kept his voice low so Taurin wouldn’t hear. His hand darted out and rubbed her in the crotch in a crude manner that left no mistake of his meaning.

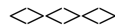
Leena jerked back. “How dare you? Taurin!”

Her husband no longer stood upright. He’d slumped into a chair. With increasing dismay, Leena noticed that his head lolled back and his eyes were closed.

“What’s the matter?” She started toward him, but dizziness overwhelmed her.

“Here, my dear. Allow me to help you,” Grotus said close to her ear.

The last thing she heard was his shrieking laughter as she fell into a deep, dreamless slumber. Her final chilling thought was that Grotus coveted her as another treasure to add to his collection. Wherever she went, he or his agents wouldn’t be far behind.



“Demon’s blood! Where in Xan are we?” Taurin sat and rubbed the back of his head.

An unfamiliar shoreline met his groggy gaze. From the position of the sun, he determined it must be morning. He and Leena had been deposited on a beach with their packs of belongings and a pile of containers he didn’t recognize.

“How do you feel?” he asked Leena, who was beginning to rouse herself.

“I’ve felt better.” She brushed her face with her hand.

Peering inside one of the containers, he discovered a supply of food—enough, it appeared, to last them for several days. His guess was confirmed by a note, signed by Grotus, telling them they’d been dropped off at Morasia. They had five days in which to find the Temple of Light, explore the site, and return to the beach. Return transportation would be provided on the morning of the fifth day. Other than some tracks in the sand that led into the water, there was no other sign of habitation.

“We must have been drugged,” Leena remarked, gazing out to sea. “I’ll bet it was in that nectar drink.”

In the humidity, her yellow gown stuck to her body like plaster. Taurin couldn’t keep his glance from raking her slender form. Memories from their other time on the beach flitted into his mind, and a surge of heat swelled in his loins. He suppressed his response; they didn’t have time for dalliance.

“I’ll bet he has a vessel that travels under the sea. That would explain why no one ever sees him going or coming from his island,” Leena guessed.

Taurin narrowed his eyes. He knew submersibles existed on Yllon as war machines used to attack rival territories, but to obtain one, Grotus would have had to pay dearly or make a substantial trade. He wondered if the smuggler had dealt directly with Drufus Gong, the most notorious gang leader on Yllon. His blood chilled at the notion. Drufus Gong had put a price on his head. Should he ever learn Taurin’s whereabouts, his life wouldn’t be worth the price of an *eulich*.

Taurin swallowed hard. He’d been so preoccupied with his role as Leena’s protector that

he hadn't given a thought to his own safety. After seeing his bibliotome, Grotus might make the connection that he was from Yllon, especially if Captain Sterckle had sold him the volumes Taurin used to pay for his passage to Xan.

"Do you still have the map Grotus gave us?" he asked gruffly, casting aside his concerns. Leena rummaged in her sack. "Here it is."

Taurin unfolded the document and pinpointed their location on the beach.

"He wants us to find the treasure for him." Leena opened their canteen and gulped down a swallow of water. "It might be worth the effort if Grotus learns news about the horn in our absence." She paused. "Sirvat told him we were coming."

Her words startled Taurin. "How do you know?"

"That message he received at dinner—I recognized the seal. It was Sirvat's personal missive. What I don't understand is why Sirvat didn't tell me she knew him."

"You can tell your brother to look into it," Taurin suggested. "Investigating the Synod falls under his jurisdiction."

Leena rose, dusting the sand off her gown. Stooping, she pulled a tan tunic from her bag.

"Where are you going?" Taurin leapt to his feet as she strode toward a strip of tropical vegetation lining the beach.

"I need to change my clothes. I'll just be a minute."

By the time she returned, Taurin had packed Grotus's containers inside his bag. "Let's move out." He added her pack, heavy with tools, to his own.

According to the map, there was a trail to follow. They were able to find it easily enough, but it was mostly overgrown. Taurin hacked their way through with a machete, which Grotus's staff had provided.

Leena followed in his wake, admiring the wide set of his shoulders and the muscles rippling on his arms. The heat had made him remove his shirt so she had an enticing view of his broad back. At his urging, she took care not to walk into any of the glistening cobwebs or insect mounds blocking their path.

After a while, the undergrowth thinned, and the trail began an upward climb. They passed through a stand of fragrant calyp trees and stopped beside a running stream to quench their thirst.

"Let's have something to eat," she suggested. "I'm hungry."

Leaning against a tree, Taurin ogled her legs. Although she'd slathered insecticide on her bare skin, she was aware Taurin hadn't seen her very often without her long gowns.

"So am I," he murmured, and she realized food was the farthest thing from his mind.

Her face turned crimson. Realizing they couldn't afford to waste time, she strode to their bags and found a couple of snack packs. "Here, eat this. It'll keep us going a while longer."

The trail seemed endless as they headed up ridges and down valleys. She estimated they would reach their target tomorrow; then they'd need another two days for the return trip. That meant they'd have one full day to explore the temple, assuming they could get inside.

Skirting around a dead root in the path, she glanced apprehensively at the sky. Clouds were gathering, and she prayed it wouldn't rain. The trail would turn into a river of mud, making their path miserable. As it was, the trek was arduous, and she had little energy to think of much else except their journey.

Curiosity about the excavation site kept her going through the long day, the cool night, and the following morning. Taurin was solicitous of her comfort, making her yearn for his tender touch. Yet there seemed to be an unspoken agreement between them that time was of the essence; they couldn't spare a moment for personal pleasures. Nevertheless, Leena decided to

take that moment when they were resting before resuming the last leg of their journey.

“I feel like we’ve been married for months,” she announced after they’d cleared away the remnants of another snack.

Taurin glanced at her, a quick, sharp perusal. He’d kept his head swathed during the night, and she hadn’t seen his eyes then, but now in the bright morning sunlight, they gleamed like two steel disks with that curious yellow-greenish light in their depths. He’d kept them going for a while after dark the night before, and she’d wondered at his keen vision.

“I’ve seen you do your morning exercises every day now,” she told him, sitting on a flat-topped rock and letting her fingers trail into a cool stream.

Taurin leaned against a thick tree trunk, his shirt hanging open. Leena couldn’t help looking at his hairy chest and feeling the stirrings of arousal.

“I’m beginning to learn what annoys you and pleases you, but there’s so much more about you that remains a mystery.”

Taurin scowled. “It’s best if you don’t know everything about me.”

“Is it?” She got up and sauntered toward him. “We’re alone in the jungle, Taurin. We’ve slept side by side for several nights. We are man and wife. Is there not more you wish to learn about me?”

Taurin averted his gaze but not before she saw the flare of passion in his eyes. “I dare not answer that question.”

Leena knew she should stop. Her taunts would lead them down a dangerous path, but she felt compelled to continue. His mystique surrounded her, enveloped her, until she wanted nothing more than to peel away his layers and see him for what he really was. That he could follow their path in the dark she didn’t doubt. He heard animal sounds before she knew the creatures were even there. And then there was that weapon strapped to his calf, a type of armament she’d never seen before until Brother Aron used one in the Black Lands. She didn’t like the unknowns about him and felt challenged to unravel his secrets.

Taurin tried to slow his rapidly beating heart as she approached. Her golden hair streamed over her shoulders as her lithe figure moved toward him. He wasn’t sure she knew what she was inviting when she teased him, but he wasn’t going to let her find out.

“You won’t like the man I really am,” he warned, his voice gruff. Against his back, prickly spines from the tree trunk bit through his shirt, but he didn’t budge. The discomfort would help focus his thoughts. “My world is a far cry from yours. You wouldn’t understand its violence even if I explained it. I’ve had to kill people.”

“What? You... you’ve killed people?”

Taurin flinched inwardly when she stopped in her tracks. It saddened him that he had to resort to the truth, but it was necessary if they were both to avoid further pain. Despite their formal bonding ceremony, she was still considering a betrothal to Malcolm—at least she hadn’t indicated otherwise to him. Upon their return, her brother would annul their marriage, leaving her free to pledge herself to her former suitor. So why start something he couldn’t finish?

“How can you so casually say you’ve killed people? I don’t understand.”

He leveled his steady gaze on her. “I didn’t expect you would. We’re from different worlds, Leena, in more ways than one. You belong with your brother and his kind.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

As though she were too stunned to argue, Leena picked her sack off the ground and started along the trail.

He was a murderer! she thought, struck speechless with horror. Such violence was

unheard of among her people. Why hadn't he been banished to the Black Lands for such a vile deed? Instead, he was living on Magar's land, with the minister's sanction. There had to have been extenuating circumstances. She knew there was goodness in his heart; he just didn't believe in it himself. Unknowingly, he ached for deliverance. Her heart was torn between wanting to show the depths of her caring and her abhorrence at what he had revealed.

Saying nothing, she continued along until they reached the beginning of the ruin. Crumbling stone walls were partially enveloped in vegetation. Tangled vines reached like spider legs to squash the stones together or force them apart. Headless sculptures lay about, covered with coarse white mold.

Leena gazed upward toward the familiar pyramid shaped tower that capped all of the temples. Missing were the antler-like decorations, the branches of life representing Lothar, that usually reached out from the superstructure.

It appeared as though the site had been partially excavated; she could see the markers laid out in a grid, the evidence of various diggings. The Ministry of Religion must have authorized an investigation but then for some reason had terminated it, making her wonder why they'd erased all records of the find.

With a tremor of excitement, she approached a hollow opening in one of the walls.

"This looks like an entranceway." She motioned for Taurin to come nearer. After lowering her sack to the ground, she rummaged inside for her notebook and tools. "I'll look for the datum point."

"What's that?" Taurin's gaze skittered about as though he sensed a threat.

Leena didn't understand what would alarm him. Exotic bird calls and the sounds of trickling water met her ears. A spicy floral scent permeated the air. It was a serene setting as far as she could tell, marred by the crumbling ruins which were devoid of life... or so she hoped.

"The datum point is the spot from which all measurements originate," she explained. "During an initial survey, a permanent marker is implanted in the ground near a corner of the site, and this point is delineated on a map. It gives future investigators a place to identify where the excavation began, and it's often used as a starting point for laying out the grid that will cover the site."

She scribbled in her notepad and showed him a diagram. "A grid pattern is a set of squares that covers the entire area."

Gazing with dismay at the growth of jungle encroaching on the structures, she decided it would be difficult if not impossible to locate the original datum point. What was the purpose, anyway? She wasn't here to do an official survey.

Coming across a pottery shard half-buried in the ground, she dusted it off with one of her brushes, labeled it, and placed it in a small container in her bag. She was writing notes on where she'd found it, describing the surrounding physical objects, when Taurin snatched the notebook from her hand.

"Why are you wasting time picking in the dirt? Let's go inside." He collected her tools and tossed them into her satchel.

Annoyed with herself for becoming distracted, Leena followed him toward the wide gap in the wall, in front of which vines dangled and leafy branches grew as though warning trespassers to stay away. A couple of mammoth helixcats, carved in stone, their faces partially eroded, guarded each side of the entrance.

"I'll go first," she said. "I'm familiar with these temples."

Shoving past him, she entered the gap and was pleased to see the interior passageway had

walls that glowed with a strange luminescence, providing a dim illumination. Carefully, she made her way through the narrow corridor, watching her footing. The paved floor was cracked and uneven, having been worn down by age. As they got further inside, a musty odor tickled her nostrils.

She glanced at Taurin over her shoulder. “Be careful, some of these temples are booby-trapped.”

“Now you tell me.” His voice sounded loud in the confines of the tunnel.

“Maybe that’s why the excavation was stopped. Perhaps the early explorers couldn’t get past the obstacles. Grotus’s men wouldn’t have had any more success.”

Halting as she came to a wide archway, Leena glanced at the floor of the chamber in front of them. It stretched like a huge square, at the other end of which was another open archway. The floor work consisted of an even patchwork of stones. Crouching down, she studied the pattern.

“What is it?” Taurin said, peering over her shoulder. He drew in a sharp breath. Bones littered the inside of the chamber ahead of them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“This is the first challenge,” Leena said. “If it’s similar to ones I’ve seen before, there’s a deadly ray that gets you if you don’t step on the right stones. The trick is finding the correct combination. Get me one of my brushes.” She placed her sack on the floor within his reach.

He gave her the requested tool and perused the environs while she patiently dusted away the symbols on the floor in front of her, being careful to keep her feet firmly rooted in the passageway so her weight did not rest on any of the stones.

“These symbols correspond with the others I’ve been studying,” she said, sitting back on her haunches. She caught sight of Taurin. “By the grace of Lothar!”

His eyes emitted a frightening greenish-yellow glow in the darkened corner where he leaned against a wall.

He stepped forward immediately, the illumination of the passage restoring his vision to normal.

“Do not be afraid,” he hastened to reassure her. “This is the reason why I shade my face in the dark.”

Struck speechless, Leena could only stare in wonder.

“According to local legend,” Taurin said, “children born with eyes like mine are seen as demons. I learned at an early age to hide my vision from others during periods of darkness.”

“What demons are you talking about? What local legends? I’m not familiar with any such mythology.”

She could understand why he covered his head in that cloth. To see his eyes emit that strange glow was enough to frighten anyone. It almost made him seem... alien. The man had said he was from Iman, hadn’t he?

“Where I come from, my eyes are seen as a mark of evil, and those thus born are usually destroyed. I was lucky. Rather than murder me, my parents left me for a foundling.”

“Murder you! I don’t understand. Who... what are you?”

Taurin sank onto the floor across from her, resting his back against the wall. Warily he rubbed a hand over his face, contemplating how much to tell her. Other than Magar, she was the first person here to learn his secret, but he dare not reveal all it meant.

Long ago on Yllon, strangers had appeared who were not kindly, like the Apostles on Xan. Instead, they promoted aggression and war. Fabled as demons, they were persecuted, and most were eventually destroyed. Intermating had occurred with the native population, and periodically their descendants showed the sign: the glowing eyes that enabled them to see in the dark. It was feared that those thus accursed could cause angry passions to surge. Fear of the demon seed was so prevalent on Yllon that even to this day, their descendants were hunted down and destroyed.

Since Yllon was a violent society anyway, it was difficult for Taurin to tell if he did have the power to drive men mad, as the stories claimed. Thus far he’d shown no inclination to negatively influence his neighbors on Xan, yet the possibility that this might be true was one of the reasons for his isolation.

“I seek my origins as you do,” he said to Leena. “These symbols are my only clue.”

He rolled up his sleeve and showed her the bracelet fixed around his upper arm. She had noticed the unique material before, when he’d bared his chest to fight Grotus, but she had not observed the symbols etched into the band. Gathering her courage, she crawled closer and gingerly traced them with her finger.

“This item was left with me as a child,” Taurin went on, lowering his heavy lids so she couldn’t read his expression.

“It is the only remnant of the past I have left, other than the books.”

“But your bracelet is constructed of the same material as the horn and the ring that I found on my last excavation. How is that possible?”

He shrugged. “I assume it’s part of my heritage. I was hoping you could help me interpret what these symbols mean. They might explain the link relating the different objects.”

“I’ve never been able to decipher the symbols. Perhaps this temple holds the answers.”

“How do we get in there?” Taurin gestured toward the chamber.

Realizing she still had many questions, Leena crept over to the opening and peered at the stones covering the floor. “I’ve determined from my studies that there are seven symbols, presumably representing an alphabet of some kind. There’s also an eighth, but it’s actually a combination of two others. One particular string appears repetitively. It’s the same string of symbols that is etched onto your bracelet and on the horn.”

Using her fingers, she drew the symbols in the dust at Taurin’s feet. “This is the sequence. The Apostles must have left us a message but no one has been able to decipher it. There’s another design I’ve found on occasion.”

Drawing a diamond shape with an antler-like branch coming out of the left corner, she frowned. “This representation doesn’t appear to be associated with the other string.”

“Can you get us inside?” Taurin asked.

Reexamining the inscriptions on the chamber floor, Leena grimaced. “Each one of the squares has a different symbol on it. Perhaps if we follow the string, we’ll be all right.”

“Let’s see what happens if you make an error.”

Before she could stop him, Taurin withdrew a small shovel from her pack and threw it onto one of the stones. A red light shot out from the eye of a huge stone statue, one of a pair, at the far end of the room. The beam aimed at the stone Taurin had hit, crackling through the air.

“I guess a lot of people have died trying,” he muttered. “You’d better get it right.”

The floor was three squares wide. In the first row, Leena studied the symbols from left to right. The first one looked like a pair of mountain humps. The middle was an oval with a horizontal line dividing the center, and the one on the right looked like a backward crescent moon. Since the common string she’d found on most of the digs began with the backward crescent, she decided to put her guess on that one.

“Give me another tool,” she instructed him.

He handed her a small hoe, and she tossed it onto the block to the right. The stone statues at the opposite end of the room remained lifeless.

“It’s safe,” she said. “I’ll go first.”

Before Taurin could object, she boldly stepped across the threshold and onto the first block to their right. Taurin grasped the sacks, flung them over his shoulder, and followed after her.

As soon as he crossed the threshold, a stone slab slid from the top of the entranceway, sealing them shut inside the chamber. Silent walls surrounded them. Now there was no way in

and no way out unless they determined the correct sequence. He waited patiently while Leena read the symbols in each row.

Fifteen squares later, they had made their way to the opposite end, where the V symbol with a dot in the center was the final choice. It was the correct selection, as evidenced by their safe passage through the open archway.

“You did it!” Taurin put his foot forward to rush ahead.

“Wait.” Leena’s hand stopped him. “Each room has a way to get across. We dare not go in haste.”

More bones littered the passageway into the next chamber, and he realized that the few souls who had made it across the first section hadn’t survived the subsequent challenge.

Leena peered inside the next chamber. “There are carvings on the walls. I don’t see anything on the floor except those odd piles of dust.”

“Strange, aren’t they?” He stared at the unusual mounds scattered about the room.

She walked forward before he could stop her. Again, as soon as Taurin followed her inside, a slab lowered behind them. This time there was no visible opening at the other end. The luminescent glow in the room reflected the odd light in Taurin’s eyes.

“Can you interpret these inscriptions?” he asked her.

Leena leaned forward, studying the carvings on one wall. “I don’t see the familiar sequence anywhere. Look, this diamond shape has the branch sticking out, but it’s in the wrong place. And here’s more of them.”

Taurin moved beside her to peer at the strange diamond shapes with the antler-like branch growing out of a corner. “They all look the same to me.”

“Wait a minute. See this—the branch rises from the upper right corner. There, it’s on the left. And down here, it’s the other side. They’re different!” As Leena came to this realization, a jolt rocked the room.

“What’s that?” Taurin’s gaze darted around the chamber.

Leena traced the outline of a diamond shape with the antler symbolizing Lothar’s branch of life on its upper left corner. As she applied pressure, the stone pushed in.

“Look, it moves.”

Was Leena talking about the stone or the entire room? Taurin’s scalp prickled. The walls seemed to be encroaching upon them, or was his imagination playing tricks?

“Something is moving, all right, and it’s not just that stone. It’s the whole place,” he observed.

“What?” Leena glanced up, startled. Sure enough, the walls slowly, steadily moved inward.

Taurin’s gaze fell to the strange piles of dust on the floor. With sudden horror, he realized what they represented.

“We’ve got to find a way out or we’ll be crushed.”

Leena’s hands splayed on the walls. “The key has to be here somewhere.”

“Maybe there’s a pneumatic door. If we step on the right spot on the floor—”

“No, I don’t think that’s it. Help me look for the diamond shape, the one with the branch in the upper left corner. If the other stones push in with this symbol...”

Taurin followed her instructions, and her theory proved correct. As the walls moved closer and closer, he frantically scabbled to find all the appropriate diamond shapes and shove on them. The ceiling was low enough that they didn’t have to reach above their height.

“We’ve found them all, but the walls haven’t stopped moving.” Leena’s voice was edged

with desperation.

“No, there’s got to be another.” Taurin was forced into a crouch, his body pressing against hers as the walls compacted further, narrowing their space. His breathing labored as their air space decreased, and dust clogged his nostrils. “Hurry. There’s not much time.”

Leena stretched to examine the bottom row of stones. “I don’t see another symbol with the branch in the correct position.”

Taurin could clearly see the carvings with his luminous vision. His gaze zeroed in on the one remaining diamond shape with a branch on its upper left corner.

“I’ve got it!” Quickly he pushed on the symbol, and as it gave way, the floor beneath them opened.

Leena shrieked as they tumbled into blackness, their bodies slipping along some kind of slide. Taurin squeezed his eyes shut against the enveloping void. Down, down, they went, until it seemed as though they were falling to the depths of the underworld. Just when he despaired of reaching bottom, they landed with a huge *whump* onto a soft substance.

For a moment he lay there, breathing hard. “Are you all right?” he asked Leena. She rested beside him, panting.

“Yes, I’m fine. We did it again.” Jubilance rang in her tone. They’d passed another challenge.

Taurin rolled over, sinking further into the bed of feathers that had broken their fall. His amused grey eyes met her questioning glance.

“This calls for a celebration,” he said, planting his mouth firmly upon hers. When she didn’t resist, he deepened the kiss, edging himself closer until he lay atop her.

His weight caused them to settle deeper into the fluff.

“I can’t breathe,” Leena croaked beneath him.

He sidled toward the edge until his feet touched solid ground. Helping Leena to rise, he briefly brushed his lips across hers. She looked infinitely kissable with her parted mouth, dreamy-eyed look, and blond hair flying about her face in disarray.

“I’d like to continue this, but we’d better move on,” he said, his voice husky.

“I’ll keep you to your word.” A coy expression danced in her eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“We’ll continue this later.” Grinning, she straightened her outfit, then strode past him to take the lead.

Taurin gathered their belongings and cautiously followed her through a curving corridor where they couldn’t see around the next bend. A strange, acrid odor pierced his nostrils, and he wrinkled his nose. “What’s that smell?”

Leena didn’t bother to answer. Instead, she stopped abruptly. He bumped into her with a muttered curse.

His heart sank as he glimpsed the sight ahead. The floor dropped away to reveal a cavernous hall, the bottom of which was filled with a pool of liquid that sputtered ominously. Reaching across the room to a ledge at the opposite end was a rickety ladder that served as a suspension bridge. With its tattered ropes and broken rungs, it looked as though no one had walked on it for ages.

“Acid,” Leena surmised, bobbing her head in understanding as she stared at the pool below.

To test her theory, she threw one of her tools into the pool. The liquid sizzled and boiled as the tool disappeared beneath the surface.

She gazed with dismay at the dilapidated bridge. How would they get across? Their journey couldn't end so soon! She had to learn the secrets hidden within the Temple of Light.

Because of the elaborate traps, it must be a significant find. She'd never come across anything similar at other sites. She'd had relatively simple tests to pass before, which she assumed were meant to keep out trespassers in the old days.

But this place, with its immense proportions and devious traps, pointed to a greater importance. She and Taurin hadn't come across any living quarters that might indicate dwelling space, nor had they seen remnants of an altar. If not a worship center or a residence for the Apostles, what purpose had this temple served? And why had the Synod suppressed all records of its existence? Had they deemed the temple too dangerous for anyone to explore?

Taurin gestured to her. "I saved a couple of ropes from the *Predator*. We can use them here." He reached into his bag, which rested on the ground, and drew out a long cord. "This one might reach the other side. We'll use the other line to tie ourselves together in case one of us falls."

Leena gazed at him in horror. "You're not thinking of swinging across on a rope?"

"No, it'll be a safety line. We'll use the bridge as much as possible." He tilted his head. "Wait a minute. If this bridge were in perfect condition, what would stop anyone from walking across? The acid pit is here for a reason."

Leena nodded slowly. "There's got to be another hazard to knock people off the bridge."

Both of them peered intently around the room. Finally Taurin shrugged.

"We'll just have to make a go for it." He tied a knot in one end of the rope. "At least I learned a few things on the *Predator*," he told her, a smug expression on his face. "One of the sailors taught me how to tie knots."

"That's good and welfare, but can you toss a line to the other end?"

"We'll see."

Taurin straightened, stretching back his arm. In a lightning quick motion, he spun the rope and tossed it across the chamber. The first time he missed his target. With a grunt of dismay, he yanked on the rope to retrieve the end before it dipped into the acid.

On his second try, he looped it over the pointed ear of a stone gargoyle guarding the entrance into the next passageway. After tugging on it firmly, he nodded approvingly.

"This should hold," he said, tying the other end to a promontory jutting out from the wall just inside the chamber entrance. "We'll use this other cord to link the two of us together." He tied it around their waists so they'd remain attached. "Your weight is lighter," he told Leena. "You go first."

"Thanks," she said, her tone sarcastic. This was one time when she would have preferred to allow Taurin to take the lead. Her gaze fell upon the broken rungs and the rickety swinging bridge. Below, the murky pool sputtered and spit as though awaiting its next victim.

Her limbs trembling, she grasped onto the safety line and began the trek across. The bridge swayed underfoot with each step. She was careful to test each rung before putting her weight forward.

Once or twice the forward rung gave way, and she had to stretch her leg across to reach the next one over, her heart thumping wildly in her chest.

About halfway across, a grating noise sounded overhead. Looking up, she saw a panel had opened in the ceiling. Spears began pelting down upon them.

"Hurry!" Taurin gave her a light shove. He was just behind her on the bridge.

Leena shrieked, covering her head with her hands. Crouching, she advanced along the

swaying ladder. When it began rocking violently back and forth, she clutched at the safety line. A spear glanced off her upper arm. Pain pierced her flesh, but she didn't dare to stop.

"Move!" Taurin dodged to the side as another spear flashed past. His action rocked the bridge even more violently.

Leena glanced up in time to see a spear point aimed straight at her face. She flung herself sideways. The side railing, a frayed rope, gave way against her weight, and she tumbled into empty space.

A scream tore from her throat. Just as she thought she'd be swallowed by acid, the line tying her to Taurin went taut.

Her body jerked upright and then swayed, her feet dangling over the bubbling pool below.

"Hold on," Taurin called, peering over the edge of the bridge.

Leena's blood ran cold, and her heart hammered so fast, she could barely breathe. Beneath her, the acid swirled and hissed.

"Pull me up," she yelled. Why was he taking so long?

"I've got to get my balance," he hollered back.

He managed to avoid the onslaught of spears as he dragged her back onto the safety of the bridge platform. Going at a crawl, they finally made it safely to the other side.

Leena collapsed onto the ledge, her body shaking. The ceiling panel closed overhead, but fear still held her in its grip.

"Are you all right?" Taurin knelt beside her, his face etched with concern. He stroked her cheek, his touch tender.

"I will be in a minute, after I thank you for saving me." She turned into his comforting embrace. His arms tightened around her, giving her a feeling of warmth and security.

She lifted her face. Taurin's eyes darkened as he lowered his mouth to hers. As he kissed her senseless, her intuition told her what her rational mind had already accepted.

Malcolm wasn't the man for her. He'd never sweep her to the heights of desire as Taurin did with a simple kiss.

His tongue thrust inside her mouth, and he explored her with an intimacy that bespoke of possessiveness. All sense of reason fled her mind.

She pulled back slightly. "Taurin, I don't care who you are or what you did in the past. I just want to be with you."

With a groan, he pulled her closer and plundered her mouth with renewed vigor. With one hand, he cradled the back of her head to lend support. His other hand roamed her body, inducing a rising heat within her core that made her press herself wantonly against him.

Don't stop, she pleaded silently, the dangers they had recently shared making her yearn for a passionate escape.

Taurin released her, while his eyes flared with insatiable hunger. She trembled inside, knowing he sought sustenance from her. Dear deity, how she wanted him! Her body shook with need.

"We'd better move on," he said, his voice thick.

"I suppose you're right. Our time here is limited, and we should make the most of it." She rose, brushed off her clothing, and prepared to proceed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As Taurin settled their bags onto his shoulders, he considered Leena's words. She hadn't said how she truly felt about him, so he assumed she'd merely needed comforting.

When they returned home, she'd regain her position in the Caucus, and his role as a farmer wouldn't garner much respect. Her family considered her pledged to Malcolm. Most likely, she'd succumb to their wishes. Shaken as he was by her declaration, he didn't give it much credit.

With a sense of regret, he pushed aside his personal longings to focus on their task at hand. Doubtless a new challenge awaited them around the next bend, and he'd need all his mental faculties if they were to survive.

Leena took the lead along a dusty corridor, up a ramp to another level, and through a maze of passages, until they came to a halt. An empty space yawned in front of them.

"Where do we go from here?" Leena asked. "I don't notice any way to get down."

Taurin peered over the rim. Blackness met his gaze except for the ever-present faint luminescent glow.

He frowned at this latest puzzle. "Look, more symbols are carved into the walls around us. See if you can interpret them." While she studied the carvings, he surveyed the ground where it dipped under his toes. "Give me one of your brushes first."

She must have heard the urgency in his tone because she hastened over with the requested item.

A moment later, he'd swept the dust away, revealing a circular depression. "Haven't we seen something like this at other entrances?"

Leena knelt beside him and traced the circle with her fingers. "I'm not sure."

"Could it be a pneumatic platform trigger?"

She straightened and stomped her foot around the circle. "Doesn't appear so."

"Then we've reached a dead end."

Leena eyed the solid wall opposite the gap, as though figuring a way to cross. "I think the next passage must be below. Do you see anything down there? We could use a rope to descend."

Taurin scrounged in her bag for a torchlight which he shone downward, but the beam didn't penetrate the distance nor did his special visionary powers.

"I suppose that's one option," he said in a morose tone.

Leena poked him. "Let's take a break. We may think more clearly after we rest."

She sat beside him, ate a fruit and nut bar, and took a long swallow of water from their canteen. Although her limbs trembled from exertion, she couldn't wait to explore further.

Taurin didn't seem in any hurry to rise. He removed the bracelet from his arm and twirled it on the floor, presumably as he'd done as a child. Leena was surprised at the musical tone emitted by the spinning gold band.

"Why, that's delightful." The whimsical sounds made her smile.

Taurin flashed her a wide grin. "Watch what happens when I separate the rings."

He took apart the interlocking bracelets and spun them one by one. Each emitted a

distinctive melody, and all three were different than the one produced by the joined armband.

“I did this all the time when I was growing up and no one was watching. It brought me a measure of comfort.”

Leena observed his brooding expression as he revisited his youthful memories. Was he wondering about his unknown heritage?

She considered the sequence of five symbols carved onto his armband. It was the same sequence she'd seen elsewhere. Maybe the middle symbol represented two letters combined. But what kind of alphabet had only seven letters? Could it be some kind of pictorial representation? Or a metaphoric language?

One of the rings he was twirling teetered into the circular depression and spun around, emitting its haunting melody. A vibration rocked the ground they sat on. Her heart lurched, and she glanced at Taurin.

“What was that?” He leapt to his feet, his gaze darting about the small enclosed space.

“If my eyes aren't fooling me, we're moving toward the opposite wall.”

Sure enough, the ledge they were on extended toward the farther end. When they reached it, a hidden door slid open, revealing a passage ahead. Hastily, they gathered their belongings before the ledge retracted. Taurin snapped his links together and thrust the armband up his sleeve. After slinging their sacks over his shoulder, he took the lead into the passageway.

The trek took them up and down several other levels, using a variation of ramps, narrow staircases, and slides. They were approaching what Leena assumed must be the bowels of the temple when they heard a strange scurrying noise ahead.

Taurin stopped abruptly in his tracks, holding an arm up to warn Leena.

“What is it?” she whispered.

“I'm not sure. But there's something around the next bend.”

Her pulse raced. If they were nearing the treasure, the obstacles would become more threatening. But what could possibly be worse than what they'd already encountered?

“Wait here,” Taurin said, his eyes glowing in the darkened corridor.

He gave her the torchlight to hold and advanced slowly, flattening his back against the wall as he rounded the bend.

Leena heard him cursing and hurried forward.

“Dear Lord!” She halted at the sight of a large chamber covered with the sticky entanglement of a huge web. “What kind of creature lives here?”

Taurin glared at her. “I don't know, and I don't want to find out.”

“Do we have to cross through here?”

“There's only one way to go, and it's forward.”

An ominous rumbling sounded from back in the corridor. Leena pointed to a rounded depression on the floor.

“Try spinning your bracelet in there. Maybe it'll clear us a safe path through this room.”

Taurin was just reaching into his sleeve to obtain his armband when a whoosh of air roared through the passage from behind. The blast knocked them straight into the confines of the sticky web. Immediately a door shut behind them, and they were trapped, their hands and feet stuck in the glue-like strands. A strange rustling noise came from a shadowed corner of the room.

“What is it? What's coming at us?” Leena didn't need a sixth sense to know that whatever creature lived in this place was advancing on them. They were probably the tastiest meal to come along for a long time.

Her eyes widened when she saw the giant eight-legged creature with huge bulging eyes

and voracious teeth. Its spindly legs manipulated the web with ease, and it seemed to have a grin on its face, as though anticipating a treat.

Taurin cursed and fought, but the best he was able to do was to reach inside his pant leg and grab hold of his blaster. Leena hoped the creature would be susceptible to its charge.

“Fire at it,” she yelled.

Beads of sweat covered his brow as he manipulated his arm into place to take aim. The sticky strands clutched at him as though they had a mind of their own.

Leena was closer to the creature and could see the hairs bristling on its legs. A cloudy fluid dripped from its feet, or whatever those pads were on the end of its legs. *It might be poison. If it smears that stuff on us, we'll be paralyzed.* She squeezed her eyes shut and held her breath.

Taurin fired. She snapped her eyes open in time to see red laser bolts sizzling through the room. They severed strands of the web that cut across their path and hit the creature. With a roar of agony, the hideous being fell back into its own entanglement and lay there motionless.

Using his blaster, Taurin cut them both free of the web and made a path to a door on the opposite side. At their approach, the door swished open, and a blast of cool air refreshed them.

“We must be getting close,” Leena said weakly.

Taurin dropped his sacks and holstered his blaster. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, let's just go on.”

His eyes intense, Taurin planted his hands on her shoulders. She had an incredible urge to sink into his embrace and to be held in the warm security of his arms. When his gaze drifted to her mouth, she thought he might kiss her, but then he turned away and the moment was lost.

Facing them across a short distance was a sturdy metal door without any visible latches and with no sign of a circular depression at the entryway. Two stone statues guarded the door on either side, fierce expressions on their animalistic faces.

“That's odd,” Taurin said, studying the surface of one statue for clues. “This has a different face on each side.”

“So does this one.” Leena examined the other stone guardian. As she touched it and applied pressure, the head rotated part way around. The door in front of them lifted half a foot and then stopped. “Holy waters, the door almost opened.”

Taurin shifted the head of his statue to match hers, but nothing happened. “Try rotating yours again.”

They shifted the heads around in various positions and different orders, noting which combination produced a reaction in the door. Finally, when one statue had the feline face directed to the left and the other one had it aimed toward the rear in a certain order of moves, the door slid fully open.

Another door immediately blocked their path.

“Now what?” Taurin's brow folded.

“There's a slot in the wall on this side.” Sweat dribbled down the back of Leena's neck as she bent forward to get a closer look. She shined her torchlight inside the slit. “Wait a minute. I think there's a depression in here. Put your bracelet in it and see what happens.”

“All right.”

He took the armband off and inserted it into the slot. As soon as its weight settled in the depression, the rounded area began to spin. Musical notes sounded, and the next door slid open. A stale, musty odor assailed her nostrils.

Taurin grabbed for his bracelet and snapped it on his arm as he charged through the archway as though fearing the door would close behind them. Leena made it through just in time

before their entrance sealed shut. Facing them was a cavernous hall, which contained pile upon pile of gleaming crystal rocks.

“Demon’s blood!” Taurin gazed around with an expression of awe. “We’ve found it.”

Leena stared at the magnificence of the sight before them. “This is incredible. What can these stones signify?”

“The temple must be some kind of storehouse. Unlike most of the other holy places on Xan, the Apostles didn’t want anyone to enter this one. They designed this place to be impregnable.”

Leena turned to him, her eyes wide. “Not impregnable. I’ll bet anyone with one of those bracelets could enter. They act like a key.”

Taurin nodded slowly. “It makes sense, in an odd sort of way. And if these spinning rings could affect entrance into this place, what else can they do?”

He moved forward to examine the crystals while considering the implications. His parents had left him the armband, which likely had been passed down to him through the generations.

When he’d arrived on Xan, he had traded Magar some of the ancient bibliotomes he owned in exchange for a plot of land. Neither one of them knew how to open the books, but now into his mind’s eye came the circular depressions on the cover of each heavy tome. If he spun his armband on the circles, would the books open to reveal their contents?

“I still believe the crystals are some kind of power source,” Leena said, distracting him from his thoughts. “Remember how the crystal rock was used to heat water in the native village in the Black Lands?”

She’d picked one up and turned it in her hand to examine the facets, her delicate features lit with awe. Her blond hair trailed over her shoulders like a golden mist, and Taurin thought she’d never looked lovelier despite the grime that covered them both. He suppressed a surge of desire to focus on their mission.

“The stone wasn’t solely responsible. The crystal caught a ray of the sun, intensifying the beam of solar energy. And there may have been an underground heating source such as a hot spring.”

“Maybe the crystals need energy from the sun to activate them.” She pursed her lips. “Spin your bracelet and see if the musical tone does anything to them.”

Taurin complied and was disappointed when nothing happened. “I wonder what use the crystals served if not a source of power.”

“Maybe they had value merely for their aesthetics or even as a type of currency. The different sizes of the stones lend credence to that theory.”

“So why haven’t archaeologists discovered crystals like these before? This place holds a huge stockpile of stones.” He swept his arm in a broad gesture.

“People could have fought over them so much that the ancients decided to restrict access.”

“Look, the next room holds more.” He strode ahead of her into the adjacent chamber.

Too engrossed to follow him and figuring there must be more of the same in there since she heard no further exclamations from him, Leena lifted the crystal in her hand. She admired the play of multi-colored lights upon its faceted surface. The stone was a magnificent gem, which Grotus undoubtedly would enjoy possessing for the intrinsic value of its beauty alone.

“Taurin, what are we going to tell Grotus?” she shouted. When no response was forthcoming, she pocketed the crystal and advanced into the next room.

Taurin sat on the stone floor, his back toward her, surrounded by a pile of books similar to the one he had shown Grotus. Stacked in another corner was a display of rings made from the same creamy, translucent material as his armband and the sacred horn.

“Dear deity.” She rushed forward to peer at the rings scattered about in different sizes. “These look just like the ring I discovered on my last expedition. Zeroun confiscated it and ordered me not to tell anyone. I wonder if he knows that more exist.”

Taurin twisted around to face her. “Look at this bibliotome.” He held up the volume he’d been studying. “It’s similar to the ones I own.”

“How many do you have?”

“Enough to have filled several trunks on my journey to your land. I traded some to Magar in exchange for my piece of property. I believe he hopes to learn their secrets. So far none of us, including Grotus, knows how to open them.”

“Grotus? How did he obtain them? I’ve never come across books like these on any of my excavations. Do you believe they were left here by the Apostles?” she asked, excited by the notion. That would certainly account for their value. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Where did you get your collection?”

His gaze skittered away. “I, uh, came across them in a library and managed to gain possession of them.”

“A library? How odd.” She paused. “I’ve always wondered if the temples in use today hold storerooms down below. The regional worship center over which my father resides was built centuries ago. Only Candors or members of the Synod are permitted access to the lower levels. So even though I haven’t come across these books on my digs—or any other rings, for that matter—it is possible they are stockpiled elsewhere.”

“It might pay to have a closer look at your father’s place,” Taurin mused.

“We have to agree on a story to tell Grotus.”

“Just tell him we never made it past the first set of challenges. If we say that we got inside but the place was empty, he’ll want to come have a look for himself. We can bring him a few crystals for a consolation prize and claim we found them in an outer chamber. Why don’t you gather some now? I’d like to remain in here a while longer.”

“What for?”

“Just to look around.”

Leena perused Taurin’s face, wondering why he was being evasive. Suppressing the questions that sprang to her lips, she left to do what he’d suggested, intending to ask him later on.

Taurin watched her go before snatching up another bibliotome. He wanted to test his theory in the few moments to spare. Fitting his bracelet into the circular depression on the cover, he spun the entwined rings, producing the familiar musical tone. Before his amazed eyes, a top section slid open, revealing a scrolling narration. He couldn’t read the words, but their meaning was somehow imprinted in his mind.

Quickly scanning several other volumes, he realized they recounted the history of the Apostles. The readings told about the scourges of disease in their time, warfare and regional conflicts, dwindling resources and erratic weather patterns, and the people’s lack of advancement. The Apostles spoke as though they were superior and told of their plan to define a new order.

Taurin couldn’t find any further reference to this new order, but he suspected it was the religion of Sabal, because the Apostles were the ones who had given the laws to the people. But

if he'd hoped to find any truth behind the religious teachings, he was disappointed.

He figured the story continued in the bibliotomes he had brought from Yllon. He had never understood the link between their two societies, but now he had the means to unlock the mysteries of the past. The rings, in varying sizes, were the keys. He couldn't wait to get home to confirm his theory and study the books from Yllon.

The value of the crystals was still beyond his comprehension, but the key to that knowledge might be in the books as well. If only he had more time to study this collection.

Before he left the chamber, he selected a small ring from the pile in the corner and placed it in his pocket. They couldn't risk taking more, or Grotus would question their tale.

A tender smile tugged at his mouth when he found Leena sitting on the floor in the next room, surrounded by a pile of crystals. She held one in her hands and was twisting it side to side, a look of rapt concentration on her face.

"It's time to move on," he said.

"Did you learn how to read those books?" she inquired mildly. Her eyes, large and round, regarded him with keen appraisal.

Dismayed by her perceptiveness, he fumbled for an appropriate response. He didn't think it wise to admit his knowledge. The information contained in the books might refute her people's beliefs about their religion. He couldn't reveal what he knew until he learned more.

"Not quite," he lied, regarding his statement as a half-truth. After all, he was unable to decipher the words inside the books. The contents became known to him through some sort of mental transfer process.

"I wish we could take some of the volumes with us, but they'd be too heavy a burden," he added wistfully.

"Grotus would inquire after the source. I filled a sack with crystals to bring him."

"That should make him happy." While Leena rose and dusted off her clothes, Taurin stooped to gather their belongings. After looking around for one last time, he pronounced himself ready to depart.

"It's a shame we can't take more with us. What about those rings in the next room?" Leena gestured in that direction.

He shook his head. "Grotus may have us searched. Now that we know the location of this place, we can always return. I don't think we should reveal what we've discovered here to anyone at this point, Dikran and the Synod included. Agreed?"

Reluctantly, Leena nodded. "We still don't know why this excavation was closed and the records purged, but I intend to find out. In the meantime, I agree with you that we shouldn't say anything about it. Our knowledge of these items might come in handy later."

She followed him through the temple's maze toward the exit. At various doorways, Taurin placed his bracelet in the circular depression, and they passed unharmed through each challenge back to the surface. Stars twinkled in the night sky when they emerged from the temple.

"How many hours have we been in there?" Leena asked, a heavy weariness assailing her.

"More than twelve. Let's make camp here for the night, and we'll head for the beach in the morning. We've got plenty of time before Grotus has us picked up."

"I wish we could contact Bendyk. We need to tell him about the plantations in the Black Lands."

Taurin inflated the air-filled mattress Grotus had provided. "Let's hope he's proceeding at a faster pace with his inquiries than we are."

Leena watched him work. In the moonlight, his eyes glowed luminously. A day's growth of beard covered his face, giving him an even shadier look than he already possessed. With his tall, well-built frame, thick black hair, and glowing eyes, he appeared as she imagined Lothar to look, had he been merely mortal.

Taurin is not of this world, she thought, and wondered where the idea had sprung from. He kept talking of Xan with the phrase "your world." Yet if he wasn't from here, who was he? What did he represent?

He spoke of demons in his past as though he feared his own heritage, but as she regarded his magnificence, she concluded that he must have descended from the gods.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Taurin caught Leena staring at him and smiled. His white flash of teeth lit his face with a devilish grin, but something very human sprang into his eyes. Suddenly she felt exposed in her short tunic.

“The temperature is cooler. I think I’ll change into one of my warmer gowns.”

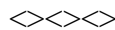
She needed a moment of privacy, a few minutes away from him to still her rapidly-beating heart. Aware that Taurin’s glance followed her movements, she picked up her bag and meandered toward a clump of trees that would hide her from view.

Hearing the sound of trickling water, she made her way through the thin underbrush to a small stream. After washing the layers of dust off her exposed skin, she donned her ruby red gown. The long sleeves provided warmth for her arms, but the low-cut neckline in front exposed more of her cleavage than she would have liked. Aware of how attractive a figure Taurin presented, she vowed to regard him in a cool, professional manner.

She needn’t have worried. When she returned to their encampment, Taurin was already lying down on his side, facing away from her. His gentle snoring told her he’d wasted no time in falling asleep. Leena stomped her foot in frustration. The least he could have done was stay awake and talk to her.

She was too restless to fall asleep so quickly. Taking one of the crystals from her bag, she held the small stone in her hand. Moonlight shimmered off its polished surface, reminding her of the time when she and Bendyk had played on the slippery stones in a brook near their home, laughing and splashing each other in the moonlight.

She wondered if her brother was all right and what he’d accomplished. Hopefully, they’d have the chance to talk soon.



Bendyk was enjoying another dinner in Swill’s apartment. She’d invited him there several times already, and he’d returned the favor by taking her out to restaurants on other evenings. They’d fallen into the easy habit of having dinner together every night, but Bendyk hadn’t wanted to press his luck by pushing Swill any further. She seemed content to keep their relationship as an easy camaraderie, and he wasn’t one to argue. His dreams of her were sinfully erotic, and as penance he forced himself to maintain a safe distance between them.

“I’m getting worried about Leena,” he told Swill, who sat across from him at her small dining table, staring into her glass of wine. Her short hair, glossy and black, curled about her neck with every movement.

She still refused to adorn herself with makeup, although her cheeks held a faint flush that he regarded as maidenly virtue. Her simple sheath dress, of a pale peach hue, impressed him more than any elaborate gown would have done. She wore the gold choker that he’d presented her the day before. She hadn’t wanted to accept the gift, but he’d insisted, saying it was a token of his appreciation for all the help she’d given him.

Having assessed the financial records of the different members of the Synod, they were moving into personal territory, which revealed interesting results.

“Communication from your sister is overdue,” Swill agreed, her amber eyes soft as she regarded him.

She knew he was worried. He’d mentioned Leena often in the past few days, wondering why they’d received no word from her. Had she been able to reach Grotus, and, if so, what were the results of her visit with him?

Bendyk twirled the stem of his wine glass. “Perhaps we should send someone after her, like one of the Caucus members.”

“We need them to help conduct our investigation.” Swill reached her hand across the table and was thrilled when he grasped her palm in his.

She didn’t want to admit how much she’d grown to like his company. The man still had his pompous moments when he spouted his religion, but he’d given up on trying to convert her. When he acted naturally, he was very appealing.

“You two have always been close, haven’t you?” Swill wished she’d had a sibling in whom to confide.

Bendyk’s eyes filled with anguish. “We grew closer after our mother died. Leena could have blamed me, but she didn’t. We needed each other then.”

“Tell me about the accident,” Swill said encouragingly. He hadn’t spoken about it after that first time, but she hoped he’d talk to her now.

Bendyk gave a long sigh and scraped his fingers through his blond hair. “It was a snowy night in winter.” His eyes took on a distant glaze. “Our father had been called away for an unexpected meeting. I’d invited some friends over and needed to go to the grocery for supplies. Mother came along to do her shopping. Being in a rush, I insisted on driving. I took Father’s rider because it was the heavier one. The roads on our estate are steep and winding.”

His voice lowered as he continued. “Despite the bad weather, I drove faster than I should have. There’s a particularly treacherous stretch near my home. The brakes failed. I...I couldn’t...I lost control of the steering. We crashed through a guard rail and went down into the ravine. My mother was killed by the impact.” His voice faltered, and he couldn’t go on.

The silence in the room stretched taut, like a rubber band about to snap. Finally he continued, his voice ragged with pain.

“I was seriously injured, pinned in place. The rider was pretty badly smashed up. I began to get cold and was afraid I’d freeze to death before anyone found us. Leena was visiting friends, so she didn’t know we were out. No one did. I hoped that my friends, when they came to the house and found no one home, would sound the alarm. But then, they might just assume it was the wrong night. The minutes ticked by, and then the hours. I grew numb with cold.”

Bendyk shivered, as though he were reliving the horror in his memory. Swill felt a surge of sympathy for him, but she didn’t dare interrupt. He was finally sharing the story with her, and she was grateful for his trust.

“My legs were broken, a few of my ribs cracked, and I had a gash on the side of my head that left me dizzy. My fingers and toes grew numb; then I could feel the coldness seeping up my limbs. I prayed to Lothar to save me. It was my fault we had crashed and my mother had died. Her body, slumped beside me, still emitted a measure of warmth, and I think that helped save me from freezing to death. My prayers kept me alert; I knew if I fell asleep, I would never awaken.”

His anguish-filled eyes bored into hers. “Lothar heard me. He sent rescuers at dawn. I was airlifted to a trauma center, and the police had the unpleasant duty of notifying my father of

what had happened.” Bendyk bowed his head. “That was the night I decided to devote myself to Lothar if he should hear my pleas. I’ve given myself to him, but I don’t delude myself that this can ever assuage my grief and guilt. If I had let my mother drive, or hadn’t gone down that hill so fast, we might have avoided the accident.”

Swill squeezed his hand. “Didn’t you say the brakes failed?”

Bendyk shrugged, avoiding her gaze. “The roadway was slick. They couldn’t hold the friction.”

“And what happened to your rider?”

“It was taken to a garage and sold for junk metal. I really wasn’t aware of what had happened for days afterward.” Letting go of her hand, he took a large swallow of wine. “My father was devastated. The accident happened just over five years ago. It was shortly after he’d been censured for his indiscretion.”

Swill raised an eyebrow. “What did he do that was so terrible?”

“He misinterpreted the Apostle’s teachings as written in a set of ancient scrolls. For his heresy, the Synod sentenced him to do a year of penance. He regarded my mother’s death as an additional punishment sent by Lothar.”

He rose abruptly, his face shuttered. “Do I smell something burning?”

Swill shot to her feet. “Cripes, I forgot about the bean fritters!” She rushed to the oven and heaved a sigh of relief that their meal wasn’t overcooked.

“You really should watch your language,” he admonished, coming up behind her and tickling her neck with a tender gesture that belied his preachy words.

Having removed the casserole from the oven, Swill took off her mitts and turned to face him. “And just how do you intend to chastise me, Bendyk Worthington-Jax?”

“By assigning you a penance.” He towered in front of her, his gaze darkening as his eyes fell to her mouth. “You’ll have to kiss me.”

“Kiss you,” Swill whispered, realizing she was backed up against the counter. His face hovered above hers, inches away.

“Like this,” he said, brushing her lips with a brief feathery touch.

Swill still didn’t want to like him; he was totally the wrong man for her. And yet she couldn’t help the thrill she felt in his company. Whenever she saw him, sunlight seemed to burst into the room. Could it be the religious fervor wrapped around him like a halo? Or was it merely her response as a woman to his masculinity?

He wore none of his priestly robes now. His plaid flannel shirt stretched across his broad shoulders. It was tucked into a pair of navy trousers that molded to the contours of his slim hips. His shirt was modestly open at the neck, just enough for her to get a tantalizing glimpse of his blond chest hairs. She stared into his mesmerizing blue eyes as her limbs grew weak with wanting.

“No,” she murmured in protest as his mouth descended once again.

He stepped closer so their bodies touched, but he kept his hands to himself as though waiting for her to make the next move. Swill leaned inward, meaning to deepen the kiss. She swayed against him, liking the lean, hard feel of his body.

Will he make love to me with the same passion as he praises his god? She’d never had a man like him want her. The other louts who’d chased after her were lowlife types who thought she’d be easy because she dressed unconventionally and came from a poor family.

Bendyk was too good for her, but she could enjoy him while their relationship lasted. She might never have the opportunity to be with anyone like him again, and he’d earned her respect

and admiration. She wanted to offer him comfort for the grief he'd suffered while easing her own loneliness. Her fingers found their way to his shirt buttons. As she unfastened them one by one, she clung her mouth to his so he couldn't protest.

Bendyk wondered what she intended but decided to wait to find out. When she opened his shirt and splayed her hands across his chest, his curiosity surged along with another part of his anatomy.

With a seductive smile, she took his hand and tugged him toward the bedroom.

"Now wait a minute," he said, hesitating.

"What's the matter? Don't you want me?" She spoke with such casualness that he wondered how many other men she'd favored with her attention.

"You're a beautiful woman, and I do desire you, but this is not right. It's improper for us to...to..."

"To what?" Swill planted her hands on her hips. "Have sex together? Relations are encouraged among singles."

"Yes, I know, but we are not intending to get bonded. Nor is this the month of trial marriages. Sex is only condoned if it's part of a serious relationship."

"Is that so?" Swill slid close to him and glided her body languorously against his. Her arms reached around him, and she kneaded his back muscles with her dexterous fingers. "Why don't you set aside your lofty aspirations for a change and experience your humanity?"

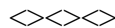
Before Bendyk had taken his vows, he'd lain with women who were casual acquaintances. But since his ordination, he'd strictly upheld society's mores. Now Swill thrust her leg between his thighs in a seductive motion that brought a vigorous response, and his remaining willpower evaporated.

"If we do this, it will change our relationship," he warned, his voice thick.

"No, it won't. We can each go our separate ways when we finish our mission. Consider this a way to relax, to relieve the pressure of our jobs."

"I need relief from pressure, all right," Bendyk gritted, nudging her toward the bed.

His body charged with need, he couldn't resist any longer. With an animalistic growl, he tore off his clothes and then waited while Swill, smiling knowingly, unclothed herself before his hungry gaze.



Taurin awoke the next morning, noting with dismay that it was well past dawn. Leena was still sound asleep on the mattress beside him, lying on her back, arms flung wide. A heavy layer of dew glistened on the grass, and the sound of trickling water reached his ears. So did the steady drone of insects and the occasional hoot of an owl or the howl of a wild animal. Exotic bird cries filled the perfume-scented air that was heavy with humidity.

Feeling Leena would be safe if he left her for a brief moment, he followed a trail through the jungle toward the sound of rushing water. The vegetation thinned, and he came upon a clear, cascading stream. With an exclamation of pleasure, he knelt by the bank and scooped cool water into his cupped hands, taking a slow, thorough drink.

Reminding himself that they should refill their canteen before leaving, he proceeded to shave using the razor he'd brought along. After managing that feat without cutting himself, he washed as best he could, wishing the stream were wider and deep enough for a swim.

Keeping his shirt off, he trudged back to camp. The sun rose hot on his back, the start of

what promised to be a sweltering day. They should get moving while it was still early, but he hadn't the heart to wake Leena. She appeared so peaceful in repose, and yesterday had been a particularly strenuous experience. She needed her rest, and he wouldn't steal it from her.

After gathering their supplies and picking some fresh fruit off the trees for breakfast, he squatted on the mattress, contemplating Leena's lovely face. Her thick-lashed eyes were closed, but he could see the rapid movements that indicated dream sleep. A small smile played about her seductive mouth, and he wondered what or who she was dreaming about.

Her blond hair spread out like a sheet of gold, gleaming in a shaft of sunlight. His gaze, filled with the longing that was in his heart, roamed her luscious body. The ruby gown molded to her curves, and he imagined his hands roving where his mind dared to go.

If only his situation was different, and she was not nearly pledged to Malcolm. Had Cranby, her father, already arranged the match? A hard glint shone in his eye as he imagined the Candor's reaction should he claim Leena for himself.

It wasn't in his destiny to have her. And yet as he observed her breast rising and falling, he felt a yearning so intense that it became painful.

At that moment her eyelids fluttered open, and she caught him staring at her.

Leena had been having the most marvelous dream. She and Taurin had just discovered the cache of crystals. With an exuberant cry, he'd swept her into his arms and kissed her firmly on the lips. The taste of his mouth was so delicious that she didn't want to let him go. She'd wrapped her arms around his neck, drawing him closer.

Leena flushed under Taurin's intense scrutiny. The look in his eye almost seemed to reflect the eroticism of her dream, and a restless urge took hold of her.

Taurin saw the sexual awareness flood her liquid blue eyes, and his loins tightened. Demon's blood, how he'd like to make slow, passionate love to her! Her parted mouth, dreamy expression, and soft, sleek body lulled him into a state of suspended reality. Here in the tropical jungle, with the spires of the ruined temple rising behind them, nothing mattered but the most primal factors of existence.

Without conscious thought, Taurin stretched out beside her, propping up his head by leaning on an elbow.

"Malcolm wouldn't approve of us being alone here together."

With his free hand, he traced a gentle line along her cheekbone. "I don't care what Malcolm thinks." She drew in a tremulous breath which told him how much his touch affected her. "He doesn't make my pulse race the way you do, or make me restless for something I can't define. Only you do that."

Taurin sucked in a breath, unable to draw his gaze from her face. He should get up now, move away from her before he acted in a manner they'd regret later. But how could he feel remorse for bringing her the pleasure she didn't realize she craved?

"Have you ever lain with a man before?" he asked, knowing the answer, yet needing to reassure himself that this was what she wanted.

"No." The word was a whisper on the wind. "But there's always a first time."

"Malcolm...your brother and father...."

"They've got their lives to lead, and I've got mine. It's time I made my own decisions."

As soon as Leena said it, she realized Malcolm had always been her father's choice for her. She'd gone along with the idea because it would have been an appropriate match and she liked Malcolm. But liking him, or even feeling a deep fondness for him, wasn't love; not in the sense of a woman and a man sharing a passionate need for each other.

In her heart, she sensed Taurin's need for her, and it struck an answering chord within her own soul. He still held many secrets, but she sensed his innate goodness. Perhaps he didn't realize it was there, but he'd shown her concern and consideration, and that meant more to her than any of his warnings about his violent past.

All of this flitted through her mind in a brief instant. Taurin hovered beside her, his gaze dark with desire, his hair tousled, his jaw clenched as he waited for her to answer the question in his eyes. Her glance lowered to his bare chest, and her blood stirred as she yearned to feel flesh against flesh, body against body.

"Make love to me," she urged, stretching out her arms. "Nothing else matters right now except you and I."

Taurin's mouth split into a smile, and his eyes softened as he slowly lowered his head and kissed her. It was a gentle kiss, a mere feathery brush of his lips on hers, but now that Leena knew what she wanted, patience flew out the door.

She leaned up, grasped his shoulders, and pulled him closer until he lay sprawled atop her.

"Gods, Leena," he grunted, his hips moving against her belly.

With an animalistic cry, his mouth claimed hers in a hunger born of desperation. Slanting the angle of his mouth again and again, he kissed her senseless. When his tongue thrust between her parted lips, she gasped with heated pleasure. He rolled his tongue in and out in an erotic motion that inflamed her senses.

She returned the favor, eager to progress, and was pleased to note how his breath quickened and the bulge prodding her thighs stiffened.

So this is what it's like to feel a woman's power, she thought, smiling inwardly.

Breaking free from his kiss, she sought to remove her gown, wishing to feel his hot skin upon her own.

"Let me help you." His eyes feasted on her as he slid her arms out of the sleeves.

He edged the garment downward, over the swell of her creamy breasts, past her trim waistline, and below the golden triangle of hair at the juncture of her thighs.

"How beautiful you are, my *angella*," he rasped, his eyes devouring her.

Restless, she lay back and lifted her face toward him. Shyness wasn't even a consideration. It was as though this was meant to be, that Taurin was the one she'd been waiting for all her life. Now she wanted to know him as only a woman could know a man: heart to heart, soul to soul, body to body.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“My wife!” Taurin uttered, kissing her gently. The tender expression in his eyes brought moisture to her lashes.

“I-I’m not sure what to do to please you.”

“You please me with your loveliness.”

After a reluctant parting kiss, he sprang up and unceremoniously stripped off his pants and boots. In the next instant, he was beside her again, ravishing her with his eyes. All of his inhibitions and concerns about their future were gone, washed away by her allure. With his index finger, he traced the outline of her lips, pleased to see the awe in her expression as she regarded the evidence of his manliness.

“You’re so big. I don’t know if I can—”

“Hush.” Leaning over, he silenced her with a kiss. “I’ll be gentle. That is, if you still want to continue.”

His gaze explored her nakedness, lingering on her breasts. They rose up like the twin peaks on Grotus’s island, lush and full of promise. Moistening his lips, he regarded her with a solemn expression.

“Say it now if you want to stop, because if I go further, there’ll be no holding back.” It took a major effort to restrain the wild passion tearing through him, but he had to control himself. He cared too much to risk hurting her.

Leena’s eyes shone with affection as she tenderly stroked his jaw. “I’m not afraid. Show me what to do.” She glanced toward his groin.

In response, he lowered his head and melded his mouth to hers.

Leena thrashed her fingers through his hair as his body covered hers. The urgency of his kiss and the feel of her breasts pressed against his chest excited her to new heights. Her nerves screamed for release from a tension she didn’t understand, an ache that began between her legs and spread through her like wildfire until her nipples tightened.

As though sensing her deep desire, Taurin’s hand roamed downward even as his mouth plundered hers and his tongue claimed her for his own. Leena writhed under his searing touch as he stroked her nipple and tweaked the tip until it stood erect, sending twinges of delight along her nerve endings. He kneaded her breast gently until a cry of ecstasy burst from her lips.

She clutched at his back, arching beneath him, shifting her position so he lay fully atop her. His hard shaft prodded her inner thigh. She opened her legs, wanting to accept him, all rational thought evaporating from her mind as her focus centered on the feel of their bodies pressed together. An unbearable throbbing arose from her womanly folds.

“Now, Taurin!” she pleaded.

With a heavy grunt, he plunged inside her, halting when he felt her tightness.

“Are you all right?” His eyes, smoldering with barely restrained passion, scanned her face.

She groaned. “Don’t stop now!”

He watched her as he increased his thrusts, wanting to see this first experience reflected

in her eyes. When her orbs widened and a violent shudder racked her body, he penetrated fully, eliciting a small scream.

Waiting a moment for her to grow accustomed to him, he resumed his movements, an erotic rocking motion that made her soar toward the heavens. The convulsion that had begun blossomed into a cataclysmic eruption as spasm after spasm of delight shook her body. Taurin's seed spilled into her as he reached his own climax, and they clung together, lost in a whirlwind of pleasure.

Sweaty and panting for breath, he rolled off her, collapsing onto his back.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked, his voice concerned.

Leena closed her eyes, too languorous to move. "I felt a momentary pain, but then the most incredible sensations overwhelmed me." Leaning up on an elbow, her hair trailing over her breasts, she regarded him with womanly guile. "Taurin, I want to do it again."

He hadn't thought of the consequences. Now that he'd awakened her passion, she wouldn't be satiated after one experience. Yet he realized this didn't mean their lack of a future together would change. She was exploring him the same way she might one of her temples: with an innocent excitement, an eagerness for discovery. And damned if he didn't want to explore with her.

"How can I resist you, *angella*?" he said when she let her hand wander to play with his chest hair.

He closed his eyes, enjoying the physical contact, breathing heavily when her hand dipped lower.

"Later," he rasped, pushing her away and leaping to his feet. "If we don't start back to the beach soon, we may miss Grotus's rendezvous." After pulling on his pants and boots, he began to break camp.

Leena watched him, admiring the play of muscles across his broad back and the tautness of his body. He was truly magnificent, and she ached with wanting him. He filled a basic need within her that she hadn't known existed, and now the desire for more consumed her.

I love him, she realized suddenly, gazing at the heavy arch of his eyebrows, the sleek line of his nose, and his finely chiseled mouth, as he turned toward her. *He's the only man I'll ever want*.

Malcolm was her father's choice, not hers. She'd lost interest in any liaison between them and would tell Malcolm at the first opportunity, being tactful so as to minimize any hurt feelings. In the meantime, she'd try to convince Taurin their match was meant to be. That he kept secrets from her didn't faze her; she'd learn them in good time. He was gentle with her, and that was more important.

"Your wife," she whispered.

"What's that?" He gave her a sharp glance.

"Now I'm truly your wife."

He paused in his work, gazing at her with a wistful expression. "Aye, you are." *For today*, he thought sadly.

Who knew what the morrow would bring? Once she learned the truth about his origins, it would shatter her belief in him. The affection he saw in her eyes would turn to loathing. His throat constricted as he imagined the pain of parting from her, knowing he'd caused her grief.

It would be better if he didn't let her get too close. Physical coupling was one thing; emotional intimacy was something else entirely. He'd been good at separating them when seeking women for pleasure. Why was it so difficult now?

Turning away so she couldn't read his expression, he made a show of preparing breakfast.

"You go ahead and eat," he told her, his gaze averted. "I'm going to refill our canteen."

Leena watched him go, a frown on her face. Why was he so eager to depart her company? Did he regret what they'd done? Or did he care so much that he feared losing her to Malcolm?

She hadn't told Taurin she hoped to honor their marriage vows. It might help if she made up for that omission, but would he insist on an annulment for his own reasons? He hadn't admitted his feelings for her, and she wondered if his affection was skin deep or more serious. She liked to think he felt as strongly about her as she did about him.

Biting her lip with uncertainty, she dressed herself in a work shirt and breeches. By the time Taurin returned, she'd finished her meager repast and was counting her tools to make certain all were packed.

Taurin ate in morose silence, and she was afraid to disrupt his mood. Later, when they'd trekked some distance into the jungle, he finally spoke.

Leaning against a tree trunk, he regarded her with a hooded expression. "Leena, I want you to make me a promise. We don't know what's going to happen when we return to Grotus's place. Give me your word that you'll do what I command without protest."

She sat on a flat rock beside a stream, trailing her fingers in the cool water. "I will, if your request is reasonable. Do you feel our lives will be in danger once Grotus gets what he wants from us?"

"Possibly. Danger lurks around every corner while we're on this quest. It behooves us to be prepared."

He fell silent, and Leena studied the brooding look on his face. His dark hair swept appealingly across his forehead, and the nearness of his tall, rangy form sizzled her senses. He seemed troubled, and she yearned to know what he was thinking.

At last she found the courage to ask the questions on her mind. "What's the matter, Taurin? Why won't you speak about what just happened between us? Are kind words so troublesome to your tongue, or do you not feel anything toward me now that your lust is satisfied?"

Stiffening, he glared at her. "Not feel anything! Cosmos, woman, what I feel for you can never be expressed in words. It is for your own good that I keep my distance."

She rose and faced him squarely. "And why is that?" she asked, her voice soft, encouraging.

Taurin's heart melted at the tender expression on her face. "I'm not someone you'd normally associate with," he reminded her, his tone harsh.

Comprehension dawned. "I'm no longer interested in Malcolm. Taurin, you're the man I want for my life mate."

Stricken by her words, he sucked in a breath. "You can't mean what you're saying."

"Yes, I do. I'm in love with you."

Inwardly, his heart leapt with joy. Yet in the next instant, the realization hit that she was an impressionable young woman, likely to fall for the first man to lie with her. "It's just an infatuation. You'll get over me."

"Why do you refuse to believe I really care for you? Has your life been so grim that you regard yourself as unworthy?" She drew herself upright. "I'm offering you a part of myself I've never shared with any other man. Don't you want me?"

Feeling like a swine, Taurin pulled her into his arms and buried his face in her hair. “Of course I do, but this isn’t right. You don’t belong with someone like me. You can’t know—”

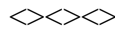
“All I know is that we need each other. Can you deny that is true?”

“No.” His voice was muffled.

“Then let’s make a deal. We’ll consider this an actual trial marriage, like they have at Beltane. If at the end of our mission, you still insist on an annulment, I’ll agree with no further imposition. Is that fair?”

“Yes, it’s fair.” Sighing, he gazed into her glistening eyes, unable to risk hurting her further. They’d play the game her way, even though she didn’t understand the stakes.

Drawing her soft body into his embrace, he kissed her thoroughly, wishing their fantasy could come true. But like many of his past desires, this one was made of the same fluff, about to be blown away by the winds of evil that were sweeping the land. If they didn’t find the horn by the month of Fearn, peace and harmony would cease to exist on this world, and everyone’s dreams would be shattered, not just their own pathetically fragile ones. For all their personal problems, he and Leena mustn’t lose sight of their goal.



The tide had washed up on the shore during the night, leaving a deposit of wet seaweed and shells on the sandy beach.

“How much longer do we have to wait for our rendezvous?” Leena used her hand to shade her face from the bright sun.

Dropping their sacks onto the beach, Taurin shrugged. “Should be soon. Remember what we’re going to tell Grotus.” His forehead glistened with sweat. Their trek had been long and tiresome.

“We found a few crystals near the entrance,” Leena repeated dutifully, “but we were unable to get past the third challenge.”

“You can embellish on the bones we saw,” he added, gazing out to sea. If he looked at her, he’d be tempted to ravish her on the soft bed of sand just like he’d had her the night before, when they’d succumbed to another bout of frenzied lovemaking.

To distract himself, he queried her about her observations at Grotus’s complex. They still needed to determine an escape plan should Grotus attempt to detain them, but as soon as he saw their means of transportation, he decided that would be their route.

On the water, an immense structure slid from the watery depths to the surface, its black hull gleaming against the deep-green sea. While he and Leena watched in amazement, a small craft was launched in their direction. As the motorboat approached the beach, they discerned a lone crewman aboard.

“Come with me! Grotus is eager for news of your success,” shouted the fellow.

Taurin assisted Leena into the craft and then seated himself beside her on a small bench. They veered out to sea, zipping across the waves toward the ominous black vessel, which was sleek and tapered at both ends, with a superstructure in the center. As they neared the submersible, another crew member helped them aboard.

After climbing down a hatch, he and Leena found themselves in a control room. Facing them was a confusing array of flashing instruments and dials.

A young crew member dressed in a tan uniform was assigned to the visitors. “My name is Stoker,” he told them. “Can I help you with your bags?”

“We’ll manage, thank you,” Taurin responded.

They were shown to their quarters, a narrow stateroom with twin bunks, a built-in set of drawers, and a small desk. Compared to their cabin on the *Predator*, this one was spacious.

“The toilet’s at the end of the corridor,” Stoker said, backing toward the door as though intending to leave them alone. A shuddering vibration indicated they were underway.

“Any chance of our getting a tour?” Taurin inquired, raising his eyebrows. “This is a fascinating vessel.” In an aside to Leena, he whispered, “We should learn all we can. We may have need of this knowledge later.”

The crew member, gullible in his youth, responded in the affirmative. Taurin took advantage by asking numerous questions, pretending he was merely curious but sharply observing the details. He coaxed Stoker into explaining the operating systems, communication network, and navigational computer.

Taurin was familiar with computer technology from Yllon. The Synod had repressed any development of advanced electronics on Xan, presumably because they wished to keep the people at a level amenable to easy control. Grotus’s clout must be far reaching for him to be able to smuggle in an item as huge as this entire submersible. Or maybe he had friends in high places.

“How many crew members are aboard?” Leena asked as they were given a tour of the machine shop.

“There’re four of us. We don’t need many for a sub this size. Some of the fleet’s larger vessels hold a crew of twenty.”

“What fleet?”

Stoker gave her an appreciative glance. “Grotus has a worldwide fleet,” he said proudly. “I didn’t show you the cargo hold, but our main assignments are for short runs. The other vessels are larger and capable of traveling a longer range.”

“Where does Grotus get the ships?”

Stoker shrugged. “Who knows? He pays well and gives generous benefits. That’s all that matters to me.”

“When do you estimate we’ll reach Grotus’s island?”

“The trip will take about twelve hours.” He led them back to their quarters. “If you’re hungry, help yourself to chow in the galley. We don’t have a regular cook.”

Left alone, Leena stared at Taurin, who restlessly paced the small cabin. “Grotus keeps a whole fleet of these vessels around the globe. This must be how he smuggles his contraband out of the different territories.”

“It makes sense,” Taurin agreed, hoping to learn more from Grotus himself when they reached his lair.

It was late by the time the submersible pulled into its berth in the underwater complex. Now at least they knew how Grotus’s visitors came and went from the island, Taurin thought.

A guide led them through a series of brightly lit chambers to a lift that rose to the surface. Through a window in an interior corridor, he noted that it was night. The lateness of the hour was confirmed when the man directed them to guest quarters and said Grotus would see them at noon the next day.

In the morning, he and Leena lazed in bed after enjoying another episode of leisurely lovemaking.

“I could get used to this,” Taurin murmured, flicking his tongue at Leena’s earlobe. He held her naked body in his embrace, luxuriating in the soft, warm feel of her.

“Me, too.” Leena writhed against him, loving the security his hard, lean body provided.

His hot breath in her ear drove her wild with desire. “Kiss me,” she demanded, wishing this interlude would never end. Their time together truly was like a dream. She was afraid it would dissolve once they returned to the Palisades.

Taurin’s mouth crushed down on hers and their bodies entwined in a twisting, desperate tangle. He entered her in a smooth thrust, his passage eased by her slickness. Instantly, she brought her legs up to wrap around his, clutching at his back, riding him like a frenzied *enix*. She’d never wanted anything in life as much as she wanted to be with Taurin, and being joined with him was the ultimate joy.

Taurin thought his heart would burst from pleasure and something else he felt deep inside and couldn’t yet acknowledge. As his thrusts deepened, a low growl rolled from his throat, and all rational thought flew from his mind. He and Leena were one, united together in the ageless rhythm of the universe, and that was all that mattered.

Was it? he asked himself later, when they rested side by side. Analyzing his emotions, he surprised himself by realizing he’d had nothing to fear from the violence coiled within his soul. Treating Leena with the gentleness she deserved had come naturally to him. This response only confirmed his notion that the supposed demonic influence was nothing more than a myth.

“What are you thinking?”

Leena’s voice cut into his thoughts. He glanced at her, smiling at the lovely portrait she made with her hair trailing across her bosom, her eyes still languid from their spent passion.

“I’m thinking how important you’ve become to me,” he said truthfully.

She touched his arm, letting her hand linger on his skin. “I hope our marriage works,” she whispered.

“What are you going to tell people when we return to the Palisades?”

Her expression clouded. “I’d like to tell Malcolm and my father about us first. Would you mind if we delayed our announcement?”

He was more concerned for her safety. There were still things about him she didn’t know, other reasons why he kept himself hidden away in Lexington Page. “Not at all,” he replied. “Let’s wait until the horn is recovered. That would be a more appropriate time for a celebration.”

They still had a lot of work to do, secrets to learn. She might despise him after certain factors came to light. If Grotus had news of the horn, it would speed their path.

Breakfast was served in their room and the morning passed quickly. At noon, they were ushered into the private dining room to greet their host.

“I was quite impressed with the mode of transportation that brought us here,” Leena remarked, chewing on a bite of egg bread spread with fruit jam.

Grotus stuffed a leafy stalk of saltreed into his mouth. He’d changed his nose ring to one holding a topaz-colored gem that flashed with each movement of his jaw. His sleek ebony hair was tied into a ponytail at the base of his neck. As before, he wore a multicolored longshirt over a pair of baggy trousers. His jewel-encrusted belt, Leena noticed, was a relic of the Brotzoa Age.

“No one has ever been able to determine what method of transport my agents use.”

Grotus’s gaze raked Leena from the top of her loose, wavy hair down to the bodice of her ruby-colored gown. “Even if you inform the Synod, they’ll not be able to track our movements. They haven’t the equipment or the knowledge.”

“Your operation is well organized.” Her compliment drew a pleased look on the smuggler’s face, and Leena surmised that flattery could work to her advantage. “Do you keep the most valuable finds for yourself or do you sell them to select buyers?”

Grotus didn’t pass up the opportunity to impress her. “Many of my collectors don’t care

how the merchandise is obtained. They pay me well for the right goods.” He beamed at her. “Some of the better treasures I keep for myself. I’m sure a woman of your talents would appreciate them.”

Leena lowered her eyelids demurely. “Your taste in art is exquisite.”

“No more exquisite than your beauty.”

Seated on the opposite side of Grotus, Taurin coughed loudly. “Have you any news regarding our quest?” he asked, raising an inquisitive eyebrow.

Grotus didn’t bestow on him the courtesy of a glance. He kept his gaze fixed on Leena while they consumed their meal—a curious mix of delicacies that Leena was only partly familiar with. She fed her mouth automatically, more interested in the conversation than the food. Grotus chewed thoughtfully on a piece of ambermeat.

“We did agree to a trade, did we not? Were you able to get into the Temple of Light?” His gaze swung to Taurin’s, and there was no friendliness in his cold black eyes.

“The temple was booby-trapped. We couldn’t get too far,” Taurin announced. “But we did manage to bring you back a sack of these, which were near the entrance.”

He withdrew one of the crystals from his pocket, handing it over to Grotus for examination. Leena thought the smuggler’s expression looked skeptical and figured he needed further convincing that their tale was true.

“I was familiar with some of the traps from other temples I’ve been in,” she said, “so we were able to gain a further distance probably than your men or any previous explorers. The third challenge was impassable, however. We barely escaped with our lives.”

Grotus turned the crystal over in his hand, licking his lips avariciously. “How many of these did you say you got?”

“A whole bagful,” Taurin replied. “I’m sure they’re quite valuable. Now what of the horn?”

Leena’s mouth dropped open. They hadn’t told Grotus before what had been missing, just that it was an important artifact. Grotus didn’t seem in the least bit surprised by the news. He must have already known the horn was the object of their quest, Leena concluded, remembering the message sent by Sirvat.

“Unfortunately, my agents were unable to pick up any hints of its whereabouts.” Grotus placed the crystal on the table. “The sacred artifact has not been presented to me for sale, so I have as little knowledge as you do about who has stolen it. Rumors are spreading among the people about the disasters that have befallen them. Apparently they don’t accept the story of a substitute trumpet being blown at the Renewal ceremony. They’re aware of greater tragedies ahead if the horn isn’t recovered.”

He spread his hands, a wide smile on his face. “I am just as eager as anyone to see the horn reinstated. My little empire is quite prosperous. Should disaster occur because the horn isn’t blown in time to reset the cycles, I would be most unhappy. My agents will continue to make inquiries, and if I learn anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Taurin and I will need transportation back to the Palisades,” Leena said, acutely disappointed at their failure.

Grotus’s expression turned sly. “Don’t be in such a rush, madam. I have much to show you.”

Taurin gave him a suspicious glare, but Grotus ignored him, signaling for one of his attendants to clear their plates. Dessert followed while they discussed the varying weather patterns.

“Go to the garden,” Grotus told Leena when they had finished. “Blanchette is waiting for you. She’ll take you to an overview of a nearby lake that’s quite pleasant. Your husband can join you shortly.”

Taurin remained, sitting rigidly in his seat, wondering what Grotus wanted with him. He didn’t have long to wait. As soon as Leena vacated the room, all traces of pleasantries were erased from Grotus’s face, replaced by a snarl.

“When you find the horn,” Grotus told Taurin, “I want it.”

Taurin stared at him. “Why would I give it to you? You just said you want this world restored to order as much as we do.”

“That relic is worth a lot of money. Dikran will pay highly for it. You will give it to me first, and I will ransom it back to the Synod.”

“Go to the devil.”

Taurin half-rose as though to leave, but Grotus stayed him with a gesture. “Who are you to speak of demons, Taurin Rey Niris? I know where you come from, and there they call you demon seed. Do you wish me to tell your enemies where to find you?”

Taurin sank slowly into his chair, too stunned to speak.

Grotus picked idly at his teeth with a lacquered fingernail. “After seeing your bibliotome, I had my suspicions. Captain Sterckle had sold me some bibliotomes that came from Yllon, or so he said. I made inquiries about you and learned you had booked passage on his ship. Then there is your bracelet, constructed of the same material as the elusive horn. Are you still wearing it?”

Taurin nodded.

“I’ll pay you a good price if you sell it to me.”

“No deal, Grotus. And you’re not getting the horn if we find it first.”

Grotus leaned forward, hunching his shoulders menacingly. “If you don’t cooperate, then I’ll tell your friends where to find you. You’re under a death sentence on Yllon. You won’t last long if they come for you here.”

A spearhead of panic shot through Taurin’s veins, more out of fear for Leena’s safety than his own. She was in danger merely by associating with him. His mind raced frantically as he sought a method of appeasement.

“We brought you the crystals. Didn’t we fulfill our part of the deal?”

Grotus chuckled, a nasty, evil sound. “Whoever said I was an honest man? My agents will be watching you. Should they learn that you have recovered the horn and not handed it over to me, I will immediately contact your prior associates.”

“How can I get in touch with you?”

Grotus’s smile broadened. “Sirvat knows how to reach me.”

Taurin’s eyebrows raised. “So Leena was correct about the two of you. What is your relationship?”

“The Minister of the Treasury would do anything to please me.” Grotus’s eyes held a mocking light as he spoke of the female Synod member. “She has long coveted my attention and provided me with certain tidbits of information in exchange for my...uh...favors.”

He examined his fingertips. “If you tell Sirvat that you need to contact me, she’ll be most happy to oblige. Now if you’ll excuse me,” Grotus said, rising, “I wish to make your wife an offer.” The way he emphasized the word *wife* showed that he didn’t think much of their bonding.

Taurin shot out of his seat, his fists clenched by his sides. “What do you mean by that remark?”

“It doesn’t concern you.” Grotus snapped his fingers, and a couple of guards arrived—

armed guards, Taurin noticed. "You will escort our brother to his chamber," Grotus ordered.

Seeing it would be useless to argue, Taurin went willingly, his troubled mind imagining all sorts of threats Grotus would make to Leena. *They couldn't be as bad as the one he made me. If my identity is exposed...*

Taurin shuddered, blocking the violent images from his mind.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Where is Taurin?” Leena asked, having been shown into the music room by Blanchette and left alone with Grotus. She’d had a pleasant stroll to the lake with her guide, but now she yearned for Taurin’s company and wondered why he wasn’t there to greet her.

“I wished to have a moment alone with you, my dear.” Grotus’s dark eyes gleamed maliciously. “Come, please be seated. If you’re thirsty, help yourself to a beverage from that carafe on the table.”

Leena remembered the last time she and Taurin had taken a drink from Grotus and refused his offer. Curious as to what he wanted from her, she sat in an upholstered armchair and waited. Grotus lowered himself onto a bench behind the magnificent keyboard instrument in the center of the room. In moments, his fingers flew over the keys, producing a beautiful melody that lifted her spirits and relaxed her mind.

“You play wonderfully,” she remarked in astonishment.

“I’ve practiced for many years.” As he played, his eyes roved over her, his expression leaving no doubt in her mind what he wanted.

Compressing her mouth, Leena glared at him meaningfully. “My husband would enjoy hearing you play. We should summon him.”

“He complained of fatigue and is resting upstairs. Come, sit here on the bench with me, and I’ll show you the music.”

“I can hear quite well from this spot, thank you.”

Grotus lit a candle of incense. “This is my favorite scent. I think you’ll enjoy it. Come closer,” he commanded, and this time she felt compelled to obey.

The spicy fragrance tickled her nostrils as she sat beside Grotus, modestly spreading her skirt about her legs.

“Have you ever played an instrument?” he asked her.

“No.” Leena gave a small smile. “My brother Bendyk used to play the hironrod, but I was never musically inclined.”

“Your artistic talents simply run in other directions.” Grotus showed her how he placed his fingers on the keys. “There are seven basic notes to play, plus three tabs and notches. Once you learn the basic sets, the rest is easy.”

Leena shook her head. “It could never be easy for me.”

Grotus played a fast, catchy tune that caught her fancy, and she swayed in place, dreamily breathing in the tantalizing scent of the incense and enjoying the crescendo of the music that thundered her senses.

“That was marvelous,” she said breathlessly when he had finished with a flourish. His nose ring seemed unusually large as she gazed into his face. He didn’t seem quite as unappealing as he had before, and that strange gleam in his eyes held her transfixed.

“If you like my music, there are other things I can share with you.” He took her hand, leading her away from the bench and toward a doorway.

In the library, Grotus rotated a book high on a third shelf. A section of wall swung aside,

revealing a passage beyond. “Go ahead,” he urged. “I’ll follow you.”

Her mind in a state of numbed tranquility, Leena strode ahead. Facing her was a short corridor with a door ahead. Behind her Grotus laughed as he swung the hidden panel back into place. Recessed lights provided illumination as he sauntered next to her and pushed a touchpad beside the far door. It swung open, and Leena gasped at the brightness within.

“This is where you keep your precious objects!” She rushed forward to study the meticulously restored artifacts and other works of art he’d gathered there.

“I knew a woman of your fine taste would appreciate these. But they’re nothing compared to my newest treasure. Follow me.”

“What is it?” She moistened her lips as the smell of incense drifted her way again, lulling her into a calm serenity.

The next room appeared to be a bedchamber, with a large round bed on a central dais. Black and gold drapes decorated the space, which had mirrors covering the walls and ceiling. She heard the door latch shut behind her, but it didn’t bother her. The cloud of incense thickened, clogging her nostrils until she could barely breathe.

“I don’t feel so good. We should find Taurin.”

“You can rest here,” Grotus said in a soothing tone, motioning to the bed. “Lie down, and I’ll see that you’re well attended.”

Feeling dizzy, Leena did as she was told, but instead of leaving to seek her husband, Grotus sat beside her.

“I’ve never met a woman of your unique beauty who also has such excellent taste in art. It’s an irresistible combination.” He trailed his pudgy fingers down her arm.

Leena felt too weak to protest, or even to wonder why her head reeled. The soft bedding was comfortable, and she couldn’t have moved her limbs had she tried because they felt so heavy. Grotus leaned over her, his face growing larger as her vision blurred.

“I’d like you to stay with me, Leena. Your man can find the horn. I need someone of your intelligence to appraise my acquisitions.”

“Stay here? No, I can’t.” Leena began to rise, but Grotus pushed her down.

He studied her face, an expression of concern on his visage. “You look pale, my dear. I think perhaps your gown is too tight. I will help you unfasten it.”

Before she could protest, he rolled her to the side and unzipped the fastening in the back. His fingers lightly caressed her flesh, and a shudder coursed through her veins, disgusting her.

“Don’t...don’t do that.”

He pushed her onto her back and gazed into her face, his teeth bared in an evil grin. “I’ll show you the pleasures that will be yours should you decide to remain. You don’t need to go away with that farmer. Stay here and reap the glories of my empire. Rey Niris will find the horn, and he’ll bring it to me.” Grotus sneered. “He has no choice.”

“I’ll not be your hostage,” Leena murmured.

Grotus’s hand groped inside her bodice, finding her breast. As he stroked her, his knee nudged her legs apart. “No, not a hostage. You will be the supreme addition to my collection. A treasure beyond comparison,” he gloated.

Leena couldn’t understand why the incense didn’t bother Grotus. Choking from the cloud that pervaded the room, she closed her eyes, barely aware of Grotus’s hands roaming her body. Her mind wandered and replayed the tune he’d performed in the music room.

C-D-E-F. Leena rattled off the keyboard notes that Grotus had taught her, only there were some missing. Try again, she told herself, focusing her mind on her one rational thought. C-D-E-

F-A-B. Was that right? She counted them all together. C-D-E-F-G-A-B. That's it! There were seven notes, plus the other notches he'd pointed out to her that made for the different combinations. Seven. Why did that number ring a bell? Leena moaned as Grotus's probing touch dipped between her thighs.

"That's it, my dear." Grotus chuckled. "I knew you would enjoy this. The perfumed incense is very hypnotic, is it not?" His grin broadened. "I am immune to its power, but you, my dear, are quite susceptible."

Seven notes, Leena thought. Just like the seven letters that she couldn't decipher in the ancient symbols. If they were letters, that is. Her mind replayed the tone of Taurin's spinning bracelet. Wait a minute! What if the symbols represented notes? That would explain why there were only seven.

Stunned by the revelation, she sat upright and stared at Grotus. "Get away. I must speak to Taurin."

"You're not going anywhere."

"Oh, yes I am." The fog dispelled from her mind, and she leapt off the bed. Her heart racing, she lunged for the door.

Grotus reached her in two quick strides and grasped her by the arm. Leena whirled about, her anger bringing clarity.

"What would you do? Keep me hostage here while sending Taurin off to locate the horn on his own? Is this how you hope to obtain it for your collection?"

Grotus glowered at her. "Rey Niris will bring me the horn, but you are not the bait. I want you here for my own reasons."

"May I remind you that without me Taurin has no way to verify the authenticity of the horn?"

"You will authenticate it here."

"The Synod would not stand for you to hold me captive. My brother Bendyk is a partner in this investigation. He would see to it that you were hunted down."

Grotus snickered, his fingers digging into her arm. "No one can reach this island."

"We did." Leena thrust her jaw out stubbornly. "I'll not work for you, no matter what you do to me. Release me at once."

Grotus, staring into her lovely eyes glittering with anger, considered his options. He wasn't certain she and Rey Niris were telling the truth about their sojourn into the Temple of Light. It was possible that they'd penetrated farther than they'd indicated, but he had no way of knowing for sure without forcing the truth from them. This he couldn't do because retrieving the horn was more important.

He enjoyed his way of life, and to see Xan descend into chaos should the horn not be found and blown would mean the destruction of the empire he'd so carefully built. He wanted to see the horn restored as much as anyone, and it was true that Leena and Taurin together had the best chance of finding it. His spies could tell him when they located the sacred object, and then he'd capture the duo and bring them here. He would force Leena to submit to his wishes by threatening to harm Taurin if she didn't cooperate.

Abruptly Grotus released her. "Very well. I will make arrangements for your return to the Palisades." Besides, he told himself, Rey Niris will return to me of his own free accord. He has to bring me the horn or I'll expose his identity, and that would make his life here worthless. Either way, the odds are in my favor.

After escorting Leena to the main hallway and summoning an attendant to take her to her

chamber, he hastened into the library, closed the door, and put through a private call to a certain influential lady's private residential suite in the Palisades.

"Sirvat," he said when he heard her voice on the line. "I am sending our two little birds back home. They have failed in their quest thus far, but I would appreciate it if you'd keep me informed of their progress." His voice lowered seductively. "I should be most grateful."

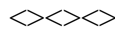
"Of course, Grotus." He could almost hear her purring on the line. "I miss you. When am I going to see you again? It's been a long time since our last meeting." Her voice was edged with the desperation of a woman who knew that her man was not nearly as attracted to her as she was to him.

"Soon, my dear. Have you any news to report?"

"Karayan and Zeroun have expressed doubts about Magar. They're unsure of his relationship with Rey Niris."

Grotus knew very well what their relationship was, but he didn't share this information with Sirvat. "Be cautious. Leena and Taurin are aware of our liaison. Call me if anything else develops."

He terminated communications, realizing he had no more clues to the horn's location than did Leena or Taurin. He'd have to impress upon his agents the urgency of the matter and see that any information they gained was passed on anonymously to the duo. A rage of helplessness shook him. Not only did the Synod have to rely upon the pair to find the horn, but so did he, and Grotus didn't like having to depend upon anyone.



Leena and Taurin were summoned to a conference with Dikran almost immediately upon their arrival at the Palisades. The Arch Nome greeted them in his private reception chamber. Sitting in a large, throne-like chair, his figure seemed dwarfed by the furnishings about him. His gaunt face and slumped shoulders indicated a weariness that went beyond his years.

At least his keenness of mind hadn't faded, Leena noted with relief. His sharp gaze focused on her and Taurin as the Caucus member who'd escorted them into the room departed. The three of them faced each other alone.

"Well," Dikran said in a tremulous voice, "have you brought me the sacred horn?"

Leena hid her failure by lifting her head proudly. "No, your grace. We have not recovered the holy relic, but we've made other significant discoveries."

A look of anguish passed across Dikran's face. "You've not found the horn! Then what are we to do? The people are growing restless. No one believes that tale about the trumpet substituting for the horn. The Truthsayers are making loud noises about rebellion, and Zeroun's enforcers are hard-pressed to quell the people's fears."

After a moment of heavy silence, Dikran addressed Taurin. "Where do you come from?"

Taurin was taken aback by the directness of the question. "I own a farm, sir, in Lexington Page."

Dikran nodded. "Karayan told me your property abuts Magar's estate. How do you two know each other?"

Taurin shifted his feet. They hadn't been invited to sit, and he envied Leena's composure as she stood beside him, an elegant figure in an emerald-green velvet gown. The crispness of autumn had finally arrived in the area, and she'd wisely chosen a heavier fabric.

"Magar and I met during a trade exchange between our two lands," he explained. "I

expressed interest in immigrating, and he agreed to help me. I raise edible flowers, which is not too common in your territory.”

Dikran folded his gnarled hands together in his lap, his gold robe reaching to his feet. He'd forsaken his headdress, and without it, he appeared merely as he was—an old man who kept his dignity but had lost his strength. His powers of observation had not been lessened, though, and Taurin felt the intensity of the Arch Nome's gaze boring into him.

“The trade records have been examined. There is no report of a meeting between you.”

Taurin shrugged. “Magar probably deemed it insignificant. My background is not the issue here. We didn't find the horn, but we did come across several clues.”

Her voice high-pitched with excitement, Leena told the Arch Nome about their excursion to the Black Lands, including the attempts on their lives and the illegal transactions of the Chocola Company on the exiles' island. Dikran's brow furrowed, and he promised to look into the matter.

At his encouragement, Leena described their encounter with Grotus, omitting any mention of the Temple of Light. Their knowledge of the treasures therein might prove useful later on.

“If Grotus could tell you nothing,” Dikran commented, “then what are we to do next?”

“I have an idea.” Taurin wagged his finger. “Brother Aron, the missionary who tried to murder us, mentioned that Wodeners don't betray their friends. I gather he was from the Woden district. Leena and I could travel there incognito to see what we can learn about the Truthsayers.”

Dikran raised an eyebrow. “It is possible Grotus may still hear news of the horn, but we cannot rely on him. I will make arrangements for your journey to Woden.”

“Just give us a rider,” Taurin said, making an impatient gesture. “We'll do this our way.”

Leena glanced at him in surprise. His tone of voice denoted no disrespect, but it sounded as though he were ordering Dikran, not the other way around.

Dikran pursed his lips, studying the younger man. “Less than two months remain before Lothar is due to reset the cycles. If the horn is not blown at the Grand Altar by then, disaster will ensue. The people may not wait that long before they revolt. The Truthsayers are using the situation as a weapon against the Synod. They must be stopped!”

He leaned forward in his chair, hunching his shoulders. “You and Bendyk are our only hope. You have to locate the horn.”

Leena bowed her head, too choked with emotion to speak. It was a heavy burden, and she didn't feel worthy of it, especially after their lack of progress thus far.

She promised to report as soon as they had news and accompanied Taurin from the chamber.

“Your brother said he would wait for us in his office.” Taurin put his hand lightly on her shoulder. Her body drooped, and she looked as though she needed support. He hoped her brother had achieved greater success than he and Leena had.

“Leena.” Bendyk's handsome face burst into a grin when she and Taurin appeared in the doorway of his office.

“Bendyk! Oh, I'm so glad to see you.” Leena rushed forward into her brother's arms, crushing him to her. How good it felt to be held in his warm embrace.

“I must bless your return,” Bendyk said, giving Taurin a solemn nod of greeting.

Behind him, Swill rose from her desk, giving Leena a friendly smile. All four of them fell silent as Bendyk raised his hands and intoned, “We give thanks to you, O Lothar, for delivering these two children back unto us in safety. You are our lord, the source of life and its blessings.

The harmony and grandeur of nature are representative of you. We owe you our eternal gratitude for your sanctifying our life and granting us peace and tranquility. Mahala.”

“Mahala,” Leena murmured, and both she and Bendyk were surprised to hear Swill and Taurin mutter in unison after them.

Bendyk’s gold medallion flashed against his white shirt as he motioned for Taurin to close the door so they could talk in private. They moved their chairs into a circle so each could see the other.

“Swill, how are you?” Leena asked the tall, slender girl.

“I’m fine, thank you.”

Swill cast a fond glance in Bendyk’s direction, and Leena raised her eyebrow. She would have expected a snappy retort and wondered what had occurred between Swill and her brother in her absence.

“Did you find the horn?” Bendyk asked without preamble.

“I’m afraid not.” Leena related to him everything they had already told Dikran.

“That sounds like your wisest course,” Bendyk said of their plan to go to Woden.

“I want to go home first and visit Father.” Leena cast Taurin a sly look from beneath her long lashes.

“Why? You’ll waste valuable time,” Bendyk retorted.

“I wish to show Taurin our estate and Father’s temple,” she added, emphasizing the last word.

Taurin caught the gleam in her eye. “Of course. I would be most honored.”

“Father doesn’t know about your vows,” Bendyk reminded her. “I could annul the marriage now if you wish. It has served its purpose.”

Leena cleared her throat. “We’ve decided to consider this a trial marriage, like the ones performed at Beltane. Taurin and I have reached an understanding, and we want to stay together.” She was gratified to see the admiration in Taurin’s eyes as he returned her gaze.

“B-But what about you and Malcolm?” Bendyk stared at her, clearly taken aback by her announcement.

Leena was amused to see Swill’s wide smile as she witnessed the intimate family scene. “I’m no longer interested in Malcolm. I’ll tell him so when I get the opportunity, but I’m eager to introduce Taurin to Father.”

Bendyk was about to say that their father would be disappointed, but he held his tongue, wondering if Leena had made the better choice. Rey Niris was a man of character, whereas Malcolm was accustomed to the easy life. He enjoyed the accoutrements of wealth through his inheritance and lacked ambition to further his intellect.

Leena was an archeologist. She’d been educated and pursued her career with alacrity. Taurin had come to this land with nothing to his name and had developed his farm into a thriving business. They undoubtedly shared the same type of enthusiasm for their work. His sister would be better suited to a man who met challenges head on and could protect her in times of adversity.

He was still concerned about Taurin’s irreverent attitude toward Lothar, but since meeting Swill, he had come to realize that everybody had the right to their own point of view. It no longer seemed important to convert those who were weak-minded enough to doubt their faith. His calling should be more in the line of helping people, as Swill tried to do.

Pleased with his conclusions, he decided to bless his sister’s marriage and pray that Lothar would grace her union with beneficence.

“Congratulations, Brother.” Bendyk extended both his hands to Taurin. “I offer my

blessings to you both and my counsel should you require it for any reason.”

Taurin accepted his handshake, a pleased look on his face. “I promise to look after your sister.”

“We’ll pretend to be new settlers when we go to Woden,” Leena said. “Dikran is arranging for the proper documentation. Now tell me, what progress have you and Swill made?”

“We’ve had some interesting observations.” Swill tugged at the long sleeves of her burgundy blouse, tucked into a black skirt that hugged her hips. “Magar makes regular unexplained entries in his receipts, which Sirvat deposits into the Treasury. Magar refuses to elaborate on the source. Sirvat’s financial records are impeccable, but the odd thing about her is these trips she takes every so often, returning with a new piece of jewelry each time. The items are created with rare gemstones. Usually, she’s not one to adorn herself.”

“I’ll bet I know where she gets them.” Taurin related what he and Leena had learned about Grotus and Sirvat’s relationship.

“I don’t believe it.” Bendyk shook his head. “She seems so strait-laced.”

Leena gave a small smile. “Perhaps she hides a passionate nature. She certainly has a peculiar bent to fall for a man like Grotus.” Her face grimaced in disgust at the memory of the smuggler. “You know, some of those items I saw in Grotus’s mansion are similar to pieces in Karayan’s house.” She pursed her lips in thought. “Karayan has quite an extensive art collection.”

“Are you implying that he buys his art works from Grotus?” Bendyk asked with a horrified expression.

“Not really. They just share the same kind of artistic taste, although Karayan is a much better dresser.”

Beside her, Taurin snorted. “We’re not here to discuss anyone’s preference in art or clothes. Did you investigate Zeroun? As Minister of Religion, his department is responsible for administering the Black Lands. Someone there has granted the Chocola Company illegal rights.”

“We’ll check into it,” Swill assured him. “We’ve cleared most of the other Synod members but weren’t sure about Sirvat’s trips and Magar’s secretive dealings in his trade commissions. I still feel he’s withholding information from us.”

“You’re wasting your time with Magar,” Taurin snapped. “I suggest you check out Zeroun. The Minister of Religion would also be responsible for—” He held his tongue; he’d nearly said *for excising any records of the Temple of Light*. “—for the Black Lands,” he finished lamely.

“Karayan wants to see you,” Bendyk told Leena, “to make certain you have arrived back here safely. He’s been stopping in often, asking after you.”

“Of course,” Leena said, pleased that her father’s friend would take such an interest in her well-being. “I’ll stop in and say hello before we leave. Why don’t the two of you come home with us?”

“Swill and I made plans to go the Festival of Hathalat tomorrow. All the offices will be closed.”

Leena’s eyes widened. “But the Festival of Hathalat is where young maidens are...”

She stopped when she saw the laughing expression in Bendyk’s eyes. How was it that he and Swill were socializing together? Could it be that their relationship had progressed beyond a professional one? They certainly seemed to share an easy camaraderie. Swill showed little of the rebelliousness she’d first demonstrated, and Bendyk wasn’t at all his usual pompous, preachy self. What an unlikely couple!

Rising, she turned to Taurin and linked her arm with his when he stood. “Let’s keep in touch, Brother. Dikran said the people are getting restless. We must conclude this business soon.”

Karayan was not in his office, so Leena and Taurin proceeded outside to the sleek blue rider that had been lent to them. Taurin started the engine, then glanced at Leena. “Why did you not tell Bendyk and Swill of your discovery regarding the symbols?”

“What? That the symbols represent seven musical notes and that the common string stands for Cadega, the constellation? We have no idea what it means.”

“It means the Apostles might have come from there,” Taurin said, careful to keep his hands on the wheel and his eyes on the road ahead.

“Are you saying they might have come from another planet?”

“Why not? Didn’t you tell me yourself that the horn is constructed of a material unlike any other found on Xan?”

“With the exception of your bracelet and the rings we found.”

“Doesn’t that mean the material could have come from another world? It would explain why the Apostles were so much more advanced than the native population.”

His words fired her imagination, confirming a theory she’d held but hadn’t dared to acknowledge. “Wherever the Apostles came from, they brought us Lothar’s teachings.”

Taurin shook his head. “I think they established the religion of Lothar because they knew it would appeal to the primitive intellect of the inhabitants. The Apostles wrote the laws as guidelines for an orderly society. There was no supernatural entity involved.”

He’d always felt that the Apostles, who were regarded with such awe on Xan, had also come to his world, where they’d been condemned as demons. What had happened to make the difference he had yet to discover, but he hoped to find out while on Xan, feeling it related to his destiny. He was a direct descendant of those ancients, and learning more about them would help him understand himself and his purpose in life.

“Are you saying there is no Lothar?” Leena demanded.

Taurin shrugged, as though unwilling to commit himself to a direct response. She fell silent, lost in her own musings about Lothar, the Apostles, and the history of her world.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

At the Palisades, Bendyk was having second thoughts about taking Swill to the festival. Ever since that first night when they'd made love in her apartment, Bendyk had been visiting her several times a week. Neither one of them had said any words of commitment. Swill made it quite clear that physical satisfaction was her main motivation, and Bendyk wasn't going to admit to any stronger emotions as far as she was concerned.

The purpose of the festival, which was to induce young maidens to succumb to their suitors' charms, gave him a moment of guilt. He was using Swill as she was using him, and such selfishness was unworthy of Lothar's blessing. A bonding ceremony was still the ideal goal for most young people, and his continuing to enjoy Swill without any plans in that direction began to weigh on his conscience.

The same night that Leena and Taurin left, he went to Swill's apartment. Aware that she was not expecting him, he was nonetheless surprised when she opened her door wearing nothing but an overshirt with a scooped neckline. His gaze swept from her damp hair to her bare legs and feet, and he surmised she'd just come from the shower.

"Please come in," she said, her face coloring to a becoming shade of crimson. She led him into her living area.

"I don't think we should go to the festival tomorrow," he said bluntly. "Let's go visit Father instead. I'd like to show you around our estate."

Swill's mouth dropped open. "You want to take me home?"

Bendyk saw the doubt on her face and interpreted her hesitation as being due to her desire to continue their work at the Palisades. Accordingly, he paced the room, hands folded behind his back, and addressed a topic he wouldn't have spoken of otherwise.

"Before the accident that killed my mother, Father had spoken out against the teachings of the Synod. Studying ancient scrolls had always been his avocation, and the ones he'd been examining were a recent find from the caves of Halea. His interpretation was grossly misguided. Charged with heresy, he was threatened with banishment to the Black Lands unless he rescinded his words."

He paused, fingering a pottery vase displayed on Swill's bookshelf. "Zeroun was responsible for assigning him penance. Father was allowed to keep his position, but the censure destroyed his faith in himself."

He fell silent, and when he said nothing more, she asked, "Why are you telling me this?"

His steady blue eyes locked on hers. "I told you the brakes failed on our rider the night of the accident. I didn't see the mechanic's report, but my father told me it showed nothing irregular. Now that we are investigating the Synod, I am wondering..."

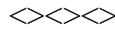
He let his voice trail off, confusion and doubt assailing him. He'd had his suspicions, but they'd been suppressed in the aftermath of the tragedy, and until now, he'd had no reason to bring forth the matter again. He wasn't sure he even wanted to dig any deeper at this point in time, but then, he didn't have to be the one to pursue the subject. Swill could do it for him.

"Of course," she said when he'd explained his purpose.

Leaving Swill so she could prepare for their excursion, Bendyk contemplated the possible consequences of this angle of their investigation. What if his suspicion was true, and the brake failure hadn't been an accident? Did he dare mention the matter to his father? It would only throw the government into a further state of chaos if someone at a high level was involved.

Hunching his shoulders as he strode down the corridor on the way to his own suite, he decided there was no other choice. Father might know what really happened that night. He resolved to discuss the matter with him to clarify the issue once and for all.

Satisfied with his reasoning, he never once considered why he needed an excuse to bring Swill home to meet his father.



Taurin was impressed by the richness of Leena's familial estate as she conducted him on a tour. He'd met Cranby earlier and endured an interrogation worthy of a Gang Inquisitor from Yllon. Cranby must have been satisfied with Taurin's responses, because he'd offered his congratulations and dismissed them both, shuffling off to his library to pursue his studies. Leena had excused herself to make a private call to Malcolm.

"This is too easy," Taurin muttered to himself, inordinately gratified that Cranby had accepted him so readily. Apparently the older man was happy to see his daughter wed, as long as her mate was honorable and offered the proper respect.

"How'd it go?" he asked when Leena strode into the foyer where he awaited her.

"I'd hoped to see him in person, but Malcolm has a business appointment later. I told him the news over the messenger. He was outraged and deeply hurt." Her eyes reflected her pain. "Once he thinks it over, I'm sure he'll realize this way is best for our mutual happiness. I just hope he doesn't complicate matters by speaking against us. His comments were not very complimentary."

"His pride is wounded, but he's a good catch. Someone else will snare him before long. If he's a gentleman, and you've given me the understanding that he is, I doubt he would malign you to others."

Advancing toward him, she kissed him soundly on the mouth. "You make me feel so much better. I'm glad you're mine."

He embraced her, sensing her need for comfort. After planting a light kiss on her forehead, he stepped away. "How about completing our tour?" he said encouragingly.

They were just finishing when Bendyk and Swill arrived.

"What are you doing here?" Leena greeted her brother with a big hug as he strode in.

Swill, trailing behind him, gazed with awe at the gilded entranceway.

"We decided not to go to the festival today," Bendyk said. "I'd rather show Swill around, especially since you're here. We're just in time for midday nourishment, are we not?"

"Of course," Leena replied, and she and her brother showed their guests into the family dining room.

Her father retained several servants, and providing for the extra pair of visitors was an easy task. They sat around a table laden with gold-rimmed dishes and gleaming silver flatware.

"Is Father not joining us?" Bendyk's brow furrowed with concern.

"He's engrossed in the library." Leena's mouth curved down. "You know how he doesn't like to be disturbed."

Bendyk rolled his eyes before helping himself to a biscuit and butter. Leena engaged him

in conversation while Taurin ate in brooding silence. Swill wasn't one for idle chatter either, and she ate quietly, casting nervous glances at Bendyk each time a new course was served.

"What are you two planning to do this afternoon?" Bendyk asked, finishing his meal with a slice of juicy porcheberry pie.

"I was going to show Taurin around Father's temple." Leena glanced at Swill, who'd barely said a word throughout the entire meal. "What about you?"

"Swill is heading into town to make some inquiries." Bendyk put a hand on Swill's shoulder.

"What sort of inquiries?" Taurin asked, sounding mildly interested.

"I want her to check into the report of brake failure from the night of the accident."

"What?" Leena hunched forward. "What brought that subject up?"

Bendyk looked uncomfortable. "I was never fully satisfied with Father's explanation of the mechanic's report."

"You mean you don't believe the brakes failed? How would you account for the accident otherwise? Unless you blame it on your reckless driving."

"Don't open old wounds," Bendyk snapped, his eyes expressing his pain. "I'm just looking for a better explanation of what happened."

"But why now? Why not five years ago when it happened?"

"I knew Father believed the accident was an extra punishment sent by Lothar for his blasphemy. The way things have been going around here lately, I'm not so sure we should let the matter go so readily."

"What did your father do?" Taurin asked quietly.

Leena twisted her head to gaze into his eyes and found reassurance there. "He interpreted an ancient scroll to read that Lothar exists in men's minds and was created in the spirit of love. He made an erroneous judgment. We should serve Lothar with love, and he will bring peace to our land. If we don't maintain harmony, Lothar will become angry, and you've seen what's happened with the weather disasters."

Taurin raised an eyebrow. "You mean your father actually said that Lothar exists merely in men's minds, implying that he is not a supernatural entity, as the rest of you believe?"

"Father admitted he was wrong," Leena gritted. "He apologized for his misinterpretation and has paid the penance." She glanced at her brother. "One of the reasons why I joined the Caucus was to find a way to clear his name. It hurts me to see him behave so differently around the Synod members, and even his peers. His scholarly efforts have always proven valid. I can't help wondering if there is any truth to his findings, although it goes against everything we've been taught."

Bendyk compressed his lips, as though he didn't give credence to the idea. "I intend to have a talk with Father. I'd like to hear his opinion about the cause of the accident."

The four of them rose, and an awkward silence descended.

"Swill, do you know the way into town?" Leena asked, feeling sorry for the girl, who'd mostly been left out of the conversation.

Swill lifted her chin. "I'll find the way."

"Let me walk outside with you." Once they were alone, she turned to Swill. "How do you feel about my brother?"

"He's the most unusual man I've ever met." The young woman cast her gaze upon the circular brick driveway.

"He cares for you."

“We’re working together. It’s a business relationship.”

“No, it’s more than that. He’s never brought a girl home before.”

“I’m not his girlfriend,” Swill protested. “And even if I wanted to be, I’d never fit into a place like this.”

Understanding lit Leena’s features. “Do you mean to tell me you don’t think you’re good enough for Bendyk?” She laughed aloud, astonished by the realization. “By all that is holy, Swill, he needs someone like you!”

Swill shuffled her feet. “I don’t come from a background anything like yours.”

Leena’s face sobered. “Listen to me. Bendyk didn’t plan to be a missionary. He took on the calling after the accident. Before that, he was spoiled and aimless. Religion has given him a purpose in life, but it’s not enough for him. He yearns for something more. I think your liaison has been good for him. He’s looking happier than he has in a long time.”

“What of you?” Swill asked softly. “You’re married to a farmer.”

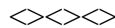
“I love Taurin. He may be a flower grower but there’s much more inside him than that, just as there is in you, Swill. You have to believe in yourself. Give yourself the respect you want others to feel for you, and the rest will follow.”

Swill’s expression clouded but not before Leena saw the longing in her face. “I have to be going. Bendyk asked me to interview the mechanic who inspected the wrecked rider after the accident.”

Leena grasped her shoulder. “Tell me what you find out, will you? And Swill, I-I do appreciate the help you’re giving Bendyk.”

“He’s lucky to have a sister like you.”

On an impulse, Leena embraced her. “Be careful.”



Hours later, Leena and Taurin were exploring her father’s temple. The regional worship center consisted of a complex of buildings located in the center of town. The characteristic antlers—the branches of life representing Lothar—could be spotted from miles away, sticking up as they did from the various spires and the central pyramid point of the temple itself. Having explored the outbuildings, Leena was now showing Taurin the main temple. He’d seen the cathedral, side chapels, and offices, but when they entered the Candor’s private robing chamber, Leena hesitated.

“I suspect the entrance to the lower chambers is in here, although Father has never admitted it. What’s down there is a secret known only to the Candors, given to them by the Synod when they take office.”

“Is this where your father does his private worship?” Taurin asked, standing before an altar at the far end.

“No,” Leena replied. “You see that receptacle?” Beneath the statue of a naked male cherub was a wide dish fashioned entirely of gold. “Lothar’s lozenge pops out of the, er, loins of the statue each month of Mystic.”

“You mean the lozenge comes out of the…” Taurin pointed to the very masculine appendage on the cherub.

“Not just one tablet, but hundreds of them. They overflow the basin. And yet Lothar always seems to know how many people to provide for. The count is nearly accurate, with only a small variation.”

“Your father keeps a census tabulation, does he not? He can tell Lothar how many lozenges to provide.”

Taurin’s mouth twisted wryly. He had no concept of how the lozenge was created or how Lothar could gauge the quantity required around the globe. This prevention of sickness was one of the wonders of Xan, and it made him almost want to believe in the god himself. Snorting derisively, he cast his gaze around the rest of the room.

“Where do you suppose the hidden entrance is located?”

Leena shrugged. “I’ve not been in here that often. Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Another puzzle,” Taurin murmured, his black-garbed figure moving briskly about the room as he poked and prodded at various objects, hoping to push a secret lever. “Did you check your father’s desk? Perhaps a clue can be found in there, or maybe there’s a key.” He frowned thoughtfully.

Leena hesitated, feeling guilty. “I don’t know if I should.”

“Demon’s blood, woman! We’re already trespassing.”

Leena was rummaging in her father’s desk when voices sounded outside the room. Her eyes widened in panic, meeting Taurin’s gaze.

“Go see who it is,” he urged in a loud whisper. “Let me know if your father is coming.”

“He said he had a meeting with the town council this afternoon.” Shutting the desk drawer, she hastened to the exit.

“Close the door behind you,” Taurin ordered. He continued to search the office until she returned a few minutes later.

“It was just some villeins seeking solace in the chapel.”

“Perhaps it would be best if you stood guard outside.”

Leena appeared to weigh his words. “All right,” she agreed finally. “Call me if you find anything significant.” Vowing to check on him after a half hour, she left, closing the door silently behind herself.

Taurin paused before the cherub at the altar, studying the exaggerated features, including the enormous organ that brought forth Lothar’s lozenge. The figure certainly didn’t impress one with its heavenly origins, despite the halo.

His gaze fixed on the circular object positioned atop the cherub’s head. Wait a minute! Wasn’t that made from the same creamy, translucent substance as his bracelet?

He grasped the halo, and it snapped off in his hand. Held thus, it looked similar to the rings they’d found in the Temple of Light. Unsure of what response his action would produce, Taurin spun the ring in the gold basin beneath the cherub.

A light, musical tone reverberated throughout the room, followed by a low, grating noise coming from behind. Taurin whipped around in time to see a partition opening as a large painting swung aside. A dark hole gaped from the wall.

“That’s it!” he exclaimed, and without considering the consequences, he dashed over and plunged into the darkness.

Inside the narrow passageway, he groped for a light switch. Finding none, he had to rely on his own vision. The path led to a stairwell ahead. He descended the steps carefully, perplexed when he faced four blank walls at the bottom level.

His blood chilled. Hopefully, this place wasn’t full of traps like the Temple of Light.

Feeling around, he smirked in the dark when his hands outlined a familiar depression in the floor. He removed his bracelet, hoping the ring from the cherub wasn’t required and that his own armband would suffice.

He needn't have worried. As he spun his bracelet, the musical tone produced had the desired effect. A wall swung open, revealing a series of chambers opening one into the other.

As he entered each room, it illuminated automatically. He passed quickly through the first few, which stored old records, since he didn't have time to search through any documents. When he came to a fourth chamber, he halted to stare in awe.

The immense hall must take up an entire square block beneath the temple, and its bright lighting showed a matrix of glowing crystals inside.

I'll be damned, he thought. *The crystals are some kind of power source, after all. But how do they work?*

Some of the crystals lying around appeared dark and lifeless. Why didn't they glow like the others?

He pushed his questions aside to stride forward into the next chamber. Here glowing wires ascended to the roof, and a crystal display on a wall showed their attachment to the antler-like decorations on the temple's edifice.

Taurin's jaw dropped. "By the Gods, those things aren't just decorations. They're an antenna system."

He examined the display, his computer knowledge enabling him to interpret the data. Those radar devices sent signals back and forth to weather satellites orbiting the planet. There must be thousands of them centered on temples around the globe.

So this was how Lothar controlled the weather system. Taurin figured there had to be a central monitoring station, most likely located at the Palisades.

Did the Synod know how to manipulate the controls, or was it totally out of their grasp, the reason why the system was failing? Computers had never developed on Xan, but they were commonplace on Yllon. Was this a legacy left behind by the ancients?

Everyone who extolled the Faith, except for the Synod and the Candors, believed Lothar controlled the weather, including Leena. How could he disillusion her by revealing their climate was monitored by a series of radar stations and weather satellites rather than by a god?

Stroking his jaw, he contemplated the function of the sacred horn. Was its blowing merely ceremonial, or did it serve to reset the central computer?

Supposedly the horn had to be blown at the Grand Altar in the Palisades, meaning there had to be a link between the sound of the horn's frequency, or the tune played, and the main weather system. Since the Synod was so frantic to find the relic, he assumed they needed it to reset "Lothar".

Curious to see what he'd discover next, he strode ahead. The huge hall beyond contained a power grid large enough to supply the whole town and the surrounding region with electricity. Taurin followed a line of cables back to the room with the glowing crystals and realized they were the true power source. He'd known about the solar collectors on the roof, but apparently they weren't adequate to meet the demand for power.

How were the crystals activated? When he and Leena had seen them in the Temple of Light, they were as lifeless and dark as those trapped here in the matrix. Did they die out with age, or was there a way to get them to function that was beyond the comprehension of the Synod? Was the mechanism for delivering their power faulty, and was the Synod technologically incapable of repairs? It seemed likely that the dying crystals were the cause of the weather disasters.

A disastrous thought struck him, and he sucked in a sharp breath. Upon entering Xan airspace in Captain Sterckle's cargo transport, they'd waited for a window to be opened in Xan's

protective energy screen. How was that defensive shield maintained, and who operated it? Could the shield be powered by these same crystals, some of which were failing?

Other scenarios filtered into his mind. What if the horn had to be blown to reenergize the crystal lattices each year? If that were so, then the horn had to be blown to fortify the defense shield. Now it seemed even more imperative that he and Leena recover the holy artifact.

His heart sinking, he debated what to tell Leena as he trudged up the stairs back to the Candor's private salon. A partial truth would be better than the whole, he decided, not wishing to be the one to tell her that a machine was responsible for the weather cycles on Xan rather than her god. In any event, he had yet to confirm his theories.

When Leena appeared, she found Taurin lounging in a chair behind her father's desk.

"Did you find an entranceway below?"

Taurin shrugged, averting his gaze so she wouldn't see how it pained him to evade the truth. "I was unsuccessful. Let's return to your father's house. We need to prepare for our trip to Woden."

Leena agreed, but her eyes narrowed as he continued to avoid her gaze. "Are you sure you didn't find anything?"

Taurin rose and hastened to her side to allay her suspicions. "Wouldn't I tell you if I did?" he said, brushing his finger across her lips.

Her large blue eyes stared into his with a look of accusation.

"Don't you trust me?" he murmured, stooping his head to lightly kiss her mouth. He hated himself for deceiving her, yet she'd despise him even more for exposing the truth. Like the bearers of bad news to kings in days of old, he didn't want to face her wrath, or be the one responsible for destroying the illusions of her faith.

Cupping the back of her head with his hand, he let his other hand roam her body, intending to seduce her to distraction. But when she swayed against him, encouraging his caress, he moaned her name aloud. As she kissed him back, he nearly lost his sense of reason. It took a strong effort to exert his self-control and step away.

"Not now; not here," he said tersely.

"We'll finish this later." A smile of promise played enticingly upon her lips as she gazed at him, a coy look on her face.

Despite her outward show of enthusiasm, Leena felt ashamed of her behavior. How easily he bedeviled her senses. Imagine succumbing to his caress in her father's holy quarters! She should exert more control over her responses unless they were together in private.

Gathering her skirts, she spun around, ready to depart. As before, in the Temple of Light, she had the distinct impression that Taurin was withholding valuable information, but she'd question him later, when they were home.

"Bendyk," she cried, upon spotting her brother who strode toward them from the cathedral. "What are you doing here?" Her face flushed guiltily, as though they'd been caught red-handed doing some vile deed.

"I thought I'd stop by to say hello before meeting Swill." He glanced at Taurin, a scowl on his face. "What are you doing in Father's private chamber?"

"Greetings, Brother," Taurin drawled. "We're searching for the entrance to the lower level. When you're at the Palisades next, try to locate the secret entry."

"What are you talking about?"

Leena touched her brother's arm. "Each major worship center has a lower level. Father never lets anyone into the one here, and we haven't been successful in finding the entrance. It

would be useful if you could find the access point at the Palisades.”

“But why?” Bendyk shook his blond head in obvious confusion. “Only the Candors and the Synod are privy to the secrets of the temples. Why were you looking here, in Father’s place of worship?”

“We’ll explain another time,” Taurin inserted hastily.

For a brief moment of insanity, he considered telling them what he’d learned and showing them the wonders below, but would they truly believe that a machine was responsible for the weather cycles? It would still seem logical to them that their god provided for the people. After all, who had programmed the main computer?

“I don’t see any reason to delay our journey until morning,” he announced to Leena. “We can get in a few hours of driving before dark. Woden is only four days away.”

Leena looked crestfallen. “I’d hoped to spend time with Bendyk and Swill later.”

“You should go,” Bendyk agreed. “There’s no sense in waiting. Just be careful. It is said Woden is a den of Truthsayers. If they learn you’re a member of the Caucus, Sister, your life will be worthless.”

“We’ll be travelling incognito,” Taurin said, “and we’ll stay just long enough to learn whether they have the horn.”

Bendyk muttered a brief prayer of blessing, and Taurin followed Leena’s example by bowing his head.

How can I destroy their faith when it occupies such a significant part of their lives? he thought. And yet if I don’t, someone else might.

Already the people were clamoring for explanations about the missing horn. If it wasn’t returned soon, the Synod would lose credibility, and anarchy would result.

Escorting Leena down the hall, Taurin vowed to himself that he’d never let that happen. This world was his now, and peace had to be maintained. If his identity was exposed as a result, perhaps Lothar’s will was at work after all.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Woden was one of the larger towns in the province of Prefectus. Being unfamiliar with the environs, Leena suggested they stop at the worship center and introduce themselves to the local priest. He could offer suggestions as to where they might find housing.

“What about a Realtor’s office?” Taurin countered, eyes straight ahead as he drove down a tree-lined thoroughfare in a business sector. Storefronts hosted banners welcoming members of the *International Merchants Association*.

“The priest would know more about the people. If this place is the center of Truthsayer activity, as we suspect, he should be aware of the dissension.”

“But if we’re seen in his company, it’ll link us with the Sabal order.” Taurin shook his head, his mouth set in a determined line. “I think we should steer clear of any connection with the priesthood.”

Glancing at Leena, he gazed approvingly at her attire. Gone were the elegant gowns and the revealing circlet. She wore a simple day dress with a fitted bodice and a flounced skirt in a pastel floral print. He’d chosen to forego his usual black attire in order to appear less noticeable. His garb was a blue longshirt belted at the waist, navy pants, and nondescript black work shoes.

They should both blend in well with the inhabitants, he thought, noticing how the business people scurrying about their afternoon rush were similarly attired.

In the end Taurin won out, and they entered a real estate office. Admiring female eyes turned in his direction as he sought a free agent to serve their needs.

“We’re looking to rent a place,” he said, draping a possessive arm around Leena’s shoulders.

An attractive brunette approached them and smiled. “Good and welfare, citizens. Please have a seat.” She gestured at two chairs facing her desk. “How can I help you?”

Taurin chose his wording carefully. “We want to be among other young people with progressive ideals. We’ve just been married”—he beamed at Leena—“and have received permission to relocate.” He drew the appropriate document from his pocket and handed it over. “We heard Woden was a good town because people here are more dynamic. You know, not stuck in the old ways.”

The woman’s green eyes glittered at him. “I see. You might like Brantome. It’s a restored area in the eastern part of town by the river. Very pleasant, and the locals have a sense of community.”

“Sounds good to me. How about you, *angella*?”

The endearment brought an instant image to his mind of the first time he’d seen Leena framed in the doorway of the tavern, her golden hair backlit like a halo about her lovely face. She’d brightened the depths of his soul and showed him how faith could offer courage and hope.

Leena turned to him and smiled. “Darling, that would be perfect.” The tender look in her eyes along with her soft voice made him want to sweep her into his arms.

Anxious to be alone with her, Taurin completed the rental agreement.

“It’s a good thing you’re not looking for a hotel,” said the Realtor, eyeing Leena

enviously. “There’s a convention in town and all the rooms are booked.”

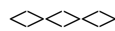
“The International Merchants Association?” Taurin guessed.

“The organization has its roots in Woden, you know. Stephan Tom is the president. I believe he has a home in Brantome. You might even run into him. Talk about a dynamic character!” The brunette pursed her lips. “Some of his views are downright heretical. But I shouldn’t be telling you this, should I?”

“Heretical? What do you mean?” Leena asked, a look of keen interest on her face.

The real estate agent glanced at her co-workers before lowering her voice. “If you’re interested in progressive viewpoints, check out the White Enix Pub. You’ll find it easily enough. It’s in a reconstructed mill by the water.”

Taurin thanked her and concluded their business. He and Leena left the office, the keys to their new home in hand.



“Prefectus, a lushly-forested district cut by deep rivers, is noted as much for its flower-strewn meadows and rolling hillsides as it is for its classic cuisine and wild-growing *rushteets*, a type of fungus valued as an edible delicacy,” Leena quoted from a guidebook handed them along with the rental papers. “Woden began as an early settlement by the Organdy River. Originally the town consisted of a cluster of stone houses, a school, a small worship center, and a mill. As the town expanded, this part became known as Brantome, named after one of the founders.”

She glanced at Taurin, thrilled at the prospect of exploration. “The former religious house has been turned into a museum. Maybe we can stop in there one day if we have time.”

Taurin nodded, having been half tuned in to her recital. He was eager to view the White Enix Pub. Following a road that led toward the river, he drove slowly past the old stone building, where a waterwheel churned in the swiftly moving current. Weeping willows and red-leafed sycamore trees lined the riverbanks. Through the open windows of the rider, the sounds of rushing water played music in his ears.

Turning away from the seductively peaceful scene, he entered a residential sector and drove along narrow streets graced by buildings with arched doorways and fluted chimneys spouting pungent wood smoke. Blooming flowerpots kept company on window sills with collections of colored glass bottles.

“What a charming neighborhood,” Leena commented, peering out her side window.

“Look, I believe that place is ours.” At the designated address, Taurin parked their rider.

They emerged in front of a modest two-story structure with a stone façade. Its red-tiled roof was marred only by the antenna of a modern messenger system. Taurin grunted as he withdrew their luggage from the trunk. They’d bought new suitcases and filled them with wardrobes suitable to their current mission. He hoped they appeared to be a normal young couple as they proceeded into the house.

“Oh, I love it.” Leena rushed from the living area into the kitchen and small dining alcove, then she went upstairs to view the bedrooms.

Taurin climbed up after her. A spacious master bedroom faced the street, while two smaller rooms took up the rear. In the master suite, he set both suitcases onto the carpeted floor. Then he straightened and gave Leena a lazy grin.

“We’re home, *angella*.” His arms stretched out for her, and she ran into his embrace, lifting her chin so he could kiss her.

As their mouths melded together, Leena wished this was their home and that they were starting a new life together. Drawing back excitedly, she said, “We’ll have to buy food and cleaning supplies.”

“Hold on,” Taurin said, touching a finger to her lips. “Remember we’re only here temporarily.”

“We still have to eat.” She had the most incredible urge to keep house now that Taurin was her husband. *Husband*. The word thrilled her as she gazed at him with deep affection.

“I’ll go downstairs and see what’s in the kitchen while you unpack.” His tender smile made her heart soar with joy. “Or should we even bother with the suitcases? I’m hoping we won’t be here that long.”

His words reminded her of the urgency of their mission. Chastising herself for becoming sidetracked by personal desires, she gave him a rueful grin. “I’m forgetting why we’re here because I want so badly to be alone with you. Please forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive.” His eyes darkened until they were like two chunks of coals pierced by a faint luminescent tinge. “Remember, we’ll have that four-day drive back to the Palisades when we’re finished in Woden.”

The sensual curve of his mouth told her how much he’d enjoyed their nights together in the various hostelries along the route, safe houses where their security had been assured by the Synod.

Before she could respond, a loud knock sounded from below. They exchanged surprised glances and then both rushed downstairs.

“Who’s there?” Leena called out.

“My name is Lilot,” a singsong female voice replied. “I’m your neighbor from across the street.”

Leena flung the door wide, aware of Taurin’s protective stance behind her. She smiled at the young woman standing on the doorstep.

“Good and welfare, neighbors.” The woman’s reddish-blond hair reached her shoulders, where it curled under in a soft style. She wore several layers of rose-colored clothing: a tunic top, an apron, covered by an overblouse, beneath which peeped out a pair of tight dusky rose leggings tucked into high-topped, sturdy black shoes. Her single item of ornamentation was a pendant necklace depicting vegetables.

“I saw you pull in and was just taking my *criche* out of the oven,” she said, offering Leena an aromatic casserole dish. “I thought you might like this, since you won’t have much time to make preparations. I grow all my own vegetables, so you don’t have to worry about contaminants.” She beamed happily. “After the festival, I’ll bake you a loaf of my bundan bread.”

“Thank you,” Leena said, accepting the dish. “My name is Leena, and this is Taurin.” As she introduced him, Taurin settled his hulking presence at her side, nodding a greeting to their neighbor.

“I hope we’ll get to know each other better,” Lilot continued, “but I must hurry to complete my own arrangements.”

“Arrangements for what?”

“Why, tonight begins the festival of Tu Imbol.”

Leena’s jaw dropped. Engrossed in their pretend homecoming, she’d forgotten all about the holiday! Her gaze swung to Taurin. “All of the restaurants will be closed tonight, and that includes the White Enix Pub. We won’t be able to dine out.”

“You’d best get to market if you want to do any shopping. It’ll be closing by four today.”

“We’re new here,” Taurin said, stating the obvious. “Where do we go?”

Lilot gave them directions. “Let me know if you need anything. I’ve got to take my qiana fritters out of the oven.” She turned away and headed down the drive.

Leena shut the door in her wake.

“We’re going to have to wait until the day after tomorrow to visit the White Enix Pub,” she said, disappointment in her tone.

Taurin glowered at her. “We’d better do what Lilot said and get to the market before it closes.” He took a set of keys from his pants pocket and jangled them. “Are you ready?”

He didn’t seem at all pleased by this turn of events, but it couldn’t be helped. Grabbing her carryall, Leena nodded.

“I’d like to attend services tonight,” she said. “Tu Imbol is an important holiday. The grove festival—”

“No!” Taurin spun to face her, steely eyes blazing. “We don’t go near the worship center.”

Riled by his tone of voice, she was about to make a waspish retort when she realized he was right. “Yes, of course,” she said, averting her gaze. “We cannot afford to be identified with the religious order. I’m sorry, Taurin.”

If they couldn’t attend the sacred celebration, she’d just have to follow her own worship service at home. And even though she understood Taurin’s rationale, she was upset he didn’t share her dismay. His tone of voice made it clear what he thought of religious services, and she wondered how their differences would ever be reconciled. While on this mission, they were working things out together, but what would happen when she moved in with Taurin permanently?

Slinging her bag over her shoulder, she stepped outside into the bright afternoon sunshine. This region should have been colder by now, with the beginnings of a frost. Instead it was like early autumn, with a fresh pine scent in the air. She took the abnormal climate as another sign of disruption in the weather cycles and mentioned her observation to Taurin.

“Perhaps we’ll gain some useful information at the town market,” she said optimistically.

“Let’s hope so.” Touching her elbow, Taurin guided her toward their parked rider. “Otherwise we can write off today as a loss.”

Luckily, the market turned out to be the heart and soul of the town. Its colorful sights and tantalizing smells converged to give it a sense of community which Leena found highly appealing. She counted more than fifty local farmers who tempted consumers with an array of fruits, vegetables, natural fiber clothing, and homemade products such as honey, cheese, wine, baked goods, and jams.

A flower seller attracted Taurin’s attention, while Leena surveyed the varieties of mushrooms for sale. From the guidebook, she’d learned this area was renowned for its edible fungi, but she’d never seen so many different kinds.

“Who’s cooking tonight?” Taurin asked after he’d rejoined her.

Leena gave him a quizzical glance. “I assumed it would be my role.”

Taurin flashed her a wide grin. “Wild mushroom tart is one of my specialties. I can’t resist when they’re so plentiful here. Then there’s my chocolate salad.” He’d procured a wicker basket and began negotiating with various vendors as she trailed after him, her mouth open in astonishment.

“I didn’t know you could cook.”

His dazzling smile took her breath away. "I've got to do something during those lonely hours I spend by myself."

"I thought you studied archeological texts and worked on your drawings."

"They don't put food in a man's stomach." He chuckled and patted his belly, while Leena warmed to this other side of him.

They walked past stalls offering garlic, leeks, carrots, and an assortment of unfamiliar leafy vegetables. Clothes merchants, fishmongers, butchers, and cheese sellers hawked their wares. Live chickens, geese, and ducks strutted about fenced cubicles, their squawking adding to the general cacophony. Bundles of produce spilled into the aisles, which were crowded with buyers. Citrus fragrance spiced the air, along with the aroma of ripened fruit heating in the sun.

Taurin stopped before a baker to order the flour and other supplies he would need to make his mushroom tart.

"I'm lucky I got me bakery," said the stout fellow wearing a flat-topped cap on his balding head. "Those produce farmers, they's real worried about the weather. If it don't get cool soon, their crops'll be ruined for next season."

A young man with an unshaven face and baggy pants overheard the remark. He gave up inspecting the squash at the next stall and sauntered over. "It's a ruse by the Synod to get us to tighten our belts. If you ask me, they're causing these weather disasters. They know when things are righted again, we'll be so grateful that we won't mind an extra tribute to Lothar." With a disgusted grunt, he spat on the ground.

The vendor's eyes darted about nervously, as though he were afraid someone in authority would overhear their conversation.

Taurin took up the slack. It wasn't too difficult to force an interested expression to his face. "I'm in full agreement with you, Brother." He handed a sack of flour to the baker, who weighed it and pronounced the price. "Things have gotten out of hand. It's beyond me what can be done about it, though."

The stranger narrowed his gaze. "You're new to these parts, aren't you? Are you here for the merchant convention?"

"No, sir." He put an arm around Leena's waist and smiled down at her. "We just got married and have permission to settle here. I have some experience in growing crops and was hoping to land a job at one of the farms."

"The farms won't have any jobs if the soil dries up." The man lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "We're fixing to do something about that real soon."

"What do you mean?" Taurin asked, his mild tone belying the keen interest that sprang into his eyes.

"You'll find out if you stick around long enough." The stranger winked and then sauntered off down the lane.

They completed their shopping, sensing an undercurrent of tension permeating the marketplace. Obviously something was in the works, but despite their determination, they failed to learn what was going on.

When the vendors began packing away their goods, Leena and Taurin gave up trying to coax information from the reluctant merchants and headed for home. True to his word, Taurin prepared a savory mushroom tart, which he put into the oven to bake. Meanwhile, he made his renowned chocolate salad for dessert. Leena peered over his shoulder to observe his technique.

"When we're ready," he told her, his hands moving deftly, "I'll combine these berries with the chocolate and orange sorbets we bought. Normally I'd include some of my edible

flowers, such as pansies and violets, but there weren't any for sale at the market. I'll have to talk to my distributor about supplying this region." Finished with his creation, he put the bowl of rinsed berries into the cooler unit.

Dusk was descending rapidly, and he was starved, but when he glanced at Leena, all thoughts of food fled from his mind. She appeared so delightfully domestic, wearing an apron she had purchased, with her hair clipped back into a low ponytail.

As though following his train of thought, her face broke into a wide grin. "Let's save that for dessert. The sun is setting. We must commence our prayers."

For once Taurin didn't argue. He knew this was an important holiday, although he wasn't familiar with the ritual. In deference to her sensitivities, he helped her set the table for their repast.

"You can uncork the wine," she instructed. "We'll need both bottles opened, but pour the white first."

When they were seated, Leena raised her glass of wine, speaking to Taurin from across the table. "Our initial cup of wine is entirely white, reminding us of winter, when nature sleeps and the land is often covered with snow. Let us give thanks that we are together to join in this celebration."

After she had uttered a prayer, she and Taurin sipped from their glasses. "Observe the fruits on the table," she said, pointing. "Each type of fruit represents a season. First we partake of varieties with a peel or shell that cannot be eaten."

She selected for herself a thick rinded citrus, a furry kemberis, and a nut with a hard shell. Taurin reached for a large round plung and began peeling off the thick red skin.

"If I'm going to have to endure your rituals, the least I can do is make them more fun." Taurin tore off a section of fruit and offered it to Leena.

At first she was shocked by his sacrilege, but when she thought about it, she agreed there was no harm in making the traditions more enjoyable. With a smile, she leaned forward, taking a bite of the juicy piece of fruit. The tangy flavor was tart on her tongue, but she licked her lips, eager for more of a taste—more of Taurin than the fruit.

"Pour a bit of the red wine into your glass of white," she ordered. "This symbolizes springtime, when the sun's rays thaw the frozen land. The earth changes color as the snow melts, and as the pink blooms of cyclamens appear in the mountains. Before we drink, we hold up our glasses and recite the prayer."

This time Taurin humored her by repeating the prayer in unison with her.

"You may choose fruits with pits or seeds that cannot be eaten." Their eyes locked, and Leena watched as Taurin popped a few cherries into his mouth and spit out the inedible innards. She took a cherry for herself and bit daintily around the pit, but when Taurin reached for a date, her hand stilled his.

"Allow me." With her knife, she cut out the pit for him. Then she held the date toward his mouth and fed him. He plucked a plum from the dish and returned the favor. Leena didn't even notice the flavor. She was too engrossed in looking into his mesmerizing eyes.

"Don't forget the blessing over the fruit." Taurin's lip curled in a half-smile.

She uttered the prayer, the words appearing automatically on her lips. "We need to refill the wine cups," she said, already feeling the effects from the first glass. She felt as if she were floating on air, or was that because Taurin's attention was centered on her?

"Which color?"

"Fill the cups with red wine and just a dash of white. This mixture symbolizes summer,

when flowers bloom and the ground softens.”

“The time of plowing and sowing,” Taurin said, nodding. “I assume we eat from the third category of fruits, those that are edible both inside and out.” He didn’t need any prompting to say the blessing over the fruit; the words were out of his mouth before Leena even thought about them. Then they were feeding each other juicy red grapes and plump, moist figs.

“I don’t know if I can drink another cup,” she murmured.

“We have to complete the ceremony.” Taurin filled their glasses with red wine. “Summer ends, and the crops grow tall as autumn approaches. The harvest season. This is why you bought these packages of seeds, isn’t it?”

“Tomorrow we are supposed to plant them, but we don’t have a garden.”

“We’ll find a spot. Drink your wine,” he urged, uttering the prayer for her. After she’d complied, he rose to get his wild mushroom tart from the oven. “I don’t know about you, but the fruit just teased my appetite. I’m ready for the main course.” He would have preferred to accompany Leena upstairs for a more tempting dessert, but the tart was best eaten freshly baked.

A flavorful aroma reached her nostrils as Taurin placed the dish on the table, along with their neighbor’s casserole. Despite her inebriated state, Leena’s stomach growled in anticipation of a solid meal.

She jabbed her fork into a soft slice of the mushroom pie and raised the morsel to her mouth. The blend of flavors pleased her palate.

“This is delicious.” She delved into her second piece. “What are your other specialties?”

“I prefer to cook mostly vegetarian dishes. Don’t worry, I have no intention of usurping your role in the kitchen.”

She glanced up and noticed that his eyes danced with mirth. Nevertheless, this was a topic that had to be addressed.

“We should talk about household chores. My term in the Caucus lasts for two years. During that time, I’ll be able to commute from Lexington Page and will be off on weekends. After that, I’ll probably return to my job at the museum.”

She’d already told him about her position as Director of Archeological Studies for the Jarvis Museum of Natural History. It would be a half hour drive from where he lived.

“I thought you were undecided about your plans.” His expression had turned serious as though he knew this was a subject that concerned her.

“After exploring the Temple of Light, I realized that archeology is my passion...aside from you,” she teased. “If I succeed in my goals, I won’t seek a higher office or further training within the religious order. I only joined the Caucus to learn the secrets of the Synod.”

Taurin shielded his reaction. She wouldn’t want to know all the secrets being slowly revealed to him. He feared such knowledge would destroy the basic tenets of her beliefs.

“Isn’t there a museum at the Palisades?” he asked.

“Yes. They’ve offered me a position as curator but I refused, because it would mean I’d have to give up the field work that I love.”

Taurin rolled his eyes. “So that means half the time you’ll be off on some archeological dig, and the rest you’ll be commuting to the museum every day. So much for our idyllic family life.”

“Marriage is an adventure in itself, and I’m greatly looking forward to exploring it with you. Now, shall we clear the table and retire for a brief interval?” Untying her apron, she fluttered her eyelashes at him. “I’ll offer you my brand of dessert before we taste yours.”

Upstairs, Taurin was more than happy to loosen her gown. “I’ve never dared dream about

having a wife or family,” he said as the garment slid to the floor.

Leena smiled at the wistful expression on his face. “That’s another thing we’ll need to talk about.”

“Huh?”

“Starting a family.”

Taurin glanced at her, startled. “I am up to date on my birth inhibitors,” he announced stiffly.

She laughed. “It really doesn’t matter.”

His eyes gentled as he regarded the lovely picture she made with her golden hair floating about her bare shoulders. Standing naked before him, her breasts were exposed, firmly uplifted as though waiting for his caress. His eyes languorously explored every curve on her body.

“It’s a little too early to be talking about children.” He pondered how many obstacles still lay before them.

“Is it? Why do I get the impression that you believe something is going to come between us?”

His jaw clenched. “Because I love you too much, and I’m afraid of losing you.”

Her mouth gaped. “What did you just say?”

“I love you, Leena.” He grasped her by the shoulders and pulled her close, burying his face in her hair, clutching her in his embrace as though he’d never let her go.

She sensed his desperation and wondered what made him feel so insecure. Obviously he didn’t have much faith in her love for him. What could possibly happen to destroy their feelings for each other? Did he know something she didn’t that made him afraid she’d leave him?

If anything, she should be annoyed that he didn’t trust her. She knew he’d read the bibliotomes in the Temple of Light. Did he withhold his knowledge because he was afraid of her reaction should she learn the truth about the Apostles? And how would these truths, if that were the case, affect their relationship with each other?

“I just want to be with you.” She tightened her arms around him, wishing she could slow time while they were together.

Her breasts pressed flat against his massive chest, and she leaned her head on his shoulder. They’d resolve their differences later. Right now all that mattered was that they were together.

Lifting her face for his kiss, she felt a swell of joy when his mouth covered hers. Her body ignited as he gyrated his hips against her naked belly, and rationale thought fled from her mind as she gave herself up to her passion.

“You’re so beautiful. I want to savor every inch of you,” he said in a husky tone. After trailing a line of kisses across her throat and down along her breast, he took a nipple into his mouth and gently suckled it.

Leena closed her eyes and cried out with pleasure. “My love, you’re killing me with ecstasy.”

“Then I will die with you.” He moved to her other breast, his tongue rhythmically stroking her nipple until she moaned in heated frustration. Crouching, he aimed his tender ministrations at the juncture between her thighs.

“Taurin, dear heaven!” Opening her legs so he could have better access, she let her head loll back, concentrating on the building tension within her core. “I’ve got to lie down,” she said when her knees threatened to buckle.

Taurin stripped off his clothes and joined her on the bed. Eager to please her, he sought

her port of entry with his fingertips. Her slickness made him groan with restrained passion. With a mighty thrust, he entered her, smiling at the cry of pleasure his action elicited.

“You are mine, *angella*,” he said, his lips finding hers.

They melded together, flesh against flesh, a primal need consuming them both as they spiraled toward the pinnacle of desire. Taurin’s explosive release stimulated her own climax, and shuddering spasms shook her body until she lay spent beneath the weight of his taut, muscled form.

“Maybe we should stay here and never go home.” He rolled onto his back.

Too content to move, Leena slid him a sideways glance. “Why are you so afraid things are going to change?” When he didn’t respond, she feared he was taking his role of protector too seriously. He withheld knowledge which he assumed would be distressing to her, and she resented his patronizing attitude.

“I’m not afraid to learn the truth,” she told him quietly. “If you would share what you read in those bibliotomes—”

“Let’s go have dessert,” he said abruptly, rising.

“Taurin, I don’t like how you’re treating me. Trust has to be at the foundation of a marriage.” Dismayed, she watched as he threw on his clothes without a single glance in her direction.

Fully dressed, he stood before her and his expression softened. “I’ll share what I know when I learn the whole story. There’s no need for you to be upset at this point, when we have to concentrate on finding the horn.”

She sat up, pulling the sheet to her waist. “I can make my own decisions about what I need to know. You’re not my keeper.”

“Oh yes, I am.” And his closed face told her he’d accept no further arguments.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The next morning, Taurin received a rude shock. He peered outside the living room window after opening the drapes and noticed a fellow hovering beside a strange blue rider. His blood pressure rocketed when he realized it was the same fellow who'd conversed with him in the market about the adverse weather conditions. Was this a coincidence, or had the man been posted here to keep an eye on them? In which case, for whom did he work? The Truthsayers? Or was he perhaps one of Grotus's agents, sent to keep tabs on their movements?

He didn't mention his concerns to Leena when he suggested over breakfast that they pack a picnic for the day.

"We'll find a spot of dirt to plant our seeds. It'll give us a good excuse to explore the environs. And bring that wicker basket. We can always say we're hunting for wild mushrooms while we're in the woods."

"Are you going to cook again tonight?" she asked with a coy glance.

"Tonight we're going to the White Enix Pub, remember?"

"That's right." She compressed her lips, wondering at the brooding look on his face.

Taurin hadn't said much after they'd returned to their room last night following dessert. His chocolate salad had been fantastic, and she'd raved over it, hoping to earn back the warm regard in his eyes. But he'd remained aloof after their discussion, and even as she tossed restlessly in bed, he'd fallen asleep instantly, dashing any hopes she might have had for further intimacy.

Adding a shawl to her ensemble, she pronounced herself ready to go out. "Shall we head toward the river?" she asked, glad she'd put on a long-sleeved wool dress when they stood outside. The air felt a bit chilly but it should warm up.

"That's as good a place as any to begin exploring." Taurin stood on the front stoop, picnic carrier in hand, glancing around as though expecting to see someone he knew.

"What's wrong?" She shifted the empty wicker basket to her other hand.

"Nothing." With a shrug, he started down the steps.

She had the distinct feeling he was lying. The street was quiet at this early hour, theirs being the only rider parked by the curb. So what was the cause of that frown on his face?

They began their expedition by a cluster of old stone houses along the riverbanks, enjoying the gracefully overhanging trica branches, whose fallen crimson leaves floated on the water's surface. Ducks swam past, searching for their morning meal. Next to a cluster of palmelo reeds, a bridge led across the water to the ruin of an old abbey, which had been converted into a museum. Since it was a holiday, the museum was closed, much to Leena's disappointment.

They passed the ancient mill that had been turned into the White Enix Pub, then followed a medieval road circling up a wooded hillside. The dirt was packed firm, indicating the trail was well-used. She enjoyed the smell of clean air and fresh autumn leaves. They hiked for some distance before coming to a meadow near an overlook where they could view the entire town and twisting river.

"This is the perfect spot for a picnic," she said. Their trek had left her thirsty and eager

for refreshment.

Taurin had brought along a cloth to spread over the grass. They'd just settled onto it when a rumble shook the earth.

"What's that?" Leena spotted a cloud of dust where the woods joined the opposite side of the meadow.

"Let's go see." Taurin leapt up as though primed for action.

"Shouldn't we fold the blanket and bring our things with us?" Sorry their idyllic interlude had been interrupted, she rose and shook out her shawl, which had become laden with fallen leaves.

"That might be wise." With impatience stamped on his features, he helped her repack the items, then shouldered the burden.

"These are truck marks," he said when they came to the site of the dust cloud.

Leena's brow furrowed. "What would a truck be doing in these parts? And why today? No one works on a holiday."

"Let's follow the tracks and see where they go."

The tire marks led into the woods and ended at a clearing beyond a construction site. Since no one was about, Leena rushed forward, anxious to see what they'd discovered. Maybe it was an excavation, a ruin that had been unearthed!

Her feet flew over the grass as she raced ahead.

"Leena, wait," Taurin called, just before her body crashed into an invisible barrier with stunning force.

Pain exploded in her forehead, and she teetered backward.

Taurin steadied her with an arm around her waist. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

"Something stopped me," she said, pointing.

Taurin peered at the empty site straight ahead. "Where did that truck go? The trail of dust indicates it must have entered the forest, but I don't see anything."

"There's some sort of barrier. Look for yourself."

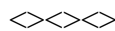
Releasing his hold on her, Taurin stretched out an arm. "You're right." Splaying his hands against the obstacle, he followed its outline for a short distance.

Keeping his back to Leena, he processed this new information with chilling clarity. The barrier was an energy shield, meant to keep out intruders. Xan did not possess this technology. It could only have come from one place: his homeworld, Yllon, a world fraught with violence.

Demon's blood! Now their doom was surely at hand. He couldn't conceive of how his fellow Ylloners were involved here, but he was determined to find the answer. Rather than attempting to breach the barrier, he suggested they return to the village.

"Tonight, in the White Enix Pub, we'll learn what's going on. I suspect the Truthsayers are mixed up in this, but they must be getting help from somewhere else."

"I agree," Leena said, biting her lip. "This wall is unlike anything I've experienced. Let's go. I can't wait to check out that pub."



The White Enix Pub bustled with activity when they entered after dark. The rustic interior of the old mill was rife with the smells of sawdust and ripening barrels of red wine.

A cacophony of noise hit Taurin's sensitive ears, and he grimaced as he scanned the bar area that took up the entire first floor. He'd been told there was a restaurant upstairs and had

called ahead to make reservations. After giving his name to a host, he allowed Leena to precede him up the stairs.

The dining room was intimate, with charming yellow and white checked tablecloths, votive candles, and rural paintings decorating the walls. Wooden beams and hanging plants contributed to the coziness of the decor. The tables were set far enough apart, and he was gratified that they might talk without danger of being overheard.

Leena ordered an appetizer of mushrooms sauteed with herbs and wine, tender fillets of kalmagn fish, crisp corn fritters, and a frozen chocolate souffle with salisbury sauce. Taurin chose a simple salad of mixed greens, a pollentine with fig preserves, and nougat ice cream made from a local wildflower honey.

Despite his penchant for practicing the culinary arts, his everyday tastes were simple. On his home planet, scrabbling for a day's food was a major occupation and the cause of many conflicts. He'd learned to eat frugally and accept whatever fare was available. Spare plots of land, which were few in the urbanized centers on Yllon, were often converted to gardens. Heavily fenced in, they provided fresh produce for the lucky owners.

Taurin's gang leader had let him tend a small piece of land, which gave him his first taste of farming. It wasn't surprising that he'd chosen to pursue agriculture as an occupation when he'd moved to Xan. Blessed as it was with rich earth and plentiful rains, Xan offered vast expanses of fertile soil to its fortunate inhabitants.

Toiling in his fields, feeling the sun on his back and the sweat dripping from his brow, Taurin had tried to erase the days of hunger from his memories and the fear that there wouldn't be enough food. He'd spent hours raking his fingers through the dirt, reveling in its richness and his blessing at being able to reap the fruits of his labor. Growing edible flowers paid off the debt he felt he owed Baker Mylock.

A warm log of satisfaction settled into his stomach, lulling him into a tranquil state. Leena, seated across from him, looked especially lovely in the glow from the candlelight. The periwinkle blue of her gown highlighted her eyes, making them seem deeper and larger.

"Tell me about your youth," he said encouragingly. His large hand snaked across the table to grasp her smaller one, and as she recounted tales of her childhood, he traced small circles in her palm.

"Stop that," she said with a becoming blush.

His gaze fell upon her lips, slightly parted. Her mouth, a rich, full pink, tempted him with its sensual outlines. She reminded him of the tulipett blossoms he grew in his fields. Feeling like a honeybee must when it was drawn to a brightly colored flower, he craved a taste of her nectar.

"I like to feel your soft skin." He widened the pattern of his circles.

Leena withdrew her hand. "You're making me lose my appetite...at least for the meal." Her knowing gaze met his amused grey eyes. "We'll forget our purpose here if you keep this up."

"You're right. We must focus on our mission."

As soon as they finished their repast, they headed downstairs to check out the bar scene. The din assaulted Taurin's sensitive ears as he descended the stairs. An argument about mushroom hunting prevailed among the patrons.

"You've got to leave enough stem for the fungi to grow again," one red-faced fellow proclaimed. "And don't use plastic bags. A wicker basket allows the spores to drop through and regenerate, which they'll do in four or five days given the right conditions."

"I pulled in fifteen hundred chekels yesterday," bragged a bearded fellow in a work shirt

and cap.

“You’ve gotta keep a steady pace,” the first speaker agreed. “We’re lucky we had the rains in this district, or it would have been a bad season. Still, if it doesn’t turn colder soon, we’ll be headin’ for trouble.”

Someone else chimed in. “Other territories have it worse. There’s no reliability to the weather anymore. But at least Lothar hasn’t totally forsaken us yet.”

Snickers of laughter greeted that announcement. One man stood up from the bar and whirled around. His eyes blazing, he addressed the crowd. “You know Lothar has nothing to do with our climate changes. The Synod is responsible. They’re trying to force us to bend our knee to their laws. I say we’ve had enough of their oppression. It’s time we stood up for ourselves and exposed them for what they are: a group of power-hungry old men, who rule the populace with fear.”

Leena stared at him in shock. How dare he utter such blasphemy? Yet no one else seemed surprised by his rhetoric. People were nodding in agreement around the room.

“Our numbers are growing,” the man went on, his tone quiet. A hush fell over the crowd as everyone listened. All eyes turned in his direction. The man was tall and lean, and intelligence sparkled behind his eyes. His business suit indicated he was a person of some position, more educated perhaps than the majority in the lounge.

“Who is that?” Taurin whispered to a well-dressed woman behind him.

“Why, he’s Stephan Tom, our president.”

“President?”

“Of the International Merchants Association. Aren’t you a member?” The woman looked at him with disdain, as though anyone who was not a member of her organization was unworthy of respect.

“Er...uh...I’m new to the group,” Taurin muttered.

“Stephan, what will happen if the horn is found?” someone called out.

“It’ll never be recovered,” the leader retorted. “And everyone will see the power of the Synod is an illusion created to subdue the populace. If Lothar were our true god, he wouldn’t be making people suffer. Religion should be no part of our government. It’s time we established an order where the people come first. We need elected officials, not an elite religious hierarchy, to govern our land.”

“Hear, hear!” someone cried, and a cheer went up.

“We must spread the word through our organization,” proclaimed Stephan Tom, his eyes fired with zeal. “Our businesses cannot flourish unless we have the ability to expand. It’s not right that we have to ask permission of an impersonal board to develop branches in other towns. Population growth cannot proceed naturally at this pace. I say the time for change has come. We’re lucky we have friends in our struggle for freedom.”

The man standing next to Stephan Tom, facing the bar with his back toward the crowd, turned around. Beside her, Leena heard Taurin suck in a sharp breath.

“Demon’s blood! What is *he* doing here?” Grabbing Leena’s elbow, he steered her toward a dark corner. “Come on, let’s get out of this light.”

“What’s the matter?” She jostled into people as they threaded their way through the throng.

Stephan Tom continued his rhetoric, inciting the crowd.

Taurin wanted to get a better view of the fellow beside Stephan Tom without being seen. From his pocket he withdrew a familiar piece of cloth and swathed it about his head so his face

would be shaded.

“That person standing next to Tom—I know him,” he said to Leena, his voice low so they wouldn’t be overheard.

“Who is he?” Leena asked.

Taurin shook his head. He couldn’t tell her the man was one of his gang members from Yllon. What was the fellow doing here? Terror struck his heart as he heard Stephan Tom tell how, with their friends’ support—and he distinctly used the plural there—their organization would march forward.

“Which organization is he referring to?” Leena whispered. “The International Merchants Association, or the Truthsayers?”

“I believe the two organizations are one and the same,” Taurin leaned against a wall where he could watch the crowd without being noticed. “It makes perfect sense. That’s how the Truthsayers are able to spread their heresy—through the Merchants Association. The business sector would have the most to gain from a laxity of the rules, and it appears they have outside help.”

His thoughts swirled in panic. Leena was in danger merely by associating with him. If that Ylloner, whose name was Testi, spotted Taurin, he was in deep trouble.

Taurin had left Yllon with a death sentence on his head. Exposure now would mean an end to his security. He had to know what the Ylloner was doing here, and how he’d received permission to travel. Normally, no one from Yllon was allowed free run of the planet. The two worlds had a restricted trade agreement. Yllon’s existence was known only to the Synod and a few trusted individuals on Xan. Aliens were not permitted outside of the spaceport.

So who had let Testi in, and why was he here? Was Stephan Tom aware that his friend was an alien? Someone in a knowledgeable position had to be involved in this, and Taurin wondered if it was the same traitor who’d stolen the horn.

Weighing his choices, he decided his best course of action would be to follow Testi. That the Ylloner was involved in an attempt to overthrow the government along with the Truthsayers was obvious, but there was more here than met the eye.

“I want to hang around a while,” he told Leena. “If you’re tired, I’ll find someone to escort you home.”

“I’m not leaving just when this is getting interesting,” she retorted. “Besides, you haven’t told me who that man is.” She indicated the fellow standing next to Stephan Tom.

“His involvement concerns me because it means outside interests are involved. I can’t let him see me, or he’ll recognize who I am.”

“So what?” Confusion shone in her clear blue eyes.

Taurin’s mouth tightened stubbornly, and Leena narrowed her gaze as she stared at him in the dim light.

“It’s time you told me what you know, Taurin Rey Niris...if that’s your real name.”

Their eyes locked and held, hers demanding answers, his evasive and wary. “He’s leaving,” Taurin said suddenly. Testi was heading out the door with Stephan Tom and several others among the crowd.

Outside the air was cool, and the scent of evergreens refreshed the night. Leena drew her shawl about her shoulders, shivering in part from fear of what they would discover.

They followed the crowd, blending in with a couple of stragglers and pretending to be part of the group. Gravel crunched underfoot, and overhead a myriad of stars shone in the darkened sky. The rush of water filled her ears as they passed by the huge waterwheel churning

in the river, a last remnant of the old mill that was converted into the pub.

“Time to go to work on putting up the new village, eh, pal?” slurred a drunken fellow next to Taurin, winking a bleary eye.

They followed a familiar trail into the woods, climbed a hill, and crossed the same meadow where they’d attempted to picnic earlier. Ahead of them, brightly illuminated by hidden spotlights, was the building site they’d observed. The energy field had apparently been deactivated because noises of construction rang heavily in the night air and villeins in all manners of dress worked at the site. Testi strode over to one of the men calling out orders to consult with him.

“Get to work,” Stephan Tom exhorted his followers. “Once this place is completed, our friends will bring in the weapons we need to empower our liberation from the Synod.”

Leena gasped. *Weapons*. They were planning an armed revolt. “They’re building an armory,” she whispered to Taurin. “We’ve got to warn Dikran.”

Careful to avoid detection, Taurin marched about the foundations, inspecting the layout. This was no armory. That huge slab of dormite was reminiscent of a launch pad, and the other structures had the marks of hangars and maintenance sheds. These people weren’t building an armory; they were building a landing site.

Demon’s blood! He stopped in his tracks, his eyes widening in shock. That could mean only one thing. Yllon was planning an invasion, and now he understood with perfect clarity why the horn had been stolen. It wasn’t for money; that’s why it hadn’t passed through Grotus’s hands.

If his theory held credence that the annual blowing of the horn served to reenergize the crystal lattice structures, and the crystals powered the defensive perimeter around the planet, then the horn had to be blown by the month of Fearn in order to strengthen the defense shield. Otherwise the perimeter might crumple, and Yllon’s ships would be clear to enter the atmosphere.

Whoever had stolen the horn had to be in league with Yllon in planning an invasion. Taurin thought his former associate, gang leader Drufus Gong, must be involved. But which Synod member was a traitor, and why? What did he or she hope to gain?

“What is it?” Leena asked, her eyes bright with concern as she touched his arm.

“We have to get away from here,” he said, suddenly conscious that Testi was patrolling the site, talking to each of the workers. At any moment, the Ylloner might spot him.

Taking her hand in his own, he hastened her away, avoiding explanations until they were safely home.

Or were they safe? Rushing into the living room, he pulled aside a drape and looked outside. A strange rider had just pulled up to the curb. Someone was still keeping tabs on them, but who was it? Someone working for the traitor in the Synod, the Truthsayers, or Grotus’s men?

He didn’t think the Truthsayers suspected their identity, considering the lack of interest shown them in the pub. That left the other two possibilities, neither of which pleased him.

“Pack your things,” he told Leena abruptly. “We’re leaving.”

She hovered behind him, questions on her lips. She could tell by the hunch of his shoulders that something awful had happened tonight, something that related to that fellow they’d seen in the pub.

“Taurin, I’m not going anywhere unless you tell me what’s happening. It’s time you trusted me enough to tell me the truth.”

Taurin spun around, a scowl on his handsome face. “You don’t want to know the truth. It

will hurt you, and you'll blame me for whatever myths I destroy.”

She ached at the pain that flashed across his countenance. “Why don't you let me be the judge of what I can or cannot accept?” Striding forward, she brushed a lock of dark hair off his forehead. “Trust me, Taurin. I love you. Nothing will ever change the way I feel about you.”

With a desperate cry, he swept her into his arms and kissed her. She was his haven, his safety amongst the swarm of hornets that threatened to sting him. She had no concept of the danger that threatened them now. It was far worse than he could have imagined. Stepping away, he pondered the implications of Drufus Gong's involvement, his blood icy with foreboding.

Leena remained silent, as still as one of the stone statues in the Temple of Light. At a loss for words, he swept his hand across his forehead in a gesture of helplessness. How was he to tell her she was married to an alien? That there was indeed life on other planets and his homeworld was preparing a hostile invasion? Would she laugh at him for creating wild fantasies, scream in rage, or recoil in terror?

He'd feared this moment ever since he began to care for her, which was almost at their first meeting. But now, when he needed her so desperately, it was worse. He didn't think he could bear to see revulsion in her eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Standing with his back toward her, he faced a painting depicting a lakeside scene above the fireplace mantel. The artist had frozen a duck in still life, its black feathers ruffled and its white neck erect, its orange beak jutting in the air as the creature glided on the water. Alone, it pursued its hunt for food, heedless of its loneliness on the vast body of the lake. He'd felt like this: adrift on a sea in the fabric of the universe, alone until Leena had entered his life and brightened the dark gray depths to a sunny blue hue. How could he tell her who he was?

"Do you believe that life exists on other planets?" he began, unable to look her in the eye.

Leena wished he would face her squarely. "I'm open to the possibilities," she replied, her tone cautious. She didn't see where the question was leading.

"The rings and the horn...the Apostles themselves...may have come from another planet. A system in the Cadega constellation, perhaps."

"So? We've had this discussion before."

"What if I told you that Xan isn't the only world in our star system that supports life? Seven planets rotate about our sun, and two of them have human populations—Xan and Yllon."

"You mean the Apostles came from this other world?"

"No, the Apostles visited Yllon just as they did Xan, and it's likely they seeded both our civilizations."

Leena frowned. "I don't understand. What does this have to do with you?"

"How do you think I know about so much about Yllon?" He whipped around, his eyes glowing luminously as a shadow crossed his face. His skin appeared darker, the angles of his jaw more delineated; his glowering countenance intensified the menacing aura that normally radiated from his being. "I'm from Yllon, Leena. I traveled here in a spaceship."

Leena gasped, inadvertently taking a step backward. "What?"

He repeated his confession, hating what this would do to her, to *them*.

"I don't believe it! You said you're from Iman. What kind of joke is this, Taurin?"

He shook his head, wondering how he could convince her of the truth. "It is no joke. You wanted an explanation; now accept it. I had to say I was from Iman to protect my true identity. Iman is a remote region; I thought no one would question me about my relocation."

"B-but you can't be from another planet! You look just like us." She stared at him, horrified. Could there be any validity to his words? No, it couldn't be true.

He scowled at her. "Look closely at me. Does anyone else you know have eyes like this? Can anyone on Xan fight with the fury I feel when rage runs through my veins? Go on," he said, his gaze narrowing, "say you want to be rid of me."

Stunned by his admission and yet stricken by the look of pain deep in his eyes, she didn't know what to say.

"I knew you'd be repulsed," he muttered.

"I just don't know what to believe anymore." She dashed a shaky hand through her hair. By the Grace of Lothar, was he for real? Did he truly come from another world, and not just from a faraway region of Xan? Her mouth went dry at the possibilities. "Perhaps if you explain

how you came to be here, or more about your world... ”

Her heart weighed heavily, as though he'd become a stranger to her. Yet logic told her he was being truthful. His admission coincided with her own theories about the Apostles. She'd dared to believe they might be visitors from another planet, and now his story confirmed her supposition.

Overwhelmed by the implications, she sank onto an armchair and waited expectantly for more details.

Taurin took a seat opposite her, his expression wary. “Yllon is a violent world rife with gang warfare,” he began, staring at his lap. “Rauch's gang is probably the biggest group, led by Drufus Gong. Drufus Gong is the one who found me when I was abandoned by my parents. He took me under his wing and raised me as he would any other young child of a gang member.”

Leena frowned in puzzlement. “Who were your parents? Why did they desert you?”

“I had the sign of the curse.” He lifted his head, and she gazed straight into the dancing, luminous lights in his eyes. “I told you about our legends. Many eons ago, demons came to Yllon, causing men to go mad and instigating killing sprees that destroyed our civilized society. Pogroms wiped out most of these demons, but their bad seeds had already been sown.

“Every few generations, the genes come together in the right combination, and a child shows the demon's sign. The fear from ages past had not dissipated in my time, and a child thus afflicted usually met with a quiet, unexplained death. Apparently my parents decided to give me a chance.

“Drufus Gong had ambitions of his own. He saw my special gift and decided to take advantage of it. I could see in the dark, an ability he used to conquer his enemies. Together we hid my special visionary power from others. It was feared that one would go mad in the presence of a demonic offspring, but I could never tell if this were true because everyone on Yllon was hostile. Killings, beatings, and rampages were the norm.

“How horrible,” she remarked, shuddering at the images such a violent society evoked.

“This armband is the only clue to my heritage,” he said, raising his sleeve so she could see it. “I told you how I used to separate the bracelets and spin them. I'd always thought it was a child's toy until I noticed the symbols carved on the side when the rings were banded together. But it was some time later before I saw those symbols elsewhere.”

Leena interrupted him. “Isn't it your theory that the Apostles visited both our worlds? In that case, why didn't they establish the reign of Lothar on Yllon?”

Taurin shrugged. “That's one of the answers I'd hoped to find here. Their visit to your world prompted an orderly society, whereas on mine it engendered violence and warfare.”

“Could it be some quality in the environment that makes the difference?”

“I don't know.” Taurin crossed his legs and then uncrossed them again. Other than Magar, she was the first person on Xan to learn his history, and he was glad to be sharing it with someone else.

His gaze roamed her lush golden hair, lovely features, and lithe, graceful body. Gods, how badly he wanted her to stay with him.

“I was sixteen,” he continued, “when my gang went on a rampage and destroyed a bakery thought to belong to a rival group. I was walking out of the demolished interior when I heard the sound of someone sobbing. I whirled around and was surprised to see the baker stooped over, his hands covering his face. We'd all believed the rival gang would restore the baker's business, but it was a way of sabotaging their efforts, so to speak. When I saw the baker hunched over, it struck a chord within me, something I hadn't felt since I was a young child, alone and lost.

“After everyone else had left, I went back and asked the proprietor why he was so upset. His gang should set him up in business again. Baker Mylock shook his head sorrowfully, saying he was just paying them protection money. Now his livelihood was destroyed and he had a family to support. I couldn’t leave him when he appeared so forlorn, so I offered to help him rebuild the shop. I returned in secret and helped him restore order to his business.

“He introduced me to his wife and children, and soon they became the family I’d never had. Drufus Gong hadn’t been much of a father figure to me. He’d remained a distant leader, demanding and ruthless. Baker Mylock treated me kindly and taught me how to read. I discovered a side to myself I hadn’t known existed.”

He paused, getting up to pace the room. Leena watched him silently, grateful he was at last confiding in her. A marriage couldn’t succeed if there were secrets between partners, and she hoped he would tell her everything he knew, no matter how traumatic the revelations.

“A year afterward,” Taurin said, stopping in front of her, “my gang attacked what we believed to be a weapons storehouse for another group. I was the scout man. When I broke inside, I discovered not weapons but a treasury of books. I tricked my mates into giving me responsibility for blowing up the place.

“That night, with the help of some local hired hands, I secretly transferred the books to an abandoned warehouse. Looking them over, I discovered a collection of bibliotomes, ancient texts with symbols written on the covers that seemed to match the ones on my bracelet. I had to know what they meant. Eager to learn more, I risked contacting the rival gang leader, hoping he could tell me how to open the sealed books. I offered to return them to him if I could have use of the library.”

Leena saw a veil of pain descend over his face. “I was betrayed. Drufus Gong realized I had lied to him. The price for treachery on my world is death. The rival gang leader put a mark on me for stealing their property. Pursued by both gangs, I was forced to flee my world. I had met Captain Sterckle, who traded with Xan, and I offered him some of the bibliotomes in exchange for passage on his ship. My only recourse was to seek asylum on Xan. Captain Sterckle introduced me to Magar, who is in charge of off-world relations.”

“Magar!” Leena straightened her spine. “He’s in charge of affairs of state.”

He gave her a wry grin. “That includes relations with other worlds, namely Yllon. Magar directs the trade relations between our two worlds. Yllon provides technology, and Xan sells us her food surplus. Population overcrowding and constant warfare have depleted our resources, and food is a valuable commodity. Normally, no one from Yllon is allowed to leave the spaceport, and the workers there are sworn to secrecy. The Synod and the spaceport crew are the only ones who know of Yllon’s existence.”

“So Magar offered you a piece of land on his property?”

“That’s right. He probably figured he could keep an eye on me if I was close at hand.”

Leena was unable to fully comprehend all he was telling her. It was too much information to assimilate at once, and she still couldn’t believe he was an alien. Dear deity, how could she conceive of such a thing?

Excitement welled within her as she considered the ramifications. Space travel was an actuality, at least within their star system. The Apostles might have come from a world located in the Cadega constellation. Taurin was beginning to fill in the blanks in the information she sought, yet there were still many questions left unanswered.

“Why did you decide to run a flower farm?”

Taurin flashed her a boyish grin, and her heart warmed toward him. Perhaps he wasn’t

such a stranger after all.

“Baker Mylock always used expensive candied flowers on his sweet breads. I decided to pay him back for his kindness by growing edible blooms and sending them to him once a month. Magar makes sure the shipments reach him.”

“Why has Magar been so good to you? He never knew you before Captain Sterckle introduced the two of you. Why would he let you, and no one else, settle on Xan?”

Taurin’s gaze narrowed. “I offered him my bibliotomes in exchange for permission to immigrate and a piece of land. He recognized their worth and accepted the deal immediately. Although none of us knew how to open them, that they were valuable was obvious. I had to swear I would never reveal my identity to anyone, and I chose to keep apart from others in case the curse was true—that I could drive men mad by my presence.”

“Surely you don’t still believe that to be so?”

“I guess not. You showed me I have nothing to fear from my violent nature—at least not when I’m with you. I keep it leashed, like a wild animal, yet it’s there should I need it.” His face darkened. “Unfortunately, I may be needing my skills rather soon. That man we followed from the pub? His name is Testi. He’s one of Drufus Gong’s best lieutenants. It alarms me that he’s here on Xan, undercover. I don’t believe the Truthsayers know who he is.”

“Testi may be the source of weapons Stephan Tom referred to,” Leena remarked. “But how would Yllon benefit if the Truthsayers gained power?”

Taurin shook his head. “The Truthsayers may have been led to believe they are constructing an armory, but I recognized the structure. It’s a landing site.”

Her eyes widened. “Meaning?”

“I think Drufus Gong is planning an invasion.”

Leena leapt up, her heart thumping in alarm. “First you tell me you’re an alien; now you’re saying we can expect a hostile invasion from outer space?”

Taurin sent her a grim nod of acknowledgement. “This planet has a protective energy shield, and when the trade ships come through, a window is opened to allow their passage. Just how the system works is unknown to me, but I suspect Lothar is involved.”

“Lothar? What does the Holy One have to do with this?”

“Lothar provides the main source of energy for your planet. He regulates the climatic cycles, supplies the lozenge against sickness, and I believe he is also responsible for the protective barrier. That means if the horn is not blown by the month of Fearn to awaken Lothar, the shield will fail. Your world will be open to invasion.”

Leena covered her mouth with her hand. “Holy waters, do you think that’s why the horn was stolen?”

He nodded. “It wasn’t taken for money, or it would have passed through Grotus’s hands by now. The Truthsayers didn’t take it to discredit the Synod. You heard them say in the pub that they hope it’s never found. That means they don’t have it.”

“So where is it? Do you think whoever stole the horn still has it?”

“That’s a plausible assumption. And if a Synod member took it to lower the energy shield, then they’re in league with Drufus Gong.”

“But how could anyone have been in contact with Drufus Gong when relations between our worlds are severely restricted?”

“Magar is in contact with them.”

“Karayan and Zeroun suspect Magar because of his relationship with you.”

Taurin grimaced. “They may be right. It’s time we had a talk with Magar ourselves.”

Leena noticed the taut lines around his mouth and wondered if he was feeling betrayed by Magar, whom he must have regarded as a friend. “Shouldn’t we get proof to show the Synod? Photos of the landing site or something equally impressive? Otherwise it will be your word against Magar’s.”

Taurin frowned. “I don’t know that proof is necessary. Our other option is to stay here and follow Testi.”

“We could also talk to Stephan Tom,” Leena suggested.

“To what end?”

“The Truthsayers believe they’re building armories and will receive weapons. Testi didn’t just show up at the site. He must have been introduced to them by someone else—someone who is secretly supporting the Truthsayers.”

“You mean, taking advantage of the Truthsayers for their own purposes. The Truthsayers are merely pawns in a high-stakes game of interstellar politics. I don’t think we should talk to them just yet. Let’s seek out Magar first. If he’s guilty, he’ll confess to using them for his own aims.”

“What if Magar doesn’t confess to anything? How will we prove our case against him?” Leena’s eyes lit up. “The construction equipment at the landing site! We could trace its origins. Maybe there’s a link.”

“I didn’t notice any markings on the crates, did you?”

She shook her head, crestfallen.

“We’ll have to make a return trip to the site,” Taurin determined. Changing the subject, he said, “Grotus knows who I am. He tried to blackmail me into giving him the horn when we found it, in exchange for keeping quiet about my identity. He’s aware there is a death sentence on my head.”

“Same goes for that fellow Testi. You can’t run the risk of him discovering your presence. It would be too dangerous for you. I’ll go to the construction site myself.”

“No way. You’re in danger just by associating with me. You should return to the Palisades now, while you have the chance to get safely away from here.”

“I’m not leaving you.”

They stared into each other’s eyes, each one determined not to yield.

“Very well,” Taurin said tersely. “We’ll wait for morning. Hunting for mushrooms is a major occupation here. We can pretend we’re stalking the woods for valuable fungi. As soon as we get the necessary information, we’ll head straight for the Palisades. Hopefully, the crates or other equipment will have notations that are traceable.”

“What if the barrier is in place?”

“Let’s worry about that later. We’d better get some sleep.”

His voice shook with weariness, and Leena realized his confession had been an ordeal for him. She was overwhelmed by all they’d discussed and readily agreed to his suggestion. It didn’t take her long to prepare for bed. As she snuggled beneath the covers, Taurin’s lean, hard body beside her, she felt a deepening sense of dread that chilled her bones.

“Come here,” Taurin said, spreading his arms.

She folded into his embrace, grateful for the warm security he provided. She hoped he realized she would never desert him, no matter who or what he was. But... an alien? His body was nothing foreign, she told herself. He was quite human, with manly urges and the delightful ability to gratify her desires. And he had human feelings as well. He’d been afraid she would reject him once she learned the truth.

Feeling a compelling urge to offer reassurance, she said, “Taurin, you’re still my husband. Just because you’re from somewhere else doesn’t mean we can’t stay together. I still love you.”

Tightening his arms around her, Taurin buried his face in her loose waves of hair. “What did I ever do to deserve you? You belong with Malcolm and his kind, not the likes of me.”

“That’s not true. You’re the perfect mate for me.” She knew him as a gentle, caring man, and that was all that mattered now.

Murmuring his name, she let her hot breath caress his ear. She flicked out her tongue, tickling his earlobe, until he moaned with rising passion.

Flipping her onto her back, he gazed into her eyes, which she knew were already glazed with desire. With a whoop of joy, he brought mouth down on hers, his tongue thrusting forth as though thirsty for intimacy. She met his movements with eager ones of her own. She wanted him, here and now, regardless of any dangers encroaching on them from the outside world. *Their* world was all that counted.

Her mouth still pressed to his, she reached for him, letting him know what she had in mind. A gratifying gasp came from his lips as she found her mark. He expanded under her bold touch, showing her how much she aroused him. A swell of pure feminine power filled her with exaltation as she craned her neck so he could kiss her throat.

He pushed her hand away and leisurely explored her body with his sensuous touch. Finally, his large palms came to rest on her breasts. He held them as though he were starving and they were a source of sustenance. When he lifted her nightgown and massaged her naked flesh, a gasp of pure pleasure escaped her lips.

It took him but a moment to shed his underclothes, and then he was atop her once more, his powerful thighs opening her legs. He plunged inside her, letting loose an animalistic howl that threw her into a frenzy.

Panting, sweating, she rocked her hips to match his rhythm, clutching at his back. Liquid heat arose from the well of her being, sapping her will, rendering her helpless against the onslaught to her senses.

“Taurin!” she screamed when her body exploded into a cataclysm of delight. He moved against her, and she felt his spasms as he joined her at the pinnacle of pleasure.

Eventually, he rolled off her, his strength spent. Listening to his steady breathing beside her, she relaxed her mind and drifted toward sleep. Her final thought was that he hadn’t told her what he’d read in the bibliotomes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Before they left the house the next morning, Taurin revealed the presence of the watchdog on the front street by briefly pulling back the drape in the living room.

“The Truthsayers would have exposed our presence here by now,” Leena said, cautiously peering out. “That fellow has to be Grotus’s man. It’s not only the horn he’s after. Grotus hopes to add me to his collection.”

“What do you mean?”

Leena related what had transpired during their last visit to the smuggler’s haven.

“Curse the man! I’ll kill him for that.”

“No, you won’t.” She put a soothing hand on his arm as he allowed the drape to fall back into place. “We’ve too many other important things to do. By the way, you forgot to mention what you read in those bibliotomes in the Temple of Light.”

He stepped away. “We don’t have time to talk now. Let’s go before that hound realizes we’ve moved our rider to the rear of the house.” Lifting their bags, he headed toward the kitchen.

Leena followed as he opened the back door to glance outside.

“All clear.” He signaled for her to move out.

A crisp, cool morning breeze ruffled the hairs on her skin as she watched him load their bags into the trunk of their vehicle. He made a dashing figure, his black garb snugly outlining the muscled contours of his body. She moistened her lips, wishing their interlude here had lasted longer but eager to continue their mission.

A winding rural road took them in the direction of the construction site. Along the way, Taurin explained how they would proceed. He found a secluded spot behind a clump of bushes in the surrounding woods and parked the rider.

After trudging a short distance across the meadow, he halted abruptly. Leena stopped directly behind him, waiting while he tested the space ahead. Sniffing the pine-scented air, she enjoyed the sensation of sunshine warming her neck. The material of her day dress was fairly thin, and standing in the shade by the rider had chilled her.

“Demon’s blood! That damn barrier is in place again.” Taurin hesitated, considering a course of action. “I’ll use my blaster,” he decided. “The villeins don’t expect anyone to have weapons of this caliber. I can probably short-circuit the thing, but the discharge might set off an alarm in town. At the very least, I would expect Testi to be alerted that something is amiss. We’ll have to act fast.”

“Just do it.” Leena stood back as he pulled his weapon.

Zing. Red laser fire cut through the air, impacting the energy shield with an eruption of sparks. For an instant, the entire defensive perimeter lit up like a neon sign. In the next moment, it went dead.

“Let’s go,” Taurin yelled, holstering his armament.

They dashed toward a truck that stood empty by the roadside. Searching for a vehicle tag, they were disappointed to find none.

“You check out the construction equipment. I’m going to look at those crates over there,”

Taurin ordered.

A few minutes later they regrouped.

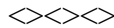
“Got it,” Leena said. She showed him the name she had written in her notebook.

Taurin nodded. “Westner Alliance Corporation. We’ll enlist those members of the Caucus who are not busy helping your brother. They can trace this to find the owners.”

“Right.” Leena nodded, eager to be off. “Too bad we don’t have a camera.”

“Someone’s coming.” Taurin pointed to an approaching cloud of dust ascending from the road to the village. “Let’s move.”

But as they turned to go, the protective shield flickered into life, and they were trapped inside. Taurin pulled his blaster and fired, but the level of the shield must have been strengthened because this time he didn’t make a dent. With a growl of rage, he drew Leena to his side as a four-wheel vehicle thundered into view.



“Who are you and why were you snooping around?” a thin-voiced fellow with a sallow complexion asked Taurin.

They’d been taken prisoner and were now being held in a cellar beneath the White Enix Pub. Taurin gathered that the pub served as headquarters for the Truthsayers, of which, they’d learned, Stephan Tom was definitely the leader. He spread his gospel through the International Merchants Association.

Most of the small business people wanted the rules relaxed so they could expand as per their own wishes and didn’t like the restrictions placed upon them by the Synod. Taurin had a lot of questions to ask himself, but right now he was the one being interrogated.

He glared back at the fellow’s pale yellow eyes and smiled amiably. “I told you we were hunting mushrooms.”

“Aye,” the man sneered. “But your wicker basket was empty, and you were found within our defensive perimeter. Where did you obtain this weapon?” He held up Taurin’s blaster.

Taurin cringed. “It was given to me. We’re simple farmer folk.” He spread his hands. “We were simply looking for some premier cepes. I thought I’d spotted a ring of *pieds de moutons*.” He nodded toward Leena. “She was after a bed of golden chanterelles. You know they’re hard to find.”

Their captor regarded them with obvious disbelief. “Are you spies for the Synod? Is that why you were sent here?”

They’d been left alone with this man, the heavy wooden door shut behind them and guards posted outside. He and Leena stood side by side, holding hands. He felt her tense at the man’s question.

“Of course not. We’re newlyweds, and we’ve just settled into the region. Actually we’d heard about your group and were interested in joining.”

The man lifted the blaster and pointed it at Taurin’s chest. “I think you’re lying.” The man’s rough manner of dress indicated he wasn’t one of the businessmen involved in governing the Truthsayers. He might be more prone to violence than his counterparts.

Taurin compressed his mouth, unwilling to say anything further that might incriminate them. The cellar was a wine storage vault, and the fruitful aroma of wine-soaked oak penetrated his nostrils. A musty odor tickled his nose, making him want to sneeze. He suppressed the urge, holding tightly on to Leena’s hand. The two men locked gazes, but after a moment their captor’s

faltered.

“I have orders not to hurt you. You’ll be tried at a hearing. That’s not the way I would do it, but I’m not the one in charge.”

“A hearing?” Leena said, her voice squeaky. “Under whose authority?”

“Ours, madam,” the man snarled.

Sticking Taurin’s blaster into his belt, he pivoted and strode toward the exit. A loud knock on the door brought a response from the guard on the other side. He stalked out, and the door slammed shut after him, the heavy lock clicking into place.

Leena’s rueful gaze lifted to meet Taurin’s. “Got any bright ideas?”

He shook his head. “Not at the moment. Let’s look around and see if there’s anything we can use to defend ourselves.”

“You don’t think they would hurt us, do you?” Alarm frissoned through her.

The look he gave her was solemn and sent chills up her spine. “That depends on who’s giving the orders. If it’s Testi, I’d say we’re in big trouble.”

“Maybe they already know who we are. If we were betrayed by someone on the Synod—”

“I don’t think that’s the case. We got caught because we tripped an alarm.” He strode down an aisle bordered by huge oak barrels on one side and filled wine racks on the other. “At least there’s plenty to drink in here.”

“This is no time for jokes.” Leena’s voice was shrill. “How are we going to get out of here?”

“We could try reasoning with Stephan Tom.”

“By telling him the truth?”

He stopped and glared at her. “That’s one alternative. Can you think of another?”

“We could insist we’re just an innocent couple caught hunting mushrooms, and we were in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Taurin’s mouth twisted into a wry grin. “Sure. And every simple farmer goes around with a blaster strapped to his leg.”

Leena grimaced. “I forgot about that.”

“If Testi sees it, I’m a dead man.”

Terror struck Leena’s heart, and she stared wide-eyed at him. “Don’t say that! I couldn’t bear it if... if anything happened to you.”

“Oh, my sweet *angella*.” Walking over, he swept her into his arms and brushed his lips across her hair. “I’m supposed to be protecting you from harm. I haven’t done very well.”

“We’ve made it this far,” she said encouragingly, tilting her face upward so he could kiss her.

Time passed swiftly as they consoled each other with physical pleasures. Several hours later, a guard entered with a tray of food.

“I must talk to your leader,” Taurin said to the man, a swarthy individual wearing a longshirt, dark pants, and muddy boots. A wicked-looking knife stuck out of his belt.

“You’ll get your chance this evenin’.” The guard handed him the provisions. “They’s all at their meeting now.”

“What meeting? The Merchants Association convention?”

The fellow nodded. “Aye, the boss man’s giving his orders.”

“Stephan Tom will be here to see us later?” Taurin persisted, hoping that Testi wouldn’t be the one sent to question them.

A sly look came into the man's face. "You'll see for yerself." He snickered before leaving them alone once again.

It was getting cold, and Leena shivered in her day dress despite the long sleeves and ankle-length skirt. Taurin tried to warm her by putting his arms around her, but she quaked in his embrace, partly from fear and partly from the cooler temperature. There was no window in the cellar, but her timekeeper told her it was past the dinner hour. Surely someone would come for them soon.

Taurin cursed inwardly at his ineptitude. He didn't know what odds they would be facing, so he couldn't make any bets about their escape. Taking out the guards was always an option, but he was reserving that one because he would rather talk to Stephan Tom while they had the chance.

Unfortunately, they weren't going to be allowed a private conversation. Just when they were giving up hope that anyone would come for them that night, the latch clicked, and the door was shoved open. Four armed guards strode into the room, and two of them bound Taurin's and Leena's hands behind their backs.

"Outside," ordered one of the guards.

"Where are we going?" Taurin asked as they were marched along a hallway, up a flight of stairs, and out into the cool night air.

"Back to the place where youse was caught. The boss said we can't spare no time from our work."

Taurin's heart sank as he saw who awaited them at the building site. Testi was in a heated argument with Stephan Tom, but they halted their conversation when Taurin's group approached.

"This is the couple we caught snooping around," said one of the guards, shoving them both forward with a light push on their shoulders.

Testi's face blanched as he caught sight of Taurin. "You! What are you doing here?"

"Do you know this man?" Stephan Tom asked. Tall and broad-shouldered, he wore a charcoal business suit. A thatch of muddy brown hair settled carelessly on his head, crowning a narrow forehead that was creased into a suspicious frown.

Making a quick assessment, Taurin decided the man's passion for his ideals outweighed the importance of his manner of dress, and his respect for Stephan Tom rose a notch.

Testi was a different sort of character, reminding Taurin of a predatory insect. Small, beady eyes rose over a long, hooked nose and a thin mouth. His rounded posture was not improved by the rust-colored tunic that covered his torso, or by the loose trousers tucked into a pair of scruffy boots.

"A pleasure to see you again," Taurin said sarcastically, nodding his head at Testi.

"This is someone I knew in the old country," Testi said in an aside to Stephan Tom, who studied Taurin and Leena with keen, penetrating eyes. "He was a criminal, wanted for theft and willful destruction of property. He was convicted, but he escaped before his sentence could be carried out. You see that he has the light of madness in his eyes."

With his hands secured behind him, Taurin had been unable to swathe his head in the protective cloth, and Stephan Tom recoiled at the sight of his glowing vision.

"You don't have to bother yourself with him," Testi continued. "I'll be happy to handle this matter."

"What were you doing here?" Stephan Tom demanded, asserting his authority.

"My wife and I were hunting for mushrooms."

“Don’t take me for a fool,” Stephan Tom snapped, his eyes blazing. “You’re spies. Who do you work for?”

When Taurin and Leena remained silent, Testi turned to the Truthsayer leader. “Let me take them aside and question them. I know ways to get a man to talk.”

“Will you tell me who you are and why you’re here, or do I let this man have his way?”

“If you leave us with him, he’ll kill me,” Taurin announced. “Just how much do you know about *his* origins? Where did he say he was from, and why is he helping you?”

Leena had been considering their dilemma. From the look on Testi’s face, it was clear he was barely restraining himself from carrying out Taurin’s death sentence right on the spot, but that would incur the Truthsayer leader’s shock and fury. Somehow he’d get Taurin into his custody and then either hand him over to his fellow agents or kill him himself and collect the reward. She had to do something to intervene!

“Why don’t we just kill them both?” suggested Testi, an evil snarl on his face. “I’ll be happy to do the job. We don’t want them alive to tell tales.” His hand reached for a strange-looking rod clipped to his belt.

Stephan Tom compressed his lips. “Obviously neither one of them is going to talk without persuasion of a more violent nature, but you know I’m opposed to anything—”

“Nonsense,” Testi cut in. “What do you think we intend against the government? This is just the beginning. If you want to be liberated, you have to fight for your beliefs. Throughout history, spies have been executed. Let me take care of them.”

He drew forth the rod, pointing it at Taurin, whose face had suddenly gone pale.

“Wait!” Leena cried, her heart thudding in her chest. “I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

Testi’s attention had been so focused on Taurin that he’d barely noticed her. Now he swung his small beady eyes in her direction. “Don’t listen to her. She’ll tell you lies. He’s probably mesmerized her with his evil stare. Look at how his eyes glow.”

Taurin tensed his muscles, wishing he could avoid a physical confrontation, but it appeared as though it would become inevitable.

“Leena, don’t say anything,” he warned.

“Why not?” she countered, her face uplifted bravely, trails of golden hair blowing about her face in the wind. “You said you wanted to talk to Stephan Tom. Now’s our chance. Let’s tell him what’s going on here. Let him learn the truth and see how he and his followers have been duped.”

“I would hear this,” said Stephan Tom, directing a meaningful glance at the Yllon agent. He walked up to Leena, lifting her chin and examining her face in the glare of an overhead spotlight.

“You said you would tell us the truth, Sister. Speak now, or I will see to it that your tongues are cut out so you may speak of this to no one and your fingers mutilated so that you cannot write. I will not have you killed, but you will wish you were dead.”

Leena stared at him, struck speechless by his threats. Would he dare do such a thing? How could anyone conceive of such cruelty?

“You talk like you’re from his world,” she said, tilting her head in Testi’s direction. “Has he so poisoned your mind that you’re willing to commit acts of violence so readily? If you must know why we’re here, it’s because we are searching for the missing horn, the one that was stolen from the sacred closet in the Palisades. We thought your people might have it. But we’ve gathered that you have no idea where it is.”

“We stumbled onto this site accidentally. You’ve been deluded into believing you’re building an armory, but actually it’s a landing site for spacecraft. A neighboring planet called Yllon is planning an invasion. Ask Testi to confirm my words. He’s one of their agents.”

“She speaks the truth,” Taurin said, continuing despite Stephan Tom’s skeptical glance. “I come from Yllon, where vision like mine is regarded as a curse. Forced to flee my homeland for my own safety, I settled here. Gangs dominate Yllon, and warfare is prevalent. The uncontrolled population rate and buildup of technology have depleted her resources. Xan must be trading food surpluses to Yllon in exchange for technology like farm machinery. But if Yllon had the chance to conquer this world for themselves, they would jump at it. Someone is handing them that opportunity by stealing the horn.”

“In other words,” Leena added, “you’re being used, Stephan Tom. You think you’re leading a revolt against the government, but you’re actually paving the way for an invasion.”

“Ha! You expect me to believe these lies? That’s the most absurd tale I’ve ever heard in my life.” The Truthsayer leader turned to Testi. “See if you can force the truth from them before you cut out their tongues. But remember my sentence. They are not to be killed; I will not have their deaths on my hands.”

As he swung away, Taurin shouted desperately, “Listen to me! This is a landing site for spacecraft. Can’t you see that slab is a launch pad?”

Stephan Tom turned back, his laughter a harsh echo in the night. “That’s the foundation for our weapons storehouse, and Testi is a friend. I don’t think he likes having aspersions cast on his character.”

“Where do you think the weapons are coming from? Who is supposed to supply them?” Taurin’s words dissipated in the air, and he received no answer.

Clenching his jaw, he realized a fight was inevitable. Testi motioned for a troop of locals to surround them. He shuddered to think what would happen to them if they were left to Testi’s mercy. Knowing the man from Yllon, he remembered Testi’s reputation for sadistic cruelty.

Leena caught her breath in alarm as one of the guards took her by the elbow and shoved her forward. What was going to happen to them? Testi knew they were telling the truth; he didn’t need to question them further. Would he kill them outright or torture them first? Or would he do as Stephan Tom had ordered—cut out their tongues and do other unspeakable horrors to them? Dizziness assailed her as she swallowed her fear and stumbled forward.

A low growl erupted from Taurin’s throat as he burst into action. At nearly the same moment, an explosion on the opposite side of the field drew everyone’s attention. Taurin used the moment to his advantage, shoving aside the nearest guard with his shoulder and flipping another one over his hip.

Leena screamed a warning as she saw Testi raise his rod. Suddenly their escort was overwhelmed by people who came out of the woods camouflaged with leaves. Leena couldn’t even tell if they were male or female because their faces were blackened, and they wore dark, shapeless clothes. One of them moved toward her, and she shrieked in fright.

“Hush, Sister, we’re setting you free.” He sliced through her bonds with a knife and then did the same for Taurin.

Taurin would have thrown himself into the fray, but their savior yanked him aside.

“Come with me. You have to get out of here.”

Taurin didn’t need any further persuasion. Grabbing Leena’s hand, he charged after the fellow through the woods. “Who are you? Why are you helping us?”

The man stopped, and Taurin got a good look at him. By the gods, it was the same fellow

who'd been their watchdog these days past, taking up a post outside their house.

"I work for Grotus, and my name is Jette. You haven't found the horn yet, and Grotus's orders are to keep you safe until you do. I've moved your rider. You can leave this place, but we'll be keeping an eye on you. Here is your weapon." He handed Taurin his blaster and showed him where he'd moved their vehicle. "Remember, my employer expects compensation. As soon as the horn is in your possession, you must contact him."

"Like hell I will," Taurin gritted, easing himself into the driver's seat while Leena quietly slid in beside him.

Jette bared his teeth in a feral grin. "No one lives who plays games with Grotus."

Taurin nodded in the direction of the construction site. "My presence is known here now, so Grotus's threats bear no weight with me."

Jette's face darkened. "Heed my words, Rey Niris, or Grotus will exact vengeance upon you and your loved ones." His nasty glance flickered in Leena's direction.

Taurin started the engine and backed away in a squeal of tires, disallowing any further warnings.

"At least we know that Grotus still hasn't any news of the horn," Leena remarked once they were safely on their way out of town.

Taurin took a circuitous route to make sure they weren't being followed. "That doesn't help us much. We still have no clue as to who does possess the horn."

Leena fell into a thoughtful silence until they'd reached a reasonable distance from Woden. "Let's head straight for the Palisades. We can take turns driving through the night."

"Aren't you too tired?" He glanced at her, concern for her welfare showing in his eyes.

Her heart warmed toward him. He must be exhausted as well, yet his first thought was for her. "I'll be fine. When it's daylight, I'd like to call ahead and alert the Caucus members to check out the name of that equipment company. Hopefully by the time we arrive, they'll have some answers."

Taurin grimaced. "I wish we'd had the chance to learn more information from Stephan Tom."

"You may have planted seeds of doubt in his mind, and that could be more important." Frowning, she shifted her position. "This is getting so complicated. Whoever stole the horn must still have it, don't you agree?"

Taurin kept his eyes on the winding country road. "I'd like to think the horn remains at the Palisades. I wonder if your brother has had any success in his investigation."

With a tired sigh, Leena leaned her head back against the headrest. "Wait until he hears that a member of the Synod stole the horn to lower the defense perimeter around Xan, and that an alien invasion is planned." A smile quirked the corners of her mouth. "I can imagine his reaction. What I don't understand is why a member of the Synod would want to be involved in such a plot. It doesn't make sense to me."

"The guilty party must crave either money or power."

"But the Synod wields full authority."

"Dikran remains at the head of the government. He might stand in the way of whoever wants to be in charge."

"Dikran is an old man. Why not simply wait until he dies?"

"There may be unknown factors involved." He gave her a somber glance. "You should call Bendyk in the morning to warn him of this new threat from Yllon's agents. Somehow I doubt Testi is the only operative. Others might have infiltrated the Palisades."

“I don’t see how that is possible. Whoever works in the holy center undergoes the most stringent scrutiny.”

“Nevertheless, we must be extra cautious upon our return.”

Testi would alert any other agents on Xan to hunt him down. Stephan Tom’s organization was international, and that meant there could be many different cells around the globe—a notion that chilled Taurin. How many other landing sites were already completed? And how much of the defensive perimeter had failed simply because some of the crystals providing the energy source had lost power?

In his mind’s eye, he saw the crystal lattice structure that had been beneath the temple presided over by Leena’s father. It was likely a similar grid existed at the Palisades, and that crystalline network powered the defense shield. It was imperative that he find the entrance to the lower levels in the Holy Temple. A central control station had to be located there, and he needed to adequately assess the damage.

“Grotus will know we’re heading home to report to Dikran,” Leena said, cutting into his thoughts. “I wish we could find a way to stop him. We’ve been trying to catch him for years but never had anything concrete to pin on him. If only we could devise a way to get the man out of action! Otherwise, we’ll always have to watch our backs.”

“Hasn’t anyone ever tried to set up a sting?”

“Of course, but he’s too smart. It’s never worked.”

“Maybe the right bait wasn’t used.”

Leena gave him a suspicious look. “Your tone of voice tells me you have something in mind. You’re not thinking of using *me* as bait, are you?”

That remark elicited a low chuckle from him. “I wouldn’t think of putting you at such risk, *angella*. Grotus wants the horn more than he wants you. It would bring him a fortune were he to ransom it back to the Synod. I know that’s what he intends to do, because Grotus told me he wants to have the horn blown as much as the rest of us. If the weather cycles continue to be disrupted, it would interfere with his smuggling operations.”

Leena’s forehead creased as she considered their options. “I’ll bet Grotus doesn’t know anything about this plot from Yllon. He has his connections at the spaceport, but he must be in the dark as far as what’s really going on. I don’t think he’d condone a takeover. He’s too content with the way things are run now. If I were in charge of regulations, I’d make them more stringent to disallow him access to the ruins.”

“Are you saying someone is purposefully being lax?”

“It is a possibility. Before all this started, I never would have thought a member of the Synod was open to a bribe, but now I’d believe anything.” Her voice rang with the bitterness of disillusionment.

“Sirvat could be involved.”

“Yes, that’s an avenue worth exploring, although I believe the excavations come under the auspices of the Ministry of Religion. Bendyk was investigating Zeroun. Perhaps he’s uncovered something important.”

Taurin tightened his grip on the steering wheel. A series of sharp curves was up ahead. Luckily the road was well-lit by bright overhead lighting. He could almost feel the lines of fatigue etching his face, just as he could feel the lead weight in his stomach. They were still no closer to finding the horn than they had been when they started out on this quest.

Grotus’s smuggling operations were minor compared to what faced them now, although he wondered what Grotus would do were he told of the threat from Yllon.

“I have an idea,” he stated, “but we’ll talk about it after we see Dikran. We may need to enlist Grotus’s aid.”

Leena glanced at him curiously. “Bendyk’s discoveries might set us in a new direction. I’ll call him as soon as it’s daylight.”

She settled back into her seat, thinking of Bendyk and the night he’d driven along a winding road like this—the night of the accident that had killed their mother. What had Swill learned from the mechanic in town? Had Bendyk discovered anything new from his discussion with their father? She couldn’t wait to compare notes with him and Swill.

Snuggling against the soft upholstery, she let her eyes drift closed. Too many confusing thoughts assailed her mind; she blanked them out until the blissful peace of slumber overwhelmed her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Bendyk wasn't in his office when she called in the morning from a public messenger at a recharging station along the road, but she did manage to connect with Dikran via his private, confidential line. She related what they'd learned and asked him to set the Caucus on the trail of the equipment supplier.

The Arch Nome was stunned by her words. "It has to be Magar. He's in charge of offworld relations. He's the only one who has regular dealings with the representatives from Yllon."

"Wait until we get there. Taurin will know what to say to him." Leena paused. "Has Bendyk reported any news? I tried to reach my brother, but he wasn't in his apartment or his office."

"You'd best speak to him yourself," Dikran said, his voice gruff. "Nothing is as it seems anymore. I don't know what will become of us."

"Your Grace?"

"Never mind. Just get back here as soon as you can, child. And see to your safety."

Back in the rider, Leena related her conversation to Taurin while she took a turn driving.

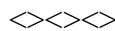
"We'll find out what Bendyk learned soon enough," Taurin commented, closing his eyes.

Noting the weary look on his face, she fell silent, biting her lip with anxiety. They had too much to worry about during the long drive to the Palisades. Why not think of something pleasant instead? This interlude provided time for her and Taurin to be alone together. Soon enough, they would be forced to face the treachery of the various Synod members. And if they succeeded in recovering the horn, what then?

Her stomach churned. She was unable to discard a nagging sense of anxiety. Instead of appreciating Taurin's company, she wondered what would happen to their relationship once the horn was blown and stability was restored. He'd brought up some valid points to be considered, such as their differences in religious beliefs. These past few days had been woefully inadequate as an example of married life. All she knew was that she wanted to be with him.

Glancing at his profile, charmingly vulnerable in repose, she let an affectionate smile play upon her lips. In many ways he still seemed like a stranger to her, yet she knew, deep down inside, that they were compatible and needed each other. Her faith complemented his skepticism; his strength of presence erased her fears. Together they would face whatever obstacles lay ahead of them. And wasn't that what marriage was all about, meeting life's challenges together?

Her grip on the steering wheel relaxed as her mind emptied of its worries. They'd get through this and settle into a routine that suited them both. Lothar would guide them. Praise be the Holy One whose beneficence provided for her people.



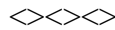
Taurin awoke to hear her mutter a prayer aloud, and a vise tightened around his heart. Whatever discoveries awaited them at the Palisades might set her against him. She'd blame him

for withholding his knowledge of Lothar, but it was the Synod's fault for deceiving the populace. It wasn't his place to reveal the truth, and doing so would break the oath he'd made to Magar not to interfere in their world's affairs.

Magar. Was the man a traitor? Did he support the Truthsayers, urging them to armed rebellion while secretly plotting an invasion with the Ylloners?

Forcing those troublesome thoughts aside, his mind returned its attention to Leena. How much he needed her to return home with him when this was over! Maybe they could work things out satisfactorily, but there were still so many problems to overcome. Shifting in his seat, he wondered if there would ever be an end to them.

Darkness seemed to loom ahead of their steps, no matter what direction they chose. If only he shared Leena's faith, it would make his outlook so much brighter. But was it faith in Lothar or his faith in her that was lacking? Walls were tumbling down around him, Magar's potential treachery being the most painful. Leena's love was the guiding light that uplifted him, drew him out of the darkness of despair. She was his savior, his *angella*. And he prayed—for almost the first time in his life—that he'd be able to keep her by his side.



Magar was not in his offices when they returned to the Palisades two days later. A cold front had finally passed through, and the air in the complex was chilly despite the efforts of the central heating system. Leena wore a topaz brocade gown and a gold-sashed blue robe, signifying her status. Her golden hair floated about her head like a mist sprayed by a waterfall, gleaming in the shafts of sunlight that penetrated through the beveled glass windows.

Taurin had on one of his usual black outfits. They stood in the corridor outside the Minister of State's suite of offices, discussing their next course of action. Upon their arrival, he'd presented her with a wedding gift: the ring he'd slipped into his pocket at the Temple of Light. It was small enough to fit on her slender finger.

"This signifies our bonding," he'd said to her, his tone solemn, as they'd prepared themselves in her apartment for their audience with Dikran. "I want everyone to know you are my wife."

She'd raised herself on tiptoe to kiss him. "I shall be proud to make the announcement." But Dikran wasn't there when they went to see him.

"We waited too long," Leena said, a look of frustration on her face. They'd arrived by four in the afternoon but had decided to freshen up before making an appearance.

"Try locating Bendyk, but use a public messenger in the lobby. The communication system in your apartment might be bugged."

She acquiesced to his command but neither Bendyk nor Swill were available. "Where is everyone?" she queried, but then comprehension dawned when she realized how quiet the corridors had been. "Of course. Today's the Festival of Lanterns."

"What does that mean?" Taurin wondered how anyone could get their work done when there were so many religious holidays.

"They've gone home to light lanterns and say a prayer for the dead. As though in mourning, one is to pursue no forms of entertainment, including answering the messenger system. It would be a sacrilege to disturb anyone during this solemn time. We'll go back to my apartment. I have some lanterns there we can light."

"No, we'll go to my place."

She shot him a quizzical glance. "You won't be needing your apartment here any longer."
"I mean, we should go home to Lexington Page, to my farm."

"Oh." Leena stared at him, aghast. Surely after such a long journey from Woden, he didn't intend to spend another hour and a half on the road? But when she saw the firm set to his jaw, she realized he meant just that. "But why?"

"We can still be here early in the morning to speak with Dikran. In the meantime, I have chores to do at home."

She acquiesced quietly, understanding it had been a while since he'd set foot in his house. He probably wanted to reassure himself that all was well there. The recent frost might have killed his crops, without his being there to tend them. She'd have to remember to ask Dikran to compensate him for the loss.

But checking on his crops seemed to be the farthest thing from Taurin's mind when they arrived at his home two hours later. They'd found a food market nearby that was still open and stocked up on a few supplies, and Leena bought lanterns there as well. As she set about preparing their meal and lighting the lanterns in the appointed places in different rooms of the house, Taurin closeted himself in his bedroom.

"Won't you join me in prayer?" she called after completing her tasks. She stood outside his closed door.

"I'll be out in a minute."

She turned away, hurt that he would exclude her. What was he doing in there that required privacy? Disturbed by his behavior, she retreated to the kitchen and set the table for two. The aroma of spiced vegetable soup wafted in the air. Warmed by the hot stove and the efficient heating system, she'd removed her cloak and donned an apron. In another pot, thick noodles simmered in an orange-spiked tomato sauce, peppered with bits of dried rasenbret.

"Something smells good," Taurin said, his voice deep.

Leena whirled around, smiling at the sight of him in the archway. His tall figure and fiercely handsome features raised her temperature. He sauntered into the kitchen, a seductive grin on his face, but behind his eyes were traces of anxiety.

"The food is just about ready," she told him. "Let us say our prayers while we're waiting."

The smile on his face vanished. "Must you follow all of the traditions so diligently?"

"Does it bother you if I do?"

"No, as long as you don't expect me to be so compliant."

Leena sighed, wiping her hands on a dry towel. "I wish you believed in Lothar. It would make all of this meaningful to you. I get the feeling that you're humoring me by participating in the rituals."

His expression softened. "I just want to please you, *angella*." Advancing closer, he lowered his head and brushed his lips across hers. "Now let's get on with these prayers, shall we?"

Their prayers finished, they ate their hearty repast while engaging in light conversation. Scrubbing the dishes afterward, Leena wondered how they would ever reconcile their differences. She didn't care for the notion that Taurin's prayers were hollow, that he pretended tolerance just to pacify her. Ideally, a marriage should be based on common values. That he thought so little of Lothar distressed her and boded ill for their future together. Or perhaps she was the one being intolerant. She'd been raised from birth to believe everyone worshiped Lothar. Why shouldn't others be entitled to different beliefs?

Taurin placed a hand on her shoulder. “Why don’t you leave the rest of the dishes for later?” He nuzzled her neck, eliciting a sigh of pleasure from her.

This part of married life she was going to enjoy. She turned off the sink and dried her hands before moving into his arms. Immediately his mouth came down on hers as she folded her body into his embrace.

“My bed is large enough for two,” Taurin drawled. “It’s about time I had a wife to warm it for me.”

His arm around her, he led her to the bedroom, muttering a curse when she noticed the bibliotomes scattered on the coverlet. Hastily he scooped them up and piled them on a table in a corner of the room.

Leena’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. Had he been reading them? His next action diverted her attention. He stripped off his clothes and stood before her naked.

“You’re next, my love. I wish to see you in all your glory.” He gave her an encouraging grin.

Needing no further prompting, Leena slid out of her gown and undergarments.

Her husband studied her from head to toe. “Beautiful,” he murmured, circling around her.

“You’re embarrassing me.”

“Nonsense. Looking at you brings me pleasure. See what it does?” He pointed to his erect appendage.

Leena’s blood sizzled as a responding heat arose within her. The bed looked inviting with its covers thrown back, the white sheets crisp and clean. She felt the barest breeze against her exposed skin, a drift of warmth from the heating system that hummed in the background.

Taurin flipped off the light switch, leaving the room in the soft glow of lantern light. Every room in the house was lit with lanterns, remembrances for those long past.

We are here to celebrate life, she told herself, opening her arms as Taurin approached. And celebrate life they did, joining together as one, murmuring words of passion in each other’s ears, melding together in a frenzied declaration of their love.

“I need you so much,” Taurin whispered, locked in her arms after they’d satiated each other’s driving lust.

She kissed him on the mouth. “I need you, too. You make my life complete.” Her hands splayed across his broad back, kneading his taut muscles. The manliness of him drove her wild, and she never wanted to let him go. Entwining her legs around his, she reveled in the feel of his rock solid body against her softness. She’d never felt so feminine as when she was with him, and it was a joy to experience such a wonderful part of life.

“My wife,” he uttered in a hoarse cry, and in it was an echo of the desperate longing in his heart.

If only he could come home to her every night, he would be a happy man for the rest of his life. She was his haven, the peace he’d been seeking, not the farm on this tiny bit of land.

He realized now that this was what he’d always wanted—a family of his own. He’d admired the bonds between Baker Mylock and his brood but hadn’t realized it was something he sought for himself. He wouldn’t let Leena leave him, no matter what happened.

The way he held on to her convinced Leena that he was troubled. “What bothers you, my darling?” she asked, staring into his glowing eyes.

He gazed back at her with such love and affection, she thought she would melt. “I’m afraid,” he murmured, searching her face.

“Afraid of what?”

“That you’ll leave me, that you won’t want me anymore after... after we finish this.”

She realized he was talking about finding the missing horn. “Time is running out,” she reminded him. “We have to recover the horn and blow it so that Lothar may awaken.”

“*Lothar. Always Lothar.*” Taurin withdrew, flopping onto his back. Would that her god had never come between them. The horn wasn’t the issue here; it was really all about Lothar. The Truthsayers may have been right when they accused the Synod of securing power for themselves to the disadvantage of the people.

He’d learned many revealing facts in his examination of the bibliotomes, but there was still much missing information. Grotus had some of the books, obtained from Captain Sterckle, and Magar had others. The things he had learned were piecemeal, like segments of a puzzle that had yet to fit together.

The books in the Temple of Light were a valuable resource, but there must be another repository located in the Palisades. He’d asked Bendyk to search for the hidden lower level and wondered if he’d been successful.

Other than the bibliotomes, the symbols carved into the walls of the ancient temples were the only other clues that related to the Apostles. Leena could interpret them, but he wouldn’t ask for her help unless it became absolutely necessary. He was able to read the bibliotomes only because the knowledge contained therein was transmitted to him via some sort of telepathic imprint. He didn’t quite understand how the method worked, but at least he wasn’t required to read the symbols. Hopefully, a new source of bibliotomes would reveal the knowledge required to repair the crystals.

The secrets of Lothar had to be contained within the Palisades. Tomorrow, Taurin vowed, he would force Dikran to disclose everything.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The next day they met briefly with Dikran. “I directed the Caucus to check into the name of the equipment company you mentioned,” the Arch Nome told them, appearing more frail than when they’d seen him last.

A vein in his forehead throbbed conspicuously as he regarded them with a defeated expression. He sat, dwarfed by his throne-like chair, while they stood in front of him like sergeants being summoned before an officer.

“The trace led to a larger corporation called Amiaus. The Caucus is checking into the details now.”

“What of the defense shield around the planet?” Taurin asked. “Is it weakening?”

Dikran nodded. “Ever since Lothar began malfunctioning. I should have seen this coming, but I was convinced someone stole the horn for the money.”

“Lothar’s malfunction!” Leena piped in. “What are you talking about? The weather disasters?”

Dikran cast her a startled look. “Eh? Oh, yes, child. Lothar is displeased because of the Truthsayer movement. You say Stephan Tom, the president of the International Merchants Association, is the leader behind this group?” Dikran frowned. “That means it reaches a wider audience than we would have imagined. It’s a strong organization that began as a grass-roots movement promoting greater freedom of choice. It’s grown in popularity over the years. Those people chafe against the restrictions imposed upon them.”

“Why doesn’t the Synod open talks with the Truthsayers?” Leena suggested. She hadn’t considered the Truthsayers’ viewpoint before, but in some respects they were right. Why couldn’t people migrate where they pleased? Why did one have to obtain permission to change settlements?

For society to grow, change had to take place. If that meant progressing from towns to cities, with all their inherent problems, then so be it. Progress always came with a price. Perhaps it was time for the Synod to meet the people’s needs in a way more suitable to the modern age.

“You forget,” Dikran told her, shaking a crooked finger in her direction, “Lothar set the rules. We follow his laws, madam.”

“And who wrote the laws?” Taurin asked quietly.

“The Apostles wrote the laws that were handed to them by Lothar,” Dikran said.

“Really?” Taurin raised an eyebrow. His gaze met Dikran’s, and for a moment he saw a flicker of uncertainty in the Arch Nome’s expression.

Dikran scrutinized his face, then turned to Leena. “Leave us for a moment, child. I wish to speak to this man in private.”

“Now, wait a minute,” Leena said, highly insulted that they would have a discussion without her.

“Go find your brother,” Taurin suggested, a kindly, indulgent look on his face. “I’ll join you in a few moments.”

“Very well.” She spun around and stormed from the room.

Taurin turned back to face Dikran. “I know about the power grids. They relay information to the weather satellites orbiting the planet. The central control station has to be here.”

Dikran compressed his lips, saying nothing, so Taurin continued. “Lothar isn’t displeased with the people. Your power source is failing. I’ve seen the crystals.” He noted with gratification the look of surprise in Dikran’s eyes. “Not all of the crystals are functioning properly, are they? They’re deteriorating, and that’s what is wreaking havoc with the weather. What’s happening, Dikran? Are the crystals wearing out? Were they a legacy from the Apostles that no one understands?”

Dikran’s posture slumped. “You know too much, son. Does *she* know?”

“Leena? No, she hasn’t a clue. She believes faithfully in Lothar. We are married, your eminence, and I love her dearly.” He gave a wry smile at the Arch Nome’s astonished look. “I cannot be the one who disillusion her with the truth.”

“So I see.”

“May I suggest that you and I make a deal? I’ll tell you what I know if you lay all your cards on the table. I give my solemn vow that what you reveal will not go beyond this room.”

“Why should I trust you?” Dikran’s probing gaze inspected Taurin.

“Because I’m from Yllon.”

“What!”

Taurin explained his background. “I know what kind of terror my countrymen are capable of bringing to your people. The defense shield has to be strengthened if you want to repel the coming invasion. Maybe I can fix the malfunction if I learn what’s causing it.”

Dikran spread his hands helplessly. “But the horn has to be blown to reawaken Lothar.”

“Lothar be damned! You know there’s no god as well as I do. I figure the horn has to be blown to reset the weather cycles, but what role does it play regarding the crystals?”

“Blowing the horn has no effect on them. We don’t know what is causing them to fade.”

Dikran’s face sagged. “Sounding the horn serves to reset the climactic patterns, as you surmised, but it also provides a temporary energy boost that can fortify the defensive perimeter, at least for a short time. It won’t solve the problem in the long run. If the crystals continue to deteriorate, eventually all power will be drained.”

With a swish of his robe, Dikran rose, his movements majestic despite his dejection. “Follow me,” he said, heading for a doorway at the rear of the chamber.

“Are you taking me to the lower level?”

“The entrance is from my private robing chamber, behind the Grand Altar in the Holy Temple.”

“Of course.” Taurin followed him through the suite of offices and out into the maze of corridors that wound through the Palisades complex.

They strode past administrative wings, small chapels, and open courtyards before reaching the Arch Nome’s private entrance to the Holy Temple. Along the way, Taurin filled Dikran in on the details he and Leena had omitted before: their discoveries in the Temple of Light, Taurin’s relationship to Magar, and his encounter with Testi. The only thing he didn’t reveal was the use of his armband. It might come in handy as a playing piece later on, and he didn’t want to give away the game so early.

“We closed the Temple of Light for excavations because it was deemed too dangerous to explore,” Dikran admitted after Taurin questioned him. “We had no idea what might be found therein except that it must be highly valuable. I’ll have to discuss this with the Synod. They may

want to reopen the site now that you know how to bypass the traps.”

“Be sure to include Leena in any professional excavation,” Taurin advised. “She’d be deeply upset if you excluded her after her skills had gained us entrance.”

In the robing salon, Dikran shuffled up to a statue of a cherub, similar to the one in Cranby’s office.

“How is Lothar’s lozenge created?” Taurin asked.

Grasping the halo and spinning it in the golden disk, Dikran shook his head. “A gift from Lothar. It just appears during the month of Mystic, and the count is almost always accurate. We have been unable to conceive how they are produced.”

Taurin’s admiration of the Apostles grew. Certainly they were an advanced civilization, but why had they left and where had they gone? And what relation were they to him? Some of the answers he’d gleaned from reading his bibliotomes, but the rest might be here, through that secret passageway that had just opened in the far wall.

A flight of steps led downward to a level filled with huge chambers, featuring vaulted stone ceilings, recessed lighting, and an air-filtering system that kept the temperatures on an even keel.

The first room held an array of equipment that surprised Taurin in its complexity. Row after row of computer banks flashed with different buttons and dials. Peering closely, he noticed monitors linking the houses of worship run by the Candors. A liquid crystal map grid made up an entire wall, displaying the global weather system. The sophisticated setup impressed him. This level of technology was beyond anything he’d seen before.

“Amazing,” he murmured, staring about the room with awe. “You and the Synod are the only ones aware of this place?”

Dikran nodded, his expression sad. “We know so little.” He gestured toward the control consoles. “None of us understands this, nor did our predecessors. Magar said he would consult with his contacts in Yllon about repairs.”

Taurin pointed to a pulsating brightness ahead. “That’s a crystal lattice structure, isn’t it?”

Dikran stopped in front of a receptacle before the entrance to the next room and withdrew two pairs of dark glasses. “Here, put these on. It’s too bright otherwise.”

Taurin donned the glasses and proceeded into the adjacent chamber. Most of the crystals in the honeycomb structure glowed brilliantly, but a few flickered, and others appeared to be dead.

“Why haven’t there been any power failures? Don’t these grids supply electricity as well as power the satellite system?”

“They do in part,” Dikran acknowledged, “but we have solar generators as backups. They’ve been able to function adequately. If more of the crystals fail, however, I don’t see how the generators can be maintained either.”

Taurin strode into the next room. Inside was a repository of inactive crystals, heaped in piles like so many inanimate rocks. Again he wondered how to activate them, and puzzled over what was causing their demise. Perhaps the next chamber held some answers.

The next room held an immense library of bibliotomes. Stacks and stacks of books rose toward the ceiling. In the center of the room, on a raised pedestal, under a glass cover, was the largest bibliotome he’d ever seen. Walking over to peer closely at it, Taurin noted the familiar sequence of symbols on the creamy, translucent cover.

“What is this?” he called out.

Dikran's voice was a hushed whisper behind him. "The sacred Book of Laws. It is the bible for our society. The Apostles—"

Taurin pivoted, his eyes blazing. "The Apostles came to this world, possibly from a star system in the Cadega constellation. They set up their own laws and established the rule of Lothar to suit their needs."

"They brought order and peace to our society," Dikran countered, lifting his chin. "They stabilized our weather, provided rain for our crops, gave us the lozenge to fight sickness. Is there not the hand of a god in all this?" Dikran swept his arm to encompass the room. "Maybe the Apostles did create all of this. But who gave them the gifts? Who were their progenitors?"

He stepped closer, his gaze piercing Taurin's. "I truly believe there is a higher order of intelligence, a superior being who is responsible for the patterns of life. This entity's name may not be Lothar, but he—or it—is the holy one I worship."

"Why don't you reveal the truth to the people? Are you afraid they will revolt against the authority of the Synod?"

"Of course I am afraid. But I see that progress is inevitable, even though it may not be for the best. The winds of change are blowing, and there is nothing I can do to stop them."

"Not unless you get the horn back and figure out what's wrong with the crystals."

"Can you assist us?" Dikran asked, his tone pleading. "The other Ylloners claimed that this technology was beyond their scope of knowledge."

"What other Ylloners?" Taurin demanded, brows furrowing.

"Why, the ones Magar consulted, of course. No, wait a minute. I think it was Karayan who suggested we bring in technicians from Yllon to fix the malfunction."

"You actually had people from Yllon down here? How do you know they didn't sabotage the system?"

"It was already failing!" Dikran shouted, raising his arms in the air. "The technicians said they had to examine the regional worship centers in the outlying districts. They felt the fault might be there."

"So you actually gave approval for agents from Yllon to scour the countryside? That's how they were brought in," Taurin said, a thoughtful gleam in his eyes. "And you say it was Karayan who suggested consulting with these technicians?"

The old man's face crinkled with thought. "I believe so." His gnarled fingers plucked at his golden robe.

Taurin's mouth compressed. "I'd like some time down here alone to figure this out. Do you think you could notify Leena that I'll be late? I'll meet her back in our apartment."

Dikran gazed at him consideringly. "Why did you not make your marriage public?"

Taurin shrugged. "We thought it best not to do so during our mission. Leena's life is governed by her religious traditions. I can't tell her about any of this."

"There is no need to disillusion her," Dikran agreed. "We'll tell her only what is necessary. See what her brother has learned and what you can piece together here. Then we'll meet again to determine a course of action."

"I tried to tell Stephan Tom the truth, but he wouldn't listen."

"He's blinded by his own ambitions. We'll put the Truthsayers in their place once the horn is recovered."

"Whoever stole it planned on the defense shield failing by Fearn. Yllon's agents are now planted around the globe. This plot must have been in the works for some time."

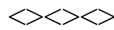
"Magar and Karayan are the most likely candidates," said Dikran, his voice grim. A wisp

of white hair fell into his face, and he tossed it back with the air of a man determined to fight his foes despite his advancing age. “We need evidence in order to bring a charge against one of them, or perhaps both, if they’re in this together. I’ll look into the matter while you’re occupied here. Contact me when you are ready for another meeting.”

“It may not be safe to talk in your office,” Taurin cautioned him. “The traitor, with the aid of his Yllon friends, may have placed listening devices about the Palisades. We know that Sirvat leaks information to Grotus, who could have spies here as well. I have an idea as to how we can use Grotus to aid us, but we’ll talk more about that later.” Taurin felt the smuggler would remain a threat to both himself and Leena until the matter of the horn was resolved.

As Dikran’s footsteps faded into the distance, Taurin slid his armband off and disengaged the bracelets. The three large rings created a musical harmony when he spun them in unison, having selected a bibliotome to research. The soothing tone brought memories of his childhood, when he’d simply stared at the spinning rings, enjoying their music.

The rings were the keys to this library. He only hoped the books didn’t contain a complete account of the Apostles’ culture, because then it would take weeks or months for him to find the answers he needed. They didn’t have that kind of time with Fearn less than two weeks away. This was his last hope to learn how the crystals functioned and how the horn served to reset Lothar.



Leena paced agitatedly in Bendyk’s office while her brother and Swill awaited her reaction in silence.

“You’re telling me the brake line was cut the night of the accident?” she cried, glaring at Swill.

The young woman bobbed her head of short black hair. “The mechanic had been paid to say it was an accident.”

“Paid by whom?” She brushed a shaky hand through her golden locks of hair. How could Bendyk have suspected this before and never confided in her?

“A representative from the Ministry of Religion was responsible,” Bendyk answered. He sat at his desk, his manner composed. His medallion gleamed brilliantly against his royal blue longshirt. “Father had a meeting that night and would have taken his rider but arranged instead to be picked up by a friend. Mother and I got in the rider intended for Father.”

“But he apologized for his transgression. You’re saying that someone still considered him a threat?”

“Apparently so.” The corners of Bendyk’s mouth turned down. “The mechanic will testify, and the representative from the Ministry of Religion has agreed to act as a witness. He received his orders directly from Zeroun.”

Leena gasped. “But that means Zeroun ordered our father to be murdered.”

Bendyk nodded grimly. “Others who have defied the faith have vanished mysteriously. If you remember, Karayan came to Father’s defense, citing his exemplary record as a factor to be considered in his sentencing. Zeroun must have realized that if his verdict was too harsh, he would be censured, and so he took matters into his own hands. He’s zealous about his faith, quick to punish anyone who deviates from the norm.”

“You mean anyone who threatens his power structure,” Swill put in, her tone sarcastic. “He wouldn’t have taken the horn. It’s too important to him to maintain Lothar’s stability.”

“But he’s a murderer!” Leena said.

Bendyk held up a hand to pacify her. “That is a matter to be dealt with separately.”

“How can you sit there so calmly? He was responsible for the accident that killed Mother and injured you. We must tell Dikran immediately.” And then she remembered that Taurin was with Dikran, in a secret meeting that didn’t include her.

“We learned something else.” Swill gazed at Leena with sympathy. “Those plantations in the Black Lands—the ones that grow beans for the Chocola Company—the land rights were granted to the Amiaus Company, of which Karayan is a large shareholder. We’ve received reports from Caucus members that Karayan made some bad investments in the past few years. He would be in dire financial straits if it weren’t for this additional income. Illicit income, I might add.”

Leena stared at Bendyk, horrified. “Is there no end to the corruption?” Her father’s closest friend was guilty of illegal business transactions; Zeroun was responsible for murder; and Sirvat was prey to Grotus’s whims. But which one of them had taken the horn? They’d eliminated nearly everyone else.

“Wait a minute. What about Magar? Magar is responsible for contact with the offworlders,” she reminded her brother. She’d told him about their sojourn to Woden and their discoveries. “He could be in league with Drufus Gong from Yllon.”

Bendyk hunched his shoulders thoughtfully. “All of our probes have come up negative on him. He appears to be clean.”

“I’ll bet Taurin knows more about Magar.”

“Then we’ll just have to wait and see what he says, won’t we?”

The messenger rang. It was Dikran’s aide, telling them Taurin would be delayed and would meet Leena back in their apartment later.

“Drat!” She knew Taurin was up to something.

She looked so disconsolate that Bendyk gave her a sharp gaze. “How are you two getting along, Sister?”

“We’re managing fine except that he doesn’t trust me.” She broke down and told him about their discoveries in the Temple of Light. “I believe he’s figured out how to read those books, but it’s something he won’t share with me.”

“Interesting,” Bendyk mused. Leena could tell by the bounce in the word that he was excited by the prospect. “I’d like to have a talk with him myself. There are too many questions that need answering at this point, and if he’s got some of them figured out...” His voice trailed off. “We’re working as a team,” he said. “Taurin will tell us what he knows, or else.”

“Or else what?” Leena couldn’t imagine her brother physically defying Taurin. Taurin’s strength and skill would outweigh him by far, even though her brother was no slouch.

“I still have the power to annul your marriage.” Bendyk stood and squared his shoulders. “If I must invoke my authority, I shall do so.”

“But I don’t want an annulment.”

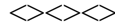
“If he loves you, he won’t risk losing you. He’ll tell us what we want to know.”

Leena was disturbed by the prospect of forcing Taurin to reveal his knowledge. He should trust her enough to confide in her himself. Her hurt went deep, and she carried it with her to her apartment. It began as a sinking feeling in her gut and rose as a throbbing ache in her heart when he didn’t return.

Too weary to wait for him, Leena went to bed, depressed as she crawled under the sheets, cold and empty without her mate.

He must have a reason for his behavior, she rationalized. Maybe he felt he was protecting her, but protecting her against what? The truth? What truths would she fear to hear?

She considered her question and the various options it presented but was unable to reach any conclusions. Fatigued, she let herself drift into sleep.



Bendyk sank down onto the sofa in Swill's living area, having been to her apartment in the Palisades enough times to feel at home. After their visit to his family estate, he noticed the reticence of her behavior toward him and wanted to address it, especially after hearing Leena's doubts about Taurin. Lack of communication was plaguing both of them, and he thought it was about time he and Swill had a frank discussion about where their relationship was headed.

He proposed discussing the new developments as an excuse to accompany her home, although both of them knew that wasn't what was on his mind. Swill had gone into her bedroom to change into something more comfortable—presumably, one of the seductive nightgowns he'd purchased for her. Heat warmed his face as he recalled his embarrassment in the clothing shop, but he had wanted to give her a gift of finery, and what better choice than a couple of silk shifts to wear against her soft skin?

Heat spread through his veins, spinning him into a sensual coil as the image of her naked body came to mind. *Stop it!* he chastised himself. He hadn't come here for that purpose.

"Bendyk, you look uncomfortable in a long shirt," Swill's low voice crooned as she sashayed into the room. The burgundy lingerie revealed a tantalizing glimpse of her cleavage and bare legs.

Bendyk gave her an appreciative glance. "Let's talk first," he suggested, making room for her on the couch.

As soon as she sat, nudging her hip against his, a wave of desire rocketed through him. He suppressed his reaction.

"I was troubled to hear of Leena's difficulty with Taurin," he began. "For a married couple to get along, they have to share their secrets. Mutual trust must be at the foundation of a relationship."

Swill observed him warily. "I agree."

He cleared his throat. "I get the feeling you're not being entirely honest with me. Ever since we visited my father, you seem more reserved. What's bothering you?"

Something flickered briefly behind her eyes. "Why does it matter?"

He'd asked himself the same question. "It just does, that's all. I care about what you think."

Swill lifted an arched eyebrow. "I felt uncomfortable in your home, as though I didn't fit in. You saw how I was raised. I'd never belong—" She bit her lip, cutting off her words.

His arm snaked out, and he tickled the soft skin on the underside of her wrist. "When order is restored to our land, I'd hate to see you waste your talents on the tithing counts. You have a keen mind and an admirable grasp of finances. Have you considered applying for a higher position?"

A look of disappointment crossed her face, as though she'd expected him to say something different.

"Not really."

"I should like to be able to see you, and if you were to live nearby—" He shook his head.

“No, that’s not what I want to say.” Rotating his body, he gazed directly into her wide amber eyes. “You made me see that there’s more to life than preaching the words of Lothar. Thanks to your insights, I no longer have to assuage my guilt over my mother’s death. You’ve given me a new lease on life, and I need you with me. Say you’ll be my bonded mate.”

Swill stared at him, her mouth gaping. “Y-You really want me?” she asked in a small voice. “I hadn’t dared hope... I mean, I dreamed about this, but I never... Bendyk, do you love me?”

He planted a teasing kiss on her forehead, a promise of more to come if she accepted his proposal. “I love you, and I’ll cherish you as my mate. Being with you is all that matters.”

She threw her arms around his neck. “You just made my dreams come true. I promise I’ll make you a good wife, even if I have to bring you down from your pedestal now and then.”

Bendyk laughed, feeling more lighthearted than he had in a decade. “I’ll look forward to that, my sweet.”

As he led her into the bedroom, he felt gratified to think that on this night, rest would be a long time in coming.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

At some point in the night, a low clicking noise startled Leena into wakefulness. Her groggy mind wondered if it was Taurin returning. As her hand stretched out, it encountered a warm, lifelike presence. He was here, lying by her side.

Glancing in his direction, she noticed that his eyes were open, glowing luminously. He appeared to be listening. When he realized she was awake, he put a hand on her arm indicating she should be quiet.

“Someone is attempting to break in,” he whispered, obtaining his blaster from under the pillow. Grotus’s agent had retrieved it for him in the ruckus of their rescue. “Perhaps we should allow our intruder to kill his mark.”

“What do you mean?”

Her heart thumping wildly in her chest, she paid careful attention while Taurin described his plan.

Concealed behind the side of the tall wooden wardrobe, she waited with a racing pulse and sweaty palms while footsteps sounded on the padded carpeting, coming from the living area. Taurin was secreted behind the door, blaster ready. They’d propped pillows on the bed to make them look like bodies—an old trick, but they hoped it would work. And if it didn’t, no one would hear her screams for help in this unpopulated wing of the residential complex.

She held her breath as the intruder approached the door to the bedroom. A floorboard creaked, and the invader stopped, hesitating for a moment before advancing. Leena saw his tall, lean shape framed in the doorway as he pointed a rod-shaped object at the bed. Before he could discharge his weapon, Taurin smashed the door into his shadowy figure. The impact slammed the intruder against the wall, where he accidentally hit the light switch. It flicked on to a dim setting.

“You!” Taurin aimed his blaster at Testi.

“Demon!” said the agent from Yllon, clutching his back. Having dropped his weapon, he glared at Taurin. “What they say about you is true.”

Taurin’s glowing eyes never wavered. “Stand up straight. I want some answers from you.”

“Fat chance.” Testi drew a hidden blaster and fired at Taurin.

Taurin’s weapon crashed to the floor as he stumbled back with a surprised cry. Testi raised his blaster to fire again, but Taurin dodged the sizzling gust, throwing himself into a somersault that landed him at Testi’s feet. He yanked his opponent off balance, and the two grappled on the floor. With a howl of rage, Taurin reached for Testi’s throat.

“Tell me who the traitor is on this world. Is it Magar, Karayan, or both of them? Talk!”

Testi’s face was growing red. Hovering behind them, Leena feared he would choke before uttering a word.

“Taurin, let him speak,” she urged.

Taurin’s jaw worked as he fought to gain control of his temper.

“You’re under a death sentence,” the agent croaked. “It is my duty to carry it out.”

“You’re the one who’s going to die,” Taurin said, tightening his hands.

“No, Taurin, stop!” Leena tried to push him aside.

As though he were swatting a fly, Taurin shoved her out of the way. “Keep out of this!” But his motion cost him the advantage. Testi thrust his fingers at Taurin’s eyes. Howling with pain and momentarily blinded, Taurin fell back.

“Drufus Gong will reward me highly for carrying out his sentence,” Testi said.

He pounced on Taurin, fastening his wrists and ankles before he could make a move in self-defense. When Taurin was sufficiently trussed up by some cords Testi had apparently brought along, the agent sat back on his haunches, satisfied by his work. Taurin glared up at him.

“Why bother tying me up? You might as well kill me and be done with it.”

“Not yet, Taurin,” Testi sneered, approaching Leena. “I think I’ll have a little fun with your woman first.”

Leena shrieked and tried to run past him, but he grabbed her by the hair, yanking her back with brutal force. Forcing her head back, he brought his mouth down on hers, his foul breath making her want to vomit.

“Now you can show me what he sees in you, lady,” Testi said, leering at her. He shoved her onto the bed, face first. “Your nightshirt barely covers your knees. Let’s see what’s underneath.”

Leena scrambled to crawl off the bed, but he seized her arm, forcing her onto her back. Her wide, frightened gaze met the sadistic gleam of his dark, beady eyes.

“Get off me!” she yelled, rage giving her courage.

A glow came from the darkened corner of the room where Taurin struggled against his bonds, watching them in fury. “Curse you,” he cried. “I’ll kill you if you hurt her.”

“This is nothing compared to what I’m going to do.”

Moving his hands to her shoulders, Testi found her nerve centers and pinched hard. An agony of pain shot through her, and she squeezed her eyes shut, biting her lip to keep from screaming. He was tormenting Taurin by hurting her, she told herself, trying to steel her body against the pain. But Testi’s onslaught was relentless, and she couldn’t help the cry of anguish that escaped her lips. Weakened by the pain shooting down her arms, she didn’t resist when he kneaded her breast, chuckling evilly.

Taurin could see them from where he sat, and he tensed when Testi placed his hands on Leena’s intimate parts. I’ll murder him, he thought, enraged. Straining at his bonds, he fought to free himself, a sense of hopelessness washing over him. I won’t let this happen, he vowed in silence. I won’t let him maul the woman I love. I’ll kill him first.

As his wrists chafed against the cords binding him, he pictured Testi’s throat in his hands. How he’d like to squeeze his fingers taut, tightening them against the man’s neck, blocking his airway until he was dead.

Leena’s eyes were closed against her assault, but suddenly Testi jerked back, and she glanced at him in astonishment. In the dim light, she saw him clutching his temples, his face a mottled shade of red.

“Stop it! The pain! It’s killing me!” He began to drool, continuing to mutter incoherently, and then his eyes rolled up in his head and he toppled over, dead.

Leena sat up and stared at Taurin, who’d suddenly gone still. Tightly bound, he sat on the floor, glaring back at her. In another instant she was by his side, untying the cord that held him a prisoner.

“I’ve killed him,” Taurin said, his voice filled with self-loathing as he got up to examine

Testi's body.

"You?" Leena sank onto the bed in exhaustion. She trembled with fear and relief and would have sought comfort in his arms, but the look on his face forbade her to come near. "He seemed to suffer a stroke."

"I thought of strangling him, and then he died." He gazed at her, his eyes horror-stricken. "It's true, the curse. I have the power to—"

"To what? Drive men mad? He was already insane with the killing instinct. You didn't cause him to feel that way."

"No, I just killed him." Taurin retrieved his blaster from the floor and changed the setting. "This has four levels," he explained in an impassive tone. "Levels one and two are light and heavy stun; they affect the nervous system. Level three is the kill mode. And level four... well, see for yourself."

He aimed and fired. As Leena gasped in horror, Testi's body vaporized into the air.

"Good riddance," Taurin mumbled. Pulling on a robe, he stumbled from the room.

Leena stared after him, too stunned to move. But after a moment, she decided his need for support was greater than her shock at his casual disposal of their attacker. Rushing into the living area, she found him seated on a couch, head held in his hands. A surge of tender emotion overwhelmed her, and she sank down beside him.

"Don't be so harsh on yourself," she said in a soothing tone, putting her arm about his shoulders. "You've shown me nothing but kindness. Perhaps this curse, if it actually exists, pertains only to people who are already aggressive in nature."

Taurin glanced at her, and she winced at the look of anguish on his face. "The entire populace on my world was affected. When the Apostles came, they inspired madness. It is their genes that I carry."

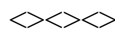
"But I don't understand. How could they have done so much good on my world and then traveled to yours and committed evil?"

Taurin compressed his lips, apparently unwilling to say more. "Perhaps we should ask Bendyk to perform an annulment in the morning. It would be best if you were rid of me as soon as we recover the horn."

She stroked his cheek. "I don't want to hear you talk that way. We belong together."

Taurin said nothing, but she didn't like the brooding look on his face and hoped he wouldn't take any action on his own that they'd both regret.

Realizing it was useless to comfort him, she returned to bed, shivering despite the warmth of the blankets. The memory of Testi's disgusting breath on her skin made her flesh crawl, but wishing for Taurin to soothe away her unpleasant memory was a waste of time. Instead, she turned on her side and considered how to get Taurin to share his secrets.



"Did Taurin tell you anything last night?" Bendyk whispered to Leena as they awaited an audience with Dikran. He'd revealed his betrothal during an earlier meeting with her and Taurin. They'd offered him and Swill their heartfelt congratulations.

She shook her head. "He's still hiding something."

Bendyk's face darkened. "It doesn't bode well for a marriage if a man withholds confidences from his wife. I will speak to him."

Before Leena could warn him that Taurin wasn't a man to be coerced, the doors to the

reception chamber opened, and an attendant ushered them in to a private audience with Dikran.

The old man sat in regal glory on his throne, dwarfed by his voluminous golden robes. A resplendent headdress crowned his thin white hair. It gave him height and dignity, affirming the intelligence in his eyes and commanding respect.

“Report,” Dikran ordered, his voice unwavering.

Bendyk revealed what he’d learned about Zeroun’s responsibility in his mother’s death and Karayan’s financial status. “As for the plantations in the Black Lands, we discovered that the property rights were granted to a corporation called the Amiaus Company.”

“The Amiaus Company!” Taurin jabbed a finger in the air. “Isn’t that the same group that’s supplying construction equipment to the Wodeners?”

Dikran nodded solemnly, meeting his gaze with a penetrating one of his own. “Aye, so it is.”

“Karayan is a major shareholder in the company,” Bendyk added. “This is the link we’ve needed. It means he might be the one involved with the Ylloners.”

“What about Magar?” Leena queried. “I thought he was in charge of offworld relations.” She still found it hard to believe her father’s friend could be involved in such a devious plot. Karayan had always been so supportive.

“I’ve been unable to speak to Magar,” Taurin cut in. “He’s away at a district meeting, but he should be back later. It doesn’t matter; I have a plan to coax the thief into the open so we can recover the horn.”

“Ooh, it’s a trap.” Swill’s face held an exultant look, as though she were enjoying herself immensely.

No doubt it pleased to her to get the goods on the Synod, Bendyk thought, amusement mixed with a tinge of sadness. Maybe the Synod did wield too much power. For the first time, he seriously considered the Truthsayers’ rhetoric. Perhaps it wasn’t so much rabble-rousing as much as a push for human rights.

“Call a meeting of the Synod for tonight,” Taurin directed Dikran. “I’ll announce that Leena and I have found the horn. We’ll say we paid ransom money to get it back from an antiquities collector. Sirvat stole it months ago to please Grotus. She gave it to him in exchange for a fake reproduction. As Renewal approached, Sirvat got nervous and stole the substitute horn in order to avoid detection. Meanwhile, Grotus sold the genuine article to the collector, who in turn ransomed it back to us. Leena has verified the horn is authentic.”

Leena snorted. “So the thief will believe he has a fake, and he’ll want to exchange it for the real thing. However, Sirvat will be at this meeting. She’ll refute your story.”

Taurin raised an eyebrow. “She may deny that she stole the horn, but then she’ll have to admit her liaison with Grotus. Leaking information at such a high level of government is a punishable offense.” He directed a quizzical gaze at the others. “How do you get rid of unworthy Synod members? Zeroun has overstepped the bounds by collusion in murder, and Karayan is engaged in illegal financial transactions. Both of them should be removed from office.”

“I appointed the Synod,” Dikran said in a haughty tone. “I have the power to dismiss them from their posts.”

“How will you support the claim that we have the sacred horn?” Leena asked Taurin.

“We’ll set a new Renewal ceremony to be held four days hence. I’ll say I’m going to blow the horn to reset Lothar. As far as I understand, there is no formal training required; normally the honor is bestowed on the horn blower as a form of special recognition. The ceremony must occur at the Grand Altar for Lothar to respond. I would expect the guilty party to

show up on our doorstep before the appointed time. Now, about the security arrangements. Can anyone show me a layout of the Palisades?"

"I can." Dikran withdrew a document from a pocket in his robe. "I thought you might need this."

Taurin spread the map across the surface of an ornamental table and the others hovered around, including Dikran.

"Here's the Holy Temple." Taurin indicated the pyramid-shaped structure that dominated the complex. "And that's the residential wing. But what are these other buildings?"

"This entire structure contains over one thousand rooms," Leena explained. "Most are connected via internal corridors, or walkways through landscaped gardens. This sector here belongs to the Arch Nome. These other areas contain the residential wing, reception halls, dining commons, chapels and museums."

"Museums?"

"The Palisades Museum contains a priceless collection of statuary, valuable antiquities, and modern religious art. The Archives, which you see over there," she said, pointing, "hold religious and historical documents. And the Library has one of the world's largest collections of early manuscripts."

"Any bibliotomes?"

"No," Dikran responded. "Those are stored in repositories elsewhere."

"How do you prevent thieves from stealing the valuable works of art?"

"We have our own internal security force, the Elite Guard. They're unarmed, of course, but are well trained in surveillance techniques and self-defense maneuvers. We've been fortunate not to have had too many incidents."

Taurin's face darkened with a heavy scowl. "If the traitor in our midst makes his move alone, we'll have little trouble. But if he calls for backup assistance from his Yllon friends, we'll need people who can fight. There's only one avenue we can turn down for aid as I see it."

"The Caucus?" Bendyk asked. Standing at Swill's side, he had a bewildered look on his face.

Taurin laughed, but his eyes lacked mirth. "Only one force on this planet is adequately trained to defend against an armed attack."

"You mean the Truthsayers." Leena narrowed her eyes. "They're planning their own insurgence, but if we could make Stephan Tom realize the truth, he might persuade his followers to join us in fighting the invasion."

Taurin shook his head. "Stephan Tom's people are playing at being soldiers. I meant Grotus's ring of smugglers. He can get here fast using his submersible fleet, plus his men are armed."

"But why would Grotus agree to help us when he wants the horn for himself?"

"The smuggler intends to ransom the horn back to the Synod. He needs the weather restored to normal conditions, same as everyone else. Otherwise his smuggling operation will be in jeopardy. Ditto for an invasion from Yllon. Grotus favors the current power structure because his transgressions are being overlooked. But if someone else takes over the government, that leniency may change."

"Fearn is rapidly approaching." Leena brushed a strand of hair from her face. "If the horn isn't blown by then, the defense shield will crumble, allowing Yllon's forces to invade. Will Grotus have enough time to get here?"

"I believe so, but we must act fast."

“How will you get in touch with him?” Dikran queried. He’d been silent up until then, absorbing their discussion from the rapt look on his lined face.

“We’ll tell Sirvat the truth,” Leena suggested, her eyes widening at the notion. “Perhaps her sentence can be lightened if she cooperates.”

“Agreed,” the Arch Nome said, tilting his head, “but we’ll wait until after we announce the new Renewal ceremony to the Synod. Her response to our accusations will be more credible if she believes herself to be wrongly accused of stealing the horn.”

“What excuse do we use in the meantime for the delay?” Leena spread her hands. “Why not just blow the horn at the meeting? Wait, I know! We’ll say that I need to restore the horn to its pristine condition as it was damaged during its sojourn.”

“Good idea,” Taurin said approvingly, his warm smile heating her blood.

Distracted by the lights of desire dancing in his eyes, she forced her attention back to their tactical discussion.

“The traitor may allow me to complete the restoration if he wants the weather cycles stabilized once he’s in power. Does that mean I’ll be relatively safe until my job is completed?”

Taurin grimaced. “He could make a move at any time. For that reason, you’ll never be left alone. Either I or Bendyk will be with you at all times. We’ll post the Elite Guards around the grounds, but they won’t be an adequate force if the Ylloners attack before Grotus arrives. There has to be something else we can do to strengthen security.”

“Your Grace,” Leena addressed Dikran as a bright idea hit her. “Are there any booby traps inside the Holy Temple, similar to the ones I’ve found on other excavations?”

Dikran gave her a startled glance. “I’m afraid not. This temple has been in continuous use since the days of the Apostles.”

“Not the entire temple,” Leena countered. “Just the central, older portion, right?” At Dikran’s nod, she went on. “There’s a high probability that traps were laid, but they were never activated. I’d like to take a look around. Now that I know how to read the carvings, perhaps they’ll provide a clue to our defenses.”

Taurin touched her elbow, providing a flood of warmth up her arm, while his eyes shone with the thrill of the hunt. “We’ll set you up in one of the workrooms in the museum. That’s where you’ll do your supposed restoration, but during the quieter hours you can study the carvings in the Holy Temple.”

At last, Taurin was showing respect for her contributions. Maybe now he’d be more willing to include her in his secret talks with Dikran. She smiled at him, acknowledging his regard.

“I can talk to Sirvat,” Swill offered, “while you get established in the museum.”

“You’ll need to emphasize the gravity of our situation to her,” Taurin instructed.

“What if Grotus demands a reward in return for his services?” the young woman asked.

“Tell him we found more crystals. That should be enough of an enticement.”

Late that evening, when all the Synod members had returned to the Palisades, they set their plan into motion.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

At a special meeting convened for the Synod, Taurin revealed that he and Leena had recovered the horn and would be blowing it at a Renewal ceremony four days later.

“Praise be to Lothar!” Zeroun shouted, raising his arms in the air. “We are saved.”

“Where is the horn?” Magar piped in, his blue eyes regarding them with admiration. The silver-haired gentleman wore his priestly robes with dignified grace despite his portly figure.

“After its sojourn, the horn truly does need a cleaning,” Leena said. “I’m going to work on it over at the museum.”

“Where did you find it?” Zeroun asked.

Taurin set his play into motion. When the accusation about Sirvat’s role in the theft was made, the woman turned pale with outrage.

“I didn’t steal it,” said the red-haired Minister of the Treasury. “I had nothing to do with the theft.”

“You don’t deny your liaison with Grotus, do you?” Leena snapped. “When you speak to him next, express our gratitude that he aided us in recovering the horn.”

“I’ll do no such thing. That lying bastard! He told me he knew nothing about the horn’s whereabouts.”

Leena smiled grimly. Sirvat had just proven herself guilty of leaking information to the smuggler. She’d have to cooperate with their plan now.

Swill stayed behind to talk with Sirvat, while Taurin and Leena set off for the museum. Bendyk assumed the direction of the Elite Guard and went off on his own.

Leena selected an appropriate workroom, which Taurin approved after inspecting the premises. Their preliminary job done, they headed back toward the residential wing. They were passing through the Holy Temple when Taurin stopped.

“I need to consult with Dikran about something,” he said, his eyes averted. “You go on ahead. I’ll catch up to you later.”

“Oh no, you don’t.” Leena planted her hands on her hips. “I’m coming with you.”

Taurin’s gaze met hers, his expression unreadable. “You need to concentrate on deciphering those carvings.” His sweeping gesture encompassed the ornate interior of the nave. “If there are booby traps around here, we need to activate them. Your role is important.”

Leena wavered, considering what she should do. Logic told her to start looking for an alternate means of bolstering their security arrangements.

“I’ll meet you at our apartment,” Taurin said, stalking off in the opposite direction.

Muttering a prayer for tolerance, Leena decided to follow him at a discreet distance. She ran into Bendyk and Swill, who were just rounding a corner ahead of her.

“Where are you going, Sister?” Bendyk gave her an indulgent smile. His arm was draped around Swill’s shoulder.

Gazing at them, Leena considered how her brother had mellowed under Swill’s influence. His change of attitude was commendable; it would make him more approachable to his flock.

She smiled at Swill and was pleased by the knowing grin the woman returned. “Taurin is

going off by himself again, supposedly to confer with Dikran. I'm following him. I won't let him exclude me anymore."

"We'll join you," Bendyk offered.

The trail led to the Arch Nome's private robing salon. Entering through the partially open doorway, Leena was surprised to see no one inside. An empty gap yawned at a far wall across the room, from which they heard muffled voices.

"I don't understand why you refuse to tell her," Dikran was saying as they approached.

She peered down a long staircase. The voices seemed to come from just beyond the landing below. Hovering in the passageway, she strained her ears to listen.

"Leena's religious traditions are very important to her," Taurin said. "It will destroy all she's ever believed in if she learns the truth. Those rituals give her life meaning. What would she have left if she learns that Lothar is nothing more than a mere machine, a computer?"

Leena's face blanched at his words. She leaned forward, listening more acutely.

"Lothar is more than a computer that controls the weather cycles and provides our lozenge against sickness," Dikran replied. "Believing in Lothar is a sign of faith, my son. Maybe Lothar doesn't exist as the image people hold in their minds, but don't you believe a higher intelligence exists somewhere out there?"

Leena could almost picture Dikran gesturing toward the heavens. Lothar, a machine? What were they talking about?

She glanced at Bendyk and Swill, both of whom eavesdropped as shamelessly as she did. They both wore expressions of disbelief mixed with fascination.

"I've read our history in these bibliotomes," Taurin went on. "The Apostles came here from another world because their sun was dying. They hoped to live in peaceful coexistence with the indigenous population on Xan, but they discovered that their presence caused problems.

"Used to communicating telepathically with each other, they hadn't realized their intense mental energy would adversely affect the human population. The minds of primitive men could not accept the powerful neural stimulation. Analysis showed that exposure to the telepathic waves caused a disruption in the cross-communication of brain hemispheres, producing headaches and mental aberrations in the native inhabitants."

"But they brought order and civilization to our world."

"True, but they didn't give us an interpretation of Lothar's laws. They created the laws, and that's what's in the bible next door. When they saw how their influence, although beneficial, physically pained the humans, they decided to leave. Some of them did not wish to travel to the stars. Instead, they journeyed to the next habitable planet, Yllon. There they set up a society with a non-interference rule. They thought perhaps if they did not influence human affairs, as they had done on Xan, the Ylloners would not be similarly afflicted.

"For some reason, however, the effect of their presence on Yllon was worse. The Ylloners, who already possessed a high degree of aggressiveness, went berserk. Eventually they killed off the newcomers, but not before the Apostles had seeded the population to ensure the continuation of their species. They didn't know if their mother ship would make it to the next star system."

Leena glanced at her brother, aghast at what she'd heard. If Taurin was correct, then Lothar was no god; he was simply an invention of the Apostles, an entity created to appeal to the primitive native inhabitants. Mechanical devices were responsible for the weather cycles and lozenges.

She'd begun to suspect something wasn't right when the climactic disasters started, and

now her suspicions had been confirmed. But why was the horn still needed to awaken Lothar? Couldn't the computer be reset in another manner? What was causing the disruption in weather?

Dammit, why hadn't Taurin confided in her?

She marched down the stairs, her fists clenched at her sides. Her brother's heavy breathing from behind told her he was as outraged as she. Swill murmured something, no doubt attempting to soothe him. Down below, an array of strange flashing equipment met her gaze. She'd never seen anything like it, not in all her experience.

"So it is true," she accused Dikran, catching him and Taurin off-guard. "The Synod does control everything. You've been perpetuating the myth about Lothar in order to retain power."

Dikran shuffled forward. "I tried to convince your man that you would accept the truth, child."

Her angry gaze slammed into Taurin. "You have no faith in me, do you?"

"I didn't want to disillusion you." He spoke soothingly, as though she were a young girl rather than a grown woman whose intelligence deserved respect.

"What does all this mean?" she demanded, glancing about the room. Bendyk and Swill moved to either side of her as though to lend their support.

"It means the Truthsayers are right," Bendyk said. "Lothar only exists in men's minds. Isn't that right?" He directed his question at Dikran.

The old man's expression crumpled. "The concept of Lothar was created to give hope to the people. Believing in a higher intelligence gives them strength to carry on. They need something to believe in."

"But you're not letting us progress," Swill cried. "Don't you see what this falsehood has done? You've restricted our intellectual growth. Do you believe this was the Apostles' intent?"

"The Apostles gave our people their laws and helped our civilization to blossom. They tamed the weather, gave us the lozenge to prevent sickness. People should be content to live under Lothar's beneficence."

Taurin attempted to explain, an earnest look on his face. "It might have been their goal to enrich humanity with their seed and thus accelerate the time frame in which we'd reach for the stars. Likely, we're all descendants of an earlier progenitor race. In that respect, we may all be part of a unity that's greater than all of us combined. A higher form of life, if you follow me. Besides, Lothar is more than a machine. Come with me, and I'll show you what I mean."

He led them into the room of crystals, and Leena gasped. Even wearing her protective eyeglasses, she could detect the brilliance of the pulsating matrix.

"I was able to read the bibliotomes," Taurin said. "I didn't need to be able to decipher the symbols; the contents are revealed through some sort of scrolling telepathic imprint once the bibliotomes are opened. Lothar, if you wish to give all this a name, is a biomechanical construct that functions from the feedback of positive telepathic signals. The Apostles must have been able to activate the crystals with a mere thought. Rising discontent on Xan with the ruling Synod is what has most likely caused some of the crystals to fail. They feed off positive vibrations or feelings."

"Then my father was right," Leena said, in awe of her parent's perception. "He claimed our duty was to serve Lothar with harmony and love, and now you're saying that Lothar—or this machine—can't function unless there is peaceful coexistence."

Taurin nodded. "Stephan Tom's inclusion in our plans is essential, since the Truthsayers' dissension is the main cause of the malfunction."

"Assuming the horn blowing is still needed to reset Lothar—I mean, the computer—what

happens if our plan fails and we don't recover the real artifact in time?"

Taurin's mouth curved in a sly grin. "Let me handle that problem. Regardless of how we accomplish the Renewal ceremony, the Synod will have to make concessions. Dikran accepts the need for change, but others will have to be convinced."

His eyes hardened. "First, we have to repel the threat from Yllon. If Stephan Tom and the Synod can air their differences, a cooperative spirit will be produced, which may please Lothar. The malfunctioning crystals might reactivate under those circumstances. That's essential to strengthen the defense shield and to stabilize the weather cycles."

Dikran adjusted his robe, which hung loosely over his thin frame. "I fear these matters are far beyond the ken of an old man. Perhaps the time has come for me to pass the torch."

"Please don't say that, Your Grace," Leena protested. "Your knowledge and wisdom are needed now more than ever."

"After we get rid of the vipers in our midst, a new government will have to be formed," Dikran mused. He glanced at each one of them in turn. "I have in mind certain replacements. It's time for some fresh, young blood in the upper echelons. If I do retain my position, I'll need trustworthy advisors. Your father will be one of them," he promised Leena.

"Father will be glad to have your redemption," she told him in a humble tone, feeling intensely gratified that all of her goals in joining the Caucus were finally being met. It made her continuation in the aide corps almost an afterthought.

She supposed she'd have to serve her time, something she'd totally forgotten about in her involvement with the missing horn. Her museum job was waiting for her; she'd regarded her appointment to the Caucus merely as a sabbatical. She realized now for certain that her true calling was in archaeology.

As the others conversed, her thoughts drifted to their earlier discussion. It seemed inconceivable that the god she'd believed in all her life was nothing more than a collection of... what? Machinery?

Her people had no knowledge of such technology. Apparently it was even beyond the advanced Ylloners' capabilities. If the Apostles had left them a legacy through the bibliotomes, truly they had much to learn now that Taurin knew how to access their knowledge.

"How did you unseal the holy books?" she asked him.

He gave her a wry grin. "I spun my rings in the depression on each cover."

"Is that so? Those rings have a lot of uses."

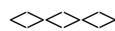
Dikran addressed Bendyk. "You'd better prepare your evidence against the guilty members of the Synod."

"You mean Zeroun and Sirvat," her brother replied.

"Don't forget Karayan. He's involved in illegal business transactions. And we still don't know Magar's part in all this."

"Magar claimed at the meeting that he knew nothing about a plot with Drufus Gong," Taurin reminded them. "We should wait and see who shows up at Leena's workroom."

They stayed to discuss the security arrangements and then split up in different directions. The trap was laid. Now they only had to bide their time until someone fell into it.



Back at their apartment, Leena prepared for bed. As she brushed out her long waves of blond hair in front of the mirror at her dressing table, she searched her soul for her feelings

regarding Taurin. Even though she'd finally learned his secrets, she felt betrayed by his lack of trust in her. She couldn't find it in her heart to forgive him so easily for his deficiency of faith.

Maybe Lothar wasn't a supernatural being, but the traditions of her people still had meaning. They were based upon an agricultural society, and celebrations of the harvest and such were still worthwhile. As for her prayers, she felt a higher intelligence must exist. Perhaps Lothar was merely a tool produced by the Apostles, but the natural beauty of her world could only have been created by a superior entity.

Now that she knew life existed beyond the stars, a greater joy enveloped her, and her faith swelled with gratitude to the Creator. Taurin was wrong to dismiss her allegiance as belonging solely to Lothar.

Her philosophical musings carried her through the rest of her nightly preparations. She was applying a lotion to her hands when Taurin's footfalls sounded from behind.

"I can do that for you," he said, his tone soft.

Seated at her dressing table, Leena glanced back at him, unable to contain her joy at his presence. She tried to calm her rapidly beating heart, telling herself she should be angry with him, but it was difficult when he took the tube of cream and began smoothing a palmful across her bared neck.

She closed her eyes, enjoying his gentle ministrations, until a rising coil of desire made her spring from her seat.

Turning, she wrapped her arms around his neck, drawing his head down for a kiss. "I love you, Taurin," she murmured against his mouth.

Despite his lack of faith in her, she couldn't help feeling a surge of affection toward him. She knew he regarded himself as her protector, but did that mean protecting her from life's disappointments as well as its physical foes? He didn't give her enough credit, although at the moment she felt the total satisfaction of a woman being cherished by her man.

Letting her hands roam the broad planes of his bare back, she gave herself in to the deep yearnings she felt for intimacy and security. Evil forces were stalking her world, and only this man could protect her and her people. He was the keeper of the rings, which were the keys to the storehouses of knowledge contained within the bibliotomes.

But none of that mattered now. The outside world disappeared as she yielded to his tender touch. Everywhere his fingertips met her flesh, her skin seared with heat. As his mouth claimed hers again and again, she writhed against him, wanting to join with him, to be united as husband and wife.

"You're mine," he said in a husky voice, showering her face with kisses.

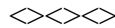
He guided her to the bed and slowly removed her flimsy nightdress, devouring her with his eyes.

With a cry of impatience, he tugged off his briefs. Then they lay naked, side by side facing each other. He caressed her skin, searching for her secret places until she clutched at him, moaning for him to complete her satisfaction.

Moving atop her, his passion surged. With a mighty thrust he slid inside her, filling her so completely that she cried out with pleasure. If only they could stay like this, attached to each other, with all the cares of the world gone from their minds. Rational thought escaped her as Taurin urged her to match his rhythmic movements.

When his hands found her breasts, she whispered his name. A sheen of sweat covered her body as she surged under him, tension springing through her body. Soaring to the heights of ecstasy in a cataclysmic release, she shuddered against him. His own explosive response spilled

inside her. Stars danced before her eyes as waves of pleasure coursed through her. Life could never be more complete than this!



Their scenes of passion were repeated in the nights that followed. To Leena it seemed like an idyllic interlude before all hell broke loose. As time wore on and the day of Renewal approached, Taurin became more fearful that his plan wouldn't work.

On the last day, a knock sounded at the door to the workroom. It was one of the Elite Guards, announcing a visitor.

"Minister Magar is here to see you, sir."

Taurin felt the color drain from his face. He'd dared to hope that Magar was not the culprit, but his visit was a good indicator that he was the thief who had stolen the horn. No doubt he'd come to get a look at the supposedly authentic one that Leena was restoring. He threw open the door, and Magar shuffled inside.

Taurin stood aside so the silver-haired Minister of State could enter. He felt a deep sense of disappointment that the man who had sponsored his immigration might be a traitor.

When Magar's ready, warm smile descended upon Taurin, it was like a knife twisting inside his gut. Like Baker Mylock, Magar was a figure whom Taurin had admired and respected. Now all that remained was the bitter taste of betrayal.

"I regret not having had the time to visit with you more often," Magar said, his voice tremulous as he glanced about the compact work space. His hands plucked nervously at his robe.

"I suppose you have come to see the horn," Taurin remarked, folding his arms and leaning against a counter.

Magar appeared surprised by the suggestion. "Why, the idea had not crossed my mind. I'll admit I was looking forward to hearing it blown at Renewal, but I understand Leena is restoring it to its prior condition." He glanced at her, bending diligently over a tracing of the carving she'd done earlier.

"If you're not here for the horn, why did you come?" Taurin persisted. A glimmer of hope rose within him that he'd been wrong about Magar, but he couldn't let his emotion enter his voice.

"I could tell from the way you looked at me during the meeting that you knew." Magar clasped and unclasped his hands. "Did you inform Dikran?"

Taurin stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Why, my problem, of course." Magar's blue eyes were troubled as he regarded his protégé.

"I have no idea what you mean, sir." What problem? Upon examination, he noted Magar's strange pallor and fine tremors. The man didn't look well. What was disturbing him so greatly that it afflicted him thus?

"I have the Agus," Magar mumbled, so low that Taurin had to strain his ears to hear.

At Magar's pronouncement, his eyes widened in shock. "The Agus!" This was a genetic disease for which Lothar's lozenge was ineffective. In one's later years, it produced tremors and progressive debilitation and, eventually, death. "Have you been to a clinic for a solid diagnosis?"

Compressing his mouth, Magar nodded mutely, and for the first time Taurin read fear in his eyes. Striding forward, he grasped Magar by the arms.

"I will help you. Whatever I can do."

Magar shook his head. “There is nothing. I thought you already knew, but now I see that I was mistaken.” He stared at the floor. “You know what this means when word gets out, don’t you?”

“There are medications that can help. It doesn’t have to mean you must leave the Synod.” Especially not now, Taurin thought to himself. Not when there are so few we can trust.

Shame swept over him like a tidal wave. To think he’d suspected Magar of complicity in the theft of the horn! How could he have been so faithless?

“We could use your advice,” Leena said, rising from her seat to face the older man. “Drufus Gong must know Taurin is here by now. He could be in danger from Yllon’s agents. There’s a death sentence on his head.”

She recapped their adventures for Magar’s benefit. During her recital, the Minister of State gazed at her with a shocked expression.

“I will help you in any way I can to catch those felons,” Magar stated in a firm tone. His eyes gleamed with renewed strength as he squared his shoulders like the proud man Taurin remembered. “Your security arrangements are sound, but I’ll keep my ears open. Count on my warning if I see any Ylloners around.”

“It’s best if you pretend ignorance,” Taurin cautioned him. “We don’t want to tip our hands that we know who is responsible for stealing the horn. He hasn’t come forward yet.”

“Karayan may be too smart to fall for our ruse,” Leena said worriedly.

She still couldn’t believe he was so deceitful, and yet it all fit—his extensive art collection; the upkeep of his mansion, which according to Swill and Bendyk, was above his means; his ambitious nature. Dikran himself had said that it was Karayan’s idea to bring in agents from Yllon to consult about Lothar’s malfunctions.

“He’s waiting for the right opportunity to make his move,” Taurin predicted. “It has to be after you finish your supposed restoration. We should make an announcement that your work is completed.”

“He may also be waiting for reinforcements from among his Yllon friends. You’re in danger by being so exposed,” she told him, her anxiety reflected in her tone.

“I’m more concerned about your safety,” he retorted.

Putting her hands on her hips, Leena glared at him. “First you wouldn’t tell me anything because you didn’t trust me, and now you think I can’t protect myself. When are you going to realize that I’m not one of your flowers that’s going to wilt at the slightest pressure?”

“Leena, you’re not accustomed to this sort of thing.” Taurin’s voice carried a dangerous edge. “You have no conception of the violence these people can perpetrate.”

“Yes, I do! That’s why I’m so worried about you.” Had he forgotten she was the recipient of Testi’s unwanted attentions? “If you’d stop treating me as though I have a brain the size of a tupa, then you’d see that I’ve dealt pretty well with our situation so far. I really resent your patronizing attitude.”

Confounded, Taurin could only stare at her in response. What the devil was she talking about?

“My job is to keep you from harm, or did you forget why you came to see me at Magar’s suggestion?”

At the mention of his name, the Minister of State gave an embarrassed cough. “Children, this isn’t the time—”

Ignoring his presence, Leena continued her tirade. Now that she’d gotten started, it felt good to ventilate her ire.

“You’ve tried to protect me from everything, afraid that I couldn’t handle even the slightest test of my beliefs. Let me tell you that your findings have only confirmed my faith in Lothar, only now I know he’s more than a god who maintains our planet. His is not a physical manifestation. So a machine is responsible for controlling the weather cycles and producing the lozenge, but somewhere out there”—she raised her hands toward the heavens—“he, or rather it, still exists.”

Taurin wasn’t in the mood for another philosophical discussion, but deep down inside, he knew she was right. He had doubted the steadfastness of her faith, only it wasn’t Lothar she believed in so much as the concept of a higher intelligence. He couldn’t discredit that idea himself.

He’d regarded her as his own personal angel, feeling her purity to be far above his, but in reality she was merely a woman. A strong woman, who followed her ideals and took courage from them. She wanted to be admired, but not worshiped. He’d made the mistake of putting her on a pedestal. Perhaps it was time for him to respect her as an equal. But first a show of trust was called for in order to win back her affection.

“I want to check on Bendyk’s progress with the Elite Guards. Come on, Magar, I’ll escort you back to the administrative wing. Will you be able to manage by yourself?” he asked Leena, fully intending to be within calling distance once he’d finished talking privately with his mentor.

“Of course.” Her smile was triumphant. Naturally, she could look after herself, and it was about time he gave her the credit she was due.

After spending another hour studying the pile of bibliotomes she’d brought into the room, she decided to focus her attention on the carvings in the Holy Temple. She’d located a couple of booby traps, but there had to be more.

She was getting ready to leave when a commotion sounded outside the door. Thinking it must be Taurin returning, she didn’t pay any attention until the door crashed open.

Glancing up, Leena gasped.

Karayan’s tall figure was framed in the doorway. And there was no sign of the Elite Guardsman or anyone else outside the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The Minister of Justice was groomed impeccably as usual, from his carefully-styled brown hair to his tailored navy blue frock coat and matching trousers. He strode into the room with a friendly smile on his face.

“Leena, how’s it going?”

“Very well,” she said with a bravado she didn’t feel. She glanced toward the corridor. Where was the guard?

Karayan sauntered closer, his smile widening. “May I see the horn? Have you restored it to its previous condition?”

“Oh, yes.” She eyed the briefcase he carried. It bulged strangely, as though there were an object inside with an irregular shape. “What have you in there?” she asked, keeping her tone on an even keel.

Karayan stopped in front of her. “I’ll show you after I see the horn.” His gaze swept from the empty work counter to the bibliotomes on a small table. “What are those?”

“They’re books I recovered from an excavation. I’ve been reading them. They reveal much about the Apostles.”

“I don’t see the horn. Where is it?” His tone had lost any hint of friendliness. His cold gray eyes assessed her.

A sheen of sweat covered her face. If he had the real horn in that briefcase, she had to get it from him. “I finished restoring it. You’ve brought the counterfeit one, haven’t you?”

Nodding, Karayan withdrew a cloth-covered object from his case. Whipping away the material, he showed her the sacred horn. At last! Leena’s heart leapt with joy, but she erased all emotion from her face.

“Why did you do it, Karayan?”

He put the horn back in the sack, tightened the loop, fastened it, and slung it over his shoulder. “This world is run by a bunch of old men and women. People are getting out of hand with their uprisings. We need a strong leader who rules with iron.”

“And that’s you,” she scoffed.

His eyes turned as dark as a thundercloud. “With the Ylloners backing me, no one will deny my power. They can offer us technology beyond our dreams. We have the agricultural resources that they so desperately need. An open exchange of trade between our two worlds has been too long in coming. I merely intend to speed the process and lead this world into a new age of enlightenment.”

“So you stole the horn, knowing that the defense shield around Xan will fail by Fearn if the horn wasn’t blown.”

“Once the takeover is complete, and I am recognized as the new Arch Nome, I will blow the horn myself to restore Lothar to his former status. That can take place only after I am put in power.”

“But you’re already a member of the Synod.”

“That’s not enough! I intend to put this land on the right track. Dissenters must be

punished ruthlessly. Technology has to advance. The Synod is too smug. I am the catalyst for change!”

“You mention dissenters, and yet you’re using the Truthsayers. Do you intend to squash them once you’ve achieved your aims, or do they share the same ideals as you?”

“They’re a bunch of fools who will follow anyone with charisma. Once my order is established, they’ll obey my dictates or perish.”

“You’ve profited from the status quo,” she pointed out. “You get money from the Chocola Company for land rights to the plantations in the Black Lands.”

He gave her a sardonic grin. “Once I’m in power, I won’t have to worry about income any longer.”

Leena bit her lip. She couldn’t keep him talking forever. Wasn’t anyone going to show up to help her? Why didn’t Taurin stop by to see how she was doing, or her brother?

Karayan read the expression on her face and smiled. “You’ve stalled long enough, Leena. Where are you hiding the horn?”

She compressed her lips, remaining silent.

Karayan withdrew a wicked-looking blade from an inner pocket of his frock coat. “Don’t force me to use this,” he said, approaching her. “Your face is too pretty to ruin. Tell me what I want to know.”

“It’s not here,” she cried, backing away until she came up against the counter and could move no further. Karayan had an odd light in his eyes that made her swallow hard. “I’ll take you to it,” she offered, hoping to elude him along the way. The only problem was getting hold of the horn in that sack.

“If you’re lying to me, I will kill you,” Karayan threatened. He gestured toward the doorway. “Move!”

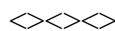
Outside the small workroom, she searched for the guard, but he was nowhere in sight. What had Karayan done to the man? Praying desperately that she’d meet someone along the way to whom she could appeal for aid, she led him through the maze of museum corridors and outside to a cloister with vaulted archways and graceful columns.

They crossed a courtyard and passed through the western entrance to the Holy Temple. Unlike other times when she’d enjoyed the beauty of the Chapel of Pyr on her right, she ignored the stained glass windows and the woven tapestries. They passed through the chantry adorned with fifteenth century sculptures, climbed a flight of steps over the south ambulatory, and walked between other chapels ornate with carvings. A number of vaults followed. The eerie silence brought Leena’s nerves to the breaking point.

What if Karayan’s allies from Yllon were already here? They might have taken out the guards one by one throughout the Palisades complex. That would explain the absence of any familiar security forces. She had to warn the others, but how?

Karayan caught her arm. “Don’t make a sound.” The point of the blade pinched her back as he emphasized his warning.

The Holy Temple was devoid of worshippers, and she realized he’d chosen a good time of day to make his move. It was evenlight, when most people were home preparing their supper and making plans for the day ahead. That meant the populace had cleared out by now, and all the administrative offices were closed. She was alone, with only her own wits to save her.



Staying in the shadows, Taurin glided silently after Leena and Karayan. He'd purposefully kept away from her workroom, intending to give the thief who stole the horn a golden opportunity to confront her. It had worked, but now he had to devise a way to get her to safety.

She appeared to be winding in circles in the Holy Temple, and it wouldn't take long for Karayan to figure out her ruse.

Then Taurin would have no choice; he'd have to make his move without any backup. Karayan wouldn't be any problem, but Taurin was puzzled over what had happened to the guards. He feared that Karayan's forces had arrived before Grotus's.

Dikran was unavailable, being closeted with Stephan Tom, who'd arrived earlier that day. If the Truthsayer leader was willing to listen to reason, maybe they could yet convince him this plot was real. Unfortunately, he couldn't count on Stephan Tom's people for assistance in the immediate future.

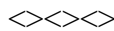
The silence of the Holy Temple unnerved him, like the calm before a storm. Stealthily, he followed his quarry, biding his time until it was safe to act. Leena appeared to know what she was doing. He'd let her play her hand unless Karayan became too threatening.

A surge of rage filled his veins as he watched her being marched at knifepoint. Her crimson gown was a splash of color against the gold-painted cherubs and religious ornaments adorning the temple. Her hair, hanging free down her back, cascaded like a thick curtain of silk. The thought of Karayan harming her made his throat constrict, and he could almost feel his mind reaching out to touch the thieving bastard.

No! With a jolt, Taurin realized what he was doing. After what had happened to Testi, and from what he had read in the bibliotomes, he realized that some of the Apostles' telepathic powers must remain in him. That was the demon's curse if he attempted to use it, not any innate power to drive men mad. And if he directed his newfound ability for an evil purpose, wouldn't he be as drenched in sin as his compatriots from Yllon? Wouldn't the ease of it tempt him into using his power again and again, until he couldn't distinguish right from wrong?

He must not abuse his heritage in this manner. The Apostles had inadvertently caused pain through their use of telepathy. For him to purposefully do so would be a grievous wrong. He must avoid temptation and forbid himself to ever use his telepathic powers again.

Squelching any thoughts of mentally assaulting Karayan, he focused his attention on Leena. What plan did she have in mind?



In the Inner Sanctum, Leena approached the Grand Altar with trepidation. The awesome splendor of the hall challenged her to defile its sanctity. Karayan followed on her heels, his blade pricking her spine as he urged her forward.

Dim light from the waning afternoon sun penetrated through the stained glass windows. Down a side aisle, a shadowy movement caught her attention. She glanced over there but saw no one.

Her heart thumping, she strode ahead and climbed to the dais, where the initiates had been honored during their acceptance into the Caucus.

The Caucus! Where were her fellow aides? They were supposed to be helping to catch the thief, yet she hadn't spied any of them. Her skin crawled as she observed the silence around her.

Fortifying herself with a deep breath, she faced the colorful frieze above the altar that represented scenes from the lives of the Apostles. Beneath her feet was an engraved pavement of porphyry and marble. Candleholders with long tapers stood on either side of the altar. Statues of the Apostles marched across the rear wall, divided by the holy closet itself.

“I put the horn back inside its resting place,” she said, pointing to the closed carved wooden doors.

“Open it,” Karayan ordered. Impatience shone in his eyes. He clutched the sack holding the genuine artifact.

Leena approached the sacred doors, feeling as though she were committing a sacrilege just by stepping on the carpet leading to the holy closet. To open the hallowed doors without it being the appointed time of year was a horrendous sin. The Apostles had known this, and one of the traps was located here.

When she'd been making her rounds, inspecting the carvings, she had dared to come to this holy place and peruse the carvings on the wooden doors. Noting a depression in a tiny recess in the wall to the side of doors, she'd spun in it the ring Taurin had given her. According to her interpretation of the carvings, that had activated the booby trap. Now the trick was to get Karayan to open the doors.

“I will not commit such a sinful act. You will have to open the doors,” she told him, raising her chin defiantly.

“Hold this.”

Karayan thrust the sack at her, apparently unconcerned that she might take off with the fake horn inside. As far as he knew, the authentic relic was inside the holy closet. His eyes gleaming with the lust for power, he approached the carved wooden doors. Leena carefully backed away. She had no idea of the nature of the trap; she had just been able to discern its existence.

Just as Karayan reached out to open the doors, he hesitated. Narrowing his eyes, he glared at her suspiciously. “Come here. I'd rather you open the doors, madam.”

“No, I won't!”

Karayan took a menacing step in her direction.

“Run, Leena!” Taurin's voice sounded from behind. “I'll take care of him.”

“Wait!” she called, whirling about. “You don't understand.”

But it was too late. Karayan tossed his blade through the air in Taurin's direction. Taurin easily dodged the missile but as he stumbled, off balance, Karayan lunged after Leena.

“Bitch! You tricked me!”

She cried out as Karayan caught hold of her arm, jerking her backward. The sack she held in her hand tumbled to the floor. Both she and Karayan flung themselves after it.

“Now!” Karayan screamed. “Get them now!”

From hidden recesses emerged a troop of men, armed to the teeth with blasters and odd-shaped objects similar to the one Testi had been carrying. They all wore black, as though that were the uniform of Yllon.

Karayan grabbed the sack containing the horn while Leena slowly straightened. Taurin hastened to her side, his fists clenched as Karayan's allies surrounded them.

“Damn you, Taurin,” Leena said to him in an undertone. “I nearly had him. The holy closet houses a trap.”

He cast her a startled look but didn't respond because Karayan, who had been issuing orders to his men, turned his attention to them. Triumphantly he held up his prize.

“Your ruse failed. I understand this is the authentic horn. Good try, Leena.” He addressed them both. “You’ll be confined with the others.”

“What others?” Her voice came out a dry croak.

“Dikran and your brother. The Caucus and Synod members. They’re all being held in the crypt. You’ll join them.”

“What do you intend to do?” Taurin regarded the traitor with a dangerous gleam in his eyes.

“The invasion will come in a few days. The takeover should be swift, once Yllon’s ships arrive. After I’m proclaimed Arch Nome, I’ll decide your fate. Perhaps I will banish you all to the Black Lands.” Karayan threw back his head and laughed, the sound of a madman.

Leena stared at him, wondering how she had ever considered him to be a friend. The man was truly power crazed.

“It won’t work,” Taurin muttered to her as an armed escort led them away. “If he blows the horn after the takeover, the crystals will continue to fail. He won’t be able to restore the weather patterns to normalcy.”

“So what?” Leena retorted as they passed the choir stalls. “Once Yllon invades, everything will be lost.”

At the north transept, they were forced down a narrow spiral staircase toward the crypt below. Leena and Taurin were dismayed to find there the other members of the Synod, the Caucus, and most of the Elite Guardsmen.

“Bendyk!” Leena rushed into her brother’s embrace. “Where’s Swill?”

“With Sirvat. They went to meet Grotus.”

“Karayan has the horn,” she said bitterly as Dikran and Stephan Tom approached.

The Truthsayer looked her in the eye. “I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you earlier, madam. Your story was true. This fine man is your sibling, is he not?” He put an arm around Bendyk’s shoulder in a brotherly fashion. “He and I have been having quite an interesting discussion.”

“Yes, indeed.” Bendyk’s face broadened into a grin. “It appears as though we have a lot to learn from each other.”

She glanced from one to the other, then to Dikran, hovering in the background. The Arch Nome didn’t appear to be very distressed by recent events.

“Aren’t any of you worried about what’s going to happen to us?” she asked, puzzled by their calm demeanor. They couldn’t rely on Grotus. Karayan’s men might intercept him.

Bendyk grinned. “We’re not really trapped down here, Sister. There’s an exit into the lower levels.”

“Where is it?” Taurin said, his voice amazingly nonchalant by Leena’s standards.

Bendyk’s gaze darted about. “Let’s keep this among ourselves. If Sirvat and Swill are meeting Grotus, we’ve got to warn him that Karayan’s allies have taken over the Palisades. Dikran made an announcement that the Palisades would be closed to the public until Renewal, which has been unavoidably delayed. We don’t have to worry about innocent citizens being hurt until things are straightened out.”

“We’d better hurry,” Taurin advised. “Karayan might still decide to do away with us all.”

Leena tugged on his arm, holding him back from the others. “What about you? Testi may have spread the word about your presence here. Even if the rest of us are spared, you’re under a death sentence from Yllon.”

His jaw tightened. “I’m aware of that. Let’s go.”

“Where are you young people heading?” a familiar voice called out behind them.

Taurin spun around to regard Magar, rushing in their direction. The silver-haired Minister of State held out both of his hands in the customary greeting. Taurin grasped them firmly, an affectionate look on his face.

“There’s a way out of here,” he stated. “We’re going to get help. You stay with the others and try to reassure them.”

“I’ll do my best, son.” Magar released his grip and stepped back. “May Lothar guide you.”

“Come on,” Taurin signaled to Leena. “Your brother has gone ahead.” Bendyk had already disappeared from sight with Stephan Tom and Dikran.

Passing through the interconnected chambers of the lower levels, Leena was dismayed to note how many more of the crystals appeared to be lifeless. At this rate they’d all blink out by Fearn if harmony wasn’t restored to her world.

When this was over, assuming Karayan was defeated and the horn was returned to its proper place, should the people’s faith in Lothar be reaffirmed? That path would certainly cause less disruption than telling the truth, as proposed by Stephan Tom. She didn’t envy Dikran having to make the choice.

If it were hers, what would she do? Was it better for everyone to believe that Lothar’s beneficence provided for them? Or should they understand that their fate was subject to a network of circuitry and their own ingenuity?

In order for peace and harmony to prevail, concessions for reform had to be made. That was the only way the crystals would function at their full capacity. The truth had to be told.

A heavy weight of sadness settled over her as she recalled the traditions that had made her life meaningful. Whom would everyone worship when they realized Lothar was a mere machine?

The answer sprang into her mind. The carvings she’d been studying didn’t apply to Lothar, a false creation of the Apostles. Initially, the Apostles believed they would be remaining on Xan. The inscriptions spoke of their own faith, a belief in a higher intelligence, an ideology she shared.

Enlightenment brightened her mind in a brilliant flash. “Dear deity,” she whispered. The answers had been in front of her all the time. She’d just never understood them.

She glanced at Taurin, who’d caught up to her brother and consulted with him. Somehow she knew he’d share this new faith. Searching for his destiny, he hadn’t recognized it was in the stars, as well as in his heart. Overlapping the vast reaches of space and the inner depths of the human soul, a thread of life encompassed all living beings. The changes about to occur could even be part of a divine plan that concerned their evolution as a race.

As they approached the exit into Dikran’s robing salon, the Arch Nome announced his intention to remain behind and guard the entrance to the lower levels.

“Where is Swill meeting Grotus?” she asked Bendyk, her voice a hoarse whisper.

“By the east gate of the Palisades.”

“We’re going the wrong way.” Having spent several weeks in training for the Caucus, she was more familiar with the grounds than her brother or Taurin. “Follow me.”

Leena’s heavy velvet gown kept her warm as they exited the building complex and entered the cloisters. Dusk had fallen, and the evening air had chilled. She turned down a garden path crossing the north entrance to the archives. The pungent smell of wood smoke permeated the air.

They approached the east gate, a massive wrought-iron structure set into the wall that

surrounded the Palisades. Voices sounded up ahead, and she saw a blur of movement. Bendyk charged ahead, yelling for Swill.

“Quiet!” The young woman stepped out of the shadows.

“Swill.” Bendyk swept her into his arms and pressed his mouth to hers in a frantic kiss.

“Save that for later,” Leena said, relieved that Swill was safe. “Has Grotus arrived with his people?”

“I’m right here, my dear.” His loud voice made her jump.

Pivoting, she stared into the glittering gaze of the renowned smuggler. He’d toned down his style of dress. Instead of his usual flamboyant longshirt, he wore a military-style belted jacket and pants with enough armaments hanging off his belt to take out a squadron of opponents.

Taurin strode up to him, holding out his hands in greeting. After a moment’s hesitation, Grotus returned the gesture.

“Thank you for coming,” Taurin said stiffly.

Grotus inclined his head in acknowledgement. “In this case, your fight is my fight.” He turned to his men, who were regrouping behind him. “Prepare for assault. Who is the traitor?” he asked Taurin.

“It’s Karayan. He’s sequestered the members of the Synod and other personnel in a crypt beneath the complex. Karayan has the horn, and he also has the following of Yllon’s agents.”

Grotus noticed his assessing glance. “The rest of my troops are taking positions at the other gates. At my signal, we will rush the complex, but I need to know where Karayan is stationed.”

Leena spoke up. “If I may venture a guess, I’d say he’s moving up his timetable. Tell me,” she said to Taurin. “The window that’s opened in the defensive perimeter each time a spacecraft approaches—where is the control panel located?”

Taurin’s eyes glowed in the approaching darkness. “Magar once mentioned that it’s here at the Palisades. Demon’s blood! Magar knows how to open the window. Karayan will force him to lower the defense shield.”

He turned and ran off into the night before anyone could stop him. Terror pounded in Leena’s heart. She gestured for Grotus to follow. “Hurry! If we lose the protective energy screen, we’re doomed.”

Grotus mobilized his men, and they all charged down the floodlit path after Taurin. She didn’t know if Bendyk or Swill followed; she was merely concerned with catching up to her husband, assuring herself he would come to no harm.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Grotus's men engaged the Yllon agents almost immediately. The Ylloners were guarding the various entrances to the Palisades structures. Taurin had veered toward the east ambulatory, presumably because that route would take him into the Chapel of the Benedines, from whence he could easily access the Arch Nome's robing salon and the lower levels.

But if Karayan had gone after Magar, he would have headed through the crypt. Hoping to cut him off, Leena entered the Holy Temple through a different entrance.

As she passed a stone effigy of Avus, the third Arch Nome, loud voices reached her from the Inner Sanctum. She crossed the nave, hurried past the choir stalls, and halted by the screen shielding access to the organ loft.

"You'll lower the defense perimeter *now!*" Karayan shouted. A loud slap resounded, the sound of a hand hitting flesh.

"I will do nothing," Magar's tremulous voice cried. "Kill me. I refuse to leave our world defenseless."

"Foolish old man. I know it has something to do with playing this organ. What is the correct sequence of notes?"

Collapsing against a wall, Leena gasped. Seven notes, seven symbols. Could the secret Karayan sought be the same repetitive string she'd encountered elsewhere?

"Why don't you try blowing the horn?" Magar sneered. "See if that opens the defense shield for you."

"Do you take me for an idiot? The horn must be blown at the Grand Altar, or it doesn't work. Besides, blowing the horn would strengthen the shield. You're just trying to trick me."

Leena heard Magar give a low chuckle. "Maybe you don't really have the true horn in your possession."

"Of course, I do." A rustling noise sounded, as though Karayan withdrew the relic from its sack. "See? Here it is."

"Give it to me."

A scuffle ensued, followed by thuds and grunts. Holy waters, the two men were fighting. Magar was no match for Karayan.

Rushing up the stairs, Leena spotted the horn lying on the ground. She dove for it, slithering along the cold marble floor until her outstretched hand grasped the sacred object. With a cry of triumph, she leapt to her feet, but she was too late to save Magar. Karayan hovered over the older man's limp form.

"You!" Karayan cried, vaulting after her.

With a shriek, she ran and tripped over a protuberance on the floor. As she tottered off balance, the horn slid from her grasp.

Karayan hesitated, a look of indecision on his face, as if he didn't know whether to attack her or to retrieve the horn. With an angry snarl, he pounced at her, grabbing her by the sleeve and hauling her to within a hairsbreadth of his fierce face.

"Show me," Karayan shouted, his breath sending onion-scented fumes her way. "You

know how to lower the defense shield, don't you?"

"No!"

"You understand the symbols. Make it work." He shook her violently until her teeth rattled, then shoved her at the organ keys. She crashed against the instrument's hard edge. Her hip flared with pain.

"She doesn't know how to play music as well as I do," a gruff male voice said from the entranceway.

Leena glanced up in surprise as Grotus sauntered into the room, stooping to retrieve the dropped horn.

"At last!" the smuggler exclaimed, his eyes gleaming.

"Give me that," Karayan demanded. "It's mine."

Grotus's complexion darkened. "You've done enough damage. It's time you reaped the consequences. Leena, move aside."

She rushed over to Magar to feel for a pulse. Relief swamped her. His beat was rapid and thready, but he'd live. Straightening, she noted with dismay that her escape route had been cut off. What could she do to help Grotus?

The smuggler clutched the horn, unwilling to let it go even in the midst of a deadly struggle against his opponent. The smell of sweat filled the air as the two men battled each other amid a flurry of punches and kicks.

"Leena," Taurin called from far away.

"I'm here!" she hollered. "In the organ loft."

Her gaze centered on the enormous instrument. What would happen if she played the sequence of seven notes? Would it reset Lothar, or might the action open another window in the defense shield? If only she knew, she'd be able to influence the course of events in their favor. Hesitating, she watched the frenzied fight.

As physical opponents, Grotus and Karayan were about evenly matched. Karayan might be older, but madness gave him energy. Grotus's propensity for fine foods acted against him, even though his physique was more muscular. Perspiration trickled down his wide forehead, his nose ring quivering as he combated Karayan's determined assault.

"Leena, take the horn." He threw it in her direction.

She caught the sacred artifact before it hit the floor. Standing in a corner, she inspected it for signs of damage. The creamy translucent surface was thankfully unmarred.

"Aargh!" Grotus's face turned an ugly shade of purple as his opponent's dirk found its target. His expression registering shock at the knife sticking out of his chest, the smuggler slid to the floor.

"No!" she cried as Karayan slowly turned in her direction, an evil smile on his face.

"Hand over the horn, Leena, and I'll spare you."

"You'll have to take it from me." She lifted her chin in defiance.

He pulled a blaster from the holster inside his frock coat and aimed it at her. "I won't hesitate to use this. Do as I say!"

"Fine. Catch it." She tossed the horn at him.

Startled, Karayan's finger twitched on the trigger. His shot sizzled through the air in a bolt of red laser fire. One instant the horn was airborne; the next, it had been vaporized, caught in the stream of fire.

"Dear deity!" Leena ducked, missing the edge of the shot. "The horn. I-It's gone. You destroyed it!"

Karayan turned on her with a murderous look. This time his blaster was aimed directly at her chest. “You made me lose it,” he shrieked. “You’ll pay for your interference.”

Behind them, footsteps thundered up the stairs. Taurin flew into the organ loft, snatching at Karayan’s legs and jerking them out from beneath him, making his shot go wild.

Knocked down, Karayan rolled to his side and then jumped to his feet. Having regained his balance, he aimed a vicious kick at Taurin’s stomach, doubling him over.

As though realizing Taurin was an adversary who could prove a challenge, Karayan muttered an expletive, threw Leena a regretful glance, then charged down the stairs toward the north transept.

Taurin recovered sufficiently to dash after him.

“Wait!” Leena yelled, but he failed to hear her.

They had important things to do. The horn had been destroyed. How would they reset Lothar in time for Fearn? Even if Karayan had been exposed, the Ylloners would commence their attack. Drufus Gong would be more than happy to assume a leadership role.

Taurin had vanished in Karayan’s wake, so she turned back to assist Magar, who was regaining consciousness. She tried to shut out the sounds of battle as she assisted him into a sitting position. It was a sacrilege to have fighting going on in the Holy Temple. Then again, who would care? Lothar didn’t exist. This place was holy to no one except the Apostles who had established it.

Their purpose in doing so came to mind, and their faith filled her with renewed hope. Her own faith wasn’t lost; it had just been misguided, and so it would be with her people.

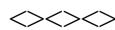
Her gaze fell upon a familiar symbol carved into a column beside her—the diamond shape, with the antler rising out of its upper left corner. Of course, why had she never realized it before? Now she finally understood what it represented!

A ruckus from below caught her attention. Someone stumbled up the stairs, and she leapt up with joy when she saw it was Taurin, disheveled and battle weary. Uttering an exclamation of relief, she rushed into his arms. He held her tightly, as if she were his haven of peace.

“He got away,” Taurin mumbled against her hair. “Karayan escaped, along with his agents from Yllon. I suppose he’ll seek refuge on their world.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said soothingly. “He won’t be a threat to us here any longer.”

“You’re right, and neither will anyone else when I tell you what I’ve figured out.”



Leena learned what he meant when Dikran convened an emergency council meeting two days later, after the remaining men in Grotus’s party finished the cleanup. They’d left by now, and Dikran presided over the assembly held in the Inner Sanctum.

All of the Candors were present, along with the Caucus, certain members of the Synod, and Stephan Tom. They sat facing the Grand Altar, where Leena stood to address them.

She wore her hair loose, aware that the darker blue of her veil contrasted sharply with her golden hair. The circlet crowning her was a source of pride. Her marriage had been formally announced, and she’d happily accepted her friends’ congratulations. Now she only needed to fulfill certain obligations before she and Taurin could be alone. She smiled at him, lounging casually in the front row.

“The diamond sign represents the Cadega constellation,” she said, smoothing down her sky blue gown. “The branch in the upper left-hand corner represents a star system, and I believe

its offshoot indicates the second habitable planet orbiting the sun. According to the inscriptions left to us by the Apostles, this is where they headed when they departed from Xan.” Her voice shook with fervor. “If we ever achieve the means to travel beyond our own system, we could visit their descendants!”

Dikran gave a tired shrug. “What good does that knowledge do us now, child? The horn has been destroyed. We have no way of resetting Lothar.”

He’d already revealed the truth to the Candors, and they had agreed to call the computer device Lothar. It would be more understandable to the people. Besides, there was a higher faith now to worship, since Leena had shown them the way.

Silence fell heavily in the great hall. No one wanted to acknowledge their defeat, but Fearn was nearly upon them and there was no horn to blow.

“Have a little faith,” Taurin said, smiling as he rose and strode toward Leena. “I should let you do the honors, *angella*. It was your faith in me that got me through all this.” He slipped his armband off his muscled limb.

Leena stared into the amused light in his eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“That receptacle in the recess beside the holy closet... it doesn’t set a trap. You must have misinterpreted the symbols. I suspect the horn, when it was blown, contained inside it a set of rings similar to these, but smaller.”

He took apart his bracelet, showing the viewers what he meant. “The air sent the rings spinning inside the horn where they rubbed against protruding nubs. This action produced a musical tone. Watch this!”

He climbed onto the dais and headed for the depression in the wall beside the holy closet. Into the depression he set his rings, where he spun them one by one.

“Your little ring didn’t have much effect,” he told Leena, “but observe this!”

With the specialized acoustics, the musical tone from his spinning bracelets reverberated throughout the holy place. The lights, which had been dim, suddenly brightened.

“Behold the Renewal ceremony!” Taurin shouted triumphantly.

Dikran, who’d been sitting during Leena’s explanation, shot to his feet. “You have reset the computers?”

Taurin nodded. “Consider it a done deal. The rings are the keys. They can unlock the secrets of Lothar and the Apostles. The horn is no longer required. Spinning the rings will serve the same purpose at Renewal, but it must be done in this receptacle.” He snapped his bracelets together and shoved the armband back in place. “Dikran, I expect you to keep your promise,” he added, tilting his head at the dignified leader.

Dikran clasped his gnarled hands together, his golden robe swishing at his feet. “We have several vacancies to fill among the Synod. First, I have created a new Ministry of Internal Affairs, of which Stephan Tom will be minister.”

Applause sounded, and the Truthsayer leader beamed happily. He seemed pleased by the concessions made in his favor as Dikran elaborated on his duties.

“Sirvat has resigned as Treasurer,” the Arch Nome continued. “Swill, I hereby appoint you as Minister of the Treasury. You have proven your worth. Even though you are not of the religious faith, I think it is time we had representatives from the laity on our council. We need to broaden our viewpoint. Bendyk, you will replace Zeroun as Minister of Religion. I believe your directives will be more sympathetic to the people.”

Bendyk jumped up, enthusiasm lighting his face. “I have learned my lesson well, Your Grace. We exist to serve the people’s needs, not to impose religious doctrine upon them.

Hopefully they will come to seek our counsel and respect us for our wisdom, rather than fearing reprisals for misconduct.”

“Hear, hear,” the other council members agreed.

“Father,” Bendyk said, turning to Cranby, who sat among the Candors, “I seek your permission to wed Swill. Thanks to her, my eyes have been opened.” The blond young man beamed at his intended bride, who sat in the second row beside his father.

“You have my blessing, son,” said Cranby.

Dikran turned his attention to the Candor. “You were censured for your honesty, sir. Your study of ancient religious texts has been forthright and accurate, and it is known that your work as a judge is widely respected. I hereby appoint you as Minister of Justice in Karayan’s stead.”

“What of Karayan?” someone shouted. “Has he been found yet?”

Taurin descended from the dais, glowering at the assemblage. “He escaped with the Ylloners. We tried to close the window but failed to do so in time. The agents escaped, and Karayan went with them. We shall have to bolster our defenses against the Ylloners, in case they find a way to pierce the shield in the future.”

Dikran’s penetrating gaze focused on Taurin. “I would ask you, sir, if you will head a new Defense Ministry. You shall be known as Keeper of the Rings, since you understand their function. Will you accept this office?”

Taurin stood before Dikran, his head bowed. “I should be honored, Your Grace. At last I have found my destiny, and it is among your people. I shall ensure that no further threat from Yllon remains.”

“Fine. Then that leaves you, Leena,” the Arch Nome said, smiling broadly at her.

Leena glanced at him, startled. She had supposed she would go back to work at the museum once her term in the Caucus was over.

“It has come to my attention,” said Dikran, “that the regulations concerning archeological sites need to be updated. I propose creating an Office of Antiquities, with you as Director. It will be your responsibility to coordinate the work at our various excavations around the globe. This will no longer come under the auspices of the Ministry of Religion.”

Leena’s expression brightened. “*I* get to set the rules?” Her mind reeled with the possibilities. She wouldn’t have to give up her field work. On the contrary, her new role would necessitate frequent on-site inspections, and she’d ensure that professional archeologists did the excavation work.

Grotus’s smuggling ring had been put out of operation by their leader’s death, but other unscrupulous individuals were eager to gain possession of valuable artifacts, either for their own collections or to offer them for sale. She’d like nothing better than to halt their illegal acts.

“If you wish, I’ll release you from your pledge to the Caucus so you can assume this position immediately,” the Arch Nome offered, his eyes twinkling.

“I accept,” she announced proudly.

After the shouts of congratulation had died down, the party split up. Leena said goodbye to her brother, Swill and Cranby. She and Taurin were returning to his farmhouse for a much needed rest before assuming their new duties.

“I can’t believe you reset those computers with your bracelets,” she told Taurin later, when they were home alone, relaxing in the living area. She’d lit candles about the room, and the flames flickered, casting shadows in the far corners.

“Do you mean to say that your faith in me has already lapsed?” he teased.

She turned toward him and lifted her face. "I always believed in you, Taurin, and I always will, now and forever."

"And I'll believe with you, my *angella*. Wherever your faith takes you, I shall remain by your side. Your loves sustains me and carries me beyond this sphere to the heights beyond."

She stared into his glowing eyes. "You are the one I'm going to worship from now on."

"No." He put a finger to her lips. "We'll pray to Lothar or whatever you wish to call the god of the Apostles and give thanks for being brought together. For I truly believe it was divine will that sent you to me."

He lowered his head and gently brushed his mouth across hers. "I love you, my darling."

As she melted into his embrace, together they joined in the rapture of the heavens while the gods spun them a song of love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nancy J. Cohen is a multi-published author who began her career writing futuristic romances. Her first title, *Circle of Light*, won the HOLT Medallion Award. After several books in this genre, she switched to writing mysteries. Her popular Bad Hair Day series features hairdresser Marla Shore, who solves crimes with wit and style under the sultry Florida sun. Several of these titles made the IMBA bestseller list.

Silver Serenade is Nancy's latest futuristic romance from The Wild Rose Press. This title won the Best Book 2010 Romantic Science Fiction/Fantasy Award at *The Romance Reviews*. Coming next is *Shear Murder*, a new Bad Hair Day mystery, from Five Star.

Active in the writing community and a featured speaker at libraries and conferences, Nancy is listed in *Contemporary Authors, Poets & Writers*, and *Who's Who in U.S. Writers, Editors & Poets*.

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