

To Call the Moons

by Megan Sybil Baker

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This he knew with unwavering certainty: he would kill her before the next full moons rose.

A thick canopy of interweaving branches tattooed the sky overhead. Light from the setting sun barely trickled through. Within the hour, Alith, the first moon would rise. An hour after that, Takin would ascend. Neither full yet; not for another three days. Torrin didn't need to glance upward for confirmation. He *knew*. Just as he knew the rain before it fell and the wind before it whined through the timbers. He was one of the damned; a full-blood Chalith, mage-line. Moon-kin.

He watched the woman a few steps in front of him tilt her head, scenting the river he'd known ten minutes ago was there. Not for the first time he wondered if she were Chalith-ar; soiled-blood moon-kin. In the two days since they'd fled Frothborn's prison, there'd been a handful of occasions she'd commented on something he'd not thought she'd be able to sense: the presence of a dark-eyed calfling, thin and shivering and all but invisible in the underbrush. A patch of ripe glowberries, their lack of scent in direct contrast to their full, sweet taste. She read the land. Not as well as he did, of course. But she read it.

He'd convinced himself that that was what intrigued him about her. Perhaps he'd work a lineage spell on her before he slit her throat.

"There's a river ahead, guardsman." She pointed through the trees. The heavy, pitted shackle on her wrist glistened dully. "We could stop for a meal, fill our water gourds."

He made a pretense of looking around for enemies. As expected, there were none. Had there been, he'd have sensed their presence before they could even make out the lines of his tall form, or catch the muted glint of

the metal clip that bound his hair at the nape of his neck. But for her, and his mission, he continued to play the bumbling, greedy guard she'd been able to bribe to gain her freedom. "If you think it's safe."

She shot him a narrow-eyed glance, her lashes dark, smudgy shadows against the paleness of her cheeks. A ghost of a smile played across her mouth. Torrin waited for the haughty retort he knew would follow; retorts he had almost come to enjoy. He wasn't disappointed.

"A tree sprite or two may intrude, perhaps. Don't worry, city-soldier. I'll not let them harm you."

He did his best to appear affronted, straightening his shoulders, adjusting the thick sash of his scabbard. "A City Guardsman has no fear of tree sprites."

She pushed against a low hanging branch, ducked under it and laughed softly when it snapped back against his throat. "Mayhaps you should. 'Tis often little things, quickly dismissed, that in the end trip us up."

He granted her that. His Chalith blade was less in length than the palm of his hand. Spellbound, it didn't need to be more in order to wield its immense power. More than one fool had misjudged the tall man with only the small blade as protection, finally in death understanding the mistake.

It would be the same blade he'd use to kill her, three nights from now. For by then he would know the truth behind her request for a Calling, and she would know what he was. For that last reason, he could not let her live.

The river's banks were wide, rocky. He kicked a space clear of stones in order to build a fire, aware that she'd removed her cloak and rummaged through her pack. Alith's light was clear and bright without the trees' interference. The moon's power surged through him. Perhaps that was why, for a moment, he gazed with an open hunger at the small woman measuring a few handfuls of dried beans into a battered metal pot.

Had she not been born a gutter-thief, she might well have been called beautiful. He didn't need to be Chalith to see that.

But he was, and that damned, exalted and exiled him at the same time. He turned back to the pile of kindling, striking the tinder stones more fiercely than was warranted. Sparks danced, pricking his skin. He focused on that, not on her, not on his mission. Not on his loneliness.

Only when their meal was finished did he again ask the question she'd stubbornly refused to answer for the past two days. "Still afraid to tell me why you seek Master Rowan?"

Her responding laughter was as silvery as the moonlight. "I think you're

not a guardsman, but an interrogator with the Chancellor's Royal Enforcers."

"I'd not need the coins you promised me, then, would I?" He hefted the small misshapen sack laced to his belt. It must have taken her weeks, perhaps even months to steal those coins. Unless, as he suspected, she'd practiced her thievery under orders from the growing taint of evil that now seeped into the land.

A taint that would pay well to reach Master Rowan. And even use a winsome-faced gutter-thief to do so.

"There'll be more coin when we reach Farlong. I told you. I can pay well for one with The Mark who can call the master."

She would pay more than well. Before they reached her camp at Farlong Cove, the moons would rise full and she would see what he was. For that knowledge, she would pay with her life. A twinge of regret rose, unbidden. Automatically, he retreated to his litany of damning the moons, damning her stubbornness and damning, most of all, himself.

But he had little choice now. He was duty-bound to accept her mission, though not because he'd been paid. He fingered the sack, the hard, uneven edges of the metal disks forming an almost readable pattern. He could sense some of their previous owners: the short, balding baker. The portly cloth seller. The wizened, harsh-voiced candle maker. All unaware of their pockets being picked by the child in tattered clothing, his gutter-thief, robbing them of their coin.

Just as she was unaware who sat opposite her. Soon to rob her of her life.

He let the sack roll to the sand with a muted thud.

"You said it was enough." There was a slight hesitation in her voice. She'd misinterpreted his distaste with the coins as dissatisfaction with his fee.

"'Tis adequate," he said with a slight shrug, not wanting her to pursue that line of questioning. It was enough for her to believe he was a City Guardsman who'd been born with The Mark, and who, at the moment, was a bit low on funds. For now. Until Alith and Takin rose full.

He woke well before sunrise and as he had the previous mornings, was drawn to watching her sleep. He thought he'd long ago lost his curiosity about Mundane folk yet this one kept snagging his interest. It wasn't her face or her form, as pleasant as both were. He'd known females more beautiful, more seductively alluring. His gutter-thief hardly qualified for

alluring in her over-large shirt and tattered breeches. Incongruous, perhaps. Inconspicuous. So much so that he'd almost passed her by, chained to the wall in the dank cell as she'd been, looking to be nothing more than a mound of dirty rags.

But then, the readings in his mage circle rarely showed who'd put out a Calling for Master Rowan. Only that one lay in the ethers, open and unanswered. He answered less and less these days, sickened by the greed that prompted them. *Master Rowan will grant me riches. Master Rowan will grant me fame. Master Rowan will slay my enemy, award me his wife.* But this one had been different, plaintive yet powerful, and laced with something he couldn't identify. That unknown could well be the latent threat portended in the mage circles. With grim determination, he'd followed its trail to Frothborn's walls then donned the guise of a guardsman when he realized where he had to go.

And his gutter-thief, seeing the star-shaped mark on his face and the corresponding streak of pure white in his black hair, had led him to her hidden sack of coins once he'd unhooked the chain from her wrists. But the shackles he'd let remain. It would do her no good to know he could unlock something no mere guard would have a key to. And besides, he told himself, it amused him to see her so encumbered. Discomforted. Though she kept silent about it.

She shifted in her sleep. The morning light showed red welts on her wrists, and a blossoming dark bruise from the weight of the thick, uneven metal bands. For a moment, the fact that she endured pain he could banish with a touch disconcerted him. Then he shoved himself to his feet and stomped down to the river's edge to splash icy water on his face. She wasn't a helpless child to be pitied. She was a grown woman, a professional thief with far too quick and sharp a tongue who'd no doubt borne worse pain in her life than a pair of rusty shackles. And if she were an agent of this latent evil, he'd be doing her a favor by ending her life in three days.

Two days. Two more days and he'd have to kill her. But unlike whatever torture she'd suffer when she was no longer useful to her employer, death by his hand would be merciful, swift. The Chalith may be demons in this Land, but they were not monsters.

That night the pull of the moons was more intense, almost searing. More than they should be, still one day from rising full. He blamed his resulting edginess on his years and their loneliness, on the biting cold wind whistling through the trees, then on the stone he'd found in his left boot. On Miera's--for that was his gutter-thief's name--sharp tongue as

she'd taunted the city-bred soldier stumbling behind her through the thick vegetation leading to their current camp. "Torry who tarries," she'd named him, mocking him.

His feigned ineptitude wore on him, sharpening his own tongue as well as darkness descended on their campsite. "You seek the Master to ensorcell another's man, is my guess. The likes of you'd get a lover no other way."

The small hand pushing the spoon through gruel in the battered pot hesitated, but only slightly. "I'd heard Mark Bearers pass no judgment on the reason for a Calling."

Most didn't. Most followed the edicts of the Marked and dutifully performed Callings for the supplicants. But he wasn't like most of the Marked. He was Chalith. It was Miera's misfortune of chance that he'd been the one to hear her plea for a Call.

"If we pass no judgment, it's because they all sound the same." He snapped a twig between his fingers, pointed the longer section at her. "You desire something beyond your ken and want Master Rowan to hand it to you."

"Is there never any other reason?"

His lips curled derisively. "Revenge. You don't want someone else to experience their deserved good fortune."

"Those sound far too simple to warrant the attention of the master."

"Are you gauging your chance for success? You know the master grants what he wishes to and little more. Tell me your request," he coaxed slyly. "Mayhaps it's one he's not heard before. I can guide you in its phrasing."

She hesitated just long enough that he leaned forward in the fire-lit darkness, very sure her next words would be what he'd waited to hear for three days. Perhaps, a small voice whispered, it would be something innocuous. Not a threat, nothing to fear. The safety of the land assured, he could disappear before sunrise, leave her damning him for stealing her coin. But alive.

She tapped the wooden spoon on the pot's edge. "I don't believe he's heard anything like mine, no."

"And that is...?"

"One you'll hear when you Call the master. In Farlong."

No, damn the eyes of the Gods! One he would hear by tomorrow night, with Alith and Takin surging through him. And his knife on her throat.

For if she lived to tell what he was-- a Marked Chalith--they'd know how to kill him. And all the land would hunt him 'til his death was assured.

That could not be. As the Marked swore fealty to their edicts, so he knew what was required of him. There was only a handful pure-blood Chalith left; he was the last of his own line. His death would unbalance the Circle of Seven. There could be no Circle of Six. It was blasphemy; it was unspeakable. If he were to die, then another Chalith must die as well to maintain balance. But the death of two in the land would rent a hole in the fabric of magicks beyond repair. Miera's folk would face an evil far beyond what they believed him to be. Chalith. Moon-kin. Demon. Unbeknownst to them, the very creatures they feared protected them. It struck him that his guise of a guardsman was not so unlikely, after all.

How then could he also be her executioner?

He'd had a choice. The same one he had with every Call he answered: dismiss the innocent, send them elsewhere. Kill those whose avarice threatened the safety of the land. He should have sent her away, that first hour, returned the coins to her keeping with a harsh word. Or a feigned illness. It mattered little the method. But for the unknown power that had hovered at the edges of her plea, and her equally as unknown reason. *Why* did she seek Master Rowan? Until he knew that one fact, he must regard her as a threat. Rumors whispered of a deeper evil walking the land. An evil that sought Master Rowan. But that's all the mage-circles would show. Not how or why this threat would come.

So every Calling was suspect. Even one from a winsome-faced gutter-thief whose pluckiness he'd come to grudgingly admire. She could well be the death of him, in more ways than one.

His thoughts darted like trillwisps in the moons' bright darkness. Sleep eluded him and it was but a few hours to sunrise. Damning the moons, himself and, most of all, her, he laid a light sleeping spell over her form, then shoved himself to his feet. He tossed his jacket onto his pack. The slight sound didn't wake her, nor did the crackle and slap of branches as he strode doggedly into the forest. He needed a clearing. It didn't have to be large; only well-shielded. He needed to shift, now, to his despised form. The sound of his wings on that first forceful, upward thrust would be louder than his jacket hitting his pack. Louder than the slap and crackle of branches. She might wake, see him. And he simply wasn't ready to kill her, yet. He'd been alone for so long. He craved her company, if only for another day.

The first clearing was too close to their camp. The second, better,

though not as spacious. It would do. He opened himself to the moons' power, the muscles of his arms and chest expanding. His large wings unfurled with a hard snap. He shoved them downward. Branches whipped in the downdraft. Pinecones pelted the forest floor. Sleeping birds scattered, screeching. He soared upward with them, his heart pounding, his breath straining. He was free.

The night sky was infinite. He focused on that, not on the small form asleep by the remnants of a campfire. A small form with bruises on her wrists from the metal shackles he could've removed but hadn't. A small form who held a secret tightly guarded inside her: the reason she needed to speak to Master Rowan.

He understood about secrets. She would learn of his, when he learned hers.

She would hate him. Hate him and fear him, though he didn't think it likely she'd cower on the ground as some had. His gutter-thief had far too much backbone for that. More likely, that soft, expressive mouth of hers would thin, harden. She might even spit out a curse or two. He'd already heard more than a few samples of those. Torrin's mouth curved in amusement as he dipped one wing, circling back. It had been late in the afternoon of the first day and his attempts to ascertain the facts behind her request had evolved into a discussion about the chancellor's policies. And elicited from her a string of invectives so colorful he'd laughed aloud; something he hadn't done in--

Riders! His gut tensed as he spotted them in the predawn light, moving northward. A long dark line, their armor purposely dulled by a waxy coating, signaling their intentions were anything but friendly. This far away, he couldn't sense if they were guardsmen or marauders. But they were armed and heading straight for her.

He turned abruptly in midair, his teeth gritted in anger, something more painful inexplicably closing around his heart. The wind scraped his face as it rushed over his skin. Time, could he reach her in time? He knew she wouldn't hear their approach 'til they were almost on top of her. His damned spell would make sure of that. She would awaken to swords drawn. It would be too late to run.

He had to reach her before they did. The band might have time on their side, but he had the element of surprise. He dove past both clearings. Branches snapped, birds squawked and he glimpsed her rising groggily onto her elbows when he was still a few hundred yards away.

A burly woman in a Royal Enforcer's tunic had grabbed a fistful of

Miera's tousled hair and yanked her head back, exposing her throat. The tip of a bearded man's sword touched her chest. Something burned correspondingly in his own. He'd already marked the band of riders as dead, simply for their intrusion. If they harmed her, he'd not only kill them, but kill them slowly. Painfully. As befitted the legends of the moon-kin.

"The scroll! Where is it? Now!" The swordsman's voice carried clearly. He swung one booted foot, aimed for her midsection. And missed as Miera wrenched to the right, arching her back, flailing upward with her own boot. She caught the swordsman in the groin.

The man's roar of pain covered the first harsh rush of wind through the trees, but not the second. Nor the deliberate thud of boots on the ground. Torrin left his wings unfurled, shadowing his face. He wanted them to see what he was but not who.

The burly woman's eyes widened in fear. "Chalith! There, by the rocks!" She stepped back quickly, releasing Miera from her grasp.

The four remaining Enforcers turned as one, swords sliding through sheaths. The injured swordsman struggled to his feet. "Your protector, Lady Valanmier?" he grunted, lunging for her.

Lady Valanmier? Torrin's mind froze at the name. Froze long enough that the swordsman reached his gutter-thief who wasn't a gutter-thief at all. But the queen's niece, betrothed of the Chancellor's son and a member of the Royal House of Valan. The family crest proudly bore a beheaded Chalith impaled on a stake.

This esteemed member of the royal family plowed her fist into the side of the swordsman's face. The man fell backward, not as much from the blow from her hand as the impact of the heavy metal shackle. "Kill her!" the man screamed.

The four remaining men split up, flanking her.

"She has the scroll," the woman countered, one hand out to stop her comrades' charge.

"Or the Chalith does." There was hatred and fear in the look the swordsman gave him. Torrin had no idea of Miera's thoughts. Not Miera's. Lady Valanmier's. Her back was to him, her concentration no doubt on the assassins in her family's employ. Assassins sent to kill not him, but her.

It made no sense. It must be a trap, their actions against Lady Valanmier a ruse. He moved, short Chalith blade glowing in his right

hand, wings arched high. One shove and he'd be airborne, out of reach of their swords.

Except they had more than swords. The second soldier thrust his free hand into his pocket then threw something on the ground. A small talisman, ensorcelled. Powerful.

Before Torrin had time to construct a warding spell, its magic hit him in the chest with the force of a battering ram. He stumbled, gasped. His vision hazed for a moment and when it cleared, Miera was in front of him, a small cylinder in her outstretched hand.

"Torrin, take this to Master Rowan!"

"The scroll!" one of the soldiers shouted.

He grabbed it. Gods' oath, she didn't know who he was.

"Fly!" she screamed at him. She kicked the talisman, sending it tumbling a few feet farther away from him. The short hunting knife in her hand pointed not at him but at the advancing line of Enforcers. "Find Master Rowan!"

"Traitorous bitch!" The burly woman's curse was directed at Miera, but she swung her sword at Torrin. It missed his left wing only because Miera stepped in its path. It sliced open her forearm. A strained cry escaped her throat but she stayed on her feet, challenging the Enforcer. Defending him, a Chalith.

The glint of swords on his right told him he had only seconds to escape. Only seconds to live if he didn't get airborne and away from that talisman, now.

He grabbed her by the waist, instead, propelling her behind him. "Run!" Painfully, he shifted his wings back inside himself and barreled after her.

Blood stained her shirt, flowed down her fingers like tiny red raindrops. He fixed on her blood's essence with his mind, wove a spell. The ground behind them slickened into a thick, wine-colored mud. It slowed the Enforcers' pursuit, but didn't stop them.

He overtook her at the first clearing. She was pale, gasping. The distance from the ensorcelled talisman restored some of his strength. He didn't know where the Enforcers had obtained such deep magic. He couldn't worry about that right now.

"I can't..." She drew in a raspy breath. "The scroll's more important. Leave me here. I'll delay them. Find Master Rowan, please!"

Footsteps thudded closer. Shouts grew louder. He clasped her wrist. "This way."

"But--?"

"Damn you, woman, don't argue!" He dragged her through a thick stand of trees to what he knew lay behind. He stopped at the edge of the precipice just as the Enforcers broke through the foliage. "Put your arms around my neck, now!"

She obeyed without comment for once, her eyes wide in alarm. The drop behind them was hundreds of feet. He jumped, shifting, his wings exploding out of his form with a crack like summertime thunder. He held her tightly as he surged upward. The morning sun was rising and he had only minutes left in his true Chalith form.

He spied a clearing on the edge of the valley, glided for it. Miera shivered against his chest, but if it were from fear or from her injury, he didn't know. He suspected the latter. He'd watched her stand up to the Enforcers. His gutter-thief, who wasn't a gutter-thief, had backbone.

He landed roughly, his wings already weakening as the moons set. Her large, dark-lashed eyes followed his movements as he quickly constructed a makeshift camp and used magic to light a small fire. She still said nothing, not even when he ripped off her shirtsleeve. Not even when he dissolved her shackles with a touch. That worried him almost as much as her shivering.

Only when he'd cleansed her wound, bound it and tried to ease her pain with a few small spells did she speak: "Torry, leave me. Find Master Rowan."

A bramble was stuck in her hair. He gently pulled it from the silken strands. She didn't flinch from his touch. He marveled at that for a moment. That and the fact that she was Lady Valanmier and the House of Valan had long ago sentenced all Chalith to death. "You could've let them kill me, then claimed I'd kidnapped you." It would have made sense. It might well have saved her life.

"And claimed as well you forced me to steal the scroll from my aunt's private study?" She shook her head. "No Chalith has been within a day's journey of the palace in centuries. And lived," she added. "They knew I, alone, took it, though not for a fortnight. Then they'd almost found me in Frothborn. I let myself be caught and thrown into jail. It seemed to be the one place they wouldn't look for me. Or the scroll."

He touched the ornate cylinder tucked in his belt. "This was your reason

for the Calling?"

She seemed not to hear him and he realized she studied his face. "I didn't know a Chalith could also bear The Mark."

There were a number of things she didn't know, including the burden of being a Marked Chalith. He wanted his answers, first. He pulled the cylinder from the belt, uncapped it and tilted it so that the parchment scroll slid into his hand. He felt its magic immediately, prickling his skin as if the bramble he'd plucked from her hair had grown a thousand-fold. It was laced with magic, deep, dark magic. He frowned, recognizing the source of power that had whispered through her Call.

"It's a spell," she said, but he knew that already.

"For?" he prompted. What could be so important she'd risk the condemnation of her family, her very life?

"It sets out how to kill Master Rowan."

He stared at her. Rumor solidified into fact. They knew. Someone knew. The readings in the mage-circles were correct. The unthinkable had become reality. Something once again threatened the Circle. And he held it in his hand.

But how much did she know, understand? "Master Rowan," he said, repeating what the Mundane had been taught for centuries, "is immortal."

"Only his name. It's bestowed upon a Chalith in the Circle of Seven. Which used to be the Circle of Thirteen." This time she frowned. "Unless my information was in error?"

No, her information was fully correct and one the Mundane were never to know. If he'd been aware of her knowledge days ago, everything that had happened in the last few hours could have been avoided. "Why didn't you tell me this in Frothborn?" he asked more harshly than he wanted to. In spite of his spells, her blood dripped through the strips of cloth on her arm and her face was more pale than he wanted it to be. And her brassiness, her teasing haughtiness, was absent.

"If you'd told me you were Chalith, I would have. You know I couldn't trust anyone else. My people, you call us the Mundane, my people fear the Chalith. Even some of the Marked do."

He nodded. He knew of the desertion, of the thinning of the ranks. That was why he'd answered the Call.

"They think you're demons," she continued. "When the chancellor reveals that Master Rowan is Chalith, and not immortal, they'll hunt him

down. They don't understand the master, and the Chalith, protect us."

"But you do." He traced the edge of her face with one finger. Again, she didn't flinch but held his gaze evenly with an acceptance he didn't dare believe possible. A heat fluttered through his body, and it wasn't from the sun rising overhead. He pushed it away, tried to concentrate on his other reason for touching her. "You're not Chalith-ar." He'd thought for sure she would be, even when he learned of her Valan heritage. How else would she have known the truth? Why else would she permit his touch?

"The summertide I turned eighteen, my family decided it best I be kept in MistHaven, until my betrothal was announced." Her eyes narrowed in obvious distaste. "Much like a prize calflet is kept in the pen until slaughter." Then her expression changed, became downcast. "My ship encountered a storm at sea. Only myself and two crewman survived."

He remembered the news, vaguely, of a royal schooner lost. It had been about four years ago.

"We were rescued by a Chalith and her Chalith-ar husband. For months they cared for us, asking nothing in return. Once we were strong enough to travel, they made sure we were on the next merchant ship to MistHaven. We willingly pledged an oath to them. They saved our lives. We would never knowingly endanger theirs."

"And because of them, Master Rowan's," he put in softly.

She laid her fingers on the scroll. "There may be other copies, but if Master Rowan has this, he can weave spells to defend against it. As we sit here, the queen gathers her army to strike. He can save himself. He can save the Chalith and this Land." She leaned toward him and he could tell the movement pained her. "But first you must save Master Rowan!"

Rowan Dal'Chalith Nar Torrin gently eased her back against the mossy boulder and enfolded her hands in his. "You just did, my lady. You just did."

* * *

This he knew with unwavering certainty as he held her in his arms, as the power of the full moons pulsed their night-borne magic through him: he would not leave her side until her wounds were healed, until the color again bloomed on her cheeks, until brassy retorts once again tripped off her tongue. Only then would he ask her to return to the Circle of Seven with him, to take her place as his heart-mate at his side.

A war of deep magicks hovered over the land like a lengthening shadow. This, too, he knew with unwavering certainty. But Rowan Dal'Chalith Nar

Torrin would not face this battle alone.

The End