

EXALTED



A SHADOW OVER HEAVEN'S EYE™

BY
TIM
WAGGONER

The wind howled and shrieked, as if the Far Northern reaches themselves were furious at having their pristine fields of snow and ice disturbed by the clumsy footfalls of invaders. The Eye of Heaven and the monk called Atreus stumbled forward, leaning on each other for support and moving as fast as their spent, battered bodies would allow. Behind them, far too close for comfort, pursued the remnants of the Wyld Hunt. Only four of the Terrestrial Exalts had survived the avalanche Atreus had brought down upon them as they'd chased their prey through the narrow pass between the mountains. But Atreus and the Eye of Heaven had been caught in the edge of the avalanche, and though they'd lived, they were definitely the worse for wear.

The Eye of Heaven knew that the gateway wasn't very far away, but she feared that she and Atreus would never reach it before the Terrestrials caught up with them.

"We're going to have to stop and fight," she shouted over the wailing wind.

"If we stop, we die," Atreus replied.

"If we don't stop, we'll die," she countered. "So, what's the damn difference?"

Atreus laughed at that, the sound a welcome counterpoint to the screaming Northern wind. "Very well, but I hope you have an especially brilliant plan for defeating our foes."

"I do. It's called improvising."



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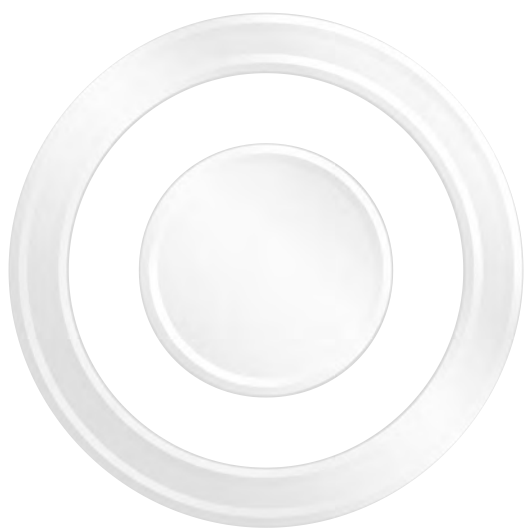
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TIM WAGGONER



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IT IS THE SECOND AGE OF MAN



Long ago, in the First Age, mortals became Exalted by the Unconquered Sun and the other celestial gods. These demigods were Princes of the Earth and presided over a golden age of unparalleled wonder. But like all utopias, the age ended in tears and bloodshed.

The official histories say that the Solar Exalted went mad and had to be put down lest they destroy all of Creation. Those who had been enlightened rulers became despots and anathema. Some whisper that the Sun-Children were betrayed by the very companions and lieutenants they had loved: the less powerful Exalts who traced their lineage to the Five Elemental Dragons. Others say that the Sun-Children's advisors, the Sidereal Exalted, poisoned the minds of the Terrestrial Exalts. Either way, the First Age ended and gave way to an era of chaos and warfare, when the civilized world faced invasion by the mad Fair Folk and the devastation of the Great Contagion. This harsh time ended only with the rise of the Scarlet Empress, a powerful Dragon-Blood who fought back all enemies and founded a great empire.

For a time, all was well—at least for those who toed the Empress's line.

But times are changing again. The Scarlet Empress has retreated into seclusion. The dark forces of the undead and the Fair Folk are stirring again. And most cataclysmic of all, the Solar Exalted have returned. Across Creation, men and women find themselves imbued with the power of the Unconquered Sun and awaken to memories from a long-ago golden age. The Sun-Children, the Anathema, have been reborn.

And all the while, the inscrutable Sidereal Exalted have watched and contemplated, guiding the destiny of Creation with small moves.







CHAPTER ONE

“A moment, thrice-honored traveler.”

Swan stopped walking and turned around, a neutral smile coming easily to his face. He'd already sensed the men concealed in the waist-high grass on the west side of the trail, so it was with no great surprise that he watched them leave their hiding places and step onto the trail to confront him. Three stood before him, and though Swan made no move to glance over his shoulder, he knew that another two stood behind.

Hands open at his sides, stance relaxed, Swan said, “Good afternoon. And what might a humble traveler such as myself do for you gentlemen on this glorious day?”

And it *was* glorious. The cloudless sky was an unbroken expanse of perfect blue. The sun was just beginning its long descent toward the horizon, and though it was hot, there was little humidity. A gentle breeze helped mitigate the heat, and the wind rustled the marsh grasses and set them to whispering.

The men before him shuffled their feet and exchanged glances, as if unsure how to proceed. All were of peasant stock, wearing nothing but crudely carved wooden sandals and loose breeches woven from coarse brown cloth. Each carried a simple thrusting spear as his only weapon. The men were of medium height and lean—almost too much so, as if they hadn't been getting enough to eat lately. Their skin was smooth, light brown, and their straight red hair was done up



in topknots, as was the custom for Southeastern men. Their fine, delicate facial features were so similar that Swan suspected they were siblings, or perhaps cousins. He wondered if the two at his back were also members of the same family. Most likely, he decided.

The man in the middle stepped forward, shifting his spear into fighting position as he did so. Despite his malnourished state, the man moved with the surety and grace of someone who knew how to handle himself in battle. This, then, was the leader.

“We took notice of you back in our village,” the leader said.

Swan allowed his smile to widen a fraction of an inch, but he was careful to keep any trace of mockery out of his voice as he said, “Of course you did. As charming as your village is, I don’t imagine you get many tourists.”

Though Swan was dressed in simple traveler’s clothes—a triple-layer cloak over a light chain shirt, canvas pants and knee-high boots—his fine features, pale skin and long deep-violet hair and matching eyes marked him as an obvious foreigner.

Swan continued before the lead villager could speak again. “But then, these lands have seen better days, have they not?”

The leader blinked several times, as if he were trying to puzzle out how he had lost control of the conversation so quickly. His grip tightened on the spear, and Swan sensed that if he confused the man too much, the peasant would simply order his men to attack.

Swan did his best to sound sympathetic and nonjudgmental as he continued. He had seen much of the Southeast’s fertile river valleys and marshlands these last few weeks, but everywhere he went, the situation was the same: The people were suffering. “There were few cattle in your village. And those animals I did see were in poor health. I saw next to no vegetables or fruits: certainly none for sale anywhere in the village. From my understanding of the

seasons in the South, the bounty of nature should be plentiful this time of year. But it is not.”

The leader relaxed his grip on the spear. His expression softened and sadness came into his eyes.

“You speak the truth,” he said in a soft voice. “Reeds Swaying at Sunset is but a pale reflection of its former glory.”

Even at the village's height, Swan doubted that anyone who wasn't born there would use the word *glory* to describe it. Reeds Swaying at Sunset was a tiny village perched on the edge of stagnant marshlands, little more than a few dozen huts surrounded by a half dozen farms. It wasn't large enough to capture the attention of even the most thorough of mapmakers, including the one who'd drawn the map Swan carried on his person. He'd only chanced to learn about the village from a passing and quite talkative trader he'd encountered several days' journey to the east.

The man to the left of the leader suddenly spoke. “It's the cursed Varangians' fault!” He spit onto the trail as if saying *Varangians* had left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Swan frowned. This wasn't the first time during his travels in the Southeast that he'd heard Varangians cursed by common folk suffering misfortune. Far from it.

“If I might ask, what have they done to incur your displeasure?” Swan asked.

One of the men behind him let out a barking laugh, forgetting or perhaps no longer concerned about concealing his presence.

“What *haven't* they done?” he said.

Swan kept his gaze fixed on the leader, for it was he who must be placated if a violent confrontation were to be avoided.

“They have altered trade routes and raised tariffs,” the leader said. “They've also created a list of favored trading partners. To get on this list, a village must render up a seasonal trading fee, which few can afford to pay once, let alone one season after another. And if anyone is foolish enough to take the Varangians' offer of credit to obtain a place on this list, they face severe penalties if they cannot





repay their debt in a timely manner. The Varangians take the best cattle and produce a village has to offer—and they *keep* taking them.” The leader paused for a moment, then continued in a voice tight with barely suppressed rage. “Worst of all, the youngest and strongest men and women are taken and sold in the slave markets of Kirighast.”

“From what I saw of your village,” Swan said, “I take it that you were one of those who set up a line of credit with the Varangians.”

As soon as the intended offer of sympathy left his lips, Swan realized that it was the wrong comment to make. The leader’s eyes grew cold, his jaw set in a determined line. He once more tightened his grip on his spear.

“Do not mock our misery,” he said in a low, dangerous tone. “We made the only choice we could at the time, and now, we must deal with the consequences of that choice.” The leader’s gaze remained cold, but his mouth stretched into a slow smile. “As you must now deal with the consequences of your choice to visit our village.”

Swan inclined his head. “My apologies; I meant no disrespect. But tell me, precisely what consequences are we talking about?”

The leader scowled and raised the tip of his spear until it was directly in line with Swan’s heart. “On those rare occasions when outsiders visit our village, we ask them to make a small donation before they leave.”

A couple of the other men chuckled at this, but Swan just kept listening, his expression carefully neutral.

The leader’s lips slowly peeled away from his teeth, but the expression was anything but a smile.

“I understand completely,” Swan said. “But we have a saying in the Coral Archipelago, where I come from: ‘Ill fortune reveals what good fortune conceals.’ What a person does during difficult times reveals the true nature of his character.”

Anger, perhaps laced with a touch of shame, twisted the leader’s features into a mask of fury. “Enough talk!” He

jabbed his spear-point toward Swan as if to punctuate his words. "Give us what we want or die!"

"Permit me to offer a counterproposal," Swan said. "Return to your village now, in peace. I have no wish to harm any of you."

The leader looked at Swan, as if the violet-haired, fair-skinned foreigner had just told an incomprehensible joke. Finally, he said, "I tried to warn you. May you learn to better heed advice in your next life."

With that, the leader lunged forward with his spear, needle-sharp tip hurtling straight toward Swan's heart. The man moved with the speed and grace of someone who has spent his entire life fighting for his survival in the unforgiving lands of the Southeast. But no matter how swiftly he moved, compared to the speed Swan could summon, the man might as well have been standing still.

Swan waited until the spear-tip was a mere fraction of an inch from his chest before turning sideways. He avoided the leader's spear-thrust and the man stumbled forward, suddenly off balance. At the same instant, Swan heard the scuff of a sandal behind him and sensed the disturbance in the air as another spear was jabbed toward his ribs. Without conscious thought, Swan's left hand moved fast as a striking snake and grabbed the leader's spear shaft. He brought his right hand down in a swift, sure arc and wood splintered at the impact of bone and flesh. As the front half of the spear began to fall, Swan yanked on the other half. The leader, who still held tight to the broken end of the spear, stumbled forward, and Swan swung him around and into the other villager who sought to puncture one of his lungs. The leader slammed into the other man with a meaty sound of flesh hitting flesh. Swan released his grip on the leader's broken spear, and the two villagers went down in an unconscious tangle of arms and legs.

The remaining trio of bandits hesitated, as if debating the wisdom of attacking Swan after what had happened to their companions. But then, as if coming to silent agreement, they rushed him in unison. Unafraid, Swan leaped



straight upward to avoid the attack. For an instant, he blocked out the sun, and to the villagers, he appeared as a silhouette surrounded by a glowing corona of light. The three men managed not to skewer one another as they collided, and as Swan came down, he seemed to hang motionless in the air for a split second, kicking three times in rapid succession. Swan then flipped forward, landed on the ground and rolled gracefully to his feet as the last three bandits collapsed, unconscious.

Swan stood for a moment, breathing slowly and evenly. He then checked on the five villagers and was gratified to find that none of them were dead or broken, though he doubted they would be feeling very good—or moving very fast—when they regained consciousness.

“I hope you’ll pardon my saying so, but you make better cattle herders than thieves.” He paused a moment, then reached into one of his pockets and withdrew a small leather pouch. “It’s not much, but perhaps it will make your circumstances somewhat more bearable.” Swan dropped the purse to the ground where it landed with a clink.

Then, without another word, he turned and resumed walking along the path in his original direction. He’d seen more than enough of the problems that plagued the Southeast. Now it was time to see if he could do anything about them.



CHAPTER TWO

“Tell Declan that I’m indisposed, Father.”

“*Indisposed?*” Anbeyssa said. “And what, precisely, is *that* supposed to mean?”

“It’s a polite way of saying I don’t want to see him, and would he please go away.”

Maylea stood at her bedroom window, peering into a small golden cage that hung from the ceiling on a slender chain. Inside the cage, a tiny colorful songbird held tight to its wooden perch. The bird looked out through the open window at the blue sky and began trilling a soft, mournful song.

Maylea’s bedchamber was larger than many homes in Yane. The walls were curved, the doorways rounded. There were no sharp angles or corners to be found. The walls were decorated with constellations rendered in ovals of polished jade—beautiful, but cold to the touch. Her bed was a circular down-filled mattress big enough to fit a half dozen people comfortably. The sheets were delicate red satin, and small throw pillows embroidered with elaborate nature scenes were piled in a mound in the center of the mattress. When she’d been a child, Maylea had loved to run across the room, launch herself into the air and land giggling on the mountain of pillows. Although those days were only a few years past, it seemed like a lifetime ago. Several lifetimes.

“Why do we keep birds caged, Father?” she asked.



Though Maylea did not turn to face him, she nevertheless heard the frown in her father's voice as he answered. "Don't try to change the subject!"

She continued as if she hadn't heard him. "We tell ourselves that it's for their own good, that they are much safer within the cage than without. That the great gift of being privileged to amuse us is worth sacrificing their freedom. But does anyone ever stop to consider *their* feelings?"

Maylea was a beautiful young woman, with fine features, flawless chocolate skin and large soulful eyes. She was tall and slender, her crimson hair bound in a single long ponytail as was the custom for women in Yane. She wore a simple bustier, loose white pantaloons and wooden-soled sandals, though her clothes were of better quality than what the average citizen could afford. She also wore a pair of large dangling earrings that nearly reached her shoulders. Such ornamentation was not uncommon in Yane, but those of the ruling class especially tended to be restrained and conservative in their use of such personal accessories. But Maylea's earrings were gaudy, showy things, more suitable for a lower-caste courtesan than a woman of her station. They consisted of seashells that had been painted gold and festooned with glittering faux diamonds and multicolored bird feathers. They were truly hideous, and her father loathed them. Maylea wore them every chance she got.

Her father's voice softened as he replied. "Only you would think of such things, my gem."

Maylea gazed at the bird a moment longer before reaching up and releasing the latch that kept the cage door closed. She swung the door open, then stepped back and waited, but the songbird didn't leap off its perch and take wing. In fact, it didn't seem to be aware that the door was open, or indeed, that there even was a door to be opened or closed at all. The bird remained on its perch, singing its sad song and looking at the blue sky forever beyond its reach in so many ways.

Maylea heard her father cross the bedchamber until he was standing next to her. "The bird is too conditioned to its captivity to accept your gift of freedom," he said. "The creature also knows that it is safer in the cage, for there are many predators in the outer world that would devour it on sight. If the bird *truly* desired its freedom, it would leave its prison, regardless of what awaited it out there."

"Even if it should be injured—perhaps even killed?" Maylea asked.

"Even then, if one truly desires a thing—if one *needs* it above all else—then no risk is too great, no potential outcome too disastrous to deter the attempt."

Maylea grinned. "Why, Father! You sound as if you're saying individuals must seek to fulfill their desires, whatever they might be."

"Not at all! My point is that this bird has the good sense to accept its lot in this life." He paused. "Unlike some."

Maylea turned to her father and scowled. "What are you saying?"

"I'm concerned about your behavior. You've been restless of late, as well as short-tempered... almost to the point of open defiance."

Maylea wanted to defend herself against these charges, but she knew she could not. What her father said was true.

Anbeyssa's voice softened as he continued. "Do you feel another of your dizzy spells coming on? Shall I send for the family physician?"

Maylea had to fight to keep herself from laughing. "No, Father. I feel fine." *Physically, at least*, she thought.

"Then perhaps you have been, ah... indulging in various recreational substances? One must take great care when doing so, for there are hidden dangers—"

If she hadn't known that her father spoke out of love, Maylea would've been insulted. "I do not enjoy such pastimes, Father."

Anbeyssa smiled, though it was clearly forced. "Perhaps then it is nothing more than the imaginings of an



overprotective father. We will speak no more of such things for now.”

Maylea didn't like the way Anbeyssa had tacked on *for now*, but she was glad that the matter had been put to rest for a time. Although she understood her father's concerns—indeed, she shared them—she had no idea what was causing her strange behavior. She had such odd thoughts and feelings... it seemed almost as if she were becoming a completely different person. Or perhaps she'd always been a different person inside, and the real Maylea was finally beginning to come forth.

“At times such as these, I wish your mother was still with us,” Anbeyssa said. “I always relied on her insight and advice—especially when dealing with our willful daughter.” He paused, then grinned. “Make that *very* willful.”

“Father!” Maylea playfully swatted Anbeyssa on the arm, just as she had done so many times as a little girl when he had teased her. And for a wonderful moment, they were simply father and daughter, with no differences between them.

But the moment passed far too quickly, and Maylea turned back to look at the songbird once more. “Have I told you I've been thinking of becoming a bird collector? I would travel throughout Creation, seeking and capturing the most exotic songbirds that I could find. I would build a great glass dome for them to live in, one filled with trees and plants from their native lands. I would release the birds there so that they might intermingle and blend their songs into one harmonious whole. Doesn't that sound wonderful?” She finished wistfully, this last thought expressed more to herself than to her father.

“I imagine it would be a great cacophony. But you're just baiting me, of course. As usual. A master astrologer began working on your chart mere seconds after your birth. His findings were most clear on the matter of your future. You are destined to marry a prince and live a long and happy life in Yane. The astrologer said nothing about bird collecting being thrown into the bargain. And speaking of marriage,

your betrothed is still waiting to see you, though I cannot guarantee he continues to do so patiently.”

Frustration boiled up inside Maylea. What did it matter what some dusty old astrological chart said? It was *her* life wasn't it? *She* should be the one to decide her future, not some astrologer! But she held her tongue. She'd had this argument with her father many times before, and it always ended the same way. Anbeyssa had been born into Yane's ruling class—which was, of course, the only way to become a member—and the citizens of Yane believed everything in Creation, from world-shaking events that changed the course of history to the seemingly random flight pattern of a drifting bit of dandelion fluff, was controlled by the movements of the heavens. And Anbeyssa was nothing if not a loyal and devout son of Yane.

Maylea gazed into her father's face, and she was startled to see tiny wrinkles at the corner of his eyes... and when had his hair become so white? It seemed only yesterday that his topknot was as red as her hair, along with his close-cropped beard. He was still a broad-shouldered, well-muscled man, but he was developing the beginnings of a midriff bulge. It was almost as if she were truly seeing Anbeyssa for the first time. When had he gotten so *old*?

On impulse, she threw herself into her father's arm and hugged him tight.

“Does anyone ever escape destiny?” she asked in small voice.

Anbeyssa held her for a moment before answering. “There is no such thing as escaping destiny, little one. Some fail to recognize it until its time comes. Others recognize it and embrace it, especially those whom fate has favored with fortune or great power. People like you and me. And we accept that we have duties to perform.”

Maylea suddenly felt a great desire to please her father. She kissed him on the cheek and then withdrew from his arms. “Very well. Tell Declan I'll meet him in the solarium in a few moments. I'd like to freshen up a bit first.”

Anbeyssa looked skeptical.





“Truly, Father—I promise.”

Anbeyssa gazed at her for one moment more before finally smiling. “You know, it would have saved us all some time if you’d just said that in the first place.” He looked at her appraisingly. “And you might consider putting on a different pair of earrings.”

“Father...”

“Oh, very well.” He left to give Declan the good news.

When Anbeyssa had departed her bedchamber, Maylea remained where she was instead of going to the lavatory to freshen up. Not for the first time she wondered why she was so different. Others didn’t seem to have any difficulty accepting whatever fate the stars predicted for them. If the heavens foretold that you would become an architect, you did so happily. If the stars proclaimed that you were destined to die alone and unloved, then you refrained from socializing with anyone throughout your life, and though you might not be happy, you had the satisfaction of knowing that you were fulfilling your destiny. Besides, you would be born under a different configuration of stars in your next life.

But Maylea had always felt... discontented. As if there was something inside her—something grand, glorious and terrifying in equal measures—waiting for the proper time to emerge. This feeling had grown worse over the last couple of years, and Maylea had grown increasingly confused and dissatisfied. Sometimes, she felt as if she didn’t belong to this world at all, that she was instead standing off to the side, observing but not participating. Almost as if...

“I was locked in a cage,” she said softly, glancing at the songbird. But the question was, when someone finally opened the door for *her*, would she have the courage to step through?



Glass panels in the ceiling were propped open to allow fresh air to enter the solarium, and a gentle breeze circulated around the room, stirring the fronds of the plants that

surrounded them and setting bamboo wind chimes to clacking softly.

Declan sighed. "How long have we been waiting, Shadi?"

He was beginning to wonder if his coming here this afternoon had been a mistake. As Maylea's betrothed, it was his duty to call on her at least once a week, and although he was an extremely busy man, he made certain to fulfill that duty. Yet, it appeared that Maylea wasn't in the mood to receive callers today—not even one she planned to marry, it seemed.

The woman beside him glanced up at an open skylight. "Judging by the position of the sun, not more than a quarter hour, my prince." She lowered her gaze and gave Declan a smile. "Though I do feel I must point out that *you* are waiting for Maylea to arrive. I'm simply performing my duty by standing here."

Declan, one of the many princes of Yane's extended royal family, sat upon a divan in the solarium of Lord Anbeyssa. As was customary, two chaperones were present, one apiece for the bride and groom-to-be. Maylea's chaperone was Eurus, one of her family's most trusted servants: a well-muscled man with crossed arms and a deep, unwavering scowl. Acting as Declan's chaperone was Shadi, his personal assistant and bodyguard. A slim, petite woman, she was one of the swiftest and deadliest fighters Declan had ever seen. She stood close to Declan, while Eurus stood a dozen yards away, in visual range but far enough away so that he didn't intrude on Declan's conversation with Shadi.

Shadi didn't look all that deadly at the moment. She stood in a relaxed stance, arms at her sides, eyes half closed, as if she were content to continue waiting for all eternity if need be.

"Let me guess: You're going to tell me that, while you appear to be on the verge of nodding off, you are, in truth, highly alert and ready to protect me at the first sign of danger," Declan said.

Declan was his parents' first-born and, therefore, first in line to inherit all of his father's holdings. Unless one or more





of his five younger brothers succeeded in having him assassinated so they could all move up a rank in the family hierarchy. For the ruling class in Yane, bodyguards weren't a luxury or an affectation. They were an absolute necessity, as vital to sustaining one's existence as air to breathe, water to drink and food to eat.

Shadi nodded, eyes still half closed. "That's right, my prince. Should a deranged fig tree suddenly uproot itself and attack your most honored person, I'll make a dash for the nearest pair of pruning shears."

Declan frowned. He glanced in Eurus's direction, but if Maylea's chaperone was listening, he gave no indication. He too appeared as if he might be half asleep, but Declan knew the man was wide awake. A servant who was lax in performing his duties would never have lasted in Anbeyssa's service as long as Eurus had.

Declan shifted position on the divan in a vain attempt to get more comfortable. "I suppose you think you're quite amusing."

"What I think doesn't matter, my prince." Shadi's eyes were completely closed now. "After all, I am but a humble servant whose only purpose in life is to fulfill your each and every wish."

"In that case, I wish you would be quiet for a change," Declan grumbled.

"And forgo the pleasure of engaging in playful banter with you? If nothing else, you must admit that it helps pass the time. But if you had a greater appreciation for the beauty surrounding us, we wouldn't need to make small talk. I can't think of a more lovely place to wait for your intended."

Shadi had been with Declan for many years and, therefore, could get away with teasing him where other servants could not. Even so, her last comment had come near to crossing the line, and it might have done so if it hadn't been so damnably accurate. Declan was born to manage his family's substantial holdings, and as such, he'd spent his entire life learning all there was to know about the ways of trade. There had been no room in his education—indeed,

no point given the astrological configuration he'd been born under—for studies of a more aesthetic nature. Even so, he could understand what Shadi meant. Anbeyssa's solarium was quite something, even by the high standards of Yane's royal family.

The structure was dome shaped and located at the very top of Anbeyssa's section of the royal complex. The roof comprised a dozen skylights, all of which were open right now, allowing sunlight to stream in. The walls and ceiling were covered with glossy white tile that caught the light and reflected it gently, so it was not too harsh on the eye. Inside the solarium was a garden filled with fig, date, butterspoon and boerbean trees, along with hundreds of varieties of flowers: orchids, irises, violets, torch lilies and many more. Most of the blooms were colored naturally, but some had been hand-painted, and it was difficult to say which was lovelier. Tiled pathways wound through the garden, with benches and divans placed at strategic intervals so that guests could sit and examine a particular aspect of the garden or simply rest, relax and enjoy the solarium's peaceful atmosphere. Gentle birdsong filled the air, a soothing counterpart to the delicate scents of mingled greenery, fruit and flowering plants. With the skylights open, birds came and went as they pleased—from tiny songbirds no larger than a man's little finger to colorful parrots with hooked black beaks and eyes that seemed to glisten with mocking amusement.

Yes, it *was* beautiful here. Calming... Declan spent so much of his time dealing with numbers, with dry facts and figures that he often neglected to attend to matters of the spirit. Perhaps he should be grateful that Maylea was taking so long. Sitting here like this was a restorative for him... a welcome respite... from...

"Declan?"

The prince started awake. He looked up to see Maylea gazing down at him, clearly amused. Shadi's expression mirrored Maylea's amusement.





Declan jumped to his feet and bowed low. “My apologies, beloved.”

Maylea smiled. “No apologies are necessary, Declan. I often doze off while in the solarium. Shall we sit?”

“Yes... of course.”

Declan waited for Maylea to sit first, then he sat beside her, making sure that their bodies did not touch, as was only proper. They sat in silence for several moments, and while the quiet didn’t seem to bother Maylea, it quickly began to irritate Declan, until he could no longer hold his tongue.

“Did I tell you that I met with a representative of the Tri-Khan last week?” he said, speaking a little too fast and sounding a bit too desperate, but unable to help himself. “As you know, my family has enjoyed favored trading status with Chiaroscuro for several generations. Once every three years, we meet with one of the Tri-Khan’s officials to renew the status, though such renewal has always been little more than a formality.”

Maylea’s jaw muscles tightened as she took a deep breath through her nose. Declan realized she was yawning with her mouth shut to keep from embarrassing him. He wished that he hadn’t begun to tell her such a dull story. If only his astrological chart had forecast that he’d grow up to be a poet. Perhaps then he would’ve been able to find the right words to tell Maylea how he really felt about her in his heart. How beautiful and graceful she was, how intelligent and strong of spirit... But he wasn’t a poet; business and trade were all he knew. That was all he was really *supposed* to know.

Besides, he thought, *if you were a poet, Anbeyssa would never have acceded to your request to court his daughter.* Anbeyssa was a former member of the Council of Elders, and though he had suffered a loss of status in recent months, he was still one of the wealthiest and most powerful lords in Yane. A man such as he would never allow his daughter to speak to a poet, let alone be courted by one.

But Declan had begun the story, and it would rude to stop before he was finished. He resolved to tell the rest of it

as rapidly as decorum would permit. And if he could find a way to make it more entertaining, so much the better.

“The Tri-Khan’s representative was a short, squat man with a face like a pig. At first I thought he might be some manner of supernatural being, for what human could possibly be so ugly?” He glanced at Maylea to gauge her reaction, but her face remained expressionless, her eyes downcast, gazing at her hands folded demurely in her lap.

Mouth suddenly dry Declan hurried on.

“But then again, he didn’t look all that much like a pig. I mean, he *did*, but then again he didn’t, if you know what I mean.”

Maylea didn’t lift her gaze from her hands, but a small smile played about her lips.

Gods, she must think I’m an idiot!

Shadi suddenly cleared her throat. When Declan and Maylea turned to look at her, she bowed deeply, then straightened.

“My prince, a thousand apologies for interrupting you, but I would be remiss in my duties if I did not remind you of your impending appointment with Caravan Master Hatrick.”

Declan frowned. “Who?”

Shadi winked, so quickly that Declan might have imagined it. Understanding came upon him then, and he nodded vigorously. “Yes, yes! *Hatrick!* I’d almost forgotten.”

He turned back to Maylea and tried not to sound as relieved as he felt. “Forgive me, my beloved. I do not wish to depart your luminous presence, but my duties demand it.” *Great*, he thought. *Now that you’re leaving, you suddenly find your poet’s tongue!*

Maylea finally looked up and met Declan’s gaze. Although her face remained composed and her voice mild, amusement danced in her eyes. “Of course I forgive you, Declan.” She reached out and patted his hand, the contact sending a tingling sensation running up the length of his arm. “We are all servants to duty, are we not?” The amusement faded from her eyes to be replaced by a great sadness.





Declan sensed that there was some hidden import to Maylea's words, but he had no idea what it might be. Now that he was about to leave, he wanted more than anything to stay and comfort her, to learn what the cause of her sadness was, and if he couldn't relieve Maylea's burden, then share it with her. But he would look even more foolish than he already did if he suddenly reversed himself, so he stood and gave Maylea's hand a loving squeeze—though strictly speaking, this went against courting protocol. He bowed to her a bit lower than was necessary and said, "May I be permitted to call on you again later in the week?"

"Of course," Maylea answered. "You are my betrothed. How could I deny you?"

Declan wasn't certain how to take this last statement, so he bowed one last time (again, too low) and said, "Until then, my treasure." Then he turned and walked away from his bride-to-be, Shadi walking on his right side, a half pace behind, as was only proper.

"I did it again, didn't I?" he whispered.

"It was a most impressive performance, even for you," Shadi whispered back.

Declan groaned inwardly. "Do me a favor, Shadi. The next time an assassin's arrow comes streaking toward me, don't bother pushing me out of the way."

"As you wish, my prince."



CHAPTER THREE

Maylea watched Declan depart with his bodyguard. When they had left the solarium, she gestured to let Eurus know he was dismissed. The servant, who also served as her bodyguard, nodded then left. Maylea knew Eurus wouldn't go far, though. He never did. When she was finally alone, Maylea burst out laughing.

Poor Declan! He really was hopeless! A prince was supposed to be calm and confident, and though she had never witnessed him at work, by all accounts that's precisely what he was when dealing with business matters. Yet, when it came to talking to her, he was like a tongue-tied little boy. She might have been flattered if it weren't so pathetic. She then thought of the way Declan had squeezed her hand toward the end of his visit.

All right... perhaps not *pathetic*.

She had to admit that in his own fumbling way, Declan could be rather sweet. Still, he wasn't exactly a grand hero out of a First Age saga, was he? In fact, he—

Maylea felt suddenly lightheaded and dizzy. She feared she might pitch forward onto the floor, and she grabbed hold of the divan to steady herself. The solarium seemed to be spinning around her, and she felt like she was plummeting to the center of Creation itself. She squeezed her eyes shut, but that only made the sensation of vertigo worse. She tried to cry out to Eurus, but all that came out of her

mouth was a weak mewling sound like that of a frightened newborn kitten.

Then, just as suddenly as it had began, the dizziness stopped. Maylea took a deep breath, then another, and when the vertigo didn't return, she slowly opened her eyes.

At first, Maylea didn't understand what she was seeing. The solarium was gone, and she now seemed to be within a vast chamber that consisted entirely of walkways and balconies. Even stranger, there seemed to be no rhyme or reason to their construction. The floor, walls and ceiling—although since she couldn't tell which direction was up and which was down, she supposed the terms were meaningless—were covered with balconies, walkways and entrances to passages. They existed at odd angles to one another, and as confusing as that was, far stranger was the fact that people, dozens if not hundreds of them, moved along the walkways, stood chatting on the balconies, stepped in and out of passageways. Some seemed to be standing upright in relation to Maylea, some sideways, and some upside down. The effect was far worse than the vertigo she had suffered only moments before, and a wave of nausea twisted her stomach. She thought she was going to vomit, but then, the nausea subsided and though the topsy-turvy conglomeration of walkways and balconies still seemed alien to her, looking at it no longer made her feel ill.

None of the others that inhabited this nightmarish place seemed to be disturbed by its impossible construction. They walked purposefully, without alarm, as if this were an everyday experience for them. Those who stood still while engaged in conversation also did not appear concerned about their surroundings. They spoke calmly, sometimes even laughing, as if nothing were wrong. Although Maylea felt perfectly grounded where she stood—and when did she stand up, anyway?—she nevertheless gripped the edge of the balcony railing for support.

Balcony...?

It was true: She stood upon a balcony. The divan, like the rest of the solarium, her home and perhaps even Yane itself, was gone.

She looked out and saw that a vast tapestry that resembled nothing so much as a gigantic map, with land masses and bodies of water woven into its surface was stretched between the balconies, ramps, walkways and stairs. But the longer she looked at it, the less it seemed as if she were looking at a piece of cloth and the more it seemed that she was looking down upon the world itself from an unimaginable height. Tiny puffs of clouds drifted above the surface of the tapestry, and she could detect swirls and eddies within the rivers and oceans.

But as remarkable as all this was, most amazing of all were the weavers of this vast tapestry. Scuttling across the surface were metallic spiders that appeared to be the size of large dogs, though their precise size was difficult to determine from Maylea's vantage. Threads trailed out behind them as they went, threads that were grabbed by other spiders and deftly woven into the tapestry. Maylea had no idea how many there were—they moved so swiftly, their metallic bodies clicking and whirring as they went, that she couldn't even begin to estimate their numbers. The spiders didn't confine themselves to the tapestry, however. They crawled along the walls of the chamber ignoring the people in their midst and in turn being ignored by them.

Maylea supposed she should have been terrified by what she was experiencing, but the longer she remained here, the more acclimated she became and the less strange this place seemed. She was beginning to find it almost familiar, as if she'd been here before.

Perhaps in another life, she thought.

She found her gaze drawn to a particular couple standing on one of the walkways that stretched above the tapestry. A tall woman with ivory skin and tangled alabaster hair stood beside a short bald man with an unkempt beard. Their clothing—coats, pants, boots and gloves alike—was made entirely from thick animal hide. Maylea couldn't tear her





gaze away from them or even bring herself to take a breath. She didn't understand why she found the pair so fascinating. Although she didn't recognize either of them, was absolutely certain she'd never seen them before, she nevertheless felt a strong sense of kinship with them.

An eerie blank expression settled across the woman's face, and she raised her right hand. Even before Maylea saw it, she knew that the woman held a silver dagger and that she intended to slay her companion with the blade. Maylea was paralyzed, caught in the grip of a dispassionate, dreamlike fascination, and all she could do was watch in horrified silence as the alabaster woman brought the dagger down in a swift arc and plunged the blade into the bald man's chest.

The man's eyes widened, and he staggered backward. The dagger was lodged to the hilt in his flesh, and blood fountained forth from the wound, soaking his fur garment with wet crimson. He reached for the hilt and tried to get a grip on it, clearly intending to pull it out, though Maylea didn't see how removing the blade could possibly help the man now. But there was too much blood, and the man's gloved fingers slid off the hilt. The alabaster woman's face remained blank and slack as her companion stepped back against the railing and tumbled over backward. The bald man fell toward the tapestry without a sound. He gazed up at the alabaster woman, eyes filled with disappointment, but most of all, with love.

As he plunged through the air, dozens of silver spiders swarmed onto the tapestry with lightning-fast speed and clustered beneath him. The man flailed his arms and legs as if in desperate hope of gaining some purchase on the air itself. But he continued to fall and dropped into the mass of waiting spiders. The metallic creatures caught and engulfed the man, and he screamed as their chelicerae began to tear his flesh.

Maylea watched in horror as the spiders pulled not skin and organs from the man's body, but rather silken threads. The spiders worked quietly, and the man's screams died away as he was reduced to nothing more than strands

of thread. The spiders then scurried off, each carrying a separate length of thread, and began weaving the strands into various places in the tapestry of Creation. Within mere moments, the deed was done, and the spiders scuttled off to attend to other duties.

Unable to believe what she had just witnessed, Maylea looked up to behold the alabaster-haired woman. Tears of grief and shock streamed down the woman's face, as if she too were unable to credit what had occurred. Then, the woman's expression changed to one of weary defeat, and she climbed over the balcony rail. Before Maylea could say anything, the woman jumped. As she fell, the spiders came scuttling onto the tapestry once more, and Maylea screamed.



"Mistress, are you all right?"

Maylea's opened her eyes and found herself looking up at the face of Eurus. She was back in the solarium.

"What... happened?" She tried to sit up—which was when she first realized that she was lying down—but Eurus put a gentle hand on her shoulder to keep her from rising.

"Rest a moment," he said. "Give your head a chance to clear."

She nodded. It was good advice.

"Are you injured?" Eurus asked.

Maylea listened to her body for a moment. "I do not believe so." She attempted a smile. "Nothing hurts at any rate. What happened?" she asked for the second time.

"I do not know, Mistress. I heard you scream, and I ran as fast as I could to come to your aid. But when I arrived, I found you lying on the floor, unconscious."

Maylea remembered the vision she'd had... or hallucination or waking dream or whatever it had been. Evidently, the stress of it had proven too much for her.

"I fell asleep and had a bad dream, that's all." Her next attempt at a smile was more successful than her first. "That will teach me to doze off just anywhere. At least I could've



stretched out on the divan before sleep took me. Perhaps then I wouldn't have fallen."

Eurus looked at her appraisingly, and Maylea feared he wasn't going to believe her hastily invented excuse. Lower-level servants would never dream of questioning their master's word, but those higher up in the hierarchy of service could think and speak more freely without repercussions—especially when they'd been instructed by Maylea's father to protect the life of his only child.

"Very well," Eurus said. "We shall speak no more of it."

"Does this mean you won't tell my father?" Maylea asked hopefully.

Now, it was Eurus's turn to smile. "Now, let's not go too far!"

Despite herself, Maylea giggled. She felt well enough to stand, and with a helping hand from Eurus, she did so.

"From the way you screamed, you must have experienced quite a nightmare," Eurus said.

In her mind, Maylea once again saw the alabaster woman stab the monk. Saw the blood spread, saw the man fall toward the tapestry that the mechanical spiders were working on with such diligence. Worst of all, she saw the love that shone in his eyes even as the life in them began to fade.

"Yes," she said softly. "Quite a nightmare, indeed."



Astrological charts of varying complexity were spread across every surface of the room—on tables, chairs, the floor, even tacked to the walls and ceiling. But the individual that stood within the midst of the intricate configurations of stars and planets had no more need of them than a sailor with a lifetime of experience needed an astrolabe to navigate around his home coast. But the charts aided thought. They were comforting reminders of simpler times. Various sorts of alchemical equipment shared table space with the astrological charts, and often rested atop them—jars of multicolored powders and liquids, mortars

and pestles, measuring spoons, tongs, cutting boards and more. A more recent interest, perhaps, but one that would yield great dividends some day.

"It won't be long now," the man said, but so softly that one would have needed to be standing with an ear almost pressed to the speaker's mouth to hear. He could sense lines of probability beginning to converge, could almost smell the death of certain possibilities while hearing the birth cries of others. Time, chance, circumstance, fate... whatever limited and inadequate words one used to describe the flow of destiny scarcely mattered. What *was* important—absolutely vital, in truth—was that events be constantly and carefully monitored for those opportunities, rare though they were, to nudge the flow gently this way or that. If one could effect just the right change in events at just the right time, destiny could be... "Improved" was a poor word for the concept the man sought, but it would have to do. But these "improvements" needed to be carried out with the utmost delicacy, else one risked too much. The benefits far outweighed any risk, but one had to be so very, very cautious...

A focal point—a chance to effect an important change in the course of the raging river that was the Great Becoming—was rapidly approaching. He had worked diligently for years to get into a position to give the proper nudge when the time came. Yet, despite decades of careful planning, of almost preternatural patience, of thousands upon thousands of painstaking astrological calculations, something had changed. And that something was Maylea. The girl was increasingly restless, willful, independent... almost to the point of becoming a threat to his plans.

He made an irritated gesture and knocked a row of astrological charts off the table beside him. The man swore, disappointed at demonstrating such a shocking lack of control, even if no one else was around to witness it. Still, control had always been an issue for him, hadn't it?





Such thoughts were swept aside. There was no time for self-recrimination. He would watch Maylea more closely, and if her willfulness became a problem, then he would deal with it.

One way or another...



CHAPTER FOUR

Swan sat at a corner table, sipping tepid, bitter tea from a cracked cup. The tea wasn't fit to be served to a condemned man, let alone a paying customer, but Swan's expression showed no sign of his distaste. In many situations, the fastest way one could insult another was to display overt dislike for food and drink that was offered. As a diplomat—albeit an unofficial one since Swan had been forced to rather hastily depart his homeland—he'd ingested far worse substances than this bilge water that was doing such a poor job of masquerading as tea. He'd no doubt experience worse yet in the future.

The Wild Camellia was a teahouse located at almost the exact midpoint between the sprawling royal palace complex and the city's market district. The decor was simple: cheap paper lanterns, dusty tapestries and ritual masks with chipped and faded paint hanging on the walls. This establishment—which Swan thought was more “mild” than “wild”—catered to mid-level functionaries and bureaucrats: clerks, scribes, accountants, personal secretaries and the like. Although the members of this class wore the white pantaloons and wooden sandals so ubiquitous in Yane, they added other touches, some practical, some ornamental. Vests with pockets, leather money belts; ear-, brow-, nose- and lip-rings; small but colorful tattoos (primarily on the backs of their hands); patterns of ritual scarring on their brows and cheeks. The color, pattern and even embroidery



of one's clothes were also clues to caste, rank and family... clues that only someone born and raised in Yane could ever hope to fully decipher. Even Swan, with all his diplomatic training and additional abilities, could only determine a rough approximation of an individual's caste.

Swan choked his "tea" down with a smile and listened, allowing a dozen ongoing conversations to wash over him and picking out pertinent bits and pieces of information with the ease that another man might pluck ripe fruit from a tree.

"...heard the Tri-Khan's guard turned back a trading caravan this week."

"*Turned back?* I heard they were massacred and their heads wrapped up as presents and sent back to Yane, a different head for each of the major houses in the royal family. And even then there were still several heads left over!"

"...master has a warehouse full of brass, and he hasn't been able to move a single piece for over two months. If the damned Tri-Khan wasn't so *tri*-stubborn..."

"...rumors that Chiaroscuro and the Guild are working together to disrupt trade through the South."

"To what end?"

"*Our* end, of course!"

This last comment inspired laughter at several surrounding tables, but Swan found nothing amusing about it. He had arrived in Yane a day ago, and he'd wandered through the city since then, visiting various establishments of high, low and sometimes no repute. Before he talked with Anbeyssa, he wanted to get a sense of what the citizens of Yane thought and felt about the current trade difficulties and the resultant economic problems that had spread throughout the South like some manner of disease. This teahouse was no different from all the other places he'd visited. The words might be spoken by different mouths, but they remained the same. Swan was hardly surprised to learn that the people of Yane largely blamed the Tri-Khan for their problems rather than the Varangian

City-States of which they were a part. One of the most basic principles of negotiation was that each side always believed it was in the right. What did surprise him was the vehemence with which the citizens spoke, and the edge of despair their voices held. The people of Yane might not be suffering as much as the villagers of Reeds Swaying at Sunset, but they were suffering nonetheless.



Swan had observed so many other things in the last couple of days. In general, clothes were dingier and in more need of repair since his last visit. The animals in the city—dray horses and oxen—were fewer in number and in poorer health. The streets were less crowded. Fewer people were running errands or conducting business. And the quality of goods and services, such as this wretched tea, had taken a downhill slide. Individually, each of these factors might not seem like much, but taken together, they painted a picture of a once-magnificent city in the early stages of decline.

Swan was young, but he'd done and seen much for a man even twice his age, and he knew that poor economic conditions were all too often a precursor to war. Such had been the case with the Ambergris Islands a century ago, when the northern chain broke off trade relations with the southern after centuries of peaceful cooperation. Open warfare erupted, and the Ambergris Islands, once home to a highly cultured and civilized race, had been completely devastated. The islands were now lifeless and barren, used only as havens for pirates and marauders.

The comments he'd overheard just a few moments ago made him fear Yane was in danger of following the same path: massacres by the Tri-Khan's guards... a sinister alliance between Chiaroscuro and the Guild... Swan didn't have enough information to know how much truth, if any, these rumors held, but that was beside the point. What mattered was that the people of Yane *believed* them. If the members of the extended royal family did too, then Yane was already much further down the path of war than anyone in the city realized. Anyone but Swan, that is.



He decided that he'd seen and heard enough; he was ready to see Anbeyssa. Besides, diplomatic training or not, he didn't think he could manage to swallow another drop of this horrid tea. He left a dinar on the table for the server—not that he'd seen the woman since she'd brought him his tea—pushed back his chair and stood. As he started to make his way toward the door, a man at one of the tables stuck out his elbow as Swan passed and bumped him on the hip. The blow was not a hard one by any means, but it was enough to cause the man, who was in the process of sipping a cup of tea, to spill a few drops onto his chest.

The man was squat with a burgeoning gut, but well muscled. He had concentric circles of scars on his left cheek and a tattoo of a blue heron on the back of his right hand. From the man's well-developed physique and callused hands, Swan guessed that he was an overseer of some merchant's warehouses who had started out as a simple laborer and risen to a position of responsibility.

Swan turned to the man and executed a low bow. When he straightened, he said, "Please allow me to offer my most sincere and humble apologies for my clumsiness."

Swan knew that the bump hadn't been his fault. Even before his Exaltation, he'd possessed more than enough grace and dexterity to maneuver his way through a crowded room without accidentally touching anyone or anything. And his skills had grown exponentially since then. If he desired, he could dash across the room, waving between the tables without jostling a single elbow or causing so much as a ripple in anyone's tea.

But Swan was a diplomat, and so, he apologized, because that's what a good diplomat did.

The man with the blue heron tattoo scowled. "Are you mocking me?"

"I assure you, good sir, that I am most sincere and do not wish to give any offense." Swan took in the man's companions with a glance. There were four, and though they were not as well muscled as Blue Heron, they nevertheless looked

strong enough. More warehouse workers then. Perhaps assistants to Blue Heron.

"It's too late for that," Blue Heron said. "I was offended the moment you came inside."

The man's companions laughed, and their amusement spread to some of the other customers. Everyone in the Wild Camellia stopped what they were doing and focused their attention on Swan. The young Exalt cursed inwardly. The last thing he wanted to do was draw unnecessary attention to himself.

"We don't like outlanders here in Yane," Blue Heron said. "Do we, my friends?" Though this last question was directed at the man's companions, he never took his gaze off Swan.

"That's right, Beryl," one of the companions said. "Can't be trusted."

"Especially these days," a second added.

"Could be an agent for the Tri-Khan," a third chimed in.

"Maybe a mercenary," the fourth said. "Hoping to find work if war breaks out."

"He's no fighter," Blue Heron—Beryl—sneered. "Just look at him. He's too thin, and he's not even armed. He couldn't battle his way through a sheet of rice paper!"

More laughter at that comment, and this time, almost the entire room joined in.

Swan thought he understood what was going on here. The citizens of Yane lived in a very structured society with a rigid caste system. The last time he had visited, Swan had found the people to be wary of outsiders, but tolerant enough. After all, Yane was one of the major hubs for trade in the South, so "outlanders" were common here. But it seemed that the current tensions between Yane and Chiaroscuro had exacerbated the Southerners' natural distrust of foreigners to the point of open hostility. Beryl had purposefully stuck out his elbow so that Swan would bump into him. He'd *wanted* to cause trouble for Swan. Instead of stopping and apologizing, Swan supposed he should have just kept on walking. He was so used to using words to smooth over





difficulties and solve problems that he sometimes forgot that silence could be just as effective as words.

Swan bowed once more, not quite as low this time, then straightened. "Once more, my apologies." Then, he turned to go, intending to depart the teahouse before the situation could escalate any further. But he only managed to take two steps before he heard Beryl's chair scrape against the wooden floor. Swan knew the man had stood, and he leaned to the right and angled his left shoulder back. Beryl—who'd been reaching out to grab Swan—caught only a handful of air.

Swan turned to face him once more.

"Thank you for your courtesy, but I can find my own way out."

Beryl grinned, displaying a mouthful of crooked yellow teeth. "Oh, I'll let you leave—*after* I've finished with you!"

The squat man took a step toward Swan and fainted with his left hand as he brought his right foot around in a sweeping arc designed to knock Swan off his feet. Swan simply jumped at the right instant and avoided Beryl's foot.

The teahouse customers laughed again, but this time, they weren't laughing at Swan. Beryl's scowl deepened, and his lips pulled back from his teeth in a snarl. He looked at his companions, all of whom remained seated at the table.

"Well? Are you just going to sit there and allow some purple-haired foreigner to make fools of us?"

Beryl's companions refused to meet his gaze, and they made no move to get up. Beryl scowled at his companions' lack of enthusiasm, then turned to Swan and dashed toward him without any further warning. The man attacked with more fury than technique, and just as Beryl's fingertips were just about to brush the fabric of his shirt, Swan turned sideways and leaned backward, bending so far that he should've lost his balance, but he didn't. Beryl continued racing forward unable to stop himself and crashed into a nearby table. The customers that had been sitting there were knocked out of their seats, and the table itself was tipped over. Beryl staggered and looked as if he might fall to the floor, but he managed to maintain his footing

and whirled about. His features twisted into an animalistic expression that wouldn't have been out of place on one of the ceremonial masks that adorned the walls.

"You little flea!" Beryl growled. His lips drew back from his teeth, and his eyes narrowed to tiny points of hatred in his milk chocolate face. He came at Swan again, but this time the young Exalt flicked his right foot against Beryl's foreleg and the man fell forward. Swan caught him easily, placed a thumb and forefinger on the back of Beryl's neck and gave a firm squeeze in just the right place. Beryl's eyes rolled white, and a soft moan escaped his lips as his body went slack in Swan's arms.

Swan carried Beryl back to his table and gently lowered him onto his seat.

"Take good care of your friend," Swan said to Beryl's companions, a slight smile playing at the corner of his lips. "I'm afraid he can't hold his tea."

Swan walked out of the Wild Camellia and headed west, in the general direction of the royal complex. He glanced over his shoulder periodically to see if Beryl and his compatriots were following him in hope of extracting a little vengeance, but he saw no sign of them.

In keeping with the Varangian obsession with all things cosmological, the city of Yane was built on a precise radial plan, like a series of wheels, one nesting inside another, with the palace complex of the extended royal family located in the exact center. This section of Yane was called Hearthside, and it was home to the middle castes. The buildings here were simple one- and two-story stone structures with slate roofs. The buildings were unadorned for the most part, the stone walls unpainted, the doors and shutters plain, featureless wood. Every now and then, Swan spied a window box containing nothing more exotic than daisies or carnations. The buildings were crowded, with barely enough space between for a man—and a thin man, at that—to slip through sideways. This section of Yane was humble to the point of being bland, as befit the caste of its inhabitants, at least according to the Varangian worldview. But the people





who lived in Hearthside took pride in their neighborhoods. The streets, while only smooth earth, were clean and dry, the buildings were well maintained, and if the pedestrians who passed by Swan didn't smile and nod at the foreigner in their midst, neither did they scowl at him or move aside to avoid him. Even with the current tensions in Yane, Swan was heartened to see that not everyone in the city was like Beryl and his friends.

After a time, Hearthside gave way to what was officially known as the Open Emporia, but which everyone in Yane—the members of the extended royal family included—referred to simply as the Sprawl. Swan thought the informal name was far more appropriate. The Sprawl was a vast open-air market situated between Hearthside and the Aerie, where the upper castes of Yane—who were almost but not quite on the same level as the royals—lived. Every caste, save the royals, who were above such things, was represented in the Sprawl, each having its own assigned section. While shoppers of any caste could move freely through the Sprawl, the sellers were strictly confined to their given section.

Swan encountered the lower-caste section first. Here, few of the sellers had booths or stands. Most sat cross-legged on the ground, with whatever meager goods they had to offer spread out on tattered blankets before them. The wares here consisted primarily of small, easily gathered objects, such as dried plants and roots, desiccated insects and lizards, small bits of bone and human teeth. Some of the sellers had a more artistic eye than others, and their merchandise was more decorative—stones carved in the shapes of elephants and giraffes, bones bound together with thin strips of leather to form crude wind chimes. The sellers called out to Swan as he passed, exhorting him to stop or at least pause long enough to examine their wares, such as they were.

“Finest mandrake root in the city! A thousand and one uses!”

“Most honored sir! Put this polished rat's claw under your pillow for three nights during the cycle of the full

moon, and you shall have erotic dreams beyond your most fevered imaginings!”

“Spiced lizard jerky! So hot, you’ll breathe fire!”

The buyers in this section of the Sprawl were few, mostly due to the humble offerings of its sellers, Swan thought. But as he continued to make his way westward, the sellers rose in caste, and they stood behind booths or in stalls, hawking wares of a more sophisticated fashion: bolts of cloth, spices, pottery, inexpensive jewelry... The clientele were more numerous here, mostly a mixture of low- and middle-caste Southerners, with a sprinkling of foreigners. Though more people were looking than buying, business was nevertheless brisk here, and the sellers rarely had to shout in order to draw the attention of prospective customers.

This part of the Sprawl was one of Swan’s favorite places in Yane. It would be a gross exaggeration to say that the castes were equal here, but they mingled in ways not conceivable in other parts of the city.

Swan paused at a stall where a Southern woman was selling turquoise jewelry. Out of all the jewelry displayed on tables in the stall, Swan’s eye had been caught by a single necklace hanging from a wooden stand, a teardrop-shaped piece of turquoise dangling on the end of a golden chain. Or at least, a chain that *appeared* to be gold. He wondered if Arianna might fancy such a thing, and he stepped into the stall to examine the necklace more closely.

As he peered at the chain, the woman selling the jewelry stepped forward and gave him a wide, welcoming smile that, if overly practiced, was sincere enough.

“And how are you this day, honored sir?” She wasn’t much older than Swan—certainly not in her thirties yet—and she was pretty, with blonde hair and a shapely figure.

Swan returned the woman’s smile and was about to reply when he saw her gaze dart to the side for an instant before returning to him. Without thinking, he quickly reached backward and his fingers closed on a small, thin wrist.

“Hey!”





Swan held tight as he turned around. The owner of the wrist—a young Southern boy wearing only a white breech cloth—gritted his teeth as he desperately tried to pull free of Swan’s grip, but the Exalt held the boy fast.

“Let me go! I’ll yell for the city guard!”

Swan judged the boy to be no more than ten, perhaps younger. “Go ahead. When a guardsman arrives, I’ll be happy to inform him that I captured a pickpocket. And a rather clumsy one at that.”

The boy stopped struggling and frowned. “Who are you calling clumsy?” He puffed out his chest with pride. “I’m one of the best in the city!”

Swan smiled. “I’m sure that’s what your mother told you, but even if she hadn’t glanced in your direction as you approached, I still would’ve felt your touch. Successful thieving requires lighter fingers than yours, my young friend.”

Still holding onto the boy’s wrist, Swan turned back to the woman manning the jewelry stall. Her eyes were wide with fear.

“Please, don’t turn us in. Jarmash and I... we’re all each other has... and these are such hard times in Yane.” She lowered her gaze. “Not that a foreign gentleman such as yourself could hope to understand.”

“I understand more than you think.” Swan let go of Jarmash’s wrist, but the boy—perhaps waiting for his mother to give him an indication of what he should do—just stood there, watching the two adults closely.

Swan picked up the teardrop necklace. “How much is this?”

“Ten dinars. But if you will overlook Jarmash’s and my... indiscretion, you may take it and go, with both our blessings.”

Swan held the necklace closer to his eyes and examined it. The chain was painted iron, not gold, and the teardrop piece of turquoise was scratched.

“I’ll take it,” he said. “But ten dinars isn’t a fair price.”

The woman held her hands. “As I said, for you, it costs nothing! Please, take it and go!”

Swan reached for his purse, opened it, and took out twenty dinars. "I think this is a more suitable amount." He put the coins on the display table, then tucked the necklace into one of his pockets.

The woman frowned in confusion. "I don't understand."

"Profits must not be very good if you're forced to have your son supplement your income through thievery. You can't afford to give away any of your jewelry for free, and perhaps the extra can keep Jarmash from having to steal for a little while."

The woman looked as if she might cry. She scooped up the coins and held them tight in her hand. "A thousand blessings upon your head, kind sir!"

Swan smiled. "Thank you. Given the direction my life has taken of late, I can use all the blessings I can get."

With a last smile at the boy—who looked at both adults as if they were crazy—Swan continued on his way toward the royal complex.

The closer he got to the Aerie, the more sophisticated and elaborate the sellers' displays became, and the more exotic and expensive their wares. The customers here were mostly upper-caste Southerners with a few royals and their entourages tossed into the mix. Though there were other foreigners here, Swan still felt suspicious eyes on him from every direction. Evidently, the tolerance of the people in Hearthside didn't extend to this particular part of the Sprawl. Still, no one showed any overt signs of hostility, and Swan reached the end of the Sprawl and the beginning of the Aerie without difficulty.

The buildings here were larger, more complex and aesthetically pleasing, the spaces between them wider, the streets broader and paved with cobblestones. More of the buildings were private domiciles, large enough to be considered mansions anywhere else in Creation, though they paled in comparison to the vast grandeur of the royal complex. The buildings were made of threaded marble and possessed a commonality of design. Sharp angles were avoided, making the structures look like a series of domes stacked one





upon another or resting side by side. The outer surfaces were covered with detailed carvings, each home possessing a dominant theme different from the next. One family might have carvings of animals adorning their home, while another might have an ocean scene, and still another a specific astrological configuration of stars and planets that Swan assumed held special significance for the dwellers within.

There was little traffic here, mostly servants going about on different errands for their masters, and a few upper-caste Southerners riding in coaches drawn by beautiful sleek horses. Again, Swan received a number of looks as he made his way through the Aerie, but as before, no one challenged him. He continued walking for a time until finally he reached the center of Yane and the royal complex.

The complex where the various royal subfamilies lived was called the Constellation, and with good reason. During the day, the homes of the royals appeared impressive enough—a vast interconnected system of domes, spires and clock towers made from what appeared to be smooth, unbroken ivory. During his previous journey to Yane, Swan had asked Anbeyssa to share to secret of the Constellation's design and building, but the lord had merely smiled and said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, "That would be telling."

But the true wonder of the Constellation was that, during the day, the spires somehow absorbed the strong Southern sunlight and the tips of the spires glowed blue-white at night, like miniature earthbound stars. Equally as wondrous, no matter which direction one viewed the Constellation from, it always formed the precise astrological configuration under which the very first member of the extended royal family was born many centuries ago.

A fifty-foot wall of smooth polished white marble surrounded the royal complex, and there was a new touch since Swan's last visit. Patrolling along the top of the wall were armed guards accompanied by great cats, powerful muscles moving like liquid beneath tawny coats and large incisors jutting over their lower jaws. Another testament to

the current tensions between Yane and the Tri-Khan. The outer wall's main gate was constructed from thick black iron bars with sharp outward-pointing spikes on top. The gate was open now, as it normally was. The gate was closed and locked only in the direst of emergencies—like an invading army from Chiaroscuro. Steady streams of servants and functionaries came and went on errands for the subfamilies they served. There were no guards stationed at the main gate, and Swan walked through and into the courtyard without any problem.



Because of the bitter and often deadly feuds that erupted within and between subfamilies, there were no common areas inside the Constellation that all might share. However, the courtyard, which was out in open air and watched over by numerous guards, served as a central—and, far more importantly, neutral—meeting ground for Yane's royals. The courtyard was filled with men, women and children gathered in groups ranging from small to large, all of them talking, laughing, arguing, playing, gossiping and, above all, plotting their never-ending intrigues against one another.

The inner wall of the courtyard was covered with intricately rendered murals depicting the history of Yane in general and the exploits of the extended royal family in particular—the latter represented primarily by scenes of business deals, trade negotiations, marriages and assassinations. None of the scenes were labeled, so Swan had only the vaguest notion of who the various personages depicted in the murals were. No doubt the royals knew every one of them by sight and could provide specific details regarding their lineage, inter-family connections and alliances, as well as whatever accomplishments for which they were noted.

Each subfamily had its own entranceway into the Constellation, stone arches with the individual family name carved at the top. Swan made his way through the crowd in the courtyard and headed for the arch that led to Anbeyssa's section of the royal complex. Two guards stood on either side of the arch, a man and a woman, both Southerners with



the hard look of skilled warriors. Swan put on a friendly smile as he approached them.

“Good day to you both. I come seeking entrance to the home of Lord Anbeyssa.” Swan reached into one of his pockets and pulled out a golden medallion. “I have a token of passage given to me by Anbeyssa himself during my last visit.” He held out the medallion for the guards to inspect, but the male made a dismissive gesture.

“Perhaps Lord Anbeyssa gave you that, and perhaps he didn’t,” the man said. “Either way, it doesn’t matter since that token is no longer valid. You must have a current one to get past us.”

“Or a letter of passage,” the woman added. “Signed by Lord Anbeyssa himself, or one of his prime functionaries.”

“You don’t happen to have such a document in your possession,” the first guard said with a barely concealed smirk. “Do you?”

“Perhaps you would do me the courtesy of explaining why my token is no longer *current*.”

“Of course,” the first guard said with an edge of mockery to his voice. He was tall and broad shouldered, with a barrel chest and thick strong arms. He wore a sword at his side, but from the confidence and ease with which he stood, Swan doubted the man needed a weapon to deal with anyone trying to force his way in to see Anbeyssa.

“In case you aren’t aware, things have changed a great deal between Yane and Chiaroscuro in recent months. Those who were at one time considered allies are not necessarily such anymore.”

“There are spies everywhere,” the woman added. “I’m sure you can sympathize.”

“Thus, all former tokens and old letters of passage are no longer acceptable,” the first guard said. “However, if you’d like to apply for a new token or letter, you have merely to visit the Sanctuary of Ultimate Order and Clarity, see the Royal Secretary of Ingress, and apply for one.”

“You should know, however, that the application process itself can take several days,” the woman put in.

“And after that, it might be weeks before your application is approved.”

“If ever,” the man said with a grin. “There’s a reason why the Sanctuary is sometimes referred to as the Morass.”

That didn’t sound promising at all. “I don’t suppose either of you would be kind enough to take a message from me to Anbeyssa?” Swan brushed his hand against his coin purse to make it jingle. “I would of course be most grateful.”

“We appreciate the offer,” the man said, “and in the past, we would’ve gladly accepted.”

“But these days, it would mean our jobs if we were caught indulging your generosity,” the woman said.

“Our jobs and perhaps more,” the male finished.

He thanked the guards for their courtesy (such as it was) then walked away from the entry gate. Despite the guards’ less-than-encouraging words, Swan decided he would pay a visit to the Sanctuary of Ultimate Order and Clarity and hope his diplomatic training—and his other abilities—would help him navigate the so-called Morass.







CHAPTER FIVE

The Sanctuary of Ultimate Order and Clarity was located on the western side of the royal complex, on the edge of the Aerie. There was no sign to indicate the Sanctuary as such, but none was needed. Where the Constellation was surrounded by a high wall and the buildings in the Aerie were all variations on a basic dome design, the Sanctuary was a squarish building constructed entirely from dour gray stone covered with tendrils of dark-green ivy. The large mahogany double doors at the entrance were square, as were the windows. There was no ornamentation or decoration of any kind. The Sanctuary was plain, simple and mundane, as befit its purpose.

A number of people—Varangians of all castes, as well as foreigners like Swan—were entering or leaving the Sanctuary. Those going in wore facial expressions ranging from hope to trepidation to outright terror. The faces of those leaving displayed frustration, devastation or stunned shock. A series of stone steps led up to the large mahogany doors, which were, at the moment, open to allow people to come and go freely. Swan paused at the bottom of the steps and gazed up at the entrance. He took a deep breath as if he were preparing himself for battle, then began climbing upward.

The moment he passed through the entranceway and into a large atrium—also made of gray stone, also without any decoration—two Varangian children ran toward him from opposite directions, their sandaled feet slapping the



stone floor. When the two youngsters noticed they were both heading for the same target, they poured on the speed, running as fast as they could, each obviously trying to beat the other and be the first to reach Swan. It was a close race, but the girl beat the boy, if only just. The girl grinned at her rival who frowned and stuck his tongue out at her. The boy then looked away from her and hurriedly addressed Swan.

“Good sir, I beg you not to allow Itta to guide you. She may run more swiftly than I, but my knowledge of the Sanctuary outstrips hers by far.”

The girl sniffed. “My mind is just as swift as my feet, Tindel.”

Swan glanced around the atrium and saw other children descending on his fellow petitioners like ants swarming over bits of dropped food. It seemed these children were the Sanctuary’s welcoming committee. He turned back to the boy and girl and spent a moment studying their faces. Finally, he made a decision.

“Sorry, Tindel. Itta *was* first.”

The boy scowled, but instead of pleading his case further, he turned and dashed off to intercept someone else who was just entering the Sanctuary.

The girl smiled at Swan. “Welcome to the Sanctuary of Ultimate Order and Clarity. As you heard, I am Itta. How may I help you obtain what you seek?”

Swan judged the girl to be thirteen, fourteen at most. She reminded him somewhat of Anbeyssa’s daughter, Maylea. She’d been about the same age at the time of his last visit to Yane.

“My name is Swan, and I have come to obtain a current pass for the royal complex. More specifically, to the home of Lord Anbeyssa.”

Itta frowned. “I’m afraid what you seek is most difficult to acquire.”

Swan waited for her to continue, but she said nothing further, only looked at him expectantly. “Then it is fortunate that I have someone of such swift foot and mind to guide me in my search, isn’t it?”

Itta nodded as if in agreement but still said nothing.

Swan decided to try a different approach. "The guards outside the entrance to Anbeyssa's section of the Constellation suggested a new permit could be obtained from the Royal Secretary of Ingress. I'll be happy to find my own way if you'll be so kind as to tell where his office is located."

"I would be delighted to do so, most honored guest."

Swan sighed in relief. *Now* they were getting somewhere!

Itta's expression became one of apologetic regret. "Unfortunately, it is impossible."

Swan was beginning to suspect that the children greeting the petitioner were less of a welcoming committee and more a first line of defense to prevent anyone penetrating the Sanctuary's bureaucracy. "And why is that?"

"Because no one is permitted in the upper tiers of the Sanctuary without an escort."

Swan maintained his smile, though it was becoming more difficult to do so. "I would be honored if *you* would serve as my escort."

The girl bowed. "I assure you, Master Swan, the honor would be entirely mine." She then fell silent again.

"But..." Swan urged.

"But I cannot escort you until I have obtained the proper permits for myself."

Swan struggled to understand what Itta was saying. "You mean that, in order to help *me* get a permit to see Lord Anbeyssa, *you* must first get a permit yourself?"

Itta grinned and nodded. "Precisely! You are most wise, Master Swan!"

Swan glanced around to see how his fellow petitioners were faring. All of them were speaking with Southern children like Itta, and all of them seemed to be having the same sort of luck Swan was having in learning what he needed to know, which is to say, none. Some held out dinars, clearly hoping to bribe the children, but the youngsters refused to take the proffered coins. Several of the petitioners were already giving up and starting to walk out of the atrium in frustration.





Despite himself, Swan was impressed. Of all the bureaucracies he'd dealt with during his diplomatic career, these children were the most formidable first barrier he'd ever encountered.



So bribery didn't work. At least, not when one offered money. But if one were to offer something a bit more special...

"Tell me, Itta, how will you go about obtaining the permit you need to escort me?" As he spoke, Swan reached into one of his pockets and brought out the turquoise necklace he'd purchased in the Sprawl. He held it bunched up in his fist so Itta wouldn't see if right away.

"It is a long and difficult process," she said. "One that can take days if one is fortunate, weeks if one... is..."

Swan began working the necklace between his fingers subtly, so as not to draw attention to it—or, at least, to *appear* as if he weren't trying to draw Itta's attention. The chain clinked softly, and he made sure that his fingers were spread far enough apart so that glimpses of the chain and the teardrop-shaped pendant would be visible.

"What is that?" Itta asked.

"Hmm? Oh, you mean this?" Swan opened his hand and revealed the necklace lying nestled in the hollow of his hand. "My apologies if I distracted you. I often handle little trinkets such as this when I talk, without even realizing I am doing so. It is a nervous habit that I've had since I was a child. Please forgive me."

Swan started to replace the necklace in his pocket, but Itta quickly said, "Wait! May I see it?"

Swan didn't allow the grin he felt inside to touch his lips as he held the necklace out to the girl. "Of course."

Itta took the piece of jewelry and examined it closely, running her fingers over the chain, rolling the teardrop-shaped piece of turquoise between her thumb and index finger.

"It's so smooth," she said.

Swan didn't respond right away. He merely continued to watch as the girl fondled the necklace for several more moments. Finally, he asked, "Would you like to try it on?"

Itta looked at Swan, her gaze both hopeful and fearful. "I wish I could, most generous sir, but floor-runners such as myself are not permitted to wear jewelry of any kind."

Swan had guessed as much. Of all the children in the atrium, none wore anything save the simple white clothing common to the South. No jewelry, no tattoos or ritual scars, no adornments of any kind to indicate caste, rank, or status.

"You have no caste, do you?" Swan asked. "None of the floor-runners do."

Itta nodded, though she didn't take her gaze off the necklace in her hand. "We were all born into a caste, but when our astrological charts revealed we were to serve here in the Sanctuary, we left our caste—along with our birth families—behind."

"I see. And as you grow older, you rise in rank within the Sanctuary's bureaucracy."

Itta nodded again. "All the administrators in the upper tiers once were floor-runners such as myself."

"And are those who work in the levels above us permitted to wear jewelry?" Swan asked.

"Some of them. It depends on the exact position they have."

"Then perhaps you can hold onto that necklace until such time as you are able to wear it openly, whenever that day might be."

Itta looked at Swan with delight. "I guess that wouldn't be against the rules of the Sanctuary." She hesitated a moment longer, and then, after a quick look around to see if anyone was watching, Itta tucked the necklace into her white bustier. Though she was still too young to have much of a bosom to fill out the cloth, the necklace nevertheless remained securely hidden.

Itta grinned. "Thank you so much, Master Swan." She then clapped her hands together and rubbed them





vigorously. “Now, let’s see about getting you upstairs to speak with the Royal Secretary of Ingress.”



Swan and his young guide stood at the end of a long corridor that was filled with administrative offices. None of them had closed doors. None were needed, given the labyrinthine bureaucracy, for very few petitioners made it this far.

“Here we are,” Itta whispered, her tone one of weary triumph. “The Royal Secretary’s Office.”

It had been several hours since Swan had first set foot in the Sanctuary of Ultimate Order and Clarity, and—with Itta’s guidance—he had at least reached the uppermost tier of the building. He now carried a number of signed, countersigned, sealed, stamped, initialed and notarized documents on his person.

“I can go with you no further,” Itta said. “Good luck to you, Master Swan.” She stood on her tiptoes and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. She then flashed him an affectionate smile before turning and running back down the corridor.

Swan stepped up the threshold of the Royal Secretary’s office, but as Itta had instructed him, he did not cross over. From where he stood, he had a clear view of the interior of the office. He’d expected the offices on the top tier of the Sanctuary to be lavish, large and well furnished, as befitted the station of their occupants. Yet, they were all tiny, cramped spaces smaller than those on the lower tiers to which Itta had taken him today. The walls were bare, there was a single window, a single plain desk with a sheaf of stacked paper, ink and quill, and two chairs: one in front of the desk and one behind. Standing at the window, looking out, hands clasped behind his back, was a bald, wizened Southern man whom Swan took to be the Royal Secretary of Ingress.

As Itta had explained to him, protocol demanded that a petitioner stand silently at the threshold and wait for the

occupant of the office to acknowledge his or her presence. So, Swan stood.

And stood.

And stood...

In all the time Swan waited, the Royal Secretary of Ingress didn't turn away from his window. Finally, Swan decided to risk the man's wrath and softly cleared his throat.

The man spun around, a look of shock on his face. But shock quickly gave way to delight, and he rushed toward Swan, grinning broadly, hands outstretched to welcome him.

"Come in, come in! It's so good to see you!"

The man clasped both of Swan's hands in his own, squeezed them warmly, then pulled Swan into the office. The man directed Swan to take a seat in front of his desk, then he hurried around and sat behind it. He folded his hands on the desktop in front of him and looked at Swan, grinning even wider than before, if such a thing were possible.

"Thank for you such an... *enthusiastic* greeting," Swan said. "If you'll forgive my saying so, after everything I've been through to get here, I wasn't expecting to be welcomed so warmly."

Now that they faced one another, Swan could see that the man was quite old, in his eighties at least, with thin white hair and a wisp of a beard. His eyes were slightly rheumy, though still bright and alive with intelligence and good humor. He wore a moderate amount of jewelry: copper bracelets around both wrists and a silver nose ring in his left nostril. The only tattoos he had were a series of blue chevrons on his right biceps. From the hours Swan had already spent navigating the complex waters of the Sanctuary, he knew these chevrons indicated their owner's rank in the bureaucratic hierarchy. And of all the bureaucrats that Swan had dealt with today, this elderly grinning man had the most chevrons, enough that they stretched almost past his elbow.





Rather than take offense at Swan's words, the old man chuckled. "Those in the lower tiers often perform their duties with less than good humor. Those of us on the uppermost tier approach our tasks somewhat differently."

"I see," Swan said, though in truth he didn't fully understand. "You *are* the Royal Secretary of Ingress?"

The man nodded. "That's my official title, but you're welcome to call me Naamen if you'd like."

"Thank you, Naamen. I am Swan, of the Coral Archipelago." The young Exalt began pulling documents from various pockets and laying them on the desk. "I think you'll find that all my paperwork is in order."

Naamen spread out the collection of papers, parchments, scrolls, tokens and seals Swan had gathered over the course of the last few hours. He looked them over, reading a line here, a passage there, nodding slowly as he did.

"So, you seek an updated permit to enter the home of Lord Anbeyssa." It was not a question.

"Yes. You see, several years ago I—"

Naamen held up a hand to silence him. "No need to explain further, my boy. It's all in here." He gestured at the paperwork spread across his desk. "Frankly, though, there's no need for me to read any of it." He grinned. "After all, you'd never have reached me if all your paperwork wasn't executed properly."

So saying, Naamen opened one of his drawers and swept the collection of papers, permits and licenses off the surface of his desk. It didn't quite fit, and he jammed it in—paper crunching, crinkling and tearing—then he slammed the drawer shut.

Swan wasn't able to keep a look of disbelief off his face, and Naamen asked, "Is something wrong?"

Swan fought to recover. "Not at all. It's just that I've never seen a filing system quite like that before."

Naamen laughed. "That's because it *isn't* a filing system! We long ago gave up trying to keep records at the Sanctuary. If we attempted to store all the paperwork we generate, we'd bury the entire city within a year! Instead,

floor-runners empty our desk drawers nightly and carry the refuse down to the lower levels, where it's incinerated."

Naamen then opened another drawer, reached in, rifled around for a moment, then withdrew a document covered with writing. He placed the document on the desktop, picked up the quill, dipped the tip in ink, then signed his name at the bottom. He put the quill back in its stand, blew on the signature to dry it, then held the paper out to Swan.

"Here you go, my boy. All you have to do is show this to the guards outside the entranceway to Anbeyssa's quarters and then to his household staff, and you'll be granted passage."

Swan stared at the paper in Naamen's hand for a moment before taking it, folding it neatly and tucking it away in a pocket. Then, not quite able to believe that after everything he'd been through in the Sanctuary that the final step had been so easy, he stood and bowed. "You have my deepest and most profound gratitude, Royal Secretary Naamen. If there is nothing else that I must do, I shall take my leave."

Swan bowed once more, then turned to go. But before he reached the hallway, Naamen said, "There isn't anything more that you *have* to do."

There was a wistful, almost pleading tone in the old man's voice that made Swan hesitate. He turned back around to face Naamen.

"But...?"

"As you might well imagine, we get few visitors on the uppermost tier. To tell you the truth, I spend a great deal of my day looking out the window and watching the birds."

Swan thought of how Naamen had been standing at the window with his hands behind his back when Swan had first reached the man's office. How many hours had Naamen stood like that, waiting for someone to enter his office and speak with him? How many *years*?

"So, while you have what you came for and you're quite free to go, I'd appreciate it if..."



“Yes?”

The elderly man opened yet another desk drawer and removed a deck of cards.

“Would you like to play Gang of Five for a while before you leave?”

Swan smiled. “I’d be delighted.”



CHAPTER SIX

After playing more than a few hands with Naamen, Swan left the Sanctuary of Ultimate Order and Clarity and returned to the room he had rented at the Inn of Divine Chance—an establishment he'd chosen for no other reason than that the name amused him. It was early evening by then, and he spent the time until sunset in quiet meditation. He then went down to the inn's common room and had a light dinner of bread, cheese and fruit before once again venturing out into the streets of Yane.

Though it wasn't yet full dark, workers were hanging lamps on street corner poles. The lamp flames had a green tinge and gave off a faint sour odor from whatever substance had been added to their oil so their smoke might keep mosquitoes and other nuisance insects away. The number of pedestrians had thinned since this afternoon, though there were still quite a few people finishing up the last of the day's business or getting an early start on the night's recreation. As he walked among them, Swan was overwhelmed by a sense of otherness, of being separate from the men and women around him. Of being *foreign* in every sense of the word. This feeling had nothing to do with the color of his skin or his manner of dress. Swan had traveled much during his time as a diplomat, and he had long ago gotten used to the differences in the cultures he encountered. In fact, he delighted in those differences, found them to be an endless source of fascination and, from time to time, a source of



frustration as well—especially when a particular negotiation was going poorly.

He felt different from the people with whom he shared the streets because he *was* different in the most profound way possible: He was Exalted. When the power of the Unconquered Sun—the greatest of gods—flowed through him, he could accomplish unparalleled feats of strength, skill and magic. Swan was determined to use those gifts in service to others, to attempt to preserve, protect and, if possible, improve Creation.

Most people believed his kind to be Anathema, and Swan couldn't blame them. The Celestial Exalted had done much harm during the First Age, when they had foolishly allowed themselves to believe that they *were* gods, instead of merely being the servants of gods. It was no great surprise, then, that ordinary humans feared and distrusted the Celestial Exalted and that the Wyld Hunt sought them out and destroyed them at every opportunity.

But this was not the First Age, and though Swan's spirit had been present in another incarnation as an Exalt back then, he was a different man now. He had vowed not to make the same mistakes in this lifetime that he had in the last, but he knew that the power he wielded could prove a great temptation. He hoped and prayed he'd be able to fulfill his vow—that he would be able to keep from succumbing to the delusion that he was better than the people who walked around him. More worthy of ruling them than they were of ruling themselves.

As he drew near the royal complex, Swan began to feel lonely and depressed. He wished he had a companion to talk with, someone with whom he could share his feelings. Someone who could truly understand his fears in a way no one else in Creation could.

He wished Arianna were here.

She was busy with her own affairs at the moment, though, and since they had parted on less-than-amicable terms, he wasn't certain that they would see one another again. In his heart, though, he felt they would... some day.

Full night had descended in the time it had taken Swan to walk from the Inn of Divine Chance to the Constellation. He passed numerous members of the extended royal family and their entourages—some on foot, some traveling by carriage—as they headed out to enjoy the nocturnal entertainments their city had to offer. Swan kept an eye out for Anbeyssa, just in case the lord had decided to avail himself of Yane's nightlife. But Anbeyssa wasn't much on attending concerts or theatrical performances. He found his best entertainment in the endless machinations the ruling caste of Yane engaged in, and therefore, Swan was not surprised that Anbeyssa wasn't to be found among the crowds of royals leaving the complex. So much the better. Swan didn't want to go to all the trouble of gaining entrance to Anbeyssa's home only to discover that the man had stepped out for the evening.



“I hope you don't mind that I let myself in.”

Anbeyssa didn't look up from the scroll that lay open on the desk before him. “I thought I'd left orders that I wasn't to be—”

“Disturbed?” Swan said with a smile.

Anbeyssa looked up and his eyes widened in surprise. “Swan, my good friend!” He got up from his table and crossed the floor of his study with quick, confident strides until he stood directly before Swan. The older man grinned as he clasped the younger's shoulders and squeezed, keeping him at arm's length, as was the custom in Yane—especially among the royal family, where assassination was often viewed as a smart career move. Anbeyssa held onto Swan for a moment, then he let go, and Swan returned the greeting.

“My apologies for coming so late,” Swan said. “I got caught up in a game of cards with a new friend.”

“No need to apologize. You are always welcome in my home, regardless of the hour.”

Anbeyssa's study was a round room with a dome-shaped ceiling decorated with a detailed painting of the



celestial configuration under which the man had been born. A chandelier hung from the ceiling lit with dozens of slow-burning candles that gave off a pleasantly understated scent of spiced vanilla. Bookcases lined the walls, crammed to overflowing with books, scrolls and parchments—many of them originals—and almost all of them written on aspects of astrology or methods of increasing one's business holdings.

"Why didn't you write to tell me you were coming?" Anbeyssa chided. "I would've arranged for a grand feast to be held in your honor!" Then, he frowned. "You say you let *yourself* in?"

Swan chuckled. "Do not be alarmed, my friend. Your staff is as alert and competent as ever. It took some doing to talk them into letting me surprise you like this—especially given the current atmosphere."

"Ah," Anbeyssa's smile fell away. "Yes, I'm afraid that these are indeed difficult times. Much of the good work we accomplished during your last visit has come undone."

Though Anbeyssa was most plainspoken for a member of Yane's ruling caste, who were known throughout Creation for their indirect and often intentionally obfuscating speech, he still had a tendency to minimize bad news.

"I'd say *all* of it has, wouldn't you?" Swan countered. "That's why I've come: to find out what has happened and to once more offer my assistance in restoring amicable relations between Yane and Chiaroscuro."

"Straight to business, eh? You know, such directness and impatience is frowned upon by my people. For a diplomat, you aren't being, well... very diplomatic, are you?"

Swan smiled. "I know you too well, Anbeyssa of Yane. No flattering words or socially accepted rituals will motivate you to do anything you don't want to do. Either you will speak to me or you won't. There is precious little I can do to sway your decision."

Anbeyssa regarded Swan for a long moment before his mouth stretched into a smile. "You speak the truth, my friend. But then, you usually do, don't you?"

Swan thought he detected a hint of a challenge in Anbeyssa's voice, but he couldn't be certain.

Anbeyssa continued. "Come, let us leave my study and adjourn to somewhere more comfortable and conducive to a private conversation between two old friends."

Without another word, Anbeyssa turned and departed. Swan took a deep breath and then followed at a respectful distance behind his royal host.



Swan took a sip of tea, the sweet liquid trickling down his throat like molten honey and filling him with a gentle warmth. "I'm glad to see—and taste—that the privations suffered by so many teahouses in Yane have yet to affect the royal family."

The young Exalt and his host reclined on down-filled couches covered with smooth satin. Between them sat a stone table sculpted to resemble a mospid perching on a tree branch, scaled wings stretched wide. Upon the bird's back rested a lacquered tray holding a pot of steaming tea. This chamber—which Anbeyssa referred to as his den—was filled with statues of animals that roamed the Southern lands: an austrech, a wild boar, a great cat, a coral snake, a grasslands deer, a giant wolf spider and even a miniature version of a tyrant lizard. Swan felt as if he and Anbeyssa were conversing within some manner of petrified menagerie.

"We aren't in danger of starving anytime soon, if that's what you mean," Anbeyssa said. "However, the prime ingredient in this tea is lakan root, which is only found in the East and must be imported at great cost, for the supply is controlled solely by the Guild."

"And in the South, the Guild does business with the Tri-Khan alone," Swan said.

Anbeyssa nodded. "Tacitly, of course, for Chiaroscuro strives to maintain a veneer of loyalty to the Realm. But thanks to our current trading difficulties with the Tri-Khan, this may well be the last pot brewed in my



house for some time. I've been saving it for a special occasion, and I can think of none more appropriate than your miraculous return."

Swan took another sip of tea and closed his eyes as a sensation of warmth spread through his chest and stomach. Lakan root was used to create a drug with mildly narcotic effects. Since his Exaltation, Swan's body was resistant to injury and poisons—recreational drugs included—but he was not entirely immune, and he decided it would be best if he went easy on the tea, despite how delicious it was.

He opened his eyes. "Miraculous?"

"Indeed! For I had heard that you met an untimely death in your homeland of the Coral Archipelago." Anbeyssa smiled, but a cunning look came into his eyes.

Swan took another sip of tea to stall for time while he tried to think of the best way to reply. The one thing he could not do was tell Anbeyssa the truth.

"I'm glad to hear that my ruse has proven so successful. In truth, I feared that it might have been exposed by now."

"Ruse?"

"I managed to make the greatest mistake to which a diplomat can fall prey: I became personally involved. I was helping to negotiate a dispute in the location of shipping lanes when I found myself attracted to the wife of one of the sea captains who were the chief complainants in the dispute."

"Ah, let me guess: You were unable to resist this attraction."

Swan nodded. "Nor was she. I foolishly thought that I could resolve the dispute while carrying on my relationship with the woman. I told myself that once the negotiations were over, we could... Well, that doesn't matter, for the talks came to an abrupt end when the woman's husband discovered our indiscretion. The captain was an extremely jealous, as well as vindictive, man. I decided the only way that I could escape with my life was to end it. Or rather, create the *illusion* of doing so."

"You staged a suicide?" Anbeyssa asked.



Swan nodded. "It seemed the most logical way out at the time. After all, I was a promising young diplomat who had been disgraced and denied the woman I loved. I left word of my plan with my family, of course, so they wouldn't grieve unnecessarily. Even to save my own life, I could not allow them to believe that I had killed myself. When the deed was done, I departed the Coral Archipelago, and I haven't been back since."

"Can you ever return?"

"Perhaps one day, once the sea captain has forgotten about the matter—or died. Though even then I shall return under a cloud of disgrace once my deception has been revealed." Swan paused to sigh, a touch that he hoped didn't seem too calculated. "But that is a concern for another day. Until then, I have vowed to redeem myself by offering my skills wherever they might be of help. And since I assisted you in negotiating the last trade agreement with Chiaroscuro, I hope I might be able to perform the same service again."

Swan kept the relief he felt from showing on his face. *Not a bad story*, he thought. *Especially for the spur of the moment.*

Anbeyssa looked at Swan for a moment before drinking the last of his tea and leaning forward to set his empty cup on the tea tray. Swan sat up, intending to refill his host's cup, but Anbeyssa held up a hand to stop him.

"I must thank you for such an entertaining story," he said. "Now, if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to hear the truth."

Despite his usual control over his emotional reactions, Swan couldn't keep surprise from registering on his face. "Pardon?"

"We have a saying in the royal family: Keep your friends close and your enemies even closer." Anbeyssa chuckled. "This is why we often marry our enemies in Yane. Since our last collaboration, Swan, I have kept an eye on you. As you are one of my very good friends—one possessed of valuable diplomatic and negotiating skills, I might add—I wished to make certain I knew where to reach you should I ever again



have need of your services. My contacts in the Coral Archipelago described your... leave-taking in a far different manner than did you."

"Perhaps your contacts were indulging in a bit of poetic license," Swan suggested. "Or maybe they'd developed a taste for one of the stronger wines the Archipelago produces."

Anbeyssa smiled, but the cunning look didn't leave his eyes. "Perhaps. Let me tell you the story as they told it to me, and you can judge for yourself." He nodded toward his empty teacup, and Swan refilled it and handed the cup back to his host. Anbeyssa held the steaming cup in his hands, but he didn't take a sip right away.

"During your last visit to your homeland, a most profound change came over you. One that, perhaps, you did not entirely welcome. This change did not go unnoticed, and you drew the attention of a Dragon-Blooded magistrate. The two of you battled, and the tale ends with your unfortunate and lamentable death." Anbeyssa paused to take a sip of tea. "What do you think?"

"It's certainly more dramatic than mine," Swan allowed, "but it's obviously incorrect on at least one major point. As you can see, I am no ghost or walking corpse. I am very much alive."

"Quite true, but simply because a story is incorrect in one detail doesn't completely discredit it. And after all, in your version, didn't you say you wished to stage your own death? Perhaps that was the single true detail in your story, while the rest was mere invention."

"*Mere?* I thought I did rather well for thinking on my feet," Swan said, sounding a trifle hurt.

"That you did, my friend. Had I not known what I know, your tale would've been most convincing in all aspects."

The two men were silent for several moments. Eventually, Swan said, "So, you know the truth. What now? Do you send a summons to the Wyld Hunt?"

Anbeyssa looked shocked. "Please! You are my friend! Such a betrayal of hospitality would be unconscionable. Besides, just because the Dragon-Blooded consider your kind Anathema doesn't necessarily make it so."

Swan inclined his head in grateful acknowledgment of his host's words.

"However, I would step cautiously during your stay in Yane, my friend. Dragon-Bloods are not an uncommon sight on our streets, and there's a Dragon-Blooded garrison in Talt. The Realm could have troops or even a Wyld Hunt here in a very short time. You are, of course, welcome to stay in my home as long as you wish, but I strongly suggest you keep a low profile during your visit."

Swan smiled wryly. "I intend to do my best, have no fear. So... what next?"

Anbeyssa took another sip of tea, then shrugged. "We continue discussing the reasons for your visit."

"Very well. We were talking about the possibility of my helping you to resolve the current dispute between Chiaroscuro and Yane. Unfortunately, given my current status as a dead man—a status that, for the time being, I wish to maintain—I'm afraid that I will not be able to help negotiate a new agreement openly. I must, by necessity, operate behind the scenes. But if I can determine the core causes of the trade dispute, I can help you fashion a solution, one that you can present to your fellow members of the Royal Council of Elders as your own."

"That might prove somewhat problematic," Anbeyssa said. "Up to this point, I have avoided taking an active role in the current situation with Chiaroscuro because my status in the royal family has suffered since the trade agreement that you and I brokered fell apart."

"Avoided taking a role, or have you been strongly *discouraged* from doing so by other members of the royal family?" Swan asked.

"A bit of both, I suppose," Anbeyssa said. And then, with a touch of shame in his voice, he added, "I am, in fact, no longer a member of the Council of Elders."





Swan was shocked. Anbeyssa's status had indeed suffered if he'd been forced off the Council. "Even so, I find it hard to believe that you haven't continued to keep your ear to the ground," Swan said.

"Naturally, I keep abreast of developments both within Yane and throughout the South, as does any member of the royal family who wishes to advance in status and avoid assassination. But try as I might, I have been unable to discover any concrete information regarding the trade dispute. There's a great deal of talk, of course, but there's little substance to it. Yane blames Chiaroscuro, while Chiaroscuro blames Yane. Meanwhile, there are rumors of involvement by both the Realm and the Guild, as well as a new organization called the Black Wolves, but as to exactly what role these factions might play—if any—no one can say." Anbeyssa frowned. "It's quite odd, really. The current trade dispute is almost like a bad flood during the time of many rains. Something that just happened naturally."

Swan believed that Anbeyssa spoke the truth, but there was something about the situation that disturbed the young Exalt. Even reduced in status, Anbeyssa was still high up in the hierarchy of the royal family. For him not to know anything specific about the trade dispute was almost unbelievable—especially with all the servants and spies at his disposal. If Anbeyssa couldn't find out information, that meant someone of significant power and influence was purposely working to conceal it from him. But if so, who? And to what end?

"While I appreciate your offer of assistance, my friend, I must admit that I am reluctant to risk damaging my standing in the family any further. Maylea is betrothed to a prince named Declan, and should any more disgrace fall on me, he might well call off the marriage. However..." Anbeyssa trailed off. He steepled his fingers, pursed his lips, and a faraway look came into his eyes.

Swan had seen this before. While Anbeyssa appeared mildly thoughtful, Swan knew he was in truth thinking furiously, calculating and recalculating various diplomatic

and political scenarios with lightning speed. Finally, Anbeyssa folded his hands together and his lips relaxed into a sly smile.

“While I no longer enjoy the status I once did, I am not without friends and allies. I believe I can make a few discreet inquiries among them, see if they have learned anything new about the dispute since last we spoke. If I should happen to discover something of interest, I shall pass the information along to you. And though with my current status, it’s doubtful the Council of Elders will listen, should we manage to develop a solution, I shall present it to them.”

Swan bowed his head. “Thank you, my friend.”

Anbeyssa waved away Swan’s gratitude. “Think nothing of it. And while I make my inquiries, perhaps you also would be so kind as to help me with a... personal problem that I’m struggling with at the moment.”

Swan raised an eyebrow, but he said, “It would be my great honor to assist you in any capacity, sir.”

Anbeyssa nodded, clearly pleased. He stood and clapped his hands once in satisfaction. “Excellent! Then, let us go speak with Maylea!”

Swan stood as well. It was considered rude in Yane to continue sitting once someone of higher caste and rank was standing. He frowned. “I beg your pardon, my friend, but what does your daughter have to with the problem of which you speak?”

“My dear Swan, Maylea is the problem.”







CHAPTER SEVEN

The wind howled like a living thing as it whipped through the pass, driving stinging pellets of icy rain before it. The woman known as the Eye of Heaven turned her face away from the frigid blast and shuddered within her bear-fur cloak. Though her skin was pale and her hair white as alabaster, she was no native of the Northern climes, and her blood felt like ice water in her veins. Still, she was stronger and had greater endurance than an ordinary human, which was why she had made it this far. But how much farther she could go, she couldn't say. A dozen miles, a dozen steps... it didn't matter. All that mattered was pulling her foot out of the snow, lunging forward and putting it down again, one slow, plodding step after another.

Here, the tundra had given way to layers of ice beneath the snow, and not even the hardy herds of mammoth, elk and reindeer—or the packs of omen dogs that preyed on them—would venture this far north.

The Eye of Heaven glanced at her companion, to whom she was bound by a length of rope that encircled both their waists. Though it was difficult to make out the monk's slender form in the ice storm, she could sense that he was struggling to keep from collapsing. Atreus too was more than human, but their time traveling through this frozen waste had taken a greater toll on him, and the Eye of Heaven feared that he would fall within the next mile. And once



Atreus fell, she knew it would be even money that he'd never rise again.

The rope around their waists was intended to keep either of them from losing their way in the storm, but it also served another purpose: communication. The Eye of Heaven took hold of the rope and gave it three sharp tugs, then two gentler ones—their prearranged signal for indicating a desire to rest. She waited several moments, and when no reply was forthcoming, she began to fear the worst. She got so far as taking a step in the monk's direction when she felt a single answering tug on the rope: the signal for yes.

The Eye of Heaven let out a sigh of relief between reddened, cracked lips, her breath an instant's fog in the air before the raging wind tore it away. She had feared the monk's pride would keep him from admitting that he needed to rest, and she was glad to find this was not the case. Slowly, for that was the only way one could do anything here, the Eye of Heaven and Atreus began trudging toward one another, using the rope between them to guide themselves, hand over hand, almost as if they were climbing instead of walking. It seemed to take hours for them to reach one another, but time had little meaning here in the narrow pass between mountains. Night and day were indistinguishable, and for all the Eye of Heaven knew, the spirits that inhabited this region purposely kept time flowing at a much slower rate just to toy with anyone suicidal enough to venture into their realm.

When the Eye of Heaven and the monk reached each other, they embraced—not out of affection, though there was more than enough of that between them—but out of sheer practicality. Their combined body heat might not be much to fight off the ice storm's chill, but it was the only weapon they had. They huddled together, backs to the wind, bodies shaking and teeth chattering.

"How do you fare?" The Eye of Heaven had to shout to be heard above the wailing wind, and even then, her voice sounded little louder than a faint whisper. Atreus's reply was

no louder, and the Eye of Heaven could scarcely make out his words.

"For this moment, I live," he said. "As for the next..." He trailed off and shrugged.

If the monk hadn't been half frozen to death, she would've laughed. "And the spider?"

"Still a happy enough passenger, though its metallic skin feels like ice against mine." The small silver arachnid lay nestled against Atreus's abdomen, wrapped in a silver cocoon of its own making, the sticky threads anchored to the monk's flesh. "I can feel it move from time to time."

The Eye of Heaven nodded, though since both of their eyes were squeezed shut against the wind and icy rain, she doubted he saw the gesture. It was vital that they keep the spider alive... if an artificial construct such as it could be said to possess life. It was a delicate device, fashioned with a mixture of exacting craftsmanship and powerful arcane magic. And it was their mission to carry this spider to a very special place that drove the Eye of Heaven and the monk to make their way, step by torturous step, though the treacherous pass and the accompanying storm. The silver spider had quite literally been made for this single purpose, as—the Eye of Heaven sometimes thought—were she and the monk.

"How much farther do you think it is?" Atreus asked.

The Eye of Heaven opened her eyes and squinted against the wind and rain as she examined her companion's face. The monk's lips were gray, and his skin had a bluish cast to it.

"Too far," she answered. "We must find shelter soon." She thought for a moment. "I'll find a place where—"

"No!" Atreus protested. "You are too weak! Save your strength. We might need it soon."

"What other need could we possibly have at the moment?" she asked, incredulous.

"Do you forget that the Dragon-Blooded pursue us?" Atreus said.

"It has been five days since last we saw them, and then, it was only at a great distance. They have surely turned back



by now. No one would be foolish enough to continue traveling though this frozen hell.”

The monk's chapped lips fissured as he smiled. “We are.”

The Eye of Heaven smiled back. “Except us, I mean. Now, be quiet, and let me see if I can find some shelter for us.” She'd almost said, *for you*, and she was glad she'd caught herself in time before she'd injured Atreus's pride. Not only did she not wish to hurt his feelings, right now she feared his stubborn pride was all that was keeping him going.

The Eye of Heaven closed her eyes and reached down inside herself to touch the blazing celestial power within. But just as the monk had warned her, her internal fire was dangerously low. As had Atreus, the Eye of Heaven had been using her Essence to maintain her strength and sustain herself against the bitter cold these last three hard weeks. Now, she had little to spare. But unless she wanted them to end up a pair of frozen corpses buried beneath snow and ice, she had no choice but to try.

She concentrated... concentrated...

At first she thought she was going to fail, but then she felt an emptiness open up deep inside her as if one of her most vital organs had been removed. She swayed, suddenly dizzy, and her vision began to go gray around the edges. If Atreus hadn't been holding her, she was certain she would've collapsed onto the snow. But the monk kept her upright, and the dizziness soon passed, though the weakness it left behind remained. But now, she knew where they had to go, could feel it out there in the storm as if it were a blazing beacon calling to her: shelter.

“Come, it's not far.”

Leaning on one another for support, the Eye of Heaven and the monk Atreus continued trudging through the storm.



CHAPTER EIGHT

“Won’t we disturb Maylea?” Swan asked. “It is getting rather late. Perhaps she’s turned in for the evening.” The young Exalt walked down a hallway in Anbeyssa’s home, the lord at his side carrying a lantern.

“Nonsense! We royals tend to keep later hours than most folk in Yane. There is much work to be done.” The older man smiled. “And many pleasures to be experienced.” His smile quickly fell away. “I am certain my daughter remains awake, if for no other reason than she hasn’t been sleeping well of late.” A troubled look came into his eyes. “Not well at all.”

They soon reached the door to Maylea’s bedchamber. A man stood guard outside. Swan recognized him from his last visit as a trusted family servant named Eurus. The man appeared to be close to Anbeyssa’s age, though he still possessed the body—and more importantly, the bearing—of a capable warrior.

“Good evening, Eurus,” Anbeyssa said, favoring the servant with the slightest of nods. This generous gesture spoke volumes about the regard Anbeyssa had for this man.

Eurus bowed low from the waist, then straightened. “My lord, a bountiful evening to you as well.”

“Is my daughter still awake?” Anbeyssa asked. “An old friend of the family—” he gestured to Swan “—has given us the great gift of an unexpected visit. I would have Maylea share in this joyous reunion.”



“I’m afraid your daughter extinguished her lights some time ago. She may well be sleeping by now—and soundly, too, I might add, for I have not heard her cry out. It would be a shame to wake her when she’s enjoying her first good night’s sleep in weeks.”

Swan was taken aback by Eurus’s boldness at making such a direct suggestion to his master, but Anbeyssa only chuckled.

“It is fortunate for you that servants of your loyalty are so difficult to find.”

Eurus grinned. “Yes, it is.”

Anbeyssa took a moment to consider the words of this servant whom he treated more like a valued friend of long-standing than a man of far lower caste and rank. “Your point is well taken, Eurus, but this is a very special friend, as you might recall from his last visit several years ago. Maylea would be furious with me for not waking her to greet him on the first night of his return.”

Eurus smiled. “I suppose she would indeed.” The man stepped aside and Anbeyssa knocked on his daughter’s bedroom door. He waited and when there was no response, he knocked again, a bit louder this time.

Eurus frowned. “This isn’t like her. Maylea has always been a light sleeper, even more so these last few weeks.” The man’s voice held concern as well as growing tension.

Swan immediately understood. Given the prevalence of assassination as a tool for advancement among the extended royal family, even a simple failure to respond to a knock on one’s door suddenly became ominous. Without thinking, Swan took a step toward Maylea’s door, but Anbeyssa put a hand on his chest to stop him.

“She’s my daughter,” the older man said.

Swan hesitated a moment before nodding and stepping back. Anbeyssa gripped the door handle and pushed. The door swung open easily. Swan peered into the dark bed chamber and extended his senses—listening for the deep slow breathing of slumber, looking for shadowy shapes that might be moving within the darkness beyond the range of

the light cast by Anbeyssa's lantern. But he neither heard nor saw anything.

"Maylea?" Anbeyssa whispered as he stepped into the room.

Swan started to follow, but Eurus glared at him, and he held back to allow the servant to follow his master. Swan brought up the rear, knowing that with his speed and agility, he could move past the other two men in an eye blink if need be.

But once inside the room, it became obvious that no threat awaited them. The chamber was empty, and Maylea's bed was still made, her silken sheets smooth and undisturbed. Swan took in the room's details: bed, dresser, vanity table, plants hanging from the ceiling, a covered bird cage hanging in front of a closed and—he stepped closer to get a better look—locked window. The three men made a quick search of Maylea's bedchamber, including her private bath, but they found nothing.

"No sign of a struggle," Swan said. He didn't state the obvious; that thankfully there was no sign of a body, either.

"I don't understand," Eurus said. "I bid her goodnight and watched her enter and close the door. I have remained at my post outside since that moment."

"Perhaps," Swan said. "But did you remain alert the entire time?" He left unspoken a graver suspicion. If something had happened to Maylea, Eurus had possibly played a role in making it happen. If so, it wouldn't be the first time a servant had turned on his master, especially if the right reward was dangled in front of his nose.

Eurus's face clouded over with anger at Swan's question, as well as the insinuation behind it, and he reached for his sword. Swan kept his gaze fixed on the man's eyes, ready to react should he move to attack.

But Anbeyssa held up his hands. "Stop it, both of you! Eurus, Swan is an honored guest in my home, and I will not have anyone draw a weapon against him during his stay. And Swan, Eurus has been with my house since we both were children. I trust him as I trust no other





person alive—which is why he guards my most precious treasure: Maylea.”

Swan and Eurus continued glaring at one another a moment longer, then the servant removed his hand from his sword and nodded to Anbeyssa.

“My most humble apologies, my lord.” He turned to Swan and nodded once more. “And to you.”

Swan smiled. “Think nothing of it. We are both concerned about Maylea, that’s all.”

Eurus didn’t return the smile, but he stopped glaring, and that was enough for the young Exalt. Swan turned to Anbeyssa. “If she didn’t leave by the door and the window is locked, perhaps she was spirited away by magic.”

“Possibly, but doubtful,” Anbeyssa said. “While the royal family isn’t above employing Dragon-Blooded outcastes and even the occasional God-Blood as assassins and mercenaries, we tend to shy away from interactions with sorcerers. We’ve always found controlling them somewhat problematic.”

Swan thought of the obsession the people of Yane had for astrology and their rigid caste system. In many ways, control was the prime driving force behind this society. Swan knew that it was possible for an outcaste or a Lunar to get to Maylea and even kill her without leaving any evidence behind—even a body. Although he was reluctant to bring up this point for fear of further upsetting Anbeyssa, he was about to do so when Anbeyssa spoke once more.

“There is another way out of this room... “ The older man stepped over to a section of wall on the left side of Maylea’s bed. He touched the wall in several places, each time pushing with a different combination of fingers. When he was finished, Anbeyssa stepped back and a small door swung open to reveal a narrow passageway inside.

“I’m impressed by the craftsmanship that went into that door,” Swan said. “The seams were completely undetectable from where I stand. I take it that we’re looking at Maylea’s personal escape route.”

Anbeyssa nodded. "Every member of the royal family has one in his or her bedchamber, and there are usually several others located elsewhere in the home, though the precise location of those doors can vary from one subfamily to another. You'll forgive me, I trust, if I refrain from telling you where the other passages are in this house."



"So, you're suggesting that Maylea left of her own accord," Swan said.

"Normally, I couldn't conceive of my dutiful daughter doing such a foolhardy thing. But her behavior has been most erratic of late. She's become willful, restless, absent-minded..."

Swan thought for a moment. "If I were feeling restless and I had my very own secret passageway, I think I'd use it to sneak out of the house I spent so much time cooped up in."

Anbeyssa nodded reluctantly. "Exactly. I fear that my daughter is out there somewhere in the night right now, wandering the city streets alone and defenseless. Outside the walls of our home, Maylea is a prime target for assassination." His voice grew softer. "Just as her mother was so many years ago."

"I shall take the rest of the house guards and immediately begin a search, my lord," Eurus said. "We will find Maylea." Eurus turned and started for the door, but Anbeyssa lay a hand on the man's shoulder to stop him.

"As much as it rends my heart to say this, we cannot risk a full-scale search. If word were to get out that Maylea was walking the streets on her own, she'd be more of a target than she already is. If things haven't changed by dawn, you can take every guard in my employ, but for now..."

Eurus looked as if he might protest, but in the end, he bowed his head. "As you wish, my lord."

Anbeyssa turned to Swan. "Can you find her for me, my friend? Before dawn?"

Swan gave Anbeyssa what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "I believe so. Tell me what some of her favorite parts of Yane are, so I'll have some idea of where to look."



As Anbeyssa began to speak, Swan thought of how he had only been in Yane for a couple of days, and already, he was about to embark on a hunt of his own.



Maylea absolutely adored the Theater District. She loved theater in all its forms, and she had often wished she'd been born two months and four hours later. If she had, the astrological configuration at that time would've allowed her to pursue a career as an actress. There was something about acting—about pretending to be one person when you were really another—that spoke to the deepest reaches of her soul, though she wasn't sure why.

The Theater District lay on the edge of the Aerie, and its architecture was just as bold, confounding and entertaining as any of the performances offered there. Each theater was built to embody a different theme. The Seawatch resembled a galleon, complete with full sails and rigging. The Baobab Tree looked exactly like what it was named for: a gigantic baobab, complete with living foliage, its entrance so cleverly concealed in the trunk of the “tree” that it was almost impossible to detect until someone opened it from the other side. But Maylea's favorite was the theater she was approaching now—the Most Illustrious and Illuminated Pavilion of Players. The Pavilion had been constructed to look like a pyramid of elephants standing one row upon another, the finely detailed and lifelike elephants in each row becoming smaller the higher they went. The ones at the bottom were gigantic, twice the size of ordinary elephants, but the one at the very top was no larger than a mastiff. Maylea had loved the Pavilion since she'd been a small child, and she came here whenever she felt sad or confused—like now. Just being around its gaudy, silly grandeur always made her feel better.

She walked behind a couple from one of the lower-ranking subfamilies—so low they were unaccompanied by guards or servants—listening as they discussed the play

they had just attended, a revival of Aari Windblossom's *Honor and Blood*.

"Did Onkar seem a trifle wooden to you this evening?"

"Not at all—I thought it was one of his most convincing performances in years."

"Really? I found Kytana to be far more engaging. She outshone Onkar in every way."

"Kytana's not fit to share the same stage with Onkar. Her notion of acting is to reveal as much cleavage as possible so the men in the audience don't notice her almost complete lack of talent."

Maylea had to fight to keep from giggling. She wore a hooded robe to conceal her identity, the cloth completely free of any ornamentation that would've identified her caste and rank. It wasn't uncommon for royals to don such anonymous clothing when they wished to go somewhere incognito—for example, when they were headed to a secret assignation or to one of Yane's more unsavory entertainment establishments. It was the custom among the extended royal family to ignore anyone so dressed, almost as if they were invisible, and while Maylea found many of the family's customs restricting, she appreciated this one. She didn't know why she was so restless this evening, but she'd felt that if she spent one more moment in her bedchamber, she might well lose her mind. And so, though she knew it would make her father furious if he ever found out, she'd put on this robe and used the secret passageway to sneak out of her room. She'd reached the Theater District just as the plays were letting out for the evening, and she walked up and down the streets, listening as people discussed the works they'd just seen.

"Dear, I think you're being quite unfair to Kytana. True, she doesn't have Onkar's years of experience on the stage, but she still—"

The man's words were suddenly cut off by a roaring blast of wind. Freezing rain slashed through the night and pelted Maylea's face and hands. Reflexively, she lowered her head to avert her face from the frigid rain and curled her hands





into fists so the voluminous sleeves of her robe would protect them. Not that there was much the robe could do. It had been designed for warm Southern nights, and its cloth was thin. In seconds, the robe was soaked with ice-cold rain and plastered to her skin. Maylea shivered and clamped her teeth together to keep them from chattering.

What in the names of all the gods in Creation was going on here? Even during the height of the rainy season, it never got this cold in Yane!

She stumbled then, and felt intense cold surround her sandaled feet. She looked down and though it was dark—the street lamps in the Theater District seemed to have gone out—she could see that she stood in several feet of snow coated with a hard layer of ice deposited by the freezing rain. Maylea had never seen snow before, let alone stood in it up to her knees, but she knew what it was. In a strange way, the sensation of cold against her skin, penetrating flesh and muscle as it slowly seeped into her bones was almost familiar... like an old memory that's sensed more than recalled.

Was this some sort of spell? Had the Tri-Khan found a way to alter the weather itself and was now using his newfound mastery of the elements to attack Yane? She lifted her head and looked to see how the other pedestrians in the Theater District were reacting to this nightmarish change in the weather. But all she saw was an unbroken expanse of snow running between two huge dark shapes that she somehow knew to be mountains. There were no other people around her, and Yane itself had vanished with them. She was alone in this frozen wasteland.

Panic gripped her, and she struggled to move forward through the snow. She had no idea where she might go, but she knew she had to do something, for dressed as she was, she would perish in mere moments in this cold. But as she tried to pull one leg free of the snow, she lost her balance and fell forward—

—onto the paved sidewalk. She remained on her hands and knees for a moment, breathing rapidly, heart pounding hard and fast. Her robe was dry, the ground was free of snow,

and the night air that surrounded her was warm and humid, just as it should be.

“Pardon me, but are you all right?”

Maylea pushed back her hood and looked up to see the male half of the couple she'd been following looking down at her with concern. His wife tugged on his arm, her face showing only disdain.

“Forget her. Don't you see her robe? She's probably just had too much wine. Don't make a scene.”

The man's concern gave way to embarrassment. “Quite right. How foolish of me.” He inclined his head. “My sincere apologies.” Then the man allowed his wife to drag him away, and the couple hurried off down the sidewalk.

Maylea slowly stood up and stared after the lower-caste couple as they continued away from her.

“Am I all right?” she whispered. “I really don't think so. I'm afraid I might be losing my mind.”

A moment later, she continued walking down the street, a shiver running down her spine despite the night's warmth.



Maylea didn't know it, but at that very moment, she was being watched. The watcher hid within the shadows of an alleyway between the Baobab Tree and the Pavilion of Players. He was garbed in black and carried an assortment of weapons and poisons, all of them designed to deal a swift and permanent end to whomever he was hired to wield them against. This watcher was a freelance assassin known as Ravenwing, and his skills were much in demand in Yane. He had contracts on several dozen royals at any given time, which was not only a testament to how much the members of the subfamilies hated each other, but also to how difficult it was to kill any of them. Ravenwing was forced by necessity to work on a number of contracts at the same time, and of all the deadly talents he possessed, the most important to his work was one that had nothing to do with killing. It was flexibility.





Case in point: This fine evening Ravenwing had been staking out the Theater District because he'd gotten wind of a rumor that the merchant prince Lazalle might attend a performance of a rather ribald comedy because he was infatuated with one of the male leads. But the rumor had turned out to be false—or else something had caused Lazalle to change his mind—for the man hadn't shown.

However (and here's where Ravenwing's flexibility served him in good stead), who should he see collapse to the ground not ten feet from where he hid but Maylea, daughter of Anbeyssa and bride-to-be of Declan. Not a week ago, a woman who claimed to be one of Declan's former lovers (whether or not she was telling the truth was completely irrelevant to Ravenwing) had hired him to kill Maylea. The woman's motives were unknown to Ravenwing, and he didn't really care what they were, no more than he cared why any of his clients hired him. But if he had to guess, he'd assume that his client had aspirations (or perhaps a better word would be *delusions*) of rekindling her supposed romance with Declan once Maylea was out of the picture. But again, none of that mattered to Ravenwing. All that mattered was that by venturing into the Theater District alone (and apparently under the influence) Maylea had just made herself a target of opportunity for Ravenwing. A sly smile spread across the assassin's face. Flexibility: a killer's best friend.

He drew a poison-smearing dagger from within one of the numerous pockets in his cloak and waited for Maylea to walk in front of the alley.



CHAPTER NINE

Swan ran through the night, the warm Southern wind rushing across his face, his long lavender hair streaming behind him and his cloak billowing like a pair of ebon wings. He moved silent and swift across the rooftops, leaping from one to the other as easily as a mortal might step on stones to cross a stream.

The night's darkness was leavened by the moon and stars above, as well as the glow of artificial starlight provided by the spires of the royal complex off to Swan's left. From time to time, he would pause, lean over the edge of a building, and scan the street below, searching for Maylea. Though she had been but a girl when last he'd seen her, he felt confident that he would recognize her. Part of his extensive diplomatic training had included memorizing individual names and faces—and allowing for changes in the latter due to age and other less pleasant factors such as injury, disfigurement or the ravages brought about by unfortunate lifestyle choices. As a result, Swan could meet a person in passing and still recognize him and recall his name instantly, no matter how many years had passed.

Of course, he *hadn't* been trained to recognize someone from a great height... at night... especially when the someone in question most likely was going about in disguise. But then, what was life without a little challenge now and again?

Swan perched on the back of the small elephant that formed the apex of the Most Illustrious and Illuminated



Pavilion of Players. During his last visit to Yane, he'd taken in a performance here, a ghastly affair dealing with murder and revenge—just the sort of stuff that enthralled most of the city's populace, especially the royals. But Swan had little taste for melodrama. His real life was filled with more than enough intrigue and conflict—far more so since his Exaltation—for him to...

His thoughts trailed off as he noticed a woman in a plain robe walking unsteadily down the street in front of the Pavilion—directly toward a man standing in the mouth of the alley below... a man garbed in a dark cloak. As Swan watched, the woman stepped in front of the alley, and the cloaked man reached out swift as a striking cobra, grabbed her and pulled her into shadows of the alley.

Distracted momentarily from his appointed task, the young Exalt leaped into the air like a giant creature of the night taking wing. As he descended into the alley, he executed a 180-degree turn and landed lightly in front of the man in black. Startled, the man took a step back, but he didn't release his captive. Swan saw that the man now held a dagger pressed to his victim's throat. At this distance, Swan could see whom the man in black had snatched, and he realized that fate and good fortune were on his side—if somewhat abeyant. He had found Maylea.

"That woman is under my protection," Swan said. "Put the dagger away and leave now, and I'll pretend that I never laid eyes on you."

The assassin was dressed from head to toe in black—shirt, pants, boots, gloves, cloak... and over his head he wore a close-fitting hood with openings for his eyes and a small slit for his mouth. Not a particularly elegant outfit, Swan thought, but serviceable enough.

The assassin quickly recovered from his initial surprise over Swan's appearance, and without a word, he hurled the dagger toward the Exalt's midsection. Swan plucked the blade out of the air as if it were simply hovering there, waiting for him to take hold of it. He detected the slight bitter odor of poison smeared on the blade—no shock

there. Swan threw the dagger to the side, and the blade sank to the hilt in the wall of the Baobab Tree more than a yard from the assassin.

The assassin glanced at the dagger imbedded in the wall, then turned and gave Swan a wry smile. "Nice throw."

"I hit what I was aiming at," Swan said. "If I'd wished, things could have gone quite differently. I'll accept your releasing the girl in return, if you please."

The assassin seemed to consider Swan's offer, and the Exalt took advantage of the opportunity to examine Maylea's face. It was definitely her, all right, grown to womanhood and even more beautiful than he remembered. But she didn't appear to be afraid. In fact, she looked as if she weren't even certain what was happening. Had the assassin managed to drug her during the time it had taken Swan to leap down from the Pavilion's roof? Had he already poisoned her?

"Very well," the assassin said in a tone of resignation. "I can tell when I am up against a superior opponent." He started to let go of Maylea, but at the last moment, he shoved her hard to the side. As she fell, the assassin darted toward Swan.

He aimed a kick at Swan's right knee, but the young Exalt grabbed the assassin's foot and twisted. The hooded killer spun around in midair and landed hard on his stomach. But instead of lying there stunned, the assassin quickly kicked off with his feet and pushed himself up into a handstand. He then flipped over into a standing position and rushed toward Swan, chopping his left hand toward Swan's throat.

Swan leaned back and easily avoided the blow, but the attack had been but a feint. A second dagger suddenly appeared in the assassin's right hand, and he swept the blade toward Swan's midsection. The hired killer was fast, but he was only mortal. Swan sidestepped the strike and chopped his hand down on the man's wrist. Swan could have easily broken it if he wished, but all he wanted to do was disarm the assassin, so he struck with far less strength than he had.





The assassin hissed in pain, and his hand sprung open. Before the dagger began to fall, Swan snatched it out of the air and flipped the blade toward the ground with such force that the weapon lodged in the earth and snapped in half. The assassin stumbled backward and cradled his injured hand against his chest, his eyes shining with a mixture of disbelief and fury.

Swan risked a glance to see how Maylea was doing. She sat with her back against the wall of the Pavilion, staring wide-eyed at Swan, but she appeared unharmed, which was all that mattered at the moment.

He turned his attention back to the man in black. “Is it a crime to kill an assassin,” he mused aloud, “or a public service?”

Swan could see the indecision in the man’s eyes, watched as he calculated his odds of succeeding should he attempt another attack. Then, the assassin made his decision.

With his uninjured hand he reached into his cloak and withdrew a trio of metal shuriken. He hurled them in rapid succession at Swan—one, two, three. Swan deflected the first two stars off to the side, where they became embedded in the wall of the Baobab. But the third he caught and returned to its owner with lightning speed. Only Swan sent the star tumbling side over side toward the assassin, and one of the flat sides struck the man on the forehead. The assassin stood for a moment, the shuriken flat against his hooded forehead as if it were trying to imitate an Exalted caste mark. The star tumbled to the ground, the assassin’s eyes rolled white, and he collapsed.

Swan rushed forward and caught the unconscious man before he could fall, lowering him gently to the ground. Swan could almost hear Arianna telling him that he was being too soft-hearted, and maybe he was, but he had to be true to his nature.

He then turned to Maylea. She still sat with her back to the wall, and she still stared at him. There was something about her eyes that gave Swan the strangest feeling...

He shook his head to clear it then gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile as he helped her to her feet.

"I'm sorry we had to meet again under such circumstances, Maylea, but I'm glad I was able to perform some small service for you."

Her strangely enthralling eyes still wide and staring, Maylea opened her mouth to speak. But of all the words that might have come forth, Swan did not expect to hear those that she uttered.

"Atreus, the Wyld Hunt still comes..."

Before Swan could say anything to that, Maylea spoke again, somewhat more coherently. "I think I'm losing my mind," she said, then fainted.

Swan caught Maylea before she could fall. "Maylea?" he said. He shook her gently, but she didn't respond. Carrying her, he stepped out of the alley and started hurrying in the direction of the royal complex. Whether she'd been drugged by the assassin or something else was wrong with her, she needed the attentions of a healer—now. But theatergoers on the street saw them and gawked, and several royals—seeing a foreigner carrying an unconscious woman garbed in a robe of anonymity—huddled behind their bodyguards and started shouting.

"Kidnaper!"

"Foreign assassin!"

"Summon the city guard!"

"Thunder and damnation," Swan murmured. He didn't have time to explain the situation to the city guard. *Maylea* didn't have time. He turned around and ran with Maylea back toward the alley, nearly knocking down a gentleman standing on the sidewalk.

"I beg your pardon," Swan called without even a backward glance. Then—still holding onto Maylea—he stepped over the assassin's unconscious form and jumped into the air.

Swan carried Maylea upward, bounding back and forth between the walls of the Baobab Tree and the Most Illustrious and Illuminated Pavilion of Players as easily and gracefully





as a mortal might climb a set of stairs. When he reached the top, he sprang onto the dog-sized elephant at the apex of the Pavilion, then once again began leaping from rooftop to rooftop, holding tightly to Maylea, as he carried her toward the soft glow of the Constellation's spires.



The man that Swan had dashed by in his haste stood on the sidewalk and watched as the Solar bounded away across the skyline of the Aerie, bearing Maylea homeward. High-caste Southerners and royals, who only moments ago had been calling for the city guard, now looked upward in awe and terror as the violet-haired foreigner leaped through the night, and more than a few of them whispered the dreaded word *Anathema*.

Soon, the pair was lost to sight. *Now, that's interesting*, the man thought. *And irritating*. Maylea, it seemed, had a protector. He was glad the Westerner had stepped in to stop the assassin, saving the man from having to take the trouble to do it himself, but the very event worried and annoyed him. He hadn't predicted the man's interference; hadn't so much as accounted for it at all. Yet, it was a significant development, for which he should have been prepared. Destiny left untended was never random, after all.

Frowning, the man turned and started walking. Perhaps he had missed something in his latest divinations and auguries. He needed to consult his charts again. He needed to double-check his progress to date and find out what detail he had let slip as he prepared for Maylea's time of decision. And he needed to find out who the Westerner who had just entered her life was, because there was something hazily familiar about him.



CHAPTER TEN

In a cramped room in one of the less savory inns in Yane, the assassin known as Ravenwing—but whose real name was (unfortunately) Little Dog—sat on the straw-filled pallet that served as his bed and examined his injured wrist. It was swollen and bruised, but it didn't look too bad overall. He flexed his wrist, and while a bolt of pain lanced up his arm, nothing felt broken.

When Ravenwing had come to in the alley, he'd discovered that Maylea and her "protector" were gone. His head pounded as if it were going to explode any moment, but he did his best to ignore the pain as he got to his feet and hurried away from the Theater District before any of the city guards could arrive. Assassination might have the tacit approval of the royals, but it was still a crime.

The sole illumination in the grubby room was provided by a guttering, foul-smelling tallow candle sitting on a plain wooden table. A single rickety chair sat at the table, and a battered trunk rested at the foot of Ravenwing's bed, containing primarily clothing and the tools of his trade. Otherwise, the room was bare. Ravenwing was the highest-paid assassin in Yane, and as such, he could've afforded far more expensive quarters. For that matter, he could've afforded to buy the entire inn, along with a dozen more like it if he wished. But he was a frugal man who didn't mind denying himself luxuries and creature comforts. For Ravenwing had a dream. There was a small, unnamed island



not far off the coast, a beautiful place of lush growth, succulent fruit and pristine beaches. It was Ravenwing's ambition to one day purchase this island, erect a palatial estate there and fill it with the most attractive young slaves of both sexes that money could buy. The island was currently owned by the Guild, which was asking an outrageous price for it, but Ravenwing so loved the island and the life he envisioned for himself there that he was determined to pay any price, and happily.

Ravenwing had been born a member of the lowest caste in Yane, and the astrological configuration at the moment of his birth didn't mitigate his circumstances in the slightest. His destiny, according to the astrologers, was to labor at simple physical tasks such as collecting garbage or shoveling manure his entire life. Such a common laborer could never earn enough money to buy an entire island, but an assassin... now *that* was a different story. And so, Little Dog the laborer became Ravenwing, killer for hire.

During his years slaying one member of the royal family or another, he'd managed to save nearly three quarters of the money needed to buy his island. But after what had happened tonight, Ravenwing's retirement plans were in serious jeopardy. For the first time since he'd forsaken his birth name and taken on his shadowy mantle, he had failed to kill a target. Worse yet, he had been bested by a slender foreigner who looked more like an actor or a diplomat than he did a warrior.

Ravenwing had removed his hooded mask before entering the inn (for here he was known only as Little Dog), and now, he reached up to gingerly touch his bare forehead. The place where his shuriken had struck was sore and swollen and likely already bruising. He remembered seeing the foreigner catch the metal star, then return it with a simple flick of his wrist. Ravenwing recalled his amazement at seeing the star tumbling toward him, and then, he remembered nothing more. The foreigner had been fast, Ravenwing would give him that, and tricky, too. But no matter how skilled the man was, he had humiliated Ravenwing this

night, and for that, he must pay with his life. Ravenwing felt no personal animosity toward the foreigner—he rubbed his sore forehead and grimaced. Well, not much, anyway. His decision to slay the man was simply a matter of business.

There were eyes and ears everywhere in Yane, and if word got out that the vaunted Ravenwing had failed to carry out a contract—and worse yet, had been bested by a foreigner—no one would hire him anymore. And if that happened, he'd never earn enough money to buy his dream island, and he could say farewell to his estate full of nubile young slaves.

Ravenwing couldn't allow that to happen. He'd worked too long and too hard for his retirement, and he wasn't about to let some fop ruin it for him. Ravenwing would have to put all his other contracts on hold for the time being and concentrate solely on killing both Maylea and her protector, and he needed to do so as soon as possible before his reputation suffered too much damage.

That decided, Ravenwing removed some cloth bandages from his trunk and began to wrap them around his injured wrist for support. As he did, he thought of warm ocean breezes and the soft, soft lips of youth touching every inch of his flesh.



The first rays of dawn were beginning to color the horizon as a cadre of riders approached a grouping of mud and wattle huts that could only laughingly be called a village. Crude stone markers were placed close to each of the huts, and not far away, a small herd of scrawny cattle grazed upon sparse grass.

The riders numbered five in all, two men and three women, all of them wearing armor and carrying an assortment of deadly weapons. Their mounts were strong, proud war horses that looked as if they could gallop without food, rest or water for days on end. The riders themselves were strong of body and beautiful of face, and they rode tall in the saddle, carrying themselves with a haughty patrician air as



if they were the lords of all Creation. They were Dragon-Blooded outcastes, and together, they formed the command cadre of a mercenary group known as the Iron Fang.

A blond woman with ice-chip eyes and a reddish tint to her skin rode at the head of the group on a chestnut stallion, and as they neared the tiny village, she raised her hand to call a halt. In unison, the riders pulled back on their reins and their mounts stopped, the action occurring with such precision that an observer might have thought the maneuver had been planned and rehearsed a hundred times. Yseult was pleased. She demanded excellence in all things from those she commanded, even in something as simple as coming to a halt. *Especially* in something so simple, for if subordinates attended to minor commands with such diligence, then they would learn the discipline needed to do the same with every order, no matter what it was. Such automatic, complete and unthinking compliance often made the difference between success and failure, life and death.

“Spread out and rouse the villagers,” Yseult ordered. “Have them line up before me.”

At once, the riders dismounted and jogged toward the huts, their mounts remaining where they stood, the horses so well trained that there was no need to tie them down. The steeds would remain standing in exactly the same spot until either their riders returned or the animals died.

The only rider who didn't dismount and head for the huts was a stocky brown-bearded warrior named Ragnor: Yseult's second in command and occasional lover. He brought his mount—a speckled gelding—even with hers.

“We're wasting time, Yseult. We're paid to raid villages and caravans, not this. Besides, just because the wagonmaster of the last caravan we attacked told us that he's heard that an Anathema is *rumored* to live in this village doesn't make it so. The man no doubt lied, hoping you would spare his life in return for the information.” Ragnor smiled. “A vain hope, as it turned out. Regardless, the others we spoke to said the creature in question is probably only God-Blooded.”

Normally, Yseult didn't permit anyone in her command—her second included—to challenge her decisions like this. But since no one else was within earshot, she decided to let it go... for now. "That's bad enough," she said. "In a few short moments, we shall know."

Yseult was a tall woman, even for one of the Dragon-Blooded. She kept her blonde hair cut at shoulder length so it wouldn't get in her way or give her opponents something to grab hold of during battle. Her eyes were a cold piercing blue, and her face was long and narrow, with high cheekbones and thin lips that seemed permanently pursed in disapproval of everyone and everything. She wore full plate armor, a helmet and a billowing red cape. Engraved on her breastplate was a stylized flame design, its fiery shape in seeming contrast to her icy demeanor. She could not afford the jade-alloy armor or weapons that every Terrestrial Exalt deserved—none of the Iron Fang could yet—but her equipment was as good as one could get just short of that.

Yseult and Ragnor watched as the other three Dragon-Blooded warriors yanked men, women and children out of their crude huts and shoved them toward their captain. The villagers protested, shouted, cried and sobbed, but the Dragon-Blooded ignored them, not even bothering to tell them to be silent, for they weren't worth wasting breath on. The villagers were typical Southerners—dark-skinned, crimson or tawny-haired, barely clothed in the simple white garb they favored. Yseult had grown weary of the Southerners' lack of imagination when it came to clothing. Still, what could one expect from lesser beings?

As the villagers were lined up before her, Yseult kept her eye out for any sign that one of them might be the one she heard about. The alleged Anathema. The difficulty in identifying one of the monsters was that the abominable transformation could occur to anyone at any time. Child, adult, elder... it didn't matter. Any one of them could be tainted by evil.

"That's all of them," one of her warriors said.





“Very well, then let us begin,” Yseult said. She looked out at the assembled villagers. “Who among you will serve as speaker for the rest?”

The villagers looked at one another in indecision before an elderly woman finally stepped forward.

“I am the oldest here, and am mother, grandmother and great-grandmother to many of these of who stand before you. I shall speak for my village and my family.”

Yseult nodded her head. “Greetings, Old Mother. I am Yseult, Captain of the Iron Fang. We have ridden for nearly an entire day and night without sleep, and I would conclude our business here as swiftly as possible so that we may return home to rest and wash the stink of this dusty, primitive land off of us.”

The Old Mother narrowed her eyes upon hearing Yseult’s insult, but she said nothing. The woman went up a notch in Yseult’s estimation.

“I have been told that an Anathema plagues these lands.” Yseult leaned forward in her saddle. “Where is the creature hiding?”

As the old woman answered, a memory played out in Yseult’s mind as it had so many other times since the events it recounted had occurred.

A teenaged boy glowing so bright she could barely look at him as she lay on the ground, broken, battered, defenseless. The boy stepping forward, bloodlust shining in his eyes beneath a blazing brand of infernal taint on his forehead, a sneer on his face as he moved in for the kill... At that instant, Yseult experienced terror such as she had never known before. It was as if she’d been reduced to a trembling child. No, worse still, a tiny shivering animal so completely consumed by fear that its small heart might burst before the giant coming toward it could reach out with its huge, hairless hand and claim its prize.

The Anathema raising his hands, preparing to deliver a death blow—

And then Chambord—her captain, and the only man she’d ever truly loved—leaping between Yseult and the Anathema. His holy anima blazing as he swung his jade daiklave at the

monster wearing the body of a human boy, just as the Anathema plunged its hand straight into Chambord's chest.

*Blood spraying the air and Yseult screaming... screaming...
"Captain?"*

Ragnor's voice startled Yseult out of her memory. Breathing rapidly, pulse pounding, she turned toward her second in command and noted the concern on his face. She looked around, saw a line of Southern villagers standing before her, gazing up at her with a mixture of fear and confusion, saw the other three Dragon-Bloods under her command shoot one another worried glances, as if something were wrong.

"What do you want?" she snarled.

Ragnor spoke once more, his voice pitched more softly this time. "It happened again."

Yseult finally understood. She'd gone too deeply into the memory of her last encounter with an Anathema and had been lost to the world for several moments. Before becoming an outcaste, she had ridden with a Wyld Hunt, but the final Hunt she had been on had gone disastrously wrong, and Yseult had been the only survivor. Afterward, she could no longer bring herself to ride with a Hunt, and her cowardice had disgraced her, causing her to flee into the Threshold as an outcaste.

She forced herself to breathe normally and concentrated on slowing her pulse. She had the sense that everyone was waiting for her to speak, so she sat up straight in her saddle, scowled and did her best to act as if nothing had happened.

The captain looked at the old woman once more. Yseult had the sense that the woman had been speaking when the memory of the failed Hunt had overwhelmed her. "Now, as you were saying..."

The Old Mother hesitated, but then said, "I only said, Captain, that there is no one like what you're looking for in our village. We have heard of none living in this region."

"I see." Yseult said, swallowing any outward sign of relief. She lifted her gaze from the Old Mother and looked





upon the stone markers that were placed near each of the huts. She pointed. "What are those?"

The old woman looked over her shoulder to see what Yseult was pointing at, then she turned back to face the captain. "They are gravestones. Out here, when our loved ones die, we bury them near our homes so that they might remain part of our family even though their spirits have departed this world."

Yseult's upper lip curled in distaste. "You would risk turning your village into a shadowland for the sake of mere sentiment?"

"We have nothing to fear from our family," the old woman said evenly, "living or dead."

Yseult nodded. "I see. In that case, I shall grant you the gift of a swift reunion with your loved ones since you lied to me." She barked out a command to her warriors. "Kill them all!"

The three Terrestrials readied their weapons, but the Old Mother raised her hands and shouted, "Wait!"

The warriors looked to Yseult, and she nodded. The mercenaries made no move to kill the villagers, but neither did they relax their weapons.

"There is a village a week's walk southeast of here," the Old Mother said. "They raise poultry and grow jimeesa weed. A Guild trader told me recently that the river god that looks out for that village claims the fairest and strongest woman of each generation for his bride. Normally nothing comes of it..."

"But?" Yseult demanded.

The old woman cast her gaze to the ground, defeated. "But this spring, according to the trader, this generation's bride gave birth. The child was born under the river's surface, and he stayed there all his first day and night, but he did not drown. The trader says the boy is now growing faster than every child in the village."

Yseult smiled. "You have my thanks, Old Mother." Then, louder, she said, "Now, kill them!"

"No, please!" The voice belonged to a young boy at the opposite end of the line. He stepped out from behind a woman—his mother, perhaps—who took hold of his shoulders and pulled him back to her.

Yseult turned to Ragnor and spoke softly. "I want you and Cadhla to restrain the child, but don't harm him." She smiled grimly. "Yet."

Ragnor dismounted and signaled to a sickle-wielding woman with greenish skin to join him. She nodded in reply, and the two mercenaries jogged over to the boy and his mother. The mother's eyes were wide with fear, but the boy didn't seem so much afraid as uncertain how to react. Ragnor pulled the woman's hands off the boy's shoulders and pushed her back, then he and Cadhla knelt beside the boy, each of them taking a firm grip on one of his arms. Another mercenary, this one holding a long trident, stepped forward at a signal from Yseult to restrain the boy's mother, who was now weeping openly.

Satisfied that the child was no true threat, Yseult dismounted and walked over to stand in front him. She turned to glance at the old woman and signaled for her to join them. Face full of sadness, the old woman complied.

Yseult turned back to the boy and examined him more closely. He appeared six, perhaps seven, and wore only a breechcloth. He had a smooth, white belly and large unblinking eyes that were almost perfect circles.

"You lied to me, Old Mother," Yseult said, snarling in disgust. "You were trying to protect this... thing."

"Oleg isn't a *thing*," the old woman said. "He's a child."

"It might look like a child, but I assure you, it isn't. No right or proper union spawned this unnatural thing."

Yseult unsheathed her sword, and the boy's mother screamed. She tried to pull free to stop Yseult, but the soldier who had hold of her held her tight, and she couldn't break his grip. Yseult touched the tip of her weapon to the child's slick belly—gratified to see that her hand did not tremble. Her sword point dimpled the boy's skin but did not break it.





“You don’t want me to order my warriors to kill your friends and family, do you?” she said softly, almost gently.

The boy looked up at her, indecision beginning to give way to fear and anger. “No,” he said quietly.

“You don’t want them to die for you just because your mother was raped by a foolish god who should have known better. You aren’t her fault.”

The boy cocked his head then opened and closed his mouth in confusion. He didn’t know what the word rape meant.

The old woman glared at Yseult. “Stop this madness!” She started forward, but the last of Yseult’s warriors—one with a long fighting chain looped over her shoulders—intercepted her and held her still.

Yseult ignored the old woman and went on. “But they don’t have to die. None of them do... if you have the power to stop us.”

She pressed her sword tip harder against the child’s flesh, and a crimson pearl of blood welled forth. In response, the boy let out a wordless, desperate shout. He thrashed and kicked, trying to free himself from the two Dragon-Bloods restraining him, but it was not clear if he was trying to throw himself at Yseult in outrage or flee the scene. Yet, though he was more than human, he was still young and weak compared to the Terrestrial Exalted who surrounded him.

Yseult lowered her sword from the child’s belly when it became clear that he could not get away. A moment later, Oleg’s exertions grew less violent, until he finally stopped struggling altogether. His breath came in exhausted gasps, and he hung suspended between Ragnor and Cadhla.

“Do not harm him, I beg of you!” the boy’s mother said, sobbing. “He hasn’t done anything wrong!”

“He doesn’t have to *do* anything wrong,” Yseult said. “He *is* wrong.”

“No, he’s special,” the old woman said in a defiant voice. “Divinely blessed.”

Yseult sniffed. “He is misbegotten, in defiance of the natural order. He has to die.”

Yseult raised her sword, and the child's mother screamed. Then, with a single swift stroke, she thrust her blade into the child's gut, and the boy shrieked in agony. She gave her sword a twist as she yanked it free, and dark blood gushed from the child's stomach. Ragnor and Cadhla released their grip on the boy's shoulders. He gasped, then fell face-first to the ground, dead.



For a long moment, no one spoke a word—not the villagers, not the mercenaries, not the boy's mother. It was the old woman who found her tongue first.

"You called poor Oleg misbegotten." Her voice was thick with grief and rage. "But from where I stand, it is *you* who are misbegotten." The old woman spat on Yseult's boot, and Ragnor stepped forward and cuffed her for the affront. The old woman went limp and would have fallen if the warrior with the fighting chain hadn't held her up.

Yseult didn't bother to wipe the spittle from her boot. "You think such foolishness because you are a primitive, savage people. You've let a vile, unholy practice continue here for far too long, and I don't suspect it was entirely out of fear. You are all complicit in this sickening perversion." She raised her voice and shouted to her warriors, "Kill them all!"

The villagers shrieked, sobbed and cried for mercy, but the Iron Fang had none. The outcastes went to work with cold-blooded efficiency.

Yseult watched impassively as her warriors slaughtered the remaining villagers without regard to age or gender. Within moments, it was all over. Bodies lay strewn about the ground, most of them still intact. The warriors under her command knew better than to expend energy on unnecessary fighting. Quick, clean strokes that killed instantly—that was what Yseult wanted from the men and woman she led. Anything else was a waste... especially on scum like this.

"Leave the filth where they lie," Yseult ordered. "Take whatever supplies you can find, then mount up."



If any of the mercenaries were disappointed that they weren't going to get a rest, none of them showed it as they went about the business of ransacking the village.

Ragnor walked over to stand by Yseult's side, and together, they gazed down upon the bodies of the child, his mother and the old woman.

"I'll give the Southerners credit," Ragnor said. "At least they tried to protect the boy."

"But the boy's father didn't," Yseult said. "He knows what he did was wrong, and he's afraid to show his face." Yseult smiled, intensely gratified. Then, her smile withered, and she turned to her lieutenant. "If you ever second-guess me in front of the others again, Ragnor, I'll cut out your tongue, roast it using my own flame, slice it into tiny pieces, and make you eat it. Do you understand me?"

Ragnor looked at her for a moment before replying in an emotionless voice. "Perfectly. It won't happen again."

Yseult smiled and patted Ragnor on the cheek. Then, she turned to watch her warriors as they collected the meager bounty the village had to offer. It was then that she heard the sound of pounding hooves.

One of her warriors called out, "A rider approaches from the west!"

Yseult and Ragnor turned to watch the rider approach.

"Hail!" the rider shouted as he drew near, flashing the secret hand sign that identified him as a messenger from the Black Wolves back in Yane. The messenger rode up to Yseult and Ragnor and brought his mount to a halt. He quickly dismounted and bowed low before Yseult. "Captain, I carry a message from the Black Wolves: An Anathema walks the city streets of Yane! The Iron Fang is to return to Wolf's Lair immediately and await further information."

Ragnor looked at Yseult and said, "It seems a mercenary's work is never done."

"Indeed," Yseult replied. Yet, despite her even tone and calm façade, Yseult could hear the sound of her younger self screaming... and screaming...



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Swan sat up in bed, surrounded by darkness. For a moment, he wasn't certain where he was, a not uncommon occurrence given how often and how far he traveled, but then his head cleared a bit, and he remembered. He was in Yane, more specifically in Anbeyssa's section of the royal complex. Fast on the heels of that memory came another.

Maylea.

He recalled searching for her in the Theater District, saving her from an assassin... Maylea saying something about a Wyld Hunt... Swan carrying her back to the royal complex and—after a hastily summoned healer had pronounced her free of poison—helping Anbeyssa and Euris tuck her into bed.

Swan hopped out of his own bed and quickly dressed in the dark. Before taking to bed he'd drawn the heavy curtains over his window, and he had no idea what time it was, whether it was still night or if the sun had risen, but he didn't want to waste time checking. He left his room and headed straight for Maylea's bedchamber. No one stood guard outside her door—he'd learned that Euris guarded her from sunrise to midnight, after which another guard relieved him while Euris slept on a pallet outside Maylea's door. Though Swan knew it wasn't proper, he opened the door and peeked in. Maylea's curtains and window were open and sunlight filled the room. But her bed was empty.



Swan closed the door and headed to the dining room. He found Maylea sitting with Anbeyssa, Eurus standing off to the side, but still well within reach should Maylea need his protection. The table was covered with an assortment of fresh fruits, breads, sweetmeats and trifles. A pair of servants stood on either side of the doorway, ready to see to any of the diners' needs with alacrity.

Anbeyssa smiled broadly upon Swan's arrival. "Ah, my dear friend! I am so glad you can join us for breakfast. I hope you'll forgive me for not sending a servant to wake you, but since you got in so late last night, I thought you might like to sleep in. I trust you are well rested?"

Swan usually began the day by meditating to restore his physical, mental and spiritual strength. Since he had foregone his morning ritual to check on Maylea, he felt tired and out of sorts, but he said, "Quite rested, Anbeyssa."

"Good, good! Well, what are you waiting for? Sit down and eat!" There was an empty seat between Anbeyssa and Maylea, and Anbeyssa gestured for Swan to take it.

Maylea smiled an invitation to Swan that made the young Exalt hesitate. There was more to that smile than simple courtesy, but he didn't want to give offense, so he nodded his thanks and took the seat. As he began to fill his plate with food, Swan turned to Maylea and saw her gazing back at him with a look that made him most uncomfortable.

"How are you this fine morning?" Though he asked this as a simple matter of etiquette, the question felt awkward and forced. Swan wasn't used to feeling unsure in social situations, and he wished he could withdraw into himself and eat in silence.

"I am well enough, Master Swan. Thanks to you. I regret the trouble I put you to last night, but I am most grateful for your assistance."

"Think nothing of it, Maylea," Swan said. "I am glad I arrived before any harm befell you."

"What you did last night, it was... "

Swan feared what Maylea might say next, but she finished by almost whispering, "...magnificent."

He decided it would be safest to discontinue this conversation, so he smiled and nodded once more before turning his attention to his meal.

"I too am eternally grateful to you, Swan," Anbeyssa said. "I could not bear to lose my daughter to an assassin's blade—not after having lost her mother the same way." He paused for a moment, his eyes glistening. "But let us not dwell on that which cannot be changed. As a small token of my thanks, I stayed up a good portion of the night penning letters of inquiry to various contacts I have in and out of the royal family. I finished before dawn and dispatched servants to deliver the messages at once. When, or even if, we shall receive any response, I cannot say, but at least our investigation has begun, eh?"

Swan remembered Maylea as an inquisitive child, always asking questions, always wanting to know why this and why that. He expected Maylea to ask what manner of investigation her father spoke about, but she said nothing, just continued gazing at him.

Swan was beginning to feel extremely uncomfortable now, and he wished he could come up with some reason to excuse himself without offending his host. "You shouldn't have stayed up so late, Anbeyssa. You must be exhausted."

"Nonsense! I feel just fine. And it was the least I could do for the man who saved my little girl's life."

Before Swan could respond, Maylea spoke. "You can stop laying on the praise so thick, Father. I'm sure Swan has gotten the point by now that we're both grateful. And one more thing, I may not be certain what I am these days, but I know what I most definitely am *not*, and that is a little girl."

By the time she finished, Maylea was sitting straight in her chair and glaring at Anbeyssa with such an imperious air that she seemed a completely different person than the one who gazed at Swan adoringly only moments ago. Anbeyssa's face clouded over with anger and hurt upon hearing his daughter's harsh words, but instead of lashing out at her, he said softly, "Perhaps you are right." He looked at Swan. "Please forgive a father's enthusiasm."





“There is nothing to forgive,” Swan said. And then, as if by unspoken agreement, the three of them continued their breakfast in silence. As Swan bit into a juicy mango, he thought of what little Anbeyssa told him of his daughter’s condition during their conversation the previous evening.

I don’t know what to do, my friend. She seems like a completely different person at times.

Swan knew he had just witnessed a prime example of what Anbeyssa had been referring to. He could think of numerous reasons for such a dramatic transformation. Being a member of Yane’s ruling class brought with it a great deal of pressure to live up to the expectations of one’s culture and family. Also, there was the matter of her betrothal to Prince Declan. An impending marriage—even one fully desired by both parties—could make anyone feel out of sorts. And there was the fact that she’d survived an attempt on her life last night. Though the royal family expected such things to happen from time to time, that didn’t mean they weren’t emotionally affected by them.

All those reasons were perfectly normal, and Anbeyssa’s worries about Maylea could well be nothing more than the concern of a loving, if overly protective, father for his only child. Still, Swan couldn’t escape the feeling that there were other forces at work here—forces that as yet defied his understanding.

Just then, a well-dressed man in a purple cloak and a more simply dressed woman suddenly burst unannounced into the dining room.

“Declan!” Maylea said, sounding both surprised and somewhat disappointed.

“Beloved, I came as soon as I heard!” Declan hurried to Maylea and knelt at her side. As he reached out and took her hand, Swan noted the look of disapproval on Euruss’s face. Not only was the man her personal guard, he also served as her chaperone during meetings with the opposite sex, and he clearly did not approve of Declan touching his young charge in such a familiar fashion. Even so, Euruss did nothing about it.

The woman who'd accompanied Declan—a servant or retainer of some sort, Swan assumed—hung back and watched as Declan stroked his betrothed's hand and gazed at her with loving concern. If Declan's servant had any reaction to what was happening, she demonstrated no sign of it.

"Are you all right, Maylea?" Declan asked.

Maylea answered, her tone half-reassuring, half-irritated. "As you can see, I'm still very much alive." She turned to Swan and gave him a smile. "Thanks to this gentleman sitting next to me. Declan, please allow me to introduce Swan—an old friend of my father's." Maylea paused significantly. "And of mine."

Declan rose and stiffly bowed to Swan. "Master Swan, you have the thanks of Declan, Prince of House Volscha. Whatever reward you ask, it can never be enough to repay you."

The young man seemed earnest enough, but Swan knew the royals of Yane were masters at feigning whatever emotions were necessary to advance their cause in any given situation. It was one of the reasons they were so fond of the theatrical arts. Still, Swan stood and returned the bow, executing his with a fluid grace the prince could never hope to match.

When Swan straightened, he locked gazes with Declan and saw jealousy in the other man's eyes. Declan wore a straight sword at his side, the weapon designed more for ornamentation than defense, and his hand was near the hilt, fingers twitching as if he ached to draw his weapon.

Declan's servant cleared her throat then, and a moment's confusion passed across Declan's face as he was jolted out of his jealousy.

"Forgive me, Swan, for failing to introduce my companion. This is Shadi, my personal assistant and bodyguard."

Swan nodded to the woman, noticing as he did so that she wore a sword, and from the way she carried herself, he had no doubt she knew how to use it.





Shadi returned Swan's nod. "It is a pleasure to meet you. You *are* the Swan who collaborated with Lord Anbeyssa on the last trade agreement with Chiaroscuro, aren't you?"

So much for maintaining a low profile, Swan thought wryly. "Yes, though I am here on a somewhat... unofficial basis."

Declan raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Does that mean you have come to help resolve the current situation?"

"Or does it mean that you'd prefer no one to know that you're in Yane?" Shadi added.

Swan kept his tone even as he replied. "A bit of both, actually." Before he could explain further, Anbeyssa jumped in.

"Given my current status within the family, I have asked Swan to be circumspect in his aid—a favor he has most graciously chosen to grant me."

Swan understood what Anbeyssa was doing. He wanted Declan and Shadi to think that he intended to use Swan to help broker a new trade agreement behind the scenes so that, if it proved successful, Swan's role would go unnoticed and Anbeyssa could take all the credit, thereby reclaiming the status he had lost when the previous trade agreement had fallen apart. And from the sly, knowing look that came into Declan's eyes, it seemed Anbeyssa had succeeded.

"Yes, of course," Declan said.

Swan wasn't surprised that the prince had bought Anbeyssa's ruse so easily. Not only did it make perfect sense from a royal standpoint, why would Anbeyssa wish to share credit with a foreigner if he didn't have to?

Swan glanced at Shadi and saw that a small smile played about her lips.

Swan stood. "I hope you shall all forgive me for leaving your delightful company so soon, but I have much work to do this day, and it is time I got started." In truth, Swan had no plans whatsoever, but he saw no reason to remain here and fan the flames of Declan's jealousy any higher.

"That is most regrettable," Anbeyssa said. He gave Declan a sidelong glance. "If understandable. Shall we

see you for tonight's evening meal? I would love to fete your return to Yane properly, as I am able under the circumstances."

Swan bowed from the waist. "I shall make every effort to be here, Anbeyssa." He turned to Maylea, but before he could say his farewell to her, she spoke.

"Surely you're not going to leave us so soon, Master Swan. I have only begun to get reacquainted with you." She started to reach for his hand, but then she hesitated, eyes widening, and pulled back. "But go if you must," she said more softly. "It is not my place to keep you."

Swan knew he needed to speak to Maylea further about what had happened last night—especially about what she had said and why she had said it. He considered putting off his "work" so that he might have an opportunity to speak with her, but a single glance at Declan squashed that idea. The prince's jaw muscles were bunched, and his lips were pressed together so hard they were starting to pale. His eyes blazed with resentment for this foreigner who seemed to have caught his betrothed's eye, and Swan was suddenly glad that Maylea had changed her mind about touching him. If she'd made even the mildest sort of physical contact with him, Swan feared Declan would have drawn his sword—ornamental or not.

He bowed to the young man. "Prince Declan, it has been a great honor to meet you, however briefly. I pray that fortune allows our paths to cross once again soon."

Declan returned Swan's bow, keeping his gaze fixed on the diplomat the entire time. "As do I, Master Swan. As do I."

Swan then nodded to Eurus and Shadi—the woman looked even more amused than she had before—and departed the dining chamber. He didn't know where he was going, only that wherever it was, it needed to be far away from Declan... and from Maylea as well.







CHAPTER TWELVE

Maylea had to force herself not to watch Swan as he left the room. She didn't know what was wrong with her. The last time she had seen him—not counting last night, of course—she had been a mere child, and though she had fond memories of him, she'd always thought of Swan as a young uncle or perhaps an older cousin. But this morning when he'd entered the room and sat down beside her, and she had to admit to herself that she'd left the seat open for that specific purpose, she'd found herself feeling weak and lightheaded, with a warmish tickling inside her stomach. But the oddest thing was, these sensations were far from unwelcome. In fact, they'd felt quite good in a strange sort of way. She'd experienced a need to sit as close to Swan as possible, to touch him if she could, to inhale the exhalations of his breath so that they might share the same air. She'd never felt like this around any man before, and certainly never around Declan.

Maylea had read numerous stories and poems that mentioned love at first sight, and though she found the notion a romantic one, she doubted its veracity. An astrologer in Yane would no doubt attribute the phenomena to a couple's destiny that had been written in the stars long before either of them was born. Perhaps there was some truth in that after all, she thought. It *would* account for her sudden, powerful feelings for Swan. But somehow, that didn't feel right. The emotions she experienced in Swan's



presence seemed at times less like new feelings and more like... memories. Strangest of all, whenever Swan spoke, Maylea thought she could hear the whistling of arctic winds beneath his voice, and despite the intensity of her emotions, the sound made her shiver.

“Maylea?”

She looked up, startled out of her thoughts. “Yes, Father?”

Anbeyssa was looking at her with a worried expression that she’d seen all too often of late. “Aren’t you going to ask your betrothed to sit and join us?”

Maylea frowned, not understanding at first to whom her father was referring. Then, she remembered who her “betrothed” was.

“Declan! Of course!” She turned and gave him the sweetest smile she could muster at the moment. “Won’t you please sit and dine with us?” She gestured to the chair that Swan had just vacated.

Declan regarded the seat as if it were contaminated by some sort of disease. But he nodded his thanks and did as Maylea asked.

At least he’ll make an obedient husband, she thought.

Declan turned to Shadi, for only he could grant her permission to sit. “Will you join us?”

Declan’s invitation sounded sincere, which surprised Maylea. Most royals would barely deign to address a servant, let alone sit and eat with one.

“Thank you, my prince, but with your leave, I have a few errands to attend to myself. I have no concerns about leaving you here for a short time, as Lord Anbeyssa’s home is well protected.” She nodded to Eurus, and the stoic guard nodded back.

Declan frowned, and Maylea had the impression that the request was somewhat out of the ordinary for Shadi. During all the times Declan had visited Maylea, she hadn’t seen him interact with Shadi much, and she realized she didn’t have a clear sense of just what their relationship was. She wondered briefly if they were former—or even cur-



rent—lovers. It wasn't unknown for even married men and women to take lovers in Yane, especially among the royal class who often married for reasons that had little to do with love. Such affairs were tolerated, as long as they remained discreet. So, even if Declan and Shadi were more than master and servant, it shouldn't matter to Maylea. But for some reason it did.

"Very well, Shadi, but do not tarry overlong," Declan said. "Like Master Swan, I too have work that I must attend to this day. And I shall not be able to do it without you."

A veiled innuendo? Maylea wondered. Or was she being overly sensitive?

Shadi bowed. "Of course, my prince. Mistress Maylea, Lord Anbeyssa." Then, she turned and departed.

"Your assistant pays me quite a compliment by entrusting you to the security of my home," Anbeyssa said.

"While I concur with her assessment of your home's safety," Declan said, "I must admit that it isn't like Shadi to leave my side without an exceptionally good reason. She's quite dedicated to her duties."

I'll just bet she is! Maylea thought.

Anbeyssa gestured for one of his servants to come forth to clear away Swan's plate and pour Declan a cup of tea. As Declan took a sip, Anbeyssa said, "The woman sounds like quite a treasure. How did you ever manage to procure her services?"

If Maylea hadn't known better, she might have thought her father was joining in with his own innuendo.

But if Declan took offense, he gave no sign. "Oh, I've known Shadi as long as I can remember. I couldn't get along without her."

Anbeyssa seemed to digest Declan's words for a moment before changing the subject. "Seeing Swan again has filled me with a desire to play negotiator once more and attempt to solve the trade dispute between Yane and Chiaroscuro. Do you have any fresh ideas or insights into the problem that you might be able to share with an old man who's hoping to recapture a little of his former glory?"



Maylea wasn't surprised that her father had made that request, but she was surprised that he'd phrased it so directly. It was, she thought, a sure sign that he was either desperate or pressed for time.

"Of course, my lord," Declan said, sounding both surprised and flattered. "I am honored you would seek my council."

As the two men began to talk trade politics, Maylea tried to listen, but she soon got bored and let her mind wander where it would. She found herself thinking of snow and ice and wind, and of a bald monk who had Swan's eyes.



Swan considered returning to his quarters to meditate, but he couldn't remain in Anbeyssa's home. He'd already made his excuse, and he was stuck with it. He left Anbeyssa's section of the royal complex and stepped out into the courtyard. Though it was early, a number of royals were already outside, chatting, gossiping and doing business while they dined on breakfasts of caviar and ostrich eggs, brought on golden platters by servants in fine livery.

When Swan had last visited Yane, he'd looked upon the royals' obsession with raising their status at the cost of another's as simply one more feature of their culture, neither bad nor good. It just *was*, and as a diplomat, it was one more element of Yane society he had to work with and around. But though it had only been a handful of years since he had last strode across the flagstones that paved the royal courtyard, it now seemed like a lifetime ago. Since then, Swan had been called into service by the Unconquered Sun, and though as a diplomat, he had always believed in working to make Creation a better place, the scope of his vision had been much narrower before his Exaltation. Then, he'd truly believed that the details mattered—tariffs, borders, land use rights, trade routes, political alliances, lines of inheritance... But now, he understood that all those things, while perhaps important in and of themselves, were dwarfed by the true significance of the forces at work in Creation. Quite

simply, there was a war going on, a battle that had been raging since the dawn of time. A battle to determine not just what Creation would be now, but what it would become in the future. There were many powers and factions in this war—the Dragon-Blooded, the Solar and Lunar Exalts, the Fair Folk, the Deathlords, along with spirits, demons, and gods without number. All of them seeking to bring their vision of what Creation should be to fruition.



The priests of the Immaculate Order and the Terrestrial Exalts who were the Dragon-Blooded believed the Solars were monsters—Anathema—who could never hope to control the vast powers they'd been granted and who would inevitably go mad and cut a swath of death and misery across Creation. Swan had believed much the same thing himself—*until* he had heard and heeded the call of the Unconquered Sun. The god wished to see Creation's ultimate potential fulfilled, and the Solar Exalted were to be his tools for making this come to pass. Swan had no doubts about the Unconquered Sun's mission, for the same desire to make the world a better place in the most profound and wide-reaching ways possible burned in his own soul. Swan didn't know how such a grand goal could be achieved or how many Ages it might take, but he had vowed to work toward that glorious future. He would fight tooth and nail for it, and gladly sacrifice his life to bring it into being if that's what it took. Next to all that, the machinations of the royals seemed petty and childish.

"Master Swan, a word with you, if you please."

He turned to see Shadi approaching at a trot. His first thought was that something had happened to Maylea, that she'd perhaps suffered another fainting spell similar to last night's. His second thought was that Declan had sent his assistant to warn Swan to stay away from his betrothed.

"I'm so glad I found you," Shadi said as she came to halt next to Swan. "I feared you had already departed the royal complex."

Swan spread his hands outward. "Not yet. What can I do for you?"



“Is it true? Have you returned to Yane to help resolve the current dispute with Chiaroscuro?”

“Do you find that difficult to believe?”

“Not at all.” If Shadi was offended by Swan’s response, she gave no indication. “I suppose what I’m trying to get at is how *much* do you intend to help? How involved are you willing to get?”

“As involved as I have to,” Swan said. “As always when political disputes arise, it is the common people who suffer. I have seen much misery during my recent travels in the South, and I can see more coming over the horizon if the situation is not soon resolved.”

Shadi nodded as if satisfied with his answer. “Then, it is with a clear conscience that I may say what I have come to tell you. Prince Declan, despite appearances, is less tradition-bound than many of his peers. Many royal men would have nothing to do with Maylea because of Anbeyssa’s drop in status during the last several months. They would never seek to court her, and if like Declan they had already pledged their troth before Anbeyssa’s reversal of fortunes, they would have found some pretext or another to break their pledge. But not my master. As near as I can tell, the thought has never even entered his mind.”

“Quite commendable of him.”

“Declan is likewise open-minded when it comes to his business dealings. Sometimes rashly so, for he is determined to make his mark among the royal family and is not adverse to taking risks to do so.”

“I do not wish to give offense, but your master does not seem like the risk-taking type.”

“Of course not. Since when does anyone in the royal family ever wish to let his or her true intentions be known when the entire city—and, indeed, even his own subfamily—is filled with potential competitors?”

Since Swan had his own secret that he wished to protect, he couldn’t argue with Shadi’s words. “Go on.”

Shadi glanced around to make certain no one else in the courtyard was close enough to hear before continuing. “One

of those risks involves business dealings with a group called the Black Wolves.”

“I’m not familiar with them,” Swan said.

“No reason why you should be. They have only recently come into existence and operate in the strictest secrecy. They are a criminal organization—drug traffickers, arms dealers and war profiteers—and they seek to profit by igniting tensions between the Tri-Khan’s holdings and the Varang City-States.”

Shadi’s words chilled Swan. These Black Wolves sounded worse than mere criminals. They were architects of chaos.

“So, the current dispute between Yane and Chiaroscuro...”

“Is the doing of the Black Wolves,” Shadi finished. “They have operations in both Chiaroscuro and Yane, and after nearly a year of diligent effort, they have caused the dissolution of the trade agreement you helped Anbeyssa to establish. They seek to bring both cities to the brink of war.”

Swan frowned. “If what you tell me is true, why would Declan have dealings with the Black Wolves? And more to the point, why would you tell me about them?”

“I serve Declan in two primary ways. I assist him as a secretary in his business activities, and I also serve as his bodyguard. When it comes to the Black Wolves, my two roles clash. While I wish to help my master succeed in increasing his status, I do not wish any harm to come to him. Declan is, shall we say, not gifted with an overabundance of foresight. He sees the Black Wolves as merely a different version of the Guild, one that he might make use of to further his own goals. But he fails to see how dangerous they are. Should they come to believe that Declan is a liability to them, they would not hesitate to have him killed. And the Black Wolves have penetrated every level of society in Yane: They have eyes and ears everywhere. Should they wish to see my master dead, I will have little hope of preventing his assassination. And yet, there is another, far more serious danger to my master.”





“Treason,” Swan said softly.

Shadi nodded. “Were the Royal Council of Elders to discover what Declan is up to, they would, at the very least, excommunicate him from the family. At most, they would have him imprisoned or perhaps even executed.”

Swan mulled this over. While the various subfamilies were constantly plotting against each other, these activities were tolerated and even encouraged. But the one unforgivable transgression among the ruling caste was to betray the royal family as a whole. Should the Council of Elders see Declan’s dealings with the Black Wolves as such a betrayal—and he had no doubt it would—there would be no trial and no appeal. Punishment would be swift and harsh.

“You put forth an interesting theory,” Swan said. “Do you also have an equally interesting course of action to suggest?”

“If you truly desire to resolve the situation between Chiaroscuro and Yane, the only way to do so is to expose the Black Wolves’ role in reigniting the tensions between the two cities. Anything else will be but wasted effort.”

“Perhaps this is so, but why not go before the Council of Elders and tell them?”

“Declan,” Shadi said simply. “If I were to do as you suggest, he would be ruined, and I would have failed in my duty to him.”

Duty? Swan wondered. Or did Shadi perhaps feel something more for her master? “I see. But if Anbeyssa were the one to expose the Black Wolves—”

“With your help, of course,” Shadi put in.

“Then Declan’s ties to them need never come to light.”

“That is my hope, yes.”

Swan spent several moments contemplating all that Shadi had told him. He could find no fault with the sentiment behind her words, but he had the feeling that she hadn’t told him the whole truth. Still, at the very least her story deserved some looking into.

“All right,” Swan said. “Since you’ve been a font of information so far, where do you suggest I start?”



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

At the base of one of the mountains, partially obscured by snow and ice, lay the opening to a small cave.

“See? I told you we’d find it!”

Atreus’s only reply was a wordless grunt that could’ve meant anything or nothing. His strength had dimmed to a dangerously low point, and the Eye of Heaven had been forced to carry him for the last mile of so, thereby depleting what precious little remained of her own strength.

We’ll never make it, she thought. We’ll both perish long before we reach the gate.

She knew she shouldn’t think such negative thoughts, that neither of them could afford to give in to weariness or despair, for if they did, then they surely would die, and sooner rather than later. She needed to get Atreus inside and out of this wind that cut like a thousand ice-forged knives. Once inside, she could start a small fire in the cave entrance and brew tea for Atreus with the last of the medicinal herbs she carried. They could eat what was left of the dried beef and hardtack they’d brought, and they could drink melted snow. They would rest, dry off, get warm and heal. And when they had restored some of the energy that they had spent getting this far, they would—

Though sheets of freezing rain obscured her vision, the Eye of Heaven thought she detected movement within the darkness beyond the mouth of the cave. Any other time, she would have instantly fallen into a defensive



posture, sai springing into her hands as if by magic. But the Northern cold had slowed both her brain and her body, so she merely watched as a white-furred beast with long curved claws and far too many teeth burst out of the cave, shrieking like a mad demon.

As the beast lunged toward them, amber eyes blazing with malign intelligence, the Eye of Heaven received a second shock when Atreus jumped out of her arms, used a throwing knife to slice the rope that tethered them together, and then shoved her out of the way with his free hand. She fell to the ice-covered snow as a monstrosity the size of a war horse slammed into Atreus with enough force to send the monk sprawling.

Atreus rolled over his shoulder and popped up onto his feet. He fell into Striking Serpent stance, throwing knife still in his hand, but his arms and legs trembled. Though Atreus was one of the Chosen of the Unconquered Sun and a mighty warrior, weeks of hard travel through the harsh, unforgiving Northern lands had taken too great a toll on him. He slumped, unable to maintain attack posture. Yet, though he wobbled, he managed to remain on his feet.

The monster that had sent him flying crouched in the snow on all fours, gazing intently at the monk as if sizing up the man's condition. Once again, the Eye of Heaven had the impression that the creature possessed a cunning intelligence far beyond that of any ordinary animal. Like many creatures that inhabited this frozen wasteland, the monster's coat was white, but the Eye of Heaven knew the thing was no natural beast. One moment it resembled something akin to a great cat, the next a wolf, and after that, a bear. But whichever form it favored at a given instant, it always had wicked teeth, cruel claws and those unsettling yellow eyes. Perhaps it was a demon or spirit native to this arctic land, or perhaps it had been a normal animal once—or even a human—that had been transformed after spending too long a time near the formless borders of Creation.

Whatever the damn thing was, it stood between them and shelter.

The Eye of Heaven leapt to her feet. She drew a pair of sai from within her fur cloak, shouted a battle cry and ran toward the creature. The monster's head jerked in her direction, flowing from lupine to ursine shape in the process. As the Eye of Heaven rushed toward the beast—her feet leaving not the slightest impression on the ice layer as she ran—the demonic beast reared up on its hind legs like a bear to meet her charge.



She launched into the air, intending to deliver a spinning kick to the creature's head and then plunge the sharp tips of her sai into its back as she landed. But as she began the maneuver, the creature—which now resembled a bipedal cat—lashed out with its claws. The Eye of Heaven managed to get one of her sai down in time to block the blow and prevent the needle-sharp claws from rending her flesh, but the impact sent her spiraling toward the ground. She braced herself to hit, but then, suddenly, Atreus was there. He caught her in midair and landed lightly onto the ice-covered snow, the frozen overlay barely cracking beneath their combined weight.

The creature brought its front legs down and once more stood on all fours, now resembling a giant arctic wolf. Eyes burning with anger and frustration, the creature released a howl of fury that blended with the sound of the shrieking wind that surrounded them. The howl increased in volume and pitch until it was impossible to tell the creature's cry apart from the noise of the lashing wind. Atreus set the Eye of Heaven down, and she clasped her sai tightly. Three more throwing knives appeared in Atreus's grip, and he now held four, two in each hand.

The creature loped toward them, tongue lolling out of its froth-flecked mouth. The Eye of Heaven and Atreus, without so much as speaking a word or exchanging a look, turned in unison to face their attacker. Then, as if they were a single being that only happened to be inhabiting two separate bodies at the moment, they hurled their weapons at the creature with inhuman strength, speed, and accuracy. The tips of the two sai pierced the monster's amber eyes and



plunged into its brain, while Atreus's knives struck the beast at four different points on its neck, severing head from body.

A steaming font of ebon blood shot into the air, and the creature's headless form continued running toward them for another few feet before it crashed to the ground and lay twitching, claws scrabbling uselessly on ice-coated snow. The head lay several yards from the body, the hilts of the two sai sticking out of bloody eye sockets and black blood pooling around the ragged stump of its neck, the ichor hot enough to melt the ice beneath it. The head had been frozen in mid-transformation and was now an obscene misshapen mixture of cat, wolf and bear. By all rights, the thing should have been dead, but the creature opened its mouth and a guttural voice came forth.

"Well done."

And then, the mouth closed, the body stopped twitching, and the creature was no more.



"We should bury the accursed thing," Atreus muttered.

They sat huddled together for warmth in the cramped cave. The ceiling was so low that neither of them could stand upright, and though they said nothing of it to one another, both knew the cave was far too small to house a beast as large as the changing creature. Yet, this was where it had come from.

"There is no need," the Eye of Heaven said. "No predator would come anywhere near the corpse of that foul monster, and the cold shall keep it from rotting, so the smell shouldn't be a problem." She held her bare hands out toward the tiny fire she'd built just inside the cave entrance. "Besides, we are both still far too weak to dig a pit in which to bury it—especially in this frozen earth."

Atreus grunted but otherwise didn't comment. He leaned back against the craggy cave wall and closed his eyes. The Eye of Heaven withdrew a pewter bowl from her pack, scooted to the cave mouth, and reached past the fire to scoop

up some snow. She then set the bowl down next to the fire and huddled against Atreus once more.

"How is your little passenger?" she asked. "I trust the creature's blow did not damage it?"

Atreus didn't open his eyes, but he reached into his fur cloak and felt around his chest. "As near as I can tell, no harm came to the spider. It is a most sturdy thing, and it was protected not only by the fur I wear, but by the web-cocoon that holds it to my skin." His cracked and bleeding lips formed a smile. "I almost think that my entire body could be burned to ashes or ground to dust without our little silver friend receiving the merest scratch."

The snow in the bowl had melted, and the Eye of Heaven removed a leather pouch filled with herbs from her backpack. She opened the pouch and selected what she needed, though she didn't put the herbs into the water right away. She wanted to let it get hot first so that the restorative tea would be at its most potent when Atreus drank it.

"Tell me something, my love." Atreus never referred to her as the Eye of Heaven. He always said her given name sounded far too formal and solemn, while just calling her "Eye" or "Heaven" alone would sound ridiculous.

"What?"

Atreus opened his eyes and looked at her, his gaze far more intense that she would have expected given his condition. "Do you truly believe in what we are doing?"

The question took her completely by surprise. "After everything we've been through... all that we've sacrificed, the thousands of miles we've traveled... how can you possibly ask such a thing?"

"It is precisely because of all that you speak of that I can ask. Almost everything has been stripped away from us, hasn't it? Friends, family, our respective places in society... our very lives will be next if the Dragon-Blooded have anything to say about it. The only thing we truly have left—" Atreus gently patted his chest "—besides our eight-legged companion is—"





“Each other,” the Eye of Heaven finished softly. Though she didn’t think the water was quite warm enough yet, she nevertheless began crushing herbs and dropping them into the pewter bowl so that she would not have to look Atrous in the face as they talked.

The monk went on. “It is precisely during times such as these, when all distractions have been wiped away, that true clarity of mind may be achieved. And so, I ask you once again. Do you truly believe?”

The Eye of Heaven didn’t respond right away. She chose her words carefully as she stirred the medicinal tea with her index finger.

“I am Chosen of the Maiden of Secrets,” she said, “and though we have spent much time together and shared many...” she smiled “*intimacies*, I do not think you really understand what it means to be a Sidereal.” She paused. “Few can who are not.”

She continued stirring the tea, feeling the water grow warmer against her flesh as she swirled her finger around and around. The storm outside continued to lash and howl, but though the cave was small, the sound seemed distant and muted, as if it were miles away instead of just outside the cave entrance.

“Imagine that you are standing next to an archer who is preparing to take aim at a target,” she said. “Should you, for whatever reason, wish to affect the outcome of the arrow’s flight, you have a number of ways to do so. You can attempt to distract the archer using voice or body movement. You could physically interfere with the archer by touching his arm as he shoots, by nudging or bumping him, even by striking him if you wish.

“Now, imagine that you still stand next to this archer, only you are now a Sidereal Exalt. You still wish to affect the course of the archer’s arrow, and you still have the same methods at your disposal as before. Only now you can foresee *exactly* what will occur as a result of each separate choice you make. So now, you can select the specific technique to employ that will give you the precise outcome you desire.”

Atreus thought this over for a time. The Eye of Heaven finished making the monk's tea and handed the bowl to him. He took a sip and grimaced at the taste, but he nodded his thanks.

"All thinking beings have the ability to imagine the outcomes of their actions," he said, "and thus make wiser choices than they might have... though I'll admit that few do."

"True enough, but a Sidereal can see much farther than others. The archer might be aiming for a stag and be thinking only of the consequences should he fail to procure food for his family. A Sidereal can foresee how the death of that single stag will affect the deer population in that area for generations to come and, more, how the effect on one species will resonate throughout the entire forest—indeed, throughout Creation as a whole—for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years."

Atreus looked at her for a long moment, then he took several more sips of tea, frowning in deep thought as he drank. After a time, the monk said, "It sounds as if you think the Sidereals are gods themselves."

The Eye of Heaven laughed. "That is why we're here, isn't it?" She grew more serious then. "Yes, there is great power in such foresight as the Sidereals possess. But there are also great drawbacks, too. We see so many possible actions and potential outcomes for any given task that it is difficult—if not impossible—for us to act quickly. How can we choose rashly, when by doing so we might overlook the best possible course of action with the best possible outcome? Worse still, what if a hasty choice results in disastrous consequences? For this reason, Sidereals prefer to contemplate patterns of probability and investigate all avenues of action and their potential outcomes before acting. It is sometimes said that a glacier moves with more speed than a Sidereal. An appropriate saying given where we are, don't you think?"

Atreus smiled at her little joke. He had only drunk half the tea so far, but already, he looked stronger and less pale.





“And when we do act, we attempt to do so in the least obtrusive way we can, so that our actions will not have unintended consequences. Now, I have told you all this so that you will more fully understand my answer to your question. In order for me to take the first step of our long journey, I had to be absolutely certain of the path I would follow. So yes, I still believe in what we are doing.”

Atreus smiled. “Very well, then I shall endeavor to maintain my belief as well.” He lifted his pewter bowl to his lips and drained the rest of the medicinal tea in several swallows.

As he drank, the Eye of Heaven hoped that Atreus would refrain from thinking further on what she had told him. For while what she had said was the truth, it wasn't the *whole* truth. Sometimes, probabilities swirled around her like a riot of color, sound and movements, making it extremely difficult to tell one probability path from another. And all too often, the farther in the future a possible outcome was, the more indistinct it was, like a rough shape glimpsed imperfectly through a haze of fog and shadow. It was true that a Sidereal had to be absolutely convinced of the rightness of a particular course before taking any action. But that certainty didn't necessarily mean the Sidereal would be proven right in the long run. After all, weren't the two main factions of Sidereals—the Gold and the Bronze—each working toward what it believed to be the best future for Creation? The Gold striving for a glorious, if less likely, future where the Solar Exalted helped usher in a new golden age, and the Bronze, who preferred to aim for a more mundane, but far more likely, future where the Terrestrial Exalted ruled and the Solars were no more.

But if the Eye of Heaven was correct—and in the deepest part of her soul, she believed she was—then the mission she and Atreus were on would save all of Creation. Provided, of course, that she and the monk could survive long enough to take their arachnid friend through the gate. But though she tried, the Eye of Heaven could not clearly

see their future after they left the cave. She did, however, know what was to come next. She leaned forward and kissed Atreus's lips, tasting the faint residue of medicinal herbs on his flesh.

When she pulled back, Atreus looked at her with a confused grin. "What was that for?"

"Because you're feeling much better and wish to make love to me—and because it is a wish I share."

Atreus laughed. "Far be it from me to argue with a Sidereal Exalt."

And there, in a small cave in the frozen North, leagues away from the closest thing resembling civilization and not knowing if they would live to see another day, the two lovers embraced.

And as they began to take both physical and spiritual pleasure in their love, neither heard—not so far off in the distance—the wail of a hunter's horn sounding above the howling wind.







CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Maylea stood at an open window that overlooked the courtyard. All the subfamilies high enough in the royal hierarchy to have quarters facing the courtyard had at least one window where they could look out and watch the goings on outside. Maylea saw Swan standing and talking with Shadi, though they were too far away for her to hear what they were saying. Unlike some royals, she'd never developed skill at reading lips so she could "eavesdrop" on courtyard conversations, but now, she wished she had.

Seeing Shadi standing close to Swan—*too* close—filled her with a jealousy so intense that it was all she could do to keep from racing out into the courtyard and shoving the brazen woman away from him. The strength of her emotional reaction should've surprised her, but it didn't. It felt right.

"That's a window, Maylea. The lavatory is at the other end of the hallway."

She turned to Eurus, scowling in irritation. "I know where the lavatory is, thank you very much."

"Which is why you now stand before this window," Eurus said.

Maylea had excused herself from the dining table with the intention of coming here all along, but she wasn't about to admit it to Eurus, even if he had guessed the truth—*especially* if he had.

“Since when do you follow me when I need to relieve myself?” she demanded.

“Since you’ve taken to sneaking out of your home and almost getting yourself killed by an assassin,” Eurus countered.

“While I appreciate your concern,” Maylea began in a tone that said she didn’t appreciate it at all, “I have absolutely no intention of sneaking out today. So you might as well...” She turned back to the window and saw that Swan and Shadi had finished their conversation. Swan headed for one of the many gates in the wall surrounding the complex, while Shadi walked back toward the royal quarters.

“That is, I *had* no intention of sneaking out.” She turned and gave Eurus a devilish smile. “Until now.”



As Swan passed through the gate and began walking purposefully east, he didn’t notice the beggar sitting cross-legged, his back against the wall that surrounded the Constellation. There was no reason why he should. After all, he had quite a lot on his mind at that moment, and to be fair, quite a few beggars plied their trade outside the royal complex. Every one of them was licensed, for only the cream of the beggarly crop was allowed this close to the royals. The requirements for obtaining a license were most strict—each applicant was required to possess all four limbs, at least one eye, and a majority of his or her teeth. No more than five percent of any visible skin should be covered with blemishes, boils or any other such unsightly infections. To keep the stink to a minimum outside the royal complex, all licensed beggars were required to bathe at least once a week and were given chits each month that would grant them access to the lower-caste levels of the public bath houses.

The beggar whom Swan ignored—but who paid very close attention to the young diplomat—fulfilled all the necessary requirements, plus he had *both* eyes. He wore a pair of dingy pantaloons which might have once been white, and that was all. He held a wooden bowl with only a couple of

dinars in it that he had placed there himself, as all smart beggars did in the morning to encourage passersby to add to the meager amount. Any coins that were added were quickly removed by the beggar and hidden away on his person, usually in a small and easily concealed money belt.

But if anyone had bothered to step close enough to this particular beggar, they would've noticed a few oddities about him. His dingy pantaloons had no tears, rips or patches. Upon closer inspection, an observer might have noted that the pantaloons appeared to have been dyed gray to make them seem old. This beggar's finger and toenails were neatly trimmed, and the lower half of his face was covered by a only day's growth of beard, if that. His tawny hair, while longish, was clean and cut. And if our hypothetical observer could somehow get close enough to frisk the beggar, no money would be found, but his or her probing fingers would surely discover a number of daggers secreted on the beggar's person—several of them coated with an extremely deadly poison.

As Swan continued down the street, the beggar set his bowl on the ground and began following, leaving the few coins the bowl contained for some other beggar to claim. For this man wasn't a beggar at all, though he did have a legitimate license. His birth name was Little Dog, but he much preferred his professional sobriquet: Ravenwing.

Though Maylea was the one he'd been hired to kill, this violet-haired foreigner had humiliated him, and thus, Ravenwing was delighted that he was the one to leave the royal complex first. Not only would slaying him provide Ravenwing with much pleasure, but once the foreigner was out of the way, Maylea would have one less protector to stand in the assassin's path.

Ravenwing followed Swan at a respectful distance, thinking about the many ways he knew to cause a man agony and wondering how many of them he'd get to try out on the foreigner before the bastard finally died.





Swan made his way through the labyrinth that was the streets of Yane, until he found himself in a part of the city he'd never been in before but had heard much about: the Rookery. This section was reserved for the second lowest caste in the city, the only lower being the untouchables who lived in a zone appropriately called Squalor. Swan had never had cause to visit Squalor either, but he couldn't see how it could possibly be much worse than the Rookery. Although pack animals and horses were forbidden in most sections of the city, the narrow, unpaved streets of the Rookery were covered with feces and soaked in urine. And while here and there someone had spread flower petals over the muck to diminish the stench, it didn't help—no more than a person could extinguish a raging inferno by spitting on it. And the waste drew flies... millions of them it seemed, crawling over the muck, buzzing through the air, the combined sound of their tiny wings a constant, maddening drone.

At first, Swan wondered, only half-jokingly, if the denizens of the Rookery had their manure specially brought in from farms outside the city. But as he penetrated farther into the Rookery, he began to see sewer grates that were clogged and backed up. The malfunctioning sewers were only part of the problem, he guessed, though a big one. With the sewers clogged, the people of the Rookery had likely returned to emptying their chamber pots into the street. A practical solution, Swan supposed, but hardly a pleasant one, not to mention unhealthy. This much waste could produce all manner of diseases: cholera being one of the worst. While at the moment he wasn't particularly grateful for the enhanced senses granted to him by his Exalted state—especially his sense of smell—he was quite thankful that his body was resistant to infection and disease.

The buildings here were smaller and shabbier than elsewhere in the city. They were one or two stories only, constructed primarily of low-grade rotting wood, with thatched roofs of dirty straw and with an absolute disregard for aesthetics of any kind. They were awkward, lopsided

hovels that, like as not, needed to lean one against another to keep from falling down in the first gentle breeze that came along. The buildings had few windows, and those that did were kept shuttered, which only made sense. Who would wish to look out upon such ugliness or let in more of the street stench than necessary?



There were plenty of people about, moving through the muck in the streets as if they didn't care whether they splattered any on themselves as they went about their business. Many of the pedestrians wore shoes and boots instead of the wooden sandals so prevalent throughout the rest of the city. Swan didn't blame them. The Unconquered Sun knew that he'd never willingly come within a mile of the Rookery without *his* boots. The majority of the people were Southerners of various low-level castes, though the proportion of foreigners was much greater here, perhaps because people of any background could be attracted to metaphorical filth, if not the actual kind—and the Rookery had plenty of both to offer. Gambling, drugs, prostitution of all sorts and other far more dark offerings were all on the menu in the Rookery. And from the look of things, there was no end to the number of people intent on buying.

Despite his diplomatic training to be nonjudgmental about different cultures, Swan couldn't help feeling disgust, outrage and more than a little nausea upon coming here. Swan believe most fervently in the inherent dignity of each human being—a belief that both Yane's royals and the Dragon-Blooded Exalts would've found laughable at best and insane at worst. But the Rookery was a place where the basest of human lusts and desires were celebrated, encouraged and ultimately exploited. Swan could readily understand why, according the Shadi, the Black Wolves ran one of their businesses here.

So, by the time Swan found the establishment Shadi had directed him to, he was in low spirits. Nevertheless, he slogged up to the front door—upon which was painted a crude image of a multicolored frog—and tried the handle. When the door wouldn't open, he knocked. A moment



later, Swan heard the sound of an iron bolt being pulled back before the door opened.

A huge brute of a man filled the doorway, and he glared at Swan with tiny eyes set deep beneath a prominent, nearly apelike brow. His shaved head was tattooed with an elaborate pattern of swirling, interlocking lines that seemed to change slightly whenever Swan blinked. The man had a fiery red beard and mustache, and both ears had multiple piercings through which sharpened fragments of bone had been inserted. He wore cotton pants but left his powerfully muscled chest and arms bare, displaying more tattooed designs along with ritual scars. The man carried a two-headed hand ax tucked handle-first through his belt, but with muscles like his, Swan supposed he didn't need to draw his weapon very often.

Swan guessed the brute was a Wyld barbarian. The man's white skin indicated that he wasn't a native of the South, and the tattoos and scarring were similar to those of other such folk Swan had encountered. But the man's bestial aspect was the most persuasive clue. Many who took the risk of living in the Wyld often suffered from bizarre physical changes.

"Don't tell me," Swan said. "You're the bouncer."

The barbarian stared at him blankly, and Swan wondered if the man's time in the Wyld had affected his mind. But then the barbarian answered in a surprisingly mellow tenor.

"I'm worse. I'm Rawgut. If I don't like your face, I'll take it and eat it for dinner." He grinned, revealing a set of twisted, sharp teeth that made his statement seem like more than simple braggadocio.

Swan remained calm. "So, what do you think of my face?"

Rawgut leaned closer and examined Swan's facial features. The barbarian took so long that Swan began to think the man was counting his pores. Finally, Rawgut drew back. "Seen worse," the barbarian said. "Don't care much for your

hair color, though. Never been partial to violet. You want in, come in. But watch your ass. You cause any trouble—”

“You’ll eat my face?”

Rawgut grinned wider than before, and Swan thought the man had more teeth in his mouth than was normal for a human.

“That’s only if I don’t *like* your face. If you cause trouble, I eat other things. I change you fundamentally.”

“I understand completely. I won’t cause any trouble.”

Rawgut looked the young Exalt over once more before finally nodding and stepping aside. Swan squeezed past Rawgut, and then, the barbarian closed the door behind them and locked it.

The barbarian started walking and Swan followed. Though it still stank in here—not least due to the unwashed barbarian—having the door closed helped cut down on the stench from the street—a blessing for which Swan’s nasal passages were exceedingly grateful.

The inside of the Painted Frog was just as unimpressive as the outside. Plain wooden walls, thatched ceiling, dirt floor, no furniture of any sort. Candles stuck in the necks of clay jugs sitting on the floor provided the light.

Rawgut led Swan into a second room, larger than the first. A large open pit yawned in the center of the floor. At first, Swan thought the Painted Frog’s customers were supposed to jump down—or perhaps be tossed down by Rawgut. But as they got closer, Swan could see a set of wooden stairs leading down into the pit.

Rawgut pointed at the stairs. “Down there. Ask for Xhosa.” When the barbarian had finished delivering his oh-so-elaborate directions, he held out his callused, sausage-fingered hand. Swan frowned, but understanding came a moment later. Swan nearly laughed. The barbarian was waiting for a tip!

Swan reached into his money pouch and, with long deft fingers, withdrew a single dinar and then, thinking better on the matter, withdrew two more. He tossed all three to Rawgut, and the barbarian snatched them out of the air with





a speed that belied his bulk. Swan hoped the amount would prove sufficient—especially since all Rawgut had done for him was open a door, glare at him and walk him from one room to another.

The barbarian examined the trio of coins before hiding them away in a pocket of his pantaloons, and then, without so much as looking at Swan as he passed, Rawgut headed back into the outer room, presumably to once more take up his position as doorman.

Swan started down.

The first thing he noticed when he reached the bottom of the stairs was the smell. No backed-up sewer stench here. Instead, the scent of incense mingled with the odors of green growing things. He wasn't surprised, then, to step into a chamber with rich soil on the floor and a small pond ringed by trees and bushes in the center of the room. The stone walls and ceiling had been painted blue to simulate sky, with a few fluffy white clouds present as an additional touch of verisimilitude. The room was lit by a glass sphere hanging close to the ceiling without visible attachment. Swan assumed it was intended to represent the sun. The sphere glowed with a bright, warm light beyond the capabilities of a simple flame to produce.

Aside from the natural decor, the room was devoid of furnishings, but it was far from empty. A dozen people sat or lay on the soil around the pond, most with eyes closed and blissful smiles on their faces. Different castes were represented: minor royals, common shopkeepers and clerks, lower castes... even a single untouchable was present. Swan had never seen so many people of such disparate castes under the same roof, let alone in the same room. There were a few foreigners in the mix as well, traders from the North and East. But whatever their differences, they all had one thing in common—clutched in the hands of each one was a colorful frog, sometimes more than one. The frogs were of varying sizes and patterns, but their color scheme tended toward a mix of reds, blues, yellows, oranges and greens. The frogs had two small sacs behind their heads from which

white froth oozed forth. When a frog had produced enough froth to cover its sacs, the person holding the frog brought the creature to his or her face and, with an expression of tremulous ecstasy, began licking the thick white substance off the frog, moaning softly in pleasure as he did.

One thing more: the skins of the frog-lickers were tight and shiny, almost glistening, and tinged with reds, blues, and yellows—as if licking the froth were somehow imbuing them with the physical qualities of the frogs from which they partook. There were several people with skin so discolored that Swan had a difficult time seeing the frogs they licked, for the creatures blended in so well with the hues of their skin.

One such man was garbed in black leather armor and sat cross-legged on the soil, a chopping sword belted to his waist. He was thin, almost to the point of emaciation, though his flaming orange hair was still thick and healthy. Swan guessed he was a foreign mercenary who'd come to Yane in search of work. Instead, it appeared that he'd found something quite different. More shocking was a high-class courtesan from the Aerie. Her head was shaved, as was the custom for the men and women who worked in the Aerie's brothels, and her breasts were bare. She wore only a gold cloth pinned around her waist, so small that it barely covered her pelvic region. Because so much of her skin was showing, her thinness—not to mention the effect of the mottled colors on her flesh—was far more striking. Others whose skins were nearly as bad included a low-level astrologer wearing threadbare robes embroidered with star patterns, a Northern trader wearing an eye-patch and dressed in leather vest and pants, and the untouchable, wearing the plain gray tunic and leggings of his caste.

Swan was looking over the frog-lickers, trying to decide which, if any, might be Xhosa, when he heard the sound of stone sliding against stone. He turned to see a rectangular section of sky-blue brick swing outward—a hidden door, he supposed, though perhaps hidden only to maintain the illusion of a pond surrounded by sky. A





middle-aged Southern man stepped through. His pantaloons were made from expensive blue silk, and he wore a vest cut from the same cloth. He was bald, though as if to compensate, he had a full red beard. He had no tattoos or piercings, making it impossible to determine his caste, but he wore a great deal of jewelry—rings on his fingers and toes, gold chains around his neck, silver bracelets on his wrists and jade earrings dangling from his ears. Whatever the man's caste, he clearly didn't lack for money.

The man pushed the door closed behind him then walked with easy, confident strides to greet Swan.

"Are you Xhosa?" Swan asked.

The man bowed, neck chains tinkling against each other. "I am. To whom do I have the honor of speaking?"

Swan returned Xhosa's bow. "My name is Bellus. I am a trader of rare and exotic merchandise, and the word on the street is that you provide a most unique service to your customers."

"Bellus, eh?" Xhosa smiled. "Well, it doesn't matter what your name is—as long as you can afford what I sell."

Swan removed a small pouch from one of his pockets and poured the contents into his hand. Silver dinars gleamed in the light cast by the magic sphere.

Xhosa's smile turned into a grin. "Ah, in that case, welcome to the Painted Frog, Bellus." He gestured toward the pond. "The first lick is free. After that, I charge by the half hour."

Swan replaced the dinars in the pouch and returned them to his pocket. "I'm not here to indulge, tempting as the notion might be. I'd like to help you expand the scope of your business."

Xhosa continued smiling, but his eyes took on a hard edge. "What makes you think we're interested in expanding?"

"We?" Swan asked. "I'd heard that you were the sole proprietor of this establishment."

"I am, though I have a number of... investors."

Like the Black Wolves, I'll wager. It was just as Shadi had said.

Swan nodded his understanding. "I see. To answer your question, I hope to make you interested in expanding if you aren't already."

"What if I have my own plans for expansion?" Xhosa asked.

So Swan smiled and poured on the charm. "Then I hope to convince you that you can use a partner."

Xhosa laughed. "You're persistent, I'll give you that!" He thought for a moment. "All right then: Where precisely would you like to see us expand to?"

"Nexus seems like the most logical choice. I do a great deal of business there and have many connections."

"You'll have to do better than that, I'm afraid," Xhosa said. "My investors have plenty of connections of their own throughout Creation—Nexus included. If I wished to expand, I'd would do so through them."

"You could do that," Swan allowed. "But how much control would you have? And what would your cut of the profits be?"

Xhosa frowned. "Honestly? I'd retain little to no control, and my cut would likely be much less than I take in myself here in Yane. Those are the main reasons I've done no expanding during the last several years."

"But if you were to partner with me, you could have as much control as you like, and as for profits, I'm quite amenable to working out an equitable deal for the both of us."

Xhosa paused. "I must admit that what you say intrigues me. But how can I know you're serious?"


Swan's only answer was to pat the pocket where the dinars were.

"All right," Xhosa said. "We can at least discuss the matter, yes? No harm in that. But first, you need to be aware of the difficulties and risks involved with running a pond such as mine."

Xhosa turned back to the door and cupped his hands to his mouth. "Gratian! Get out here!" he yelled.

Nothing happened for a moment, but then, the door swung slowly open once more and another Southern man



 stepped forth. He was younger than Xhosa—in his late twenties, early thirties—and more simply dressed, though he did wear a white cotton shirt with long sleeves in addition to pantaloons. His hair was red, though his short beard was shot through with blonde. Like Xhosa, this man displayed no obvious signs of caste. Swan doubted that was a coincidence. The Black Wolves doubtless preferred their operatives to maintain as much anonymity as possible.

“This is Gratian,” Xhosa said as the white-shirted man joined them. “He is my most able assistant and something of an expert when it comes to our little multicolored friends here.” Xhosa nodded toward the frogs in the artificial pond before turning to Gratian. “This is Bellus, Gratian. He’s interested in helping us expand our business. But before the two of us talk further, I’d like you to tell him all about our... merchandise.”

Gratian bowed. “As you will.” He turned to Swan and said, “Come with me, please,” and then stepped closer to the edge of the water. Swan followed while Xhosa remained standing where he was. Gratian and Swan picked their way around the Painted Frog’s customers, but the frog-lickers ignored them—if they were even aware of the two men at all. They stopped at a portion of the bank where a few stray frogs sat. Gratian removed a pair of gloves from one of his pockets and slipped them on. The gloves were a mottled blend of blues, oranges, reds and greens, and Swan realized they had been made from frog. Gratian then bent down and picked up one of the frogs. He held the amphibian gently, and Swan noted that even though his hands were gloved, Gratian was careful not to touch the sacs behind the frog’s neck.

“These fellows don’t have a name—at least none that I’m aware of. They were found not far from Yane, in a place called the Obsidian Valley. Whether it is a natural defense or some manner of enchantment, I know not. What I can tell you is that they produce a powerfully addictive narcotic. Just one taste—the merest drop on your tongue—and you are addicted for life.”

Gratian lightly stroked one of the frogs' sacs with his index finger. The frog quivered, and white froth began to ooze forth.

Swan stared at the white foamy substance the frog produced. Even the mildest of drugs had their dangers, but this sounded like it was more powerful than any chemical Swan had ever heard of. "Amazing," he said, in a feigned tone of admiration, for in truth he found nothing to admire here.

Gratian nodded. "Isn't it?" He knelt once more and released the frog, careful not to allow the small amount of foam it had produced to come into contact with his gloved hands. He then stood, removed the gloves and returned them to his pocket. "You can imagine the possibilities, I trust."

"Oh, yes." Swan spoke as if he were excited about the frogs' trade potential. "The farmers in this region grow both tobacco and dreamweed, and they make a fine profit from each. But this—" he gestured to the frog Gratian had just put down—"could be the most profitable drug ever produced."

"Indeed," Gratian said. "But there are several... factors that make the mass production and distribution of the chemical problematic."

"Oh?"

"Chief among them is that the frogs produce their most potent froth in the hot Southern climate." Gratian nodded toward the tiny pond. "This water comes from an underground stream, and it keeps my little friends happy. Our associates have tried to relocate the frogs in other places, but without success. Go much farther north than Yane or much farther southwest than Chiaroscuro, and the froth the frogs produce isn't as potent or addictive."

"Quite a problem indeed," Swan said. "Can the chemical be bottled and transported that way?"

"Yes, but once it's excreted from the frogs, it must be stored in sealed containers right away, lest it begin to lose potency. For the same reason, the chemical must be used immediately after the container is unsealed. Within an





hour after opening a container, the drug is useless. As you can well imagine, this makes transporting large quantities difficult. And there's another problem. After ingesting frog froth over a period of time, a lick's body undergoes a most curious transformation."

Swan glanced at the Painted Frog's customers, all of them still writhing and moaning in ecstasy.

"Their skin," Swan said.

Gratian nodded. "The more one becomes accustomed to the drug, the more one's skin becomes discolored and tight, as you can see. I've been working on finding a way to counter this side-effect, but without much success so far, I'm afraid."

"Thank you, Gratian," Xhosa said. "That will be all for now."

Gratian bowed to his master, then to Swan. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Bellus." He then returned to the side room and closed the door behind him.

When the door was sealed once more, Swan said, "So, there is no way to expand your business."

"None that we've found yet," Xhosa admitted. "But we remain hopeful. For if we can discover solutions to our problems, imagine the possibilities. Beginning with a simple chemical produced by a humble amphibian, we can build the foundation of a criminal and economic empire that shall encompass all Creation!"

The whole enterprise seemed ridiculous on the surface: narcotic-producing *frogs*? But the more Swan thought about it, the more he saw just how dangerous such an addictive substance could be. "Yes, I suppose you could."

"But if such a glorious day ever comes to pass, I'm afraid you won't be alive to witness it, Swan of the Coral Archipelago. Oh, don't look so surprised. The Black Wolves have eyes everywhere in Yane. We've been watching you since the moment you set foot in the city. Do you really think that you're the first spy the royals have sent? They'd love nothing better than to root out and destroy us. You've obviously

come here at Anbeyssa's behest to infiltrate our organization and bring it down from within."

Swan felt relief upon hearing Xhosa's words. While the master of frogs knew that Swan had lied, he didn't know the true reason for Swan's visit, nor was he aware that he stood in the presence of a Solar Exalt. Swan expected Xhosa to call for Rawgut, but instead he turned to address his customers. "A lifetime of free licks for the one of you who brings me the foreigner's head!"

Slowly, the addicts opened sleepy eyes and did their best to focus on Swan. Once they'd gotten a good luck, a number of them turned away, uninterested, but those five with the most discolored skins—the mercenary, the courtesan, the astrologer, the trader and the untouchable—smiled, put down their frogs and began to rise.







CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“I have walked on the face of this world for fifty-seven years. And in all that time, I have managed to avoid setting foot in the Rookery. Until today.”

“Don’t sound so miserable, Eurus. Think of it as an adventure.”

“My idea of adventure doesn’t involve quite so much filth.”

Maylea swatted Eurus on the arm, though privately she agreed with him. The two stood in an alley across the street from the building that Swan had entered—the one with a frog painted on the door.

“Why isn’t there a sign?” Maylea asked.

“The frog *is* the sign,” Eurus replied. “The inhabitants of the Rookery are mostly illiterate.”

Maylea and Eurus wore hooded robes that they’d hurriedly donned before leaving the royal complex. The hems were caked with filth, even though they’d had to lift up their robes in order to slog through the muck that choked the streets.

“Why don’t they learn to read?” Maylea asked. “It would make their lives much simpler, not to mention richer.”

Eurus snorted, and Maylea wondered if he were reacting to her suggestion or attempting to clear the stink out of his nose.



“Because of their caste. The jobs they were born to do don’t require them to learn to read.”

Eurus’s voice held a disdain that Maylea had never heard before. He’d always been such a kind, gentle man—at least to her—and this sudden harshness disturbed her.

“Can we never escape the chains that fate forges for us?” she asked softly, speaking more to herself than to Eurus.

“My lady, are you well?” Eurus’s voice held only concern now.

“I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

“Your voice. For a moment it sounded as if someone else were speaking.”

Maylea patted his arm. “It was probably just your imagination. Think of it no more.” She turned her attention to the building across the street. “What do you think he’s doing in there?”

Eurus shrugged. “I do not know, but your father trusts him, so despite appearances to the contrary, we must believe that whatever business Master Swan is transacting is honorable. I’m far more concerned about what your father will do to me when we return to the complex.”

“He will praise you for not allowing me to go off on my own again.”

Eurus let out a bark of laughter. “I’ll be fortunate if he doesn’t order my immediate execution.”

Maylea was about to tell him not to be silly when she wondered if perhaps she had gone too far this time. She’d been drawn to follow Swan, but now that she was here—breathing a stench so rank it was almost solid, and with feet caked with such noxious filth that she feared there’d be no flesh left on them when she was finally able to wash—she had no idea why she’d been so intent on following the diplomat.

The words she’d spoken to Eurus came back to her then.

“*Can we never escape the chains that fate forges for us?*”

“Evidently not.” Maylea whispered. She continued watching the door with the badly rendered frog painted upon it, waiting for whatever was destined to happen next.



Ravenwing lay flat upon a thatched roof only two buildings away from the alley where Maylea and her bodyguard hid. He'd become aware of them quite soon after he'd started following the purple-haired foreigner. Unable to believe his good fortune at seeing the second of his two targets out on the street, he'd hung back and allowed them to pass him. Then he followed, hoping that he'd soon get a chance to kill both Maylea *and* her protector in one strike. Not only would it be infinitely more satisfying, but if he succeeded, the reputation of Ravenwing the assassin would grow in stature... perhaps enough that he could raise his fees and retire to his beloved island all the sooner.

But now, lying on a roof in the Rookery and listening to the grunting and groaning of the prostitutes and their customers in the building beneath him, Ravenwing was curious. Why had the foreigner come here to the ass-end of Yane? It couldn't be to partake of the dark and sordid pleasures the Rookery had to offer. The higher castes had the same sort of establishments in their sections of the city, just cleaner and more expensive.

Perhaps he likes his fun dirty, Ravenwing thought. If so, then he'd certainly come to the right location. Ravenwing doubted there was a filthier place in all Creation.

But what really perplexed Ravenwing was why Maylea had followed the man—and to *here* of all places. She'd almost died at Ravenwing's hands last night. By all rights, she should be hiding inside her father's quarters, too afraid to set foot in the royal courtyard, let alone leave the complex grounds. But here she was, sneaking around in the same pathetic disguise she'd worn last night. At least this time she'd had the sense to bring a bodyguard with her, though Ravenwing doubted the man would give him any trouble—certainly not as much as the foreigner had given him last night.

Ravenwing was contemplating how best to proceed, when out of the corner of his eye he detected movement.



He turned and saw someone skulking in the mouth of an alley further down the street. The newcomer was too far away to clearly make out many details, not even the gender, though he *could* tell that he or she was a Southerner. He supposed that it was merely one of the Rookery's denizens, an opportunistic predator who'd also set sights on Maylea and her bodyguard as potential prey. If so, he or she would be no real competition for him. Still, his instincts told him that something more was going on here, and Ravenwing hadn't become so successful at the art of assassination without heeding his instincts.

Ravenwing decided to wait, watch and see how events played out over the next few minutes. He had started this day with the intention of killing Maylea's protector, and he still hoped to do so. But now he also wanted to assuage his curiosity. With any luck, he'd accomplish both goals before the setting of the sun.

Ravenwing kept his gaze focused on the door with the painted frog while those in the building beneath cried out in release as they satisfied their petty lusts. Ravenwing intended to continue being patient. If he did, perhaps he too would find satisfaction before long.



Swan fell into a defensive stance. The addicts picked up speed as they came toward him, as if their bodies were slowly but surely remembering how to move. The flame-haired mercenary was the first to approach Swan. His eyes were dull, his facial features slack, and there were dried white crusts of frog froth at the corners of his mouth.

Swan held up his hands to show he was unarmed and took a step back.

"Let's no one be hasty."

But if the mercenary understood Swan's words, he gave no sign. He continued forward, gripped the hilt of his sword with a hand covered with tight, mottled skin, and slowly drew his weapon. Swan glanced at Flame Hair and saw that the other four addicts with the worst skin—meaning those

who were most addicted, Swan guessed—were also coming toward him, intent on collecting Xhosa's reward. Their slow, awkward motions, dull gazes and lurching gaits made the quintet of addicts resemble the walking dead, though Swan knew they were living mortals whose bodies and minds had been ravaged by their addiction. As such, they were more to be pitied than feared.



The mercenary's sword made a hissing rasp as he drew it from the scabbard, and a hint of bloodlust showed through his otherwise glazed-over eyes.

Swan glanced around the room, looking for Xhosa, but the man was gone. He then noticed the chamber's hidden door closing, and he realized that while Xhosa might have wanted him dead, he didn't want to stay and watch.

Flame Hair closed on Swan and raised his sword—hand trembling as if he could barely hold the weapon aloft—and then, he swung the blade toward Swan's neck. The young Exalt leaned back, and the blade sliced through nothing but empty air. The mercenary stumbled, suddenly off balance, and Swan took the opportunity to straighten, plant his foot on the addict's backside and shove. Flame Hair dropped his sword as he fell to his hands and knees, but he didn't go all the way down.

Swan turned to the other four addicts who were coming toward him. The one-eyed trader held a knife, and the courtesan had a slim dagger with a finely wrought gold handle, though Swan had no idea where she'd managed to conceal it on her mostly naked body. The other two addicts were unarmed, but they approached with their hands hooked into claws. Swan guessed they would try to tear him apart if they could.

There was no point in his staying here any longer, though. Xhosa was gone, and Swan had seen enough. If he remained, he'd be forced to harm these addicts to defend himself, and that was an outcome he wanted to avoid if he could.

The other four addicts stood between Swan and the stairs. They had nearly reached him, and Flame Hair was



already staggering to his feet. The young Exalt jumped up into the air, brought his knees to his chest, and performed a flying somersault over the addicts' heads. The trader and courtesan slashed their daggers at Swan as he passed overhead, but they both missed. Swan landed on his feet and ran for the stairs. He took them in two quick bounds, then paused at the top. There was no door to close, but he thought he'd put enough distance between himself and the addicts. All he needed to do now was walk out.

"Xhosa says you're a spy."

"A simple misunderstanding," Swan said as Rawgut lumbered toward him. He was glad to see the barbarian still carried his ax tucked beneath his belt. He didn't question how Xhosa had gotten a message to Rawgut so quickly. There were any number of ways.

Swan heard the addicts coming up the stairs behind him, and he knew if he didn't get out of there in the next few seconds, a fight would break out—a fight one or more of the addicts probably wouldn't survive.

"“My business is concluded here,” Swan said, “so I'll be taking my leave now.”"

Swan darted past the barbarian and toward the front door.

"Damn it! Get back here!" Rawgut shouted.

Swan heard the barbarian pounding after him, but there was no way a man that large could move fast enough to catch him. He made it to the front door, and as he ran toward it he decided he couldn't spare the time to open it. He was going to have to break it down. He started to pick up speed, intending to leap into the air and kick the door open as he passed through. He saw the door burst into splinters in his mind, could feel the wood give way beneath his foot. One more step and then...

Swan launched himself into the air, but as soon as his feet left the floor, the clasp of his cloak tightened around his throat. He jerked to a halt in midair and heard Rawgut grunt with effort as the barbarian swung him around by the cape and slammed him into the wall. The impact bloomed

through Swan's body, and he slumped to the floor, momentarily stunned. He felt more pressure on his throat, and he realized that Rawgut still had hold of his cloak.

Swan's constitution was far stronger than a mortal man's, and the pain receded quickly and his mind cleared. Just as Rawgut started to yank on the cloak again, Swan reached up and quickly undid the clasp. Caught off guard, Rawgut stumbled backward, colliding with the dagger-wielding courtesan. They went down in a tangle of arms and legs, Rawgut swearing as they hit the floor.

"You cut me, you bitch!"

Rawgut leaped to his feet, and Swan could see that the barbarian was bleeding from a cut on his lower back. The wound didn't appear serious, but it seemed that the simple fact he'd been hurt had sent Rawgut into a rage. He reached for his hand ax and drew the weapon in a single, swift motion. The courtesan—still holding onto her dagger, the blade smeared with Rawgut's blood—was attempting to rise. Rawgut lifted his ax over his head, clearly intending to cleave the woman's skull in two.

The remaining addicts ignored the courtesan's plight and came toward Swan, still eager to claim Xhosa's reward. Swan ran past the Northern trader, deflecting a knife blow with a simple flick of his hand. The astrologer and the untouchable both made a grab for him, but Swan ducked beneath their arms without slowing. The flame-haired mercenary swung his sword, but Swan rolled beneath the strike and came up on his feet running.

Rawgut started to bring his ax down, and Swan leaped into the air. His right foot struck the ax blade and turned Rawgut's strike aside. The force of Swan's blow knocked the ax out of the barbarian's hands, and the weapon spun through the air and embedded itself in the wall.

Swan landed in a crouch next to the courtesan.

"Are you all—" was as far as he got before the woman slashed out at him with her dagger. He rolled to the side to avoid the strike and came up on his feet just in time to see the mercenary's sword point thrust toward his abdomen.





Swan batted the blade aside with the flat of his hand, but before he could follow through and disarm Flame Hair, the astrologer grabbed Swan's left wrist.

It's getting a bit cramped in here, Swan thought. He twisted free of the astrologer's grip and shoved the man backward, careful not to apply too much force. The courtesan was on her feet and coming toward him once again, the mercenary and the trader were closing in, and Rawgut had hold of his ax's handle and was working the weapon free from the wall.

Enough was enough.

Swan spun around, plucked the dagger out of the courtesan's hand and hurled it hilt-first at the mercenary's sword. The dagger knocked the weapon out of Flame Hair's hand before rebounding to strike the trader's wrist. The one-eyed man yowled—evidently not so drugged that he couldn't still feel pain—and dropped the knife. Swan then fell into a crouch, straightened his right leg and swept it around in a circle, knocking the five addicts off their feet. Once they were down, Swan sprung up and started for the door again.

Suddenly, Rawgut was standing in his way, ax in hand. The barbarian's lips curled back from his too-sharp teeth. "Remember what I said I'd do if you caused any trouble?"

"Sorry," Swan said. "Playtime is over."

The young Exalt launched himself into the air and kicked Rawgut in the chest. The barbarian flew backward, slamming into the door of the Painted Frog and reducing it to kindling as he flew out into the street. Rawgut landed in the muck with a thick splash and slid halfway across the street before coming to a stop.

Swan stepped out of the Painted Frog through the demolished doorway and debated what to do next. The addicts would no doubt come after him within moments, and Rawgut was already lifting himself out of the street sewage, and he'd managed to keep hold of his ax. The barbarian didn't strike Swan as the type to forgive and forget, so he knew Rawgut would soon resume his attack.

Swan wasn't a man who fought for the sake of fighting. He fought only when he had to, when there was no other choice. But he had another choice now. He'd learned all he could from his visit to the Painted Frog. It was time to leave.

Yet, before Swan could take a step out of the doorway, he saw a Southern man come running out from the mouth of an alley across the street. He wore a robe and carried a sword, and he looked a great deal like Eurus. In fact, he *was* Eurus, and he was heading straight for Rawgut. The barbarian was far stronger and faster than an ordinary mortal, perhaps due to the taint of the Wyld in his blood. As good a fighter as Eurus might be, Swan wasn't sure the man would prove a match for Rawgut.

He knew better than to call out a warning, though. By doing so, he risked alerting Rawgut to the servant's presence. Instead, Swan started running toward the barbarian, his feet slapping through the street muck without slipping or sliding. Before Swan could reach Rawgut, the barbarian—perhaps warned by some primitive sense of danger or simply hearing Eurus splashing in the muck behind him—whirled about to meet the charge of this new foe.

Eurus swung his sword as he approached, but Rawgut swept his ax in a vicious arc and struck the servant's blade, snapping it in two. The force of the blow knocked Eurus down, and he sprawled in the street muck, covered with filth and momentarily helpless.

Instead of finishing Eurus off, Rawgut spun back around to meet Swan's attack. He drew back his ax, tightened his grip, and then hurled it at Swan. The ax tumbled toward Swan end over end. Time seemed to slow down for the young Exalt as the weapon came closer... closer...

When the ax was only an inch from his face, Swan grabbed the weapon by the handle, spun around and sent the weapon hurtling back to its owner. The blunt top of the ax head struck Rawgut in the stomach, and the barbarian grunted as he was knocked backward into the sewage.

Swan ran up to check on Eurus. He glanced at Rawgut as he drew near, saw the barbarian's eyes were closed, and



was satisfied that the man was not going to make any more trouble for the time being. Eurus was trying to sit up, and Swan gave the servant a hand.

“Are you injured?” Swan asked.

Eurus shook his head. “Only my pride.” He looked down at his filth-smearred robe. “And I’m not looking forward to what Anbeyssa’s laundress is going to say when she sees this mess.”

Swan smiled and helped Eurus to his feet. But as he did, another robed figure emerged from the alley and came hurrying toward them as fast as she could without slipping in the street muck.

“Eurus, you had me worried sick!” Maylea said as she joined them.

“Do not fret, Mistress. I’m fine.” Eurus turned back to Swan. “That was quite an impressive performance, Master Swan. It seems you are skilled at more than just using words, eh?”

“I’ve had some training in the martial arts,” Swan allowed. “What are you two doing in the Rookery? Surely Anbeyssa doesn’t know. After last night—”

“Swan!” Maylea interrupted, pointing toward the Painted Frog.

Swan turned to see the five addicts shuffling out of the open doorway, led by the flame-haired mercenary. He sighed. He didn’t want to fight them anymore, and he could think of only one way to get rid of them.

“Think about it,” he called out. “With Xhosa and Rawgut gone, you can have all the frogs to yourselves!”

At first the addicts didn’t stop, and Swan feared that they were too drugged to understand him. But then, they paused and, one by one, turned and headed back inside the Painted Frog.

Eurus looked at Swan and frowned. “Frogs?”

“I’ll explain later,” Swan promised. “But first, we should get Maylea back home.” He took the girl’s elbow, intending to urge her to start walking, but then he saw the blank look on her face. Maylea was gazing down the street, eyes wide

and staring as if she were struggling to believe what she was seeing. The street in that direction was empty, though. Worried, Swan shook her gently. She closed her eyes as if to clear her vision, and when she opened them again, she looked at Swan and gave him a smile.

"I'm all right," she said, though she appeared shaken.

"What happened?" Swan said.

Before Maylea could answer, Rawgut suddenly leaped to his feet, roared and swung his ax toward Swan. The young Exalt prepare to defend himself and his two companions, but before he could strike, Rawgut stiffened and his eyes went wide. He fell face-first into the muck and lay still.

Swan knelt to examine the barbarian's body and saw the shaft of a small dart protruding from the base of his skull. He stood and scanned the street, but he saw no one. Whoever their unknown benefactor was, he or she was gone.

Swan decided not to worry about this new mystery right now. He'd had more than enough of the Rookery for one morning. He wanted to get Maylea home where she'd be safe and—he inhaled and made a face—take a few dozens baths to try and get the stink of this wretched place off him.

"Let's go," he said, and the three of them started slogging through the muck back toward the royal complex.







CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Yseult and Ragnor sat at a stone table in the small chamber that served as a meeting room for the Black Wolves, though she had no idea what its original purpose was. The walls, ceiling and floor had been carved from the glossy black rock native to this valley. The table also had been formed from the same stone, as had the chairs upon which they sat. Not exactly the most comfortable seats, but serviceable enough. In the middle of the table rested a softly glowing oil lamp. Though the lamp was turned low, the chamber was well illuminated, thanks to thousands of tiny crystalline flecks in the black stone. They caught the lamplight and reflected it tenfold. There was enough light for Yseult to make out the runes etched into the ceiling, each as large as a human hand. They had been carved in a spiral pattern, and Yseult always found herself getting dizzy if she looked at the runes too long.

Both outcastes held pewter mugs filled with a bitter-tasting ale called Riverhorse. Yseult referred to the ale by another name: “backwash.” Still, the alcohol content was high, and the Black Wolves provided it for the mercenaries—as much as they wanted—and that was all that mattered.

Yseult took a drink and pointed up at the ceiling. “Ever wonder what those are?”

Ragnor glanced upward for a moment, then shrugged. “Not really. I don’t like looking at them. It gives me a headache.” He took a gulp of ale as if it might prevent



such a malady from coming on. “It’s just some sort of writing,” Ragnor continued. “Praises to the gods, or perhaps a dull inspirational quote from one sage or another. Nothing special.”

Yseult shook her head in mock disappointment. “You have a seriously stunted imagination, Ragnor. Wolf’s Lair is a remnant of the First Age—a stronghold where some ancient warlord once garrisoned his troops. I’d call that something “special.””

Ragnor took another sip of ale, then grinned at her, dollops of foam on his beard. “I’m not a historian.”

Before Yseult could say more, Xhosa walked in through the open doorway. “My apologies for keeping you waiting. We had an... incident at one of our establishments today, and I was unavoidably detained.” The man took a seat at the stone table, glancing at the mugs of ale Yseult and Ragnor had and looking as if he’d very much like one himself after the hot, dusty trip from Yane. But the Wolf’s Lair had no serving staff. If Xhosa wanted a drink, he would have to get it himself.

“We received your message,” Yseult said. “Obviously, or we wouldn’t be talking right now. The rider you sent said that there’s an Anathema in Yane. Is this true?”

Xhosa nodded. “We’ve only recently been able to piece together who he is and *what* he is. In fact, it was this Anathema who caused the incident that delayed me. He is a Westerner name Swan, and we believe he is working as an agent for the royal family.”

“What makes you believe that this Swan is Anathema?” Ragnor asked. “I do not wish to suggest that you are mistaken, but false accusations of being Anathema are not uncommon. And even if this Swan is Anathema, what do you want *us* to do about him?”

Yseult slammed her mug down so hard on the stone table that the pewter was crushed and ale splattered all three of them. The table itself, though, wasn’t so much as scratched.

“I am in command of the Iron Fang, Ragnor! Something you seem to have forgotten of late!” Yseult knew that

Ragnor's questions were sensible though that didn't stop her from being furious at him for asking. She glared at Ragnor.

You think I'm afraid, don't you? That I'm not strong enough to take on Anathema. But you're wrong. You're wrong!

Ragnor wiped ale from one of his eyes before replying. "Forgive me. And thank you again for reminding me of my place."

Ragnor had managed to keep his voice calm, but Yseult knew how angry he was. Not that she gave a damn. It was the duty of a second in command to occasionally ask questions and offer suggestions to his superior. Even at times to point out where she might be making a mistake. But Ragnor had been challenging her too directly and too often lately. First in front of their fellow mercenaries, and now in front of their employer—or at least their employer's representative. And she had taken much more than enough of it from him. She was so furious at Ragnor that she felt her body temperature begin to rise, and the ale that had splashed onto her hands began to sizzle.

Xhosa's eyes widened in fear, and he stood up as if preparing to flee from the room. Ragnor looked at Yseult impassively, but neither said or did anything more. Several seconds passed before Yseult managed to regain control of her temper. Her skin cooled.

She turned to Xhosa and said, "Please, sit down."

Looking as if he wasn't sure if it were a good idea or not, the man sat once more.

"Though my second in command oversteps his bounds at times, I am forced to admit the questions he raises are valid. How *do* you know Swan is Anathema?"

Xhosa looked suddenly uncomfortable. "Our usual ways. Various reports from our operatives and, ah, special information we've received from... certain sources."

Despite their harsh feelings for each other a moment ago, Yseult and Ragnor exchanged looks. Neither of them knew much about the Black Wolves, other than that they paid well and allowed the Iron Fang to use Wolf's Lair as a base of operations while they worked. So, while Xhosa was





their primary contact with the Wolves, Yseult didn't have a clear picture of exactly where he fit in the organization's hierarchy. Sometimes, he seemed quite confident and in control, but other times—like now—he seemed vague and uncertain. Perhaps the problem simply was that he was mortal. In Yseult's experience, ordinary humans normally had weak minds and even weaker spirits.

"So, if this Anathema is working for the royal family," Yseult said, "then you should summon an official Wyld Hunt. Yane is an ally of the Realm, and whoever harbors this monster would have no choice but to cooperate with a Hunt."

"True," Xhosa admitted, "but we'd prefer not to involve the Realm at this particular... juncture in our plans. The Black Wolves have been working to destabilize the South, to sow discord and distrust between Yane and Chiaroscuro. The last thing we desire is for the Realm to enter into the equation and reverse all that we—yourselves included—have worked for."

"We're mercenaries," Yseult said. "We work for money, nothing else." But even as she said this, she knew it wasn't entirely true. Money had nothing to do with why she had killed that God-Blooded boy this morning. She'd been working her courage up. Tempering it so that she could test it once again, after all this time.

Xhosa smiled. "All to the better, since we intend to pay you quite well for what we'd like you to do tonight."

"Which is..." Yseult prompted.

Xhosa's smile became a grin. "Why, impersonate a *real* Wyld Hunt, of course."



Swan walked down the hall toward Maylea's bedchamber. He had bathed twice since returning to Anbeyssa's home and had donned a fresh set of clothes—including a new pair of boots—but he imagined that he still smelled the faint odor of sewage about himself. He *hoped* he was imagining it.



Eurus, also freshly bathed, stood in front of Maylea's door, but he wasn't alone this time. A second guard stood next to him, and Swan knew the other man wasn't there so much to protect Maylea as to keep an eye on Eurus. The faithful guard kept his face expressionless as Swan approached, but the diplomat could see the shame burning in the man's eyes. Eurus had disappointed his master, had allowed his daughter to not only leave the Constellation but venture into the Rookery, and he had lost a good measure of the trust he had built up with Anbeyssa over many years. Swan knew that it was only his close relationship to Anbeyssa that had saved Eurus from immediate imprisonment—or worse—upon returning.

Swan stopped in front of Eurus. "I've come to see Maylea, at her father's request."

The new guard frowned at Swan but Eurus nodded. The two men stepped aside—the new guard rather reluctantly, Swan thought—and he knocked on the door.

"It's Swan." He waited several moments and just when he thought Maylea wasn't going to respond, she called out. "Come in!"

Swan entered the room and found Maylea sitting on the edge of her bed. The covers were not disturbed, so he didn't think she'd been napping.

"It is nearly time for dinner. Your father sent me to escort you to the dining room."

"So, he no longer trusts me to walk about freely in my own home."

Swan glanced at the section of wall where the hidden door was located. As per Anbeyssa's orders, it had been locked from the other side to prevent Maylea from using it to sneak out again.

"There *was* an attempt on your life last night," Swan pointed out. "It's only natural that Anbeyssa should be concerned for your safety."

"Concern I can understand," Maylea said. "But to treat me like a prisoner..."



“Perhaps he wouldn’t treat you as such if you weren’t insistent on sneaking out at every opportunity.” Swan smiled to show that he was teasing, at least partially.

Maylea scowled at him, but then her expression softened and she smiled back. “You’re right, of course.” She sighed. “I think we should talk.”

“I agree.” He walked over to the bed, but instead of sitting on it next to her, he sat cross-legged on the floor. Swan didn’t think it was a good idea for both of them to sit on her bed. Not with the way Maylea looked at him sometimes.

Maylea smiled with amusement, as if she had read his thoughts. Then, her expression turned serious. “What became of Xhosa and his strange frogs?”

“I returned to the Painted Frog after Euris and I got you home safely, but I found nothing. The frogs were gone, as were the addicts, and when I managed to gain entry into the back room, I found only piles of ash. I spent some time sifting through them, but all I found was this.”

Swan reached into a pocket and pulled forth a tiny shred of paper no larger than a coin. He offered it to Maylea for her inspection. She took it, her fingers brushing his, and the momentary contact made her gasp.

Maylea quickly withdrew her hand and held the tiny scrap of paper close to her eyes to examine it.

“I see fragments of words, but they are written in a language I do not recognize. As you said, there is no sign of burning. The paper isn’t blackened at any point and the edges are not curled.” She handed the scrap back and this time they both were careful not to make physical contact.

“Do you know what it is?” she asked.

“I didn’t recognize the language either, so after stopping at a public bath to wash the stink of the Rookery off of me one more time, I visited a rare book dealer. After we settled on a price for his assistance, the dealer looked over the fragment and told me that he believed the language was an obscure variant of Old Realm. He was able to decipher only

a few words, but from those he deduced that the fragment was once part of an astrological text of some sort.”

“In Yane, that’s like saying you found a speck of sand in a desert. Astrological writings are everywhere.”

“Yes, but ones written in such an ancient language? I would think they’d be quite rare.” Swan tucked the scrap of paper back in his pocket. “Still, as you say, it is no great surprise to find such writing in this city.”

“So, Xhosa escaped?”

“So it would appear. But I originally went to the Painted Frog in search of information, not to capture the proprietor.”

“Even so, the thought that Xhosa might start his business anew disturbs me. I also wonder about something else. What became of our unknown ally—the one who stopped Rawgut?”

“He or she remains unknown,” Swan said. “While I was in the Rookery, I made a more thorough search but found no sign of our mysterious benefactor. But there is another, more pressing matter before us. Right before Rawgut attacked us for the last time, you had the most curious expression on your face, as if you were seeing something that wasn’t there. Or at least something that I could not see. What was it?”

Maylea looked away then, and though she gazed toward her window and the songbird hanging in its cage, Swan had the impression that she saw much, much, farther.

“At first all I saw was you and Eurus, and then, everything became clouded, as if a sudden fog had descended to obscure my vision. When it cleared, I seemed no longer to be in the Rookery, but I wasn’t sure where I was. It was as if I were in two different places at the same time, each equally real, equally vivid. One place was a cavern lit by a baleful red light, and there I saw you fighting a blonde swordswoman whose skin was the color of flame. The second place in my dual vision was much different—a Northern wasteland of ice, snow and freezing rain. I saw a man and woman, both clad in fur. The man was bald, though bearded, and the woman had skin and hair as white as the arctic landscape that surrounded them. They were running across the ice and





snow, moving far faster than was humanly possible. Not far behind them a group of warriors pursued on foot, though they wore no special protection against the cold. I believe the warriors were Dragon-Bloods.”

Swan wondered if this vision was in truth a memory from a previous incarnation of Maylea’s resurfacing.

Maylea continued. “Neither vision lasted long. I didn’t say anything to you at the time because these weren’t the first visions I’ve had, and they frighten me. I don’t know what to do, Swan.” She looked at him now, tears welling in her eyes. Eyes that, for the merest of instants, seemed to be filled with the blackness of night dotted with cold bright stars.

But then they were just Maylea’s eyes again—if indeed they’d ever been anything else—and she asked in a plaintive voice, “Am I going mad?”

Despite his resolve to avoid giving Maylea the impression that he reciprocated her feelings for him, Swan stood and walked over to her bed. He sat down next to her and took her hands in his.

“I do not believe that you are going mad,” Swan said gently. “I do, however, believe that something is happening to you—something at once wonderful and terrifying. I suspect that you too are one of the Chosen of the gods and that you are fast approaching your time of Exaltation: the moment when you cease being human and become... more.”

He felt Maylea begin to tremble, and the tears that had been threatening to fall began to do so now. “But how can this be? No one in my family has ever been Anath—... I mean, Exalted. I’ve done nothing that I know of to bring this on myself. I’m not especially reverent, and the astrological chart drawn up immediately after my birth did not foretell that this would happen to me.”

Swan smiled. “That’s why we are called Chosen. The gods choose us, not the other way around.”

“And we have no say in the matter? None at all?”

"The Unconquered Sun did not feel the need to consult me before my transformation," Swan said wryly. "We are Chosen, and we serve. It is as simple as that."

Maylea pulled her hands away from his. "Simple for you, perhaps. But I was born and raised as a member of the royal family of Yane. I've been told all my life that I must accept the path that fate laid out for me at the moment of my birth. Not only couldn't I do anything to change it, it was wrong to even think such thoughts. And now you tell me that I am in the process of becoming something inhuman and that I have no choice about that either!"

"I understand how you feel," Swan said. "Indeed, I believe all Exalted can to one degree or another. My Exaltation came upon me suddenly, not gradually as yours appears to be doing. But for some time afterward, I wrestled with the same questions you now ask. And to some extent, I still do to this day. While I do not pretend to have the answers, I have come to believe that there are many circumstances beyond our control in this world. The weather, the seasons... Some people are born tall, some short, some strong, some weak, and so on. None of these things can we change. We must do our best to live and work with whatever circumstances we are given because we must. I am Exalted, and I choose to use my abilities to make Creation a better place, even though I may be reviled and hunted unto death by those who believe my kind—*our* kind—to be evil."

Maylea was silent for a time as she pondered Swan's words. At last she said, "So, we have no choice at all?"

"We can choose to do nothing. To turn away from the gifts we are given and refuse to use them at all. We can run from the rest of the world and live out our lives hiding what we are, denying our true selves. We might live a longer life that way, but I think it would be a sad, miserable life and, ultimately, a wasted one."

Maylea thought a bit longer before speaking again. "We have a saying in Yane: 'The stars may deal the cards, but we mortals play the hand.'"

Swan smiled. "Exactly."





Maylea took his hands once more, scooting closer to him this time. He was uncomfortably aware of how near she was.

“So, what will I become?” Maylea asked. “Will I be like you? Will I finally understand what my visions mean?”

“I cannot say. I am still new to this existence myself, and there is much that I still have to learn. I can tell you that when the moment finally arrives, part of you—the deepest, truest part—will understand who and what you are and what you are meant to do.”

“Such certainty sounds wonderful.”

Swan chuckled. “It comes with its own set of problems, believe me.”

Maylea laughed then, and Swan joined her.

When their laughter died away, Maylea looked deeply into Swan’s violet eyes for a long moment, then leaned forward and gently pressed her lips to his.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As the sun set in the western sky, painting the horizon with a rich blend of hazy reds and oranges, shadows lengthened, grew darker and slowly began to fill the streets of Yane. Clock towers all over town chimed the evening hour in unison, harmonizing like a vast, spectacular choir. Outside the wall that surrounded the Constellation, a man stood waiting. As the law commanded, the beggars that littered the street here during the daylight hours were gone by now, and while there was still a good bit of traffic coming and going, at least the watcher wouldn't have to put up with the rank smell of beggar while he waited. He'd endured more than enough stink in the Rookery to last him any number of lifetimes.

He didn't regret having to abandon the Painted Frog, though he would miss his books and scrolls, for sentimental reasons if nothing else. And as for his amphibian friends... well, he could always procure more. He'd managed to avoid a direct confrontation with Swan, and that was all that mattered.

But such inconveniences would be worth it in the end if all went according to plan. And it would—he had foreseen it. Still, just because the outcome was inevitable didn't mean he could stand back and let events play out on their own. He needed to take an even more direct hand in matters than he had so far, and tonight, he would.



All he had to do was wait for Yseult and the Iron Fang to arrive.



Swan gently but firmly pushed Maylea away.

Maylea looked hurt. "Did I do something wrong?"

Swan smiled. "No, not wrong. Just... unexpected."

She returned his smile and touched his cheek. "Unexpected, but not unpleasant, I hope." Before Swan could answer, she hurried on. "Ever since you returned to Yane, I've experienced such strong feelings for you. So strong, they're overwhelming at times. I—I've tried to understand them—why they suddenly appeared, why they're so intense—and the best I can come up with is that we were..." She looked down, as if she were too embarrassed to meet Swan's gaze, "...lovers in a previous lifetime."

"I suppose that's possible," Swan said after a moment's thought, "but I have to be honest with you: I do not have any such memories myself."

Maylea looked into his eyes once more. "If you have no memories, does that mean you have no... feelings for me as well?"

Maylea leaned forward and parted her lips ever so slightly. Swan found himself tempted to kiss those sweet lips, to stroke her silken hair, to... but he could not. By her own admission, Maylea wasn't thinking clearly these days. She was emotionally confused and prone to having strange visions and dizzy spells. Add to that the attempt on her life last night as well as witnessing the battle with Rawgut in the Rookery, and she was no doubt under a great deal of stress. If Swan were to give in to his attraction to Maylea, he would only be taking advantage of her feelings—feelings he couldn't return. If he had feelings for anyone, they were for Arianna.

He gave her his kindest smile and said, "I'm sorry."

For a moment, Maylea looked as if she might start crying, but then she put on a brave smile. "Just because you don't have any memories of our being lovers in the past doesn't mean such memories might not surface one day. If

you don't mind, I'll keep hoping those memories will return to you... and once they do, that you shall return to me."

Swan wasn't sure how to respond to that, but he was saved from having to come up with something by the sound of Eurus speaking loudly on the other side of the bedchamber door.

"Good evening, Prince Declan! How good it is to see you again!"

"I did not come here to exchange pleasantries with you, servant. I've come to see my intended—with her father's blessing, I might add."

"I'm afraid that my mistress is indisposed," Eurus said. "I don't know if you've heard, but she's had a rather trying day."

The second guard said nothing, and Swan was grateful that the man held his tongue.

"If you're referring to my future bride being dragged through the filthy streets of the Rookery by that foreign diplomat who Anbeyssa for some unaccountable reason places such high stock in, then yes, I *have* heard. Which is why I am here and why you are going to let me pass. *Now.*"

The door burst open and Declan came into the room, followed by Shadi.

Declan stopped and stared at the woman he planned to wed—who at the moment was sitting on her bed next to that "foreign diplomat."

"Maylea?" he said, so many questions wrapped up in the way he spoke her name.

Swan stood up, doing his best to avoid looking as if he were jumping off the bed in a panic. "I know how this much seem to you, Declan, but I assure you—"

Declan scowled and reached for his sword.



Ysult rode at the head of a group of Dragon-Blood riders. They wore armor and carried weapons far finer than they usually did, thanks to Xhosa and the cache of weapons he had revealed in the Wolf's Lair. The armor was not perfectly fitted, and it was not cut in the style most fashion-





able among the Realm's finest warriors, but it all matched, it was freshly polished, and it gleamed in the moonlight as if brand new. With any luck, it should prove good enough to allow the Iron Fang to bluff its way into the royal compound. At least, that was the plan.

The mercenaries thundered through the streets of Yane, pedestrians scattering out of the way and gawking as they passed. Ragnor rode at Ysult's side, holding aloft the banner of the Realm. From time to time he glanced over at her, as if he were worried, but he said nothing.

You fear that when we find the Anathema I'll get lost again in the memory of what happened to poor, brave Chambord and freeze up. But I won't, Ragnor. Not this time.

She hoped.

She hated riding through the twisting-turning streets of Yane. Xhosa had said the city was designed according to some idiotic astrological principle that she didn't understand, which accounted for why the streets were laid out in such a counterintuitive fashion. But as far as she was concerned, the architects of Yane had been lunatics, plain and simple.

"Look at that," Ragnor said. "It's even more impressive up close."

Ysult came out of her thoughts and looked where Ragnor indicated. They were in the Aerie now and getting close to the royal complex. The clock tower spires of the aptly named Constellation glowed at the tips, their blue-white light looking for all the world as if the royals of Yane had somehow pulled the stars down from the sky to decorate their home.

Ragnor looked at her and smiled. "Almost worthy of Dragon-Bloods, eh?"

She returned his smile. "Almost," she agreed.

A few moments later, the Iron Fang reached the outer wall of the royal complex. The main gate was open, and though there were guards at the entrance, Ysult kept riding full on, the rest of the Iron Fang following her lead.

“Ware the Hunt!” she shouted as they approached the gate. Since the leader of a real Wyld Hunt wouldn’t look at the guards to gauge their reactions—let alone seek their permission to enter—neither did Yseult. As she rode through the gate, she saw out of the corner of her eye that the guards gave way easily. Certainly, they made no verbal protests, at least none that she could hear over the pounding of horse hooves on the flagstones of the royal courtyard.



Though night had fallen, Yseult couldn’t have told it from the atmosphere in the courtyard. Xhosa had told them that the royals often congregated in the courtyard as it was considered neutral territory by the separate subfamilies. But what he hadn’t said was that the courtyard was more like an open-air festival than a neutral meeting ground between warring clans. There must have been at least a hundred Southerners gathered, standing in groups of various sizes, eating food and drinking wine brought to them by servants circulating through the courtyard bearing silver platters of meat, cheese, fruit, pastries and drink. The courtyard was lit by glowing lanterns hanging from wooden poles set into the flagstones. The lanterns gave off curls of smoke, filling the air with an acrid-sweet scent that Yseult guessed was used to keep insects from spoiling the party.

The Iron Fang rode hard and fast into the midst of the royals—because that’s exactly what a *real* Wyld Hunt would have done—and those that stood in the riders’ way moved out of the way quickly with a chorus of frightened screams and outraged protests. But those that weren’t in the riders’ path stood their ground and watched as Yseult and her mercenaries rode past. Their faces were little more than blurs as Yseult passed, but she had the impression that a number of the royals, rather than being alarmed, were instead amused, as if they considered the sudden appearance of a Wyld Hunt in the courtyard to be little more than an unexpected but not unwelcome novelty. Yseult would’ve liked nothing better than to rein in her mount and teach these decadent mortals some respect, but she and her people



had a job to do, so she did her best to ignore the Southerners and keep riding.

The Constellation had a series of entrances built into its base, each one leading to the private quarters of a different subfamily. According to Xhosa, counting eastward from the entrance aligned with the main gate in the outer wall, the door to Anbeyssa's quarters was number thirty-six. Yseult led her "Hunt" around the side of the Constellation, counting entrances as they went. Eight... seventeen... twenty-nine... thirty-four, thirty-five...

"This is it!" she called out to her people, and then she brought her horse to a halt before the thirty-sixth entrance. As she dismounted, she noted Anbeyssa's family name carved into the stone arch over the entranceway. Xhosa hadn't steered them wrong.

Each of the subfamilies' entrances were flanked by a pair of guards, and Anbeyssa's was no exception. They were male and female, both mortal, both pathetic.

Yseult turned to her mercenaries. "Dismount!" As the men and women under her command—Ragnor included—began to get off their horses, Yseult walked up to Anbeyssa's guards. She drew herself up to her full height and allowed her body temperature to rise just enough so that the mortals would feel waves of heat ripple off her.

"You two, see to our mounts."

She expected the mortals to stand aside, but though they were clearly intimidated by Yseult—not to mention the other Dragon-Bloods standing behind her—they remained at their posts.

"I-I'm sorry," the male guard said, "but before we can allow you to enter, we need to see permits."

"For all of you," the female added.

Yseult scowled. Xhosa had warned her that no one was allowed into royal quarters without the proper paperwork issued from the Sanctuary of Ultimate Order and Clarity. Not that a real Wyld Hunt would've bothered to seek such permits. Still, Yseult had dismissed Xhosa's warning. What mortal in his or her right mind would demand that a Wyld

Hunt display its papers in order to gain admittance *anywhere*? But it appeared that the Southerners of Yane—or at least, these two particular Southerners—weren't in their right minds.

Yseult leaned closer to the male guard and allowed her body temperature to rise even higher, causing beads of sweat to break out on the man's brow. She kept her voice pitched low and dangerous as she spoke.

"According to information we've received, your master is sheltering an Anathema. If you do not stand aside immediately, you will both share your master's guilt... *and* his punishment." Yseult put her hand on her sword and allowed a puff of smoke to escape her nostrils for good measure.

The male guard gave the female one a quick glance.

"J-Just make sure to see the house steward when you go in," the woman said.

"And we'll take good care of your mounts!" the man added.

Yseult sneered. These two might have remained at their posts instead of immediately fleeing, but in the end, they submitted to their superiors, as was only natural and proper. "The horses will remain where they are until we return. Just make sure no one goes near them—unless they want to get their heads kicked in, that is."

Ragnor snickered at that, and the guards stared at the mercenaries' horses as if they might be demons in equine form.

Yseult turned to Ragnor. "Two teams. Ch— Ragnor, you're with me, inside. We'll flush the Anathema out. Leysha, you, Cadhla and Toish be ready in position outside."

She and Ragnor split off from the other three mercenaries and headed into the house. She signaled for him take the first hallway on the right while she went left. When one of them found the Anathema, she would call out and drive him toward the other. Then, the two would work together to drive it out into the courtyard and destroy it. Ragnor saluted and moved away to do his part, and Yseult was on her own, trying to surprise and flush out a real Anathema. If she heard





the faint sounds of Chambord's dying screams in her ears, she did her best to shut them out as she led her group into the home of Lord Anbeyssa.



Maylea rose from her bed and interposed herself between Swan and her betrothed. "We were only talking, Declan!"

Declan responded to her, but he didn't take his eyes off Swan—nor did he remove his hand from his sword. "Perhaps so, but you were alone with him in your bedchamber, without a chaperone."

Declan's voice was tight and his eyes full of anger. He had his hand on his sword, and Swan was certain that if Maylea hadn't been standing between them, the young prince would have drawn his weapon and attacked by now. The young Exalt tried to read the situation and decided the best thing for him to do was remain quiet and allow Maylea and Declan to settle this themselves—if they could.

"Eurus was standing right outside," Maylea pointed out. "And the door was unlocked."

"Yes," Declan agreed, "and your man-servant tried to keep me from entering, as if he didn't want me to learn what was going on in here!"

"Perhaps he merely knew how severely you'd overreact!" Maylea countered.

"Or perhaps he was ashamed of his mistress's behavior!"

Swan decided that staying out of this wasn't helping after all. If nothing else, by interjecting himself into the conversation, perhaps he'd draw Declan's fire from Maylea. But before Swan could say anything, he heard the sound of frantic footsteps pounding down the hallway, and a male voice crying out, "Mistress! Mistress!"

Everyone—Swan, Maylea, Declan, Shadi, Eurus and his fellow guard, who both stood in the open doorway—turned to look at the newcomer. He was stout middle-aged Southerner with white hair and beard, garbed in a black vest

and black pantaloons trimmed with gold. It was Casnar, Anbeyssa's house steward.

The man stopped in the doorway and leaned on Eurus as he tried to catch his breath.

Maylea rushed forward, alarmed. "What is it?"

"The house... has been... invaded," the steward said between gulps of air.

"By whom?" Eurus asked, voice tense but controlled.

"Imperial warriors! They come... hunting Anathema and claim we harbor such! I tried to... prevent them from entering..." The steward didn't continue, but there was no need to. If Dragon-Bloods wished to enter a domicile, no mortal could stop them.

Eurus gave Swan a quick glance before turning to his fellow guard. "Cherax, inform the rest of the house guards, and tell them to do what they can to stall the imperials. Tell them to offer any assistance that slows them down."

The guard looked frightened, but he nodded and jogged off down the hallway.

Eurus turned to the steward. "Go make yourself available to the imperials too. As steward, it's your duty to aid them in their search." Eurus smiled grimly. "Point out every conceivable hiding place, and assure them that no Anathema are being concealed there. Leave no closet unopened. Pull back every tapestry."

The steward also looked scared, but his jaw was set in a determined line as he answered. "Yes, of course." Then, he looked at Maylea. "Just sit tight, Mistress. I'm sure this is some kind of misunderstanding, and it will all be cleared up soon enough." The man then turned and hurried back down the hall in the direction from which he'd come.

Maylea stepped close to Swan and put her hand on his arm. "Swan..."

He pressed a finger to her lips. She knew he was Exalted, and from the way Eurus had glanced at him, the guard knew as well, or at least suspected. But Declan and Shadi didn't know. And none of the others knew that Maylea's erratic





behavior over the course of the last few weeks might indicate that she too was soon to be Exalted.

Whether or not Maylea understood why he wished her to be silent, she nodded and said no more.

Swan thought furiously. Despite his efforts to keep a low profile, somehow a Wyld Hunt had gotten wind that an Exalt was in Yane. Perhaps someone who had witnessed his rescue of Maylea last night or the battle with Rawgut in the Rookery earlier that afternoon. More to the point, they knew *he* was the Anathema for which they hunted, else why would they now be searching Anbeyssa's home? He didn't relish the idea of facing an entire Wyld Hunt by himself. He'd faced one before, but Arianna had been with him then, and without her, he'd never have survived. Without her... He needed to get out of here—now. Yet, he couldn't leave Maylea behind. If the Hunt so much as suspected that she might be Exalted too...

"The Wyld Hunt is known for taking extreme measures in the course of fulfilling its duties," Swan said. "If the Dragon-Bloods question Anbeyssa—as they surely will—they might even use Maylea against him... threaten her in order to force him to cooperate. For her own safety, I think it best if I escort her—"

Declan stepped toward Swan, this time actually drawing his sword. "If anyone is going to be escorting Maylea anywhere, *foreigner*, it's going to be me!"

Before Swan could reply, Eurus drew his own sword and stepped between them. "Master Swan is an honored guest of Lord Anbeyssa. Any who raises a sword against him in my Lord's house must answer to me!"

Declan sneered. "Out of my way, *servant!*"

Eurus's eyes flashed with barely restrained anger, and his grip tightened on hilt of his sword. "Prince or not, you'd best know how to use that blade, boy."

"You fools! We don't have time for this!" Shadi yelled.

Everyone turned to look at Declan's assistant, surprised at the sudden vehemence in her tone—none more surprised than Declan himself.

"Shadi, this isn't—" Declan began.

"Silence!" she snapped, and Declan immediately closed his mouth with an audible click.

"We have only moments at best before the Dragon-Bloods get here." Shadi turned to Swan. "I know what you are, Swan, as well as Anbeyssa knows it. You cannot let the Hunt capture you. Not only for your own sake, but the damage to Anbeyssa's reputation for giving shelter to an Anathema would be considerable. Not to mention how poorly it would reflect on the Council of Elders themselves. You must go at once!"

Declan looked at Shadi as if she'd just sprouted a second head. "What are you going on about?"

From elsewhere in the house came the faint sounds of shouting and minor scuffling as the Dragon-Bloods went about their search.

Shadi looked at Declan and sighed. "This isn't how I imagined myself telling you this, Declan, but in addition to serving as your assistant, I am also an agent for the Council of Elders. For the last few months, I've been working on learning as much about the Black Wolves as I can, so that the Council can either eliminate the competition they present or partner with them and share in their profits." She smiled. "That's why I encouraged you to have business dealings with them, Declan. I even set up the initial meetings between you, though you thought they'd sought you out." She glanced at Swan. "But I can't explain further right now. I must make certain that Anbeyssa is safe during the Dragon-Bloods' search."

Declan looked as if he were desperately trying to grasp Shadi's sudden revelation and not quite managing the job. "Well then, if you serve the Council—and you wish to protect Anbeyssa—then I shall accompany you." He gave Maylea a quick smile. "After all, he's soon to be my father-in-law." He started toward the doorway, but Shadi grabbed his arm before he could get too far.

"You can't go with me. You have a temper, Declan, and if you attempt to engage any of the Dragon-Blooded in





combat, all you'll succeed in doing is getting yourself killed. And I've saved your sorry hide from assassins too many times to let you sell your life so cheaply. Besides, your reputation might well suffer if it's discovered you were here tonight. It's best all around if you leave." She turned to Eurus. "I assume you know of escape passages in the house. Take Declan, and get him out of here." Declan started to protest, but Shadi quickly added, "So that you will survive to fulfill your pledge to Maylea, if nothing else."

"But Maylea..." Declan began.

"She'll come with me," Swan said. "I can protect her."

Declan looked unsure for a moment, but then he nodded. "And what of you, Shadi?"

She smiled. "If it's our fate, I'll see you again soon. If not..." She smiled and touched Declan's cheek. "I'm going to miss you, you foolish man."

She turned and then dashed out of the room.

The sounds of struggle elsewhere in the house had grown louder and closer by now, and Eurus grabbed Declan's forearm. "Come along!"

Declan nodded. He turned to Maylea and bowed his head. "Good fortune and safety to you, my beloved, until we meet again." He looked at her for a moment longer before turning to Swan and saying, "Take good care of her."

"I will," Swan assured him.

Declan then turned away from the two of them and followed Eurus out of the room at a run.

Once they were gone, Swan closed the door to Maylea's bedchamber and locked it. He knew a locked door wouldn't stop the Dragon-Bloods, but it might slow them down for a second. He then reached for Maylea's hand and said, "Let's go!"

"Go where?" Maylea said. "Father had the door to my secret passageway locked from the inside, remember?"

Swan grinned. "There's one more way out of your bedchamber."

Maylea's eyes widened. "You can't be serious!"

In reply, Swan scooped her off her feet and ran toward the balcony.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Yseult stood next to Anbeyssa in the lord's dining room, which was where the "Hunt" had found him. Quite a lot of food was laid out on the table. Either Anbeyssa was something of a pig, or someone in his household hadn't made it to dinner. The Southerner himself sat in a chair at the head of the table, fingers digging into the armrests while he glared daggers at her. From various locations throughout Anbeyssa's home came the sound of boots pounding on floors and cries of pain as her Dragon-Blooded warriors... *encouraged* servants to tell what they knew.

"You can make this a great deal easier on yourself, Lord Anbeyssa—not to mention your household staff—if you simply tell me what I need to know."

Anbeyssa grimaced as another cry echoed through his home, but he said nothing.

"If you think to impress me with your strength at resisting me, don't bother," Yseult said. "Your silence only prolongs the inevitable and increases the discomfort for your servants."

Anbeyssa scowled, but he didn't rise to Yseult's bait. Despite her words to the contrary, she did rather admire the old man. A lesser mortal would've told her what she'd wanted upon merely seeing her and her warriors burst into their home. But not Anbeyssa. He was made of sterner stuff.

"Tell me where the Anathema is, Lord Anbeyssa. Right now you are merely guilty of giving shelter to a monster. I am



willing to believe that the Anathema fooled you, perhaps even laid an enchantment on you with its unholy powers. If you tell me where to find him, I shall collect him, and then, my warriors and I shall depart and trouble you no more.”

Anbeyssa spoke through gritted teeth. “You have no right to be in my house.”

From her days riding with a *real* Wyld Hunt, Yseult knew the proper response to give. “I have every right. I am in command of a Wyld Hunt, and the Realm has an agreement with Yane. No matter where Anathema appear or who they are, the Immaculate Order and the Dragon-Blooded have the authority to go wherever we want and do whatever is necessary to get the job done.”

But Anbeyssa refused to be placated. “And do you have the authority to disregard basic courtesy? I am a nobleman of Yane, and this is my home! If you believe that an Anathema is present within my house, then it is *my* responsibility to root the monster out, not yours! When the Council of Elders learns of this outrage—”

Yseult sighed. She’d had enough of play-acting. In a single fluid motion faster than the human eye could follow, Yseult drew her sword and pressed the tip to Anbeyssa’s throat. She pressed her sword point forward until it dimpled the skin and caused a pearl of blood to well up. Anbeyssa stiffened in his chair and sat very, very still.

Yseult smiled. This was much better. “The Immaculate Order prefers that Wyld Hunts cause the minimum amount of death and destruction—especially when it comes to important dignitaries and allies. But I lied to you a moment ago. My people and I are *not* an official Hunt. We are, instead, outcaste mercenaries who’ve been paid—and quite well, I might add—to hunt down and destroy the Anathema called Swan. And since I am not a warrior of the Realm, I am not bound by the Realm’s rules, which means that if I want to kill you, I can. After all, there *are* an awful lot of you royals, aren’t there? What’s one more or one less?”

She pressed her sword point harder against Anbeyssa's throat, and the pearl of blood became a trickle running down his neck.

"I imagine you're feeling quite nervous by now," Yseult said. "A word of advice: If your throat feels dry, don't swallow."

The fear in Anbeyssa's eyes was joined by anger, and the latter quickly burned away the former.

"Go ahead and kill me if you want to," he said, speaking softly. "But as low as my status is in the family right now, you'll find my death no great victory. But before I move on to the next life, I say this: I hope the Exalt you hunt tears you limb from limb, and I hope that he does so as slowly as possible."

The blazing eyes of a teenage boy... Chambord screaming as the monster ripped the still-beating heart from his chest with its bare hands...

Yseult began to tremble and Anbeyssa—wily old bastard that he was—smiled as he scored a point against his tormentor.

Yseult bared her teeth and was about to thrust her sword through the old man's throat and all the way through his chair back, when she heard a voice behind her.

"Lord Anbeyssa, I've come to—"

Yseult glanced over her shoulder to see who the newcomer was, but she kept her sword pressed to Anbeyssa's throat.

"What in the name of all the gods do you think you're doing?" the woman demanded. She was Southern, and from her bearing and attitude—not to mention the sword she wore at her side—Yseult assumed she was one of Anbeyssa's guards.

Yseult smiled. "Whatever I damn well please. Not that it's any business of yours."

"It certainly is!" The woman took a step into the dining room and lowered her hand to her sword. "My name is Shadi, and I am a representative of the Council of Elders. In their name, I demand that you remove your sword from Lord





Anbeyssa's throat! Even a member of the Wyld Hunt cannot draw a weapon against of a member of Yane's royal family without good reason!"

"I had a good reason," Yseult said. "I wanted to."

This woman—Shadi—suddenly frowned. "Wait... I recognize you. You're Yseult of the Iron First! Our intelligence doesn't speak well of you."

Yseult allowed herself a thin smile laden with malice. "Your tone doesn't speak well of your intelligence."

"The Council has been very interested in your employer's activities of late," Shadi said. "And they're going to be *extremely* interested in what's taking place here tonight. The Black Wolves will pay a high price indeed for violating the sanctity of the Constellation."

"But you're making a false assumption," Yseult pointed out. "You're assuming that you will live long enough to tell them."

Yseult pulled her sword away from Anbeyssa's throat and whirled around, sweeping the weapon toward Shadi's midsection, hoping to catch the woman beneath the left arm. As fast as Yseult was, though, Shadi had anticipated her strike. She managed to angle her body away from Yseult's attack and brought her own weapon around to block the blow. Yet, regardless of how skilled a fighter Shadi was, she was, in the end, only a mortal.

The strength behind the mercenary captain's strike snapped Shadi's blade in two and drove her backward into the dining room's doorway. Yseult could've easily finished her off with her own blade, but she decided to kill the woman in more dramatic fashion to make more of an impression on Anbeyssa. Perhaps that would loosen the stubborn old man's tongue. She sheathed her sword as flames erupted across her body. The fire did not injure her, nor did it damage her clothing, though it burned hot and fierce.

Yseult leaped at Shadi. She slammed into the woman's middle and wrapped her flame-flecked arms around her, pinning her arms to her sides. The momentum of Yseult's leap hurled them both out into the hallway. They fell to the

ground, Yseult on top of the woman, the captain still holding on tight.

Yseult increased the pressure of her embrace, squeezing... squeezing... The woman screamed and thrashed as her flesh blackened and burned, but no matter how hard the she fought to dislodge her attacker, Yseult held on.

In moments, the woman's exertions faded and her screams dribbled away to rasping sobs, until, finally, she was still and silent.

Yseult held on for a little longer, just to be certain. When the flame that wreathed her had finally spent itself, Yseult let go of the woman's charred, featureless husk and stood. The Dragon-Blood didn't have so much as a blister on her red-tinted skin or a single scorch mark on her clothes.

She walked back into the dining room and saw Anbeyssa was gone. It seemed the man had taken advantage of Yseult's distraction to make his escape. The mercenary searched the dining room, but she found no other way out, and she was certain Anbeyssa hadn't left through the doorway. Even occupied as she was with Shadi, if Anbeyssa had tried to sneak past them, she would've noticed. He must have used a secret passageway of some sort, one that she wasn't able to detect. An irritating development, but hardly a major setback. After all, the Iron Fang hadn't come here for Lord Anbeyssa; it'd come for Swan. With any luck, it would only be a matter of time before her warriors ran him to ground. And then... She glanced at the smoking, blackened husk that had been Shadi and smiled.



Maylea held tight onto Swan as they plunged through the darkness toward the flagstones below. Swan bent his knees as they landed, absorbing most of the impact so Maylea wouldn't be injured. He put her down, and she let go of him reluctantly.

"I'd like to say that was fun, but I'd be lying," she said.

They found themselves in a scene that was more like a festival celebration than a compound being searched by





imperial soldiers. Royals filled the courtyard, talking, laughing and gossiping with each other as servants circulated through the crowd bearing food and drink on silver platters. More than a few of the higher-ranking royals argued with soldiers who wanted nothing more than for the Southerners to clear out so they might get on with the business of the Hunt.

“Only in Yane,” Maylea said, half in exasperation, half in amusement.

But then, one of the royals in the crowd pointed at them and shouted, “Anathema!”

Whoever it was must have seen Swan leap from Maylea’s balcony and land unharmed. Swan had hoped that, in all the confusion, their descent to the courtyard would go unnoticed. Unfortunately, it hadn’t.

Two women garbed in full armor came running through the crowd toward Swan and Maylea. They were Terrestrial Exalts—one whose skin was tinted faint green, the other with a vaguely bluish cast. The first was armed with a pair of sickles. Their sharp metal edges gleamed in the moonlight, and wicked metal thorns were beginning to grow from each blade as well. The second Terrestrial carried a chain that she whirled over her head with such speed that it stirred up an angry wind.

Swan stepped in front of Maylea. “Stay behind me,” he told her and prepared to meet the Dragon-Bloods’ assault. As that assault came, Swan had only an instant to thank fate that neither warrior was armed with any serious jade-alloy weaponry.

Both women launched themselves into the air as they came running toward Swan, but Swan wasn’t about to stand meekly and wait for them to attack. He dashed forward and leaped upward to meet the Dragon-Bloods in the air.

As the three Exalts soared toward one another, the Wood-aspected warrior slashed at Swan with her sickles. But the Solar spun away from her strikes, and the sickles hissed through empty air. As Swan passed, he kicked with his left foot and struck the sickle-wielder a solid blow on

the jaw. Then, without pausing to see what effect his kick had, he turned his attention to the other Dragon-Blood. Before he could do anything to her, the Air-aspected warrior lashed out with her chain, and the metal links wrapped around Swan's wrist. The angry wind blasted Swan at the same time, but he somehow managed to stay upright and keep his balance.



Knocked off balance by the force of Swan's kick, the sickle-wielder tumbled toward the flagstones and slammed into them shoulder-first. Swan and the chain-thrower landed on their feet at the same instant, though the force of the wind pushed Swan back several feet until the chain ran out of slack. Swan tensed his arm to yank the chain and pull the woman toward him, but before he could, she rapidly drew the chain toward her instead. Caught off guard, Swan was pulled off his feet and flew toward the Air-aspected warrior. Swan anticipated that the chain-thrower intended to bring him in close so she could strike him, so he prepared himself to deflect the blow. Unfortunately, he anticipated incorrectly. At the last second, the woman whirled and cracked the chain like a whip, sending Swan hurtling toward the marble wall of the Constellation. He flipped around and struck the wall feet first, bending his knees to absorb the force of the impact. In the split-second before he rebounded off the wall, he noticed the sickle-wielder starting to rise to her feet, and when he pushed off, he aimed toward her.

The sickle-wielder turned to meet Swan's attack, raising both of her weapons into striking position. As he drew close to her, Swan angled his head to make himself as tempting a target as possible. The woman took the bait and swung one of her curved blades toward Swan's neck. But inches before the thorny, razor-sharp steel touched his flesh, Swan twisted away from the woman's strike and extended his right arm. Instead of laying open his throat, the sickle neatly sliced through the other warrior's chain at a point close to Swan's wrist.

No longer bound, Swan landed in a rough three-point crouch and turned to meet the sickle-wielder's next attack.



He raised his right wrist as one of her sickles came swinging toward him, and he blocked the blow with the length of chain still wrapped around his wrist. The strike did no damage to Swan's flesh, but it severed the links of the remaining chain and the pieces fell away from his wrist and clattered onto the flagstones.

The other Terrestrial wasn't finished with him yet, though. She spun the weapon around her other hand and flung it at Swan like a dart, the weighted end streaking toward Swan's throat on a gust of whistling wind. The young Exalt twisted backward and down with impossible grace, and the chain only kissed his cheek on the way by. The sickle-wielding Dragon-Blood tried to dodge as well, but she had not seen the weapon coming as quickly as Swan had. She avoided the heavy iron weight on the end, but the wind coiled the chain around her throat just as it had been intended to do to Swan. The woman made a gagging sound and began to claw at the iron chain encircling her throat, her fingertips fighting for purchase around the thick handles of her sickles.

The Air-pected Terrestrial reflexively flicked her wrist as if to call a loyal dog, and the chain around her partner's neck loosed immediately. As the wind unwound the chain and blew it back toward the Air-pected Dragon-Blood, Swan snatched away one of the sickles from the choking Terrestrial, and hurled it at the chain-thrower with all his strength. The thorny blade of the sickle stuck in the Dragon-Blood's shoulder between the plates of her armor, and the woman yelped. She clutched the sickle's handle and pulled the weapon free without thinking. She then immediately collapsed in shock as bright blood began to flow from the torn-open wound. Meanwhile, the other Dragon-Blood had fallen to her hands and knees to take in great heaving gulps of air. Swan let her breathe for a few second before aiming a kick at her head and rendering her as unconscious as her companion.

As the sickle-wielder fell over onto to her side, Swan turned to check on Maylea. He was relieved to see her

standing unharmed next to the Constellation's wall. He crouched, intending to leap to her side and resume their flight from the royal complex, when Maylea suddenly pointed and shouted, "Look out!"

Swan looked up to see a large, well-muscled Water-aspected Dragon-Blood hurtling through the air with a long, gleaming trident held at the ready. Blue light surrounded the head of the trident and streaked out behind the Dragon-Blood like the wake of a serpent moving on a lake's surface.

Swan leaped toward the Terrestrial, intending to meet the man's attack in midair. The Dragon-Blood warrior gave Swan a feral grin. As soon as Swan was within striking distance, the soldier thrust his weapon forward, and gleaming waves of bluish-white formed around the trident's metal head and rushed toward Swan just ahead of the three wicked points. With a sinuous, adder-quick motion, Swan grabbed the haft of the trident with one hand and used it to lever himself onto the man's back and straddle him like a flying mount. The Dragon-Blood struggled for a second to dislodge Swan, but the young Exalt managed to hold on as the flagstone surface of the courtyard floor rushed up to meet them.

At the very last instant before impact, Swan released his hold and launched himself into the air. Unable to get into a position to land on his feet, the Dragon-Blood slammed into the ground head-first, shattering flagstones and sending shards flying everywhere. The warrior lost hold of his trident when he hit, and the weapon flipped over and stuck in the ground. The haft waved back and forth as the impact vibrations wore off.

Swan landed gracefully, rolled twice, and came up on his feet. The Dragon-Blood groaned, and his limbs twitched a couple times, but it didn't look like he was going to be getting up anytime soon.

Swan heard a chorus of shouts, and at first, he thought more Dragon-Bloods were attacking. But then he realized the shouts were actually cheers, and that they came from a crowd of spectators standing far too close for Swan's





comfort. He'd had been so caught up in dealing with the Terrestrial Exalts that he'd forgotten all about the royals in the courtyard. He wished the fools had enough common sense to seek safety, but of course, few members of Yane's royal family would want to miss out on the opportunity to witness such a grand spectacle as a battle between Exalts. No matter how short it was or how short their *lives* would be if they weren't careful.

Swan did his best to ignore the spectators as he checked the other Dragon-Bloods he'd bested to make certain they were all still down. Those aspected to Wood and Water seemed legitimately unconscious, but he was concerned about the one with the shoulder wound. It hadn't looked that serious to Swan—and he certainly hadn't intended it to be fatal—but the woman had made it much worse and promptly passed out from pain. What kind of elite, well-trained soldier did that? Was she trying to trick him somehow, or was she just not all that well trained? After another few quiet moments passed and the woman did not rise, Swan was forced to believe the latter. He then turned once more to Maylea, and again, he was glad to see that she still stood by the Constellation's wall completely uninjured.

"Praise the Unconquered Sun," he said. But as he started to go to her, he saw a robed figure less than a dozen yards away her. The figure's features were concealed by the robe, and Swan had no idea who it might be, but whoever it was, he or she was heading for Maylea at a fast jog. Swan's first thought was that this was the assassin from the other night who'd managed to take advantage of all the confusion to sneak into the royal complex so he could make another attempt on Maylea's life.

Just as Swan was about to leap to intercept the robed figure, he heard the loud crash of shattering rock followed by a rumble like thunder as the ground exploded beneath him in a shower of flagstone fragments. The young Exalt was thrown into the air, and when he came down he landed in a pile of stone rubble. Aching and dazed, but not gravely injured, he looked up and saw a stocky but powerfully built

Dragon-Blood standing about fifty feet away. The man was fully armored, he had a short brown beard, and his skin was a rich earthen color. Obviously, this warrior was an Earth-aspected Dragon-Blood. The man held the handle of a stout iron mace tight in one gauntlet-clad hand. The iron head was shaped in the likeness of a boar, and he was pointing it toward where Swan had just been standing. That spot was now pockmarked by an impact crater a couple of yards across.



Swan rose to his feet. He didn't have time for this; he had to protect Maylea. He glanced in her direction, but he saw no sign of her now, or of the robed figure that had been approaching her. An icicle of fear lodged in his spine, and Swan feared the assassin had gotten to Maylea. He knew he had to abandon this fight, find Maylea and save her if he could.

But the Earth-aspected warrior—as if sensing Swan's desire—said, “You're not going anywhere, Anathema.” Then, he held out his other, empty, hand with his palm facing Swan. In a flash of energy with a rich, earthen hue, a slashing shard of crystal formed in the air in front of his hand and flew toward Swan like a crossbow bolt. Swan rolled out of the way, and the shard destroyed a table and chair behind him—one that thankfully happened to be empty. The Dragon-Blood carelessly fired a second and then a third time, sending a deadly hail of shards streaking toward Swan.





CHAPTER NINETEEN

Maylea watched as Swan fought like a demon against the Dragon-Blooded warriors. None of the Exalts—Swan included—seemed remotely human. Is this what she was destined to become? The prospect both thrilled and terrified her.

After Swan's defeat of the Dragon-Blood with the trident, the royals gathered in the courtyard cheered and Swan paused to take stock of his surroundings.

"Don't stop!" someone from the crowd shouted.

"Kill them while they're down!" another yelled.

Maylea wasn't surprised by the bloodthirstiness of her fellow royals, but she was surprised by her lack of emotional reaction to it. Normally, she would have been sickened, might even have shouted for them to be quiet. But she felt detached from everything that was happening, including the danger Swan was still in from the Wyld Hunt—danger she would share if the Terrestrial Exalts suspected she might be Anathema as well. Yet, she couldn't bring herself to feel much of anything beyond a distant intellectual curiosity about how events would finally play out. It was most strange.

Her musings were interrupted by a voice breathing softly in her ear.

"Good evening, Maylea."

A hand clamped over her mouth, and an arm encircled her waist. She didn't bother struggling to break free from the man—and he *was* a man; she could tell by his voice.



Whoever had hold of her possessed a grip stronger than steel, and in her current detached mode of thinking, she knew that she couldn't escape. Why waste energy trying?

"I know you'd prefer to stay and see if your young protector survives, but I'm afraid that I need you to come with me."

Maylea looked at Swan. If he knew she'd been grabbed... but no. Swan was now fighting for his life against another Dragon-Blooded warrior, this one wielding a mace. They matched speed against speed, strength against strength, both moving so rapidly they were little more than blurs.

The robed man lifted Maylea as if she weighed no more than a feather, and he leaped into the air, carrying her toward the outer wall and the main gate of the royal complex. She should've been terrified to find herself flying through the air in the arms of a mysterious robed stranger, but she felt nothing beyond a certain sense of rightness, almost as if this was *supposed* to happen.

Her abductor landed in the midst of a crowd of royals and leaped into the air once more before any of them had time to react. The robed man carried her up, up, and then, they descended toward the courtyard. Maylea guessed that one more leap would carry them through the open gate. Her abductor's feet touched the flagstones once again, but this time, they landed in front of a middle-aged Southern warrior brandishing a sword, a grim look of determination on his face.

"Release her!" Eurus demanded.

"I don't think so." The robed man kept his arm wrapped securely around Maylea's waist, but he took his hand from her mouth. He reached into the sleeve of the arm that encircled her middle and withdrew a single sharp quill—the sort that might belong to a porcupine or nettle-eater. The robed man gripped the quill between his thumb and forefinger, squinted one eye as he took aim, and then with a flick of his wrist, he hurled the tiny spear at Eurus.

Despite his age, Eurus was still a skilled warrior, and he brought up his sword in time to block the quill. But the

needle-thin weapon shot through the steel blade as if it were rice paper. The quill plunged into Eurus's left eye and pierced the soft meat of his brain.

Maylea no longer felt so detached as she watched Eurus stumble and fall to the ground, limbs twitching and mouth frothing. A few seconds later, Eurus stiffened, every muscle in his body tightening, then his body relaxed and he grew still.

Maylea started to scream, but her abductor slapped his hand over her mouth once more, and all that came out was a muffled cry of grief and fury, inaudible to anyone more than a few feet away.

"It's past time we took our leave," the robed man said. He lifted Maylea again and leaped into the air once more. She tried to turn her head to gaze upon her beloved friend one last time, but her abductor held her with too strong a grip. Not that it mattered. She doubted she could see through the tears in her eyes anyway.



Crouching on top of the outer wall, a figure garbed entirely in black watched the robed man carry Maylea through the air, then land in front of the currently unguarded gate. Like everyone else—including the guards that normally patrolled the top of the wall with their feline companions—the gate guards were in the courtyard, below, enthralled by the sight of Exalts fighting.

The robed man slipped through the gate with Maylea and carried her down the deserted street toward a waiting wagon. After only a moment's hesitation, Ravenwing followed.



At first, Swan attempted to dodge the stone shards that the Earth-aspected warrior fired at him, but there were just too many, and the more he moved to avoid them, the closer he brought the fusillade to the gawking spectators. So, to protect them as much as himself, he was forced to stand and





deflect the shards instead. Swan's hands moved so fast that they became virtually invisible to mortal eyes, and even to another Exalt they would've been but blurs. He slapped one shard after another aside, using them to take out incoming chunks of rock whenever he could. Stones flew right, left, up and down, smashing into the ground, colliding with other shards, breaking, shattering, being reduced to tiny pebbles and gray clouds of rock dust. Swan's concentration was completely focused on not letting any of the deadly missiles hit him—or worse, fly past him and strike someone else. And all the while that he was kept busy battling the rock-storm, the Earth-aspected warrior was coming closer. It was a good tactic, and Swan knew he had to come up with something equally clever to counter it.

The caste mark on Swan's forehead blazed, radiating the holy energy it was costing him to continue struggling to deflect one shard after another. A few seconds later his anima began to glow, energy coruscating around his body like the corona of the sun during an eclipse. And still, the Dragon-Blood fought on.

Now, rather than batting aside, Swan snatched a fist-sized chunk of rock out of the air. Swan said a quick mental prayer to the Unconquered Sun and then hurled the stone back at the Terrestrial warrior. The missile struck the man between the eyes, and he grunted and staggered backward. He did not fall, but the blow was enough to distract him for a moment, and the hail of rock shards ceased.

Taking advantage of his opportunity, Swan launched himself into the air, his anima blazing like a miniature sun. He kicked the Terrestrial square in the chest with both feet then sprang off in a different direction, sending the man stumbling backward even faster. Swan twisted his body in midair as he flew, and he grabbed the haft of the trident that the downed Water Aspect warrior had left standing in the earth. He snatched the weapon up and hurled it toward brown-bearded warrior. The off-balance Terrestrial tried to raise his mace to block the attack, but he was too disoriented and slow. The wicked points of the trident penetrated his

armor and lodged in his chest. The boar-headed mace tumbled from his fingers and fell to the ground. The bearded warrior stared down at the tall shaft protruding from his chest, as if some manner of strange, unidentifiable artifact had been welded onto his breastplate.

Blood ran down the man's chest and back, trickling down his legs to form a widening puddle at his feet. "Tell Yseult..." the Terrestrial said. "Tell her..." But whatever message he wished to relay would go forever unknown. The warrior's eyes glazed over, his jaw went slack, and he fell to the ground, dead.

Swan scanned his surroundings, alert for another attack. Two of the Dragon-Bloods he'd already bested were conscious again and rising to their feet. They looked at him, and Swan—anima still blazing bright—took a step toward them. He scowled, affecting a mask of all the demonic fury he knew the two of them must think was brewing inside him.


Without a word to him or each other, the Terrestrial Exalts fled, pausing only long enough to gather their two fallen. Once they were gone, the courtyard was completely silent for a moment, and then, the crowd of assembled royals burst into cheers. Toasts were made to Swan's victory, and much money exchanged hands to fulfill debts incurred by friendly (and not-so-friendly) wagers.


Swan turned to check on Maylea, but she wasn't where he'd left her. He remembered the robed figure moving toward her, a figure that just might have been the assassin who'd tried to kill her in the Theater District last night,

"Maylea!" he shouted. No response. He called her name once more, but again, no answer. He raced through the courtyard, turning his head this way and that, searching for her, but he didn't see her face among the gathered royals. Many of them backed away in terror now that the Anathema was coming toward *them* rather than armed and armored soldiers.

He ran toward the main gate, but as he reached it, he stopped. Before him, lying facedown on the stone floor of the courtyard, was Euris. The servant's left eye was a bloody



 ruin, and though Swan had no idea what sort of weapon had been used to slay him—a dagger? a dart?—he suspected the man had died trying to protect Maylea.

 Swan ran through the gate and out into the night, praying he wasn't too late to save Maylea's life.



Yseult stood in the courtyard, sword drawn and held tight. She watched as the Anathema—glowing with the baleful power of its evil—hurled a trident at Ragnor. *Leysha's* trident, at that. She watched as the weapon's head plunged through her lover's armor and violated the flesh beneath. She watched as Ragnor said something to the Anathema, though she was too far away to hear what, and then fell dead to the ground.

She began to tremble as she saw her people—those who had survived the monster's wrath—turn away from the Anathema and flee for their lives with their fallen. Terror... complete, unreasoning, overwhelming... took hold of her then, and she sheathed her sword and dashed after her warriors. As she ran, she had to fight the urge to scream. She was afraid that once she started, she'd never stop.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Dawn came the next morning to Creation as it had done since time began. But though the sight of the sun usually cheered Swan, this day its light seemed harsh, as if the celestial orb were rebuking him for his failure of the previous night.

A single soft knock came from the door. Swan turned away from Maylea's window and crossed the bedchamber floor. He stood at the door and waited. Another knock, a pause, then two rapid taps. Satisfied, Swan unlocked the door and opened it. Anbeyssa and Declan entered, and once they were inside, Swan closed and locked the door again.

"How are you feeling, my friend?" Swan asked Anbeyssa.

Anbeyssa reached up to touch his bandaged throat. "Physically, I am well enough. Emotionally..." There was no need for him to elaborate.

"I spent some time in the courtyard this morning, Swan," Declan said. "From what I heard, no one suspects that you've returned to Anbeyssa's home."

Declan didn't meet Swan's eyes as he spoke, perhaps because he was uncomfortable speaking to an Anathema. But Swan wondered if it was also because the man blamed him for Maylea's disappearance.

"You truly have no idea what's become of my daughter?" Anbeyssa asked plaintively, as if he were begging for some news, some slight hope, even if Swan had to lie.

"None, my friend."



"I'm sure you did your best," Anbeyssa said. "I had my guards make some inquiries among last night's witnesses, but they learned little of importance other than Maylea was abducted by a robed man of uncertain caste who leaped as if he were Exalted himself. I'm afraid they were paying more attention to your battle with the Terrestrials than they were to my daughter. Perhaps if Eurus still lived, he might have been able to find out..." Grief for an old friend choked off Anbeyssa's words.

"So the Dragon-Bloods weren't a true Wyld Hunt?" Declan asked.

"Apparently not," Swan said. "Considering their performance in retrospect, I'm not altogether surprised."

"Just before poor Shadi died, the captain of that so-called Hunt admitted she was an outcaste mercenary hired by the Black Wolves," Anbeyssa said. "The Council of Elders held an emergency meeting late last night, and since it was my house the mercenaries defiled—not to mention my daughter who was abducted—they asked me to attend. After hearing my testimony, the Council decided that while the Black Wolves staged last night's attack as a diversion so they could abduct Maylea, they did so at the behest of the Tri-Khan. The Council believes he intended my daughter's kidnapping as revenge against me for my role in the negotiating the last trade agreement. As a result, the Council has decided to block trade with Chiaroscuro."

"This is disturbing news indeed," Swan said. "If the Council breaks off *all* trade, the Tri-Khan will not allow such an act to pass without response. But I find it difficult to believe that the Tri-Khan ordered Maylea's abduction. I do not see what Chiaroscuro could hope to gain by kidnapping Maylea. No offense intended, Anbeyssa, but your standing in the royal hierarchy isn't even high enough at the moment to justify kidnapping your daughter."

"No offense taken, my friend. Regardless of my past accomplishments, the Council will not listen to anything I have to say regarding the trade dispute. And after last night—being discovered sheltering an Anathema in my

home and failing to prevent my daughter's abduction—my status in the family could hardly be any lower. I'm lucky they only think I'm an old fool instead of a corrupt demon-sympathizer.”

“Perhaps the Tri-Khan is unaware of Anbeyssa's status,” Declan offered.

“Doubtful,” Swan said. “The Tri-Khan makes it his business to know everything that occurs in the South—especially if there's the slightest chance it could affect Chiaroscuro's fortunes.”

“I hope that the Council did not punish you because of me,” Swan said.

“Do not worry on that score, my friend,” Anbeyssa said. “I told the Council I had no idea you were ‘Anathema,’ and they were more than willing to believe I could so easily be led astray.”

“Speaking of the Council,” Declan said, “I still can't believe that Shadi was working as one of their agents. She was always such an... effective assistant. More like a friend than a servant.”

Swan put his hand on the prince's shoulder. “Who's to say she couldn't be both a servant of the Council and a friend to you at the same time? I was there when she bade you farewell, Declan. I believe the affection she expressed toward you was genuine.”

Declan didn't reply, but he met Swan's gaze for the first time since entering the room, and he gave the diplomat a grateful smile.

“It was Shadi who first told me of the Black Wolves,” Swan said, thinking out loud. “And it was she who suggested I might learn more about them by visiting the Rookery and seeking out the Painted Frog. Perhaps my visit is what truly spurred the Black Wolves into action.”

“But if they were angry with *you*, why kidnap Maylea?” Declan asked.

Swan shrugged. “At first, I feared the assassin who attempted to kill Maylea in the Theater District was responsible for abducting her. But after learning of the Black





Wolves' involvement in last night's attack, I don't know about that. Yesterday in the Painted Frog, Xhosa accused me of being a spy for Anbeyssa. Perhaps Maylea's abduction was their way of striking back at him." Swan didn't want to say anything to the other two men, but he could think of an additional reason why Maylea might have been the target for abduction. He believed that she was on the cusp of Exaltation, and though he couldn't see how at the moment, he wondered if it were possible that her forthcoming change was somehow part of what had happened last night.

The sound of sharp, sardonic clapping came from Maylea's balcony.

"An interesting conversation. The three of you would make excellent imperial magistrates."

They turned to behold a slender man dressed in black, his face concealed behind a hood, come walking toward them from the direction of Maylea's window.

Declan's hand fell to his sword. "Who are you?" he demanded.

The man in black executed a low bow. "My real name is of no importance, but among those of your caste—who, I might add, have added much gold to fatten my purse over the years—I am known as Ravenwing."

Swan recognized the man's body language and the cocky lilt in his voice right away. "You're the assassin of whom we've been speaking."

Before Ravenwing could respond, Declan drew his sword and took a step toward the hooded man.

"If you kill me—as unlikely a prospect as that is—you'll never find the girl."

Declan hesitated. "You're lying. You didn't abduct Maylea. The Black Wolves did."

"Believe me, I'm not above lying if there's profit in it, but I've come here today because I have something besides my skills to sell: information. Why else would I risk sneaking into the royal complex in broad daylight? Normally, I'd have waited until nighttime, but the man you seek most likely will

be even father out of your reach by then. And who knows what he'll do to the girl in the meantime?"

"Then, my daughter is alive?" Anbeyssa asked. Though none of them had said it aloud, the possibility that Maylea had been killed soon after being abducted had hung heavily over all three of them.

"She was when I saw her last," Ravenwing said.

Declan raised his sword. "Tell us what you know or I'll gut you where you stand!"

"I'm a businessman, not a philanthropist," Ravenwing said. "And I don't respond well to threats."

Swan stepped over to Declan and put a hand on his sword arm. "Let's at least listen to what the man has to say."

Scowling, Declan lowered his sword, though he did not sheathe it.

Ravenwing bowed to Swan. "Thank you. First, let me say that I am aware of your encounter with the Black Wolves. I desired to pay you back for our encounter the other night—as much to maintain my reputation as for personal satisfaction—so I trailed you yesterday during your visit to the Rookery.

A thought suddenly occurred to Swan. "Was it you who hurled the dart at Rawgut?"

Ravenwing shook his head. "It was a nice shot, and I'd like to take credit for the kill, but the truth is that someone else also followed you yesterday."

"Ah," Swan said in sudden realization. "Shadi."

"I don't know her name, but after the barbarian died, I decided to follow her instead of you for a time. Just to satisfy my curiosity, you understand. I followed the woman all the way back to the royal complex."

"It makes sense," Anbeyssa said. "If Shadi was using you to assist in her investigation of the Black Wolves—or simply as a stalking horse—she would have wanted to be present to see what you learned."

"Regardless, she wouldn't have allowed the barbarian to slay you," Declan put in. "Shadi isn't that cold-blooded. Wasn't..."





“What does any of this have to do with what happened to Maylea?” Swan asked Ravenwing.

“After what happened in the Rookery, my curiosity grew,” Ravenwing said. “As I mentioned before, I’m a businessman, and I occurred to me that if I learned more about what all of you were involved in, I might be able to find a way to make a profit from that knowledge. So, I kept an eye on the Constellation, ready to follow you or Maylea or Shadi if any of you should leave again.”

“So, you were present last night,” Swan said.

Ravenwing nodded. “In the courtyard. Which is how I know *who* took Maylea and *where* he took her afterward. I saw the abduction take place, and I followed them. So, are you interested in the information I’m selling or not?”

Anbeyssa looked at the assassin suspiciously. “You accepted a contract to kill my daughter. I know better than to ask who hired you, but why would go back on that deal now?”

“Who says I plan to go back on it? I can always kill Maylea after you’ve rescued her.”

Declan let out a cry of rage and rushed toward the assassin, but Swan grabbed the prince’s arm and stopped him.

“Relax,” Ravenwing said, a sneer in his voice. “Only joking. But Lord Anbeyssa’s question is a legitimate one, and it deserves a serious answer. I will happily leave my contract unfulfilled—if you agree to my price.”

Ravenwing then named a figure so outrageous that Swan was certain the man was joking again. That, or he was insane.

But Anbeyssa took the man seriously. “My daughter is worth any price, as I’m sure my companions will agree. But just because you ask to be paid an exorbitant amount is no proof that you will not continue to seek to increase your fortune by later killing Maylea.”

Ravenwing bowed to Anbeyssa once more. “You are truly a wise negotiator, my lord. The reason your daughter—and indeed, anyone else in Creation—will no longer have to

fear the assassin called Ravenwing is that, if you pay his price, he will immediately retire. I kill solely for profit, not pleasure. Once my financial goals are realized, I plan to leave Yane and live out the rest of my days in delicious hedonism. No one in Yane, or anywhere else for that matter, shall ever hear of Ravenwing again.”



The room was silent for a time while Swan, Anbeyssa and Declan pondered the assassin's words. Finally, Swan offered his right hand to the assassin and asked, “Do you give your oath that you'll help us find Maylea? Your extortion notwithstanding.”

Ravenwing nodded and shook the diplomat's outstretched hand. “Fine. If you want it, you've got it.”

As soon as Ravenwing said this, a faintly glowing ribbon of ancient legalistic characters materialized and danced in the air between Swan and the assassin. When the light faded, Ravenwing said, “What just happened?”

Swan smiled. “You just made a promise to me. A *binding* one. Now we know for certain that you will aid us in looking for Maylea.”

“Hold on a moment! I said I would *tell* you what happened to her! I didn't actually mean I'd *help* you!”

“You just swore the oath,” Swan said. “Besides, if you want Anbeyssa to pay your price...”

Ravenwing sighed. “All right, all right.” The assassin frowned. “But you drive a nasty bargain, Anathema.”



The wind howled and shrieked, as if the Far Northern reaches themselves were furious at having their pristine fields of snow and ice disturbed by the clumsy footfalls of invaders. The Eye of Heaven and the monk called Atreus stumbled forward, leaning on each other for support and moving as fast as their spent, battered bodies would allow. Behind them, far too close for comfort, pursued the remnants of the Wyld Hunt. Only four of the Terrestrial Exalts had survived the avalanche Atreus had brought down upon them as they'd chased their prey through the narrow pass



between the mountains. But Atreus and the Eye of Heaven had been caught in the edge of the avalanche, and though they'd lived, they were definitely the worse for wear.

The Eye of Heaven knew that the gateway wasn't very far away, but she feared that she and Atreus would never reach it before the Terrestrials caught up with them.

"We're going to have to stop and fight," she shouted over the wailing wind.

"If we stop, we die," Atreus replied.

"If we *don't* stop, we'll die," she countered. "So, what's the damn difference?"

Atreus laughed at that, the sound a welcome counterpoint to the screaming Northern wind. "Very well, but I hope you have an especially brilliant plan for defeating our foes."

"I do. It's called improvising."

Atreus laughed again, and they turned to face their pursuers. Though they were still a dozen yards away, there was no mistaking that the four were warriors sworn to defend the Empire of Blood. The blood of the Dragons that coursed through their veins kept them so warm that they had no need to wear any protection against the arctic cold.

As the four Hunters approached, they drew swords with one hand and daggers with the other.

Atreus assumed a fighting stance, and the Eye of Heaven drew her sai, and they prepared to meet whatever destiny had in store for them—victory or defeat, life or death.

The two female Hunters leaped high, intending to attack from the air, while the two males—including the Hunt's commander—continued running forward to attack from the ground. The Eye of Heaven jumped skyward with all her strength. She soared toward the two Hunters, and as the three Exalts closed in on each other, she extended her arms straight out from her body and began to spin rapidly. The Hunters tried to defend themselves, but the Eye was simply moving too fast, and the whirling points of her sai sliced through both of the Hunters' throats. Black blood sprayed the air, and the two Terrestrials tumbled to the

snow-covered ground, both dead before they hit. The Eye of Heaven landed gracefully, without making so much as a dent in the surface of the ice-coated snow. She spun around just in time to see the commander of the Wyld Hunt—a tall, lean man with blue ice-chip eyes and blond hair—come dashing toward her.



“Monster!” he shouted, a hysterical edge to his voice. As he drew near, he launched himself into the air, ice-blue eyes gleaming with hatred and more than a little madness.

The Eye of Heaven leaped again to meet the commander’s attack, trusting Atreus to handle the remaining Hunter.

As she ascended toward her opponent, the commander swung both his sword and dagger at her, but the Eye of Heaven managed to parry both strikes with her sai. The two Exalts spun around each other in midair as they rapidly exchanged strikes, the sound of clashing steel momentarily drowning out the raging arctic wind. Then, they flew past one another and landed on the snowfield. The Terrestrial broke the icy coating and sank up to his knees, but the Eye of Heaven landed without causing so much as the smallest crack in the ice. Seeing that the commander was at a momentary disadvantage, the Eye of Heaven dashed toward him, feet moving so fast they seemed barely to touch the surface of the snow.

As if sensing the danger coming his way, the commander leaped up in a spray of ice and snow and spun around to meet the Eye of Heaven’s charge. The commander shouted a battle cry, but before he could attack, the Eye of Heaven hurled a sai at him. The thin blade flew into the man’s mouth and pierced the base of his skull. His ice-blue eyes widened, and the commander made a gagging sound.

The Eye of Heaven summoned her weapon, and it pulled free from the commander’s mouth in a spray of black blood that pattered onto the ice below. The handle of the sai slapped into her palm just as the Hunt commander keeled over.



The Eye of Heaven smiled grimly. His kind were responsible for hunting the Chosen to the point of extinction, and the Empire they served had ravaged Creation for centuries, leaving the world a barren, used-up husk in its wake, like a plague of locusts whose hunger could never be sated. The deaths of one Terrestrial and the Hunt he commanded could hardly make up for all of that, but damned it if didn't feel good.

Suddenly remembering that one Hunter remained, she turned to see how Atreus fared.

The last Terrestrial Exalt lay on his back in the snow, jagged shards of ice embedded in his eyes, a pool of ebon blood spreading out beneath his head. Atreus held several additional ice shards, but he dropped them now, for they were no longer needed.

When he saw the Eye of Heaven looking at him, he shrugged. "Improvising."

She laughed and went to his side, and then leaning on each other for support, they continued their trek northward. They were tired, they were hungry, but at least they were no longer hunted.

A couple of hours later, their long journey finally ended. In the middle of a vast snow-covered plain, with nothing else visible for miles in all directions, they came across an arch four yards tall and three yards wide, made from a combination of orichalcum, moonsilver, starmetal and jade. The arch was smooth and unmarked, with the exception of a dozen or so ancient Old Realm glyphs carved into its surface. Given the frigid temperature, the freezing rain and the cutting wind, the surface of the arch should've been coated with ice, but it wasn't. It was untouched by the elements, as if it were protected by some sort of magic. Or, the Eye of Heaven mused, as if it wasn't exactly *there*.

Her weariness suddenly became too much for her, and for a moment, she thought she might collapse to the snow, never to rise again. But Atreus put his arm around her waist to steady her.

"Are you injured?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Just momentarily overwhelmed. After all our hardships and sacrifices, we're almost there. The gateway to Yu-Shan is still here and still standing after all this time. Once we enter, we shall at last find the Loom of Fate, and if our little silver friend you carry does its job, Atreus, the Empire of Blood shall never come into being."



The monk gave her a wry half-smile. "Is it too late to voice my discomfort with this idea? Just hearing you say it makes me uneasy."

She laughed. "Would you rather I say that we're about to rewrite history?"

Atreus pretended to consider the matter for a moment. "Never mind. I like your first description better."

Laughing, they walked forward arm in arm and passed through the gate.





CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“I still don’t understand why you need me to come along,” Ravenwing grumbled.

Swan and Declan rode on horseback down a well-worn dirt road, their assassin “guide” riding between them, his hands bound to the pommel of his saddle. The assassin was still garbed in black, but it was too hot to wear his hood, so he had forsaken it.

“That has to be at least the twentieth time you said that since we left the city,” Declan said. “And believe it or not, I’m getting quite tired of hearing it.”

“Perhaps, my prince, but I’ve yet to grow tired of saying it.”

Swan paid no attention to the two of them. They’d been bickering all day, and the sound of their voices had become little more than background noise to the young Exalt.

The Southern sun had dipped below the horizon, though full night had not yet fallen. Even so, the air remained hot, dry and oppressive. Since leaving Yane, they’d ridden through plains covered with yellowish waist-high grass, and from time to time throughout the day, Swan had spotted an elephant, a herd of zebra or a pride of lions crossing the savanna. The beasts were always far enough away, though, that they gave little notice to the men riding through their domain.



Thanks to Ravenwing, they now knew that last night the robed man—who might or might not be an Exalt of some sort—had taken Maylea to a horse-drawn wagon parked not far from the royal complex. Once there, he'd administered some sort of sedative to her using a quill similar to that with which he'd slain poor Eurus. Dray horses were forbidden within Yane that close to the royal complex, but Swan doubted that the abductor had been unduly concerned about breaking such a minor law, not after everything else he'd done. The kidnaper had then placed the unconscious Maylea in the wagon bed and covered her with a blanket before climbing into the driver's seat and driving it out of the city. Ravenwing had followed and watched as the man headed southwest.

Declan turned to Swan. "Actually, though I'm loath to admit it, I've been wondering the same thing as our annoying companion here. Why *do* we need him to accompany us? He's already told us all he knows, and we know he spoke truthfully because of the oath he took. What other use is he? We should just execute him and be done with it."

"You mean pay me what you owe me then release me," Ravenwing corrected.

Declan shrugged. "If Anbeyssa insists upon it. I, however, see no need to consider any deal made with the likes of you as binding."

"That's because you suffer from a deficiency of honor, my prince. It's a common failing in your caste, I'm afraid."

"It's because I'm a sensible man," Declan countered.

Swan could no longer continue to ignore the two of them. "For the last time, Ravenwing is with us because we may have need of his skills." Swan smiled. "Besides, if Ravenwing wants to earn the ridiculous sum of money he's intent on extorting from Anbeyssa, he's going to have to do more than provide us with a bit of information."

What Swan didn't tell Declan was that he wasn't entirely sure himself why he'd brought Ravenwing along. He'd simply been following his instincts at the time. He hoped they wouldn't prove faulty in this instance. And as for

why Declan had come along... the prince had put it quite clearly himself that morning.

"*Maylea is my betrothed. I am going with you, and you're not going to stop me, no matter what you are.*"

As if he'd read Swan's thoughts, Declan said, "You're an Ana— I mean you're... Why do you even *need* anyone's help? Can't you just... I don't know... cast some sort of spell and *know* where she is?"

Swan smiled, though not entirely in amusement. "I possess many gifts that ordinary men do not, but I am not a god." This last thought was a sobering one. The Solar Exalts in the First Age were destroyed precisely because too many of them—Swan's previous incarnation included—came to believe that they *were* divine.

"So, if you cannot use your powers to find Maylea, what did you hope to accomplish by riding across the savanna all day?" Declan asked.

Swan sighed. "I was hoping that we would come across some sign of Maylea and her abductor. Wagon wheel tracks, perhaps, or someone who witnessed him pass by."

"But we haven't seen anyone else since we left Yane," Declan said.

"No, we haven't," Swan admitted.

"Nor will we," Ravenwing mumbled.

"And it will be dark soon," Declan pointed out.

"Yes, it will," Swan allowed.

"And we're tired," Ravenwing put in. "We are, after all, only mortal men. We cannot go without rest like you."

The assassin's words came as something of a shock to Swan. Not so long ago, he'd been a mortal man himself. How quickly he had forgotten was it was like to grow tired after a long day of traveling—especially traveling through the sweltering heat of the Southern savanna. The horses were still relatively fresh, but the men on their backs were flagging.

"Very well," Swan said. "We'll stop for a while."

Swan and Declan brought their mounts to a halt and climbed out of their saddles. Swan untied Ravenwing's





hands so he could dismount, though—at Declan’s insistence—the Exalt tied them once more after the assassin was down. After that, they removed the saddles from the horses, rubbed them down and then fed and watered them. The men drove stakes into the hard savanna earth and tethered their mounts so they wouldn’t wander off. Afterward, the three sat down to a meal of salted beef and dry biscuits. It was fully night by then, and Declan wanted to make a fire, but Swan pointed out that even a small fire would be visible from a great distance, giving away their position to any potential enemies that might be in the area.

“But what about wild animals?” Declan said, glancing nervously around their simple campsite.

Ravenwing chuckled. “We have *him* as a traveling companion, remember? He’ll protect you.”

Declan glared at the assassin but said no more, and the three men ate in silence for a time.

After a while, Declan broke the silence. “Who do you think Maylea’s abductor was? One of the outcaste mercenaries?”

“Perhaps,” Swan said, “though Dragon-Bloods tend not to employ such stealth as Maylea’s kidnaper used. Terrestrial Exalts prefer to meet their challenges head on.”

“You don’t think it’s Xhosa, do you?” Declan said. “From what you said, the man showed no sign of being Exalted when you encountered him at the Painted Frog.”

“No, I don’t think Xhosa is the kidnaper,” Swan said. “The description of the man Ravenwing saw doesn’t fit Xhosa.”

Swan remembered what Ravenwing had said earlier that morning in Maylea’s bedchamber.

“I only caught a glimpse of his face, just enough to know that he was Southern, somewhere in his twenties or early thirties, and that he had a short beard.”

Xhosa was middle-aged and had a long beard.

“What do we do next?” Declan asked, his voice tight with frustration. “We have no idea where Maylea was taken, and it seems we have no way of finding out.”

"I think our best move would be to return to Yane in the morning," Ravenwing said. "There you could hire experienced trackers who would be able to lead you to Maylea. And you could drop me off so that I can collect what Lord Anbeyssa owes me and get started on my life of island debauchery."



"No one asked you," Declan snapped. Then, his voice softened. "Besides, we can't go back. Maylea might not have that kind of time."

"You don't even know where she is," Ravenwing countered.

Swan had a sudden thought. "Tell me, do either of you know a valley in this region of the South that is home to a species of multicolored frog?"

Both Declan and Ravenwing looked at each other in confusion.

"I'll take that as a no," Swan said. "I'm sure that Xhosa spoke the name of the valley where the frogs came from, but I can't recall it."

After a few moments of silence, Ravenwing said, "Might it have been the Obsidian Valley?"

"Yes, that's it!" Swan exclaimed. "Have you been there?"

Ravenwing shook his head. "No, but when I was searching for places to retire several years ago, I pored over every map I could find of all the lands in Creation. I thought the Obsidian Valley sounded intriguing, but after a bit more research, I discovered that the name is far more exotic than the reality. It's a small valley filled with volcanic rock—hence the obsidian in the name—along with a bit of vegetation, a handful of watering holes and little else. Not exactly my idea of paradise."

"Not yours," Swan said, excitement building, "but perhaps a frog's."

Ravenwing shrugged. "I don't know frogs."

"It sounds ludicrous," Declan said, "but I'll see if it's on the map." He took a parchment map out of his saddlebag and unrolled it. Despite his earlier warnings about starting a



campfire, Swan lit a small candle so they could see. Declan and Swan consulted the map for a moment, then the prince said, "It's not here."

"Let me look," Ravenwing said.

Declan scowled but held the map for the assassin to look. Swan joined them.

"It's right here," Ravenwing said. "Or it would be if it were labeled." Though his hands remained bound, he stretched out one of his little fingers and tapped it on the map. "Due south of our present location. We'll need to leave the trail and cross the open grasslands to get to it, but it's not that far. A half day's ride, perhaps less."

Swan stared at the map for a long moment, memorizing the location Ravenwing indicated. When he was finished, he nodded to Declan, and the prince rolled up the map once more and replaced it in his saddlebag.

"Good. We can set out first thing in the morning."

"Maylea might not be able to wait that long," Swan said. He blew out the candle and tossed it to Declan. "You and Ravenwing can remain here for the night, but I have no need of further rest." The young Exalt walked over to where they'd left the saddles and picked his up.

"But what about us?" Declan said.

Swan walked over to his mount and began to put the saddle on her. "You can follow after me in the morning."

"But even if Xhosa's frogs came from the Obsidian Valley, what makes you think the Black Wolves have taken Maylea there?" Declan said.

"Instinct, dear prince," Swan said. "Instinct!" He untied his horse from the stake, leaped gracefully into the saddle, then tapped his heels against the animal's flank to start it galloping.

If his companions had any response, it was lost in the sound of rushing wind as the horse's hooves thundered across the dark grasslands. Swan hunched forward, gripped the reins tightly, and thought, *Hold on, Maylea. I'm coming.*




CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Maylea struggled to open her eyes. She knew it was a simple enough task—after all, she did it every morning, didn't she? But for some reason, she was having the most difficult time now. Perhaps if she tried opening them one at a time... She was trying to decide whether to start with the right or the left, when she heard voices, two of them. But they were muffled, as if she were hearing them with ears stuffed full of cotton. But the more consciousness returned to her, the more clear the voices became.

"But what if the Anathema comes here?"

"He won't. There is nothing to link us to what took place last night. And even if by some chance Swan *does* discover that the Black Wolves were responsible, there's no way he can find us here."

Maylea realized she was lying down on what felt like a straw-filled pallet. She tried to recall how she'd gotten here—wherever *here* was—but her mind was still too fuzzy, and the memories refused to come. She did feel awake enough, however, to finally try opening her eyes. She did so and immediately closed them halfway again. An oil lamp glowed softly on a table made of black stone, but though the light was dim, it hurt her eyes and made her head throb, so she was forced to squint. Standing next to the table were two Southern men: one middle-aged, one younger. The older of the pair was bald and had a full red beard. He was dressed in a blue vest and pantaloons with gold embroidery, and he

 wore quite a collection of jewelry. The younger man was dressed more simply in a white cotton jacket and pants. He had a full head of red hair and a neatly trimmed beard to match. Neither man displayed any obvious signs of caste, but from the way they stood—the older man with slumped shoulders and a worried look on his face, the younger with an impatient scowl—she assumed the more simply dressed man was the superior of the other.

The older man looked down at the floor, as if he were suddenly afraid to meet the other's gaze.

"Yes, there is, Gratian. When you were speaking with Swan in the Painted Frog, you... mentioned that we procured our frogs from here. The Obsidian Valley, I mean."

"So?"

The older man continued looking down at the floor, which seemed to be made from the same black stone as the table upon which the lamp sat. And that the walls and ceiling were made from as well.

"So... if Swan discovers the Black Wolves' involvement in last night's raid on the royal compound, he knows where to find us."

The younger man—Gratian—gave his companion a reassuring smile. "Don't trouble yourself about it, Lycean. Even if Swan remembers hearing the name of the valley, only the most detailed of maps show its location. But if the Solar does come, the Iron Fang will handle him, though Swan's arrival would make little difference to my plans. Our pretty young guest and I will have departed long before he could get here."

Maylea didn't feel afraid upon hearing Gratian's words, didn't feel anything except a general detached curiosity about what was happening. She had the sense that whatever it was, it was important, but beyond that...

The man called Lycean sniffed. "Some help the Dragon-Bloods will be. Half of them are either dead, missing or deserted after their defeat in the royal courtyard last night. Who's to say the remaining six won't break and run the first time the Anathema says boo?"

Lycean's words stirred Maylea's sludgy memory. The battle in the courtyard... Swan fighting against Dragon-Blooded warriors... a man in a robe... a man she now realized had been Gratian. Her full memory suddenly returned to her in a rush, and she gasped and sat up.

Lycean and Gratian turned to look at her, the latter smiling.

"I see the sedative I gave you has finally worn off," Gratian said. "But I'd advise you not to try to stand just yet. You might find yourself feeling somewhat light-headed for a few moments longer." He turned to Lycean. "Leave us, please. And don't worry about the mercenaries. I promised to triple their payment if they remain to guard Wolf's Lair while I am... away. If Swan should come, they will deal with him."

"But Yseult isn't here to command them, nor is Ragnor," Lycean said. "What if the remaining mercenaries won't listen to me?"

"Well, of course they won't listen to *you*," Gratian said. "You're Lycean, a great actor. True, you might not possess a great deal of skill when it comes to memorizing pre-written lines, but you do possess a brilliant talent for improvisation. A talent which has yet to fail me. So, the Dragon-Bloods might not listen to a mere actor. They'll listen to Xhosa, Lord of the Black Wolves—because you'll *make* them listen."

Lycean looked pleased. "Do you really think I'm that good?"

The man sounded to Maylea like a child looking for reassurance from his parent.

"Yes, I do," Gratian said. "Now, if you wouldn't mind leaving our guest and I alone, we have much to discuss."

"Of course, of course," Lycean said with an imperious air so different from the meek, uncertain man he'd been but a moment ago. "You two talk, while I go inform the Dragon-Bloods of my decision. Farewell." With a last nod to Maylea, the man swept out of the room, moving with a confidence equal to that of any royal in Yane.





There were two chairs at the table. Gratian pulled one back, turned it around to face the pallet upon which Maylea sat and then sat himself. The chair, like everything else in the room, had been carved from ebon stone.

“That looks very uncomfortable,” she said, her throat dry, voice raspy.

Gratian shrugged. “One gets used to it. As you might have gathered by now, my name is Gratian. You are currently within a stronghold called Wolfs’ Lair, though that is but a recent name for it. It’s been almost an entire day since the battle in the royal courtyard, and you’ve been asleep all that time.”

“You’re the man in the robe, the one who grabbed me and carried me off.”

Gratian nodded. “Yes, and once you’ve heard my reasons for taking such actions, I hope you’ll forgive me for them. As I said, this place is now called Wolf’s Lair, but it originally was an underground garrison constructed by a First Age warlord called K’un Atalil. An elite cadre of his warriors used this garrison as a hidden base from which they could ride forth, attack their enemies and then seemingly vanish into the savanna. A number of years ago, I came across several references to it in my research. It took me some time to locate it, but when I did, I realized its potential. It had been abandoned for centuries, but everything was intact—the troop quarters, the armory with all its weapon and armor... Only the forge once used to produce those weapons and armor had fallen into disrepair, and I didn’t really have use for that anyway. The entire stronghold and everything in it was carved out of the obsidian rock that fills the surrounding valley.” Gratian paused to rap his knuckles on the stone tabletop “Even this room, which as near as I can tell, used to be one of the officer’s quarters.

“Millennia ago, this valley was the site of much volcanic activity, which resulted in the preponderance of the black rock. One of the surviving lava pools in the area was even incorporated into the design by the warlord who built the stronghold in order to stoke his great forge.”

Maylea suddenly recalled a scene from her dual visions in the Rookery: Swan fighting against a blonde-haired woman in a stone chamber illuminated by a pulsating crimson glow. Could this be the forge of which Gratian spoke?

“So you’ve been using this stronghold as your base,” Maylea said. “Just as you’ve been using Lycean to play the part of Xhosa, to disguise the fact that *you* are the true power behind the Black Wolves.”

Gratian chuckled. “Your perceptions are growing sharper. Your time is close at hand—just as I knew it would be.”

“You sound quite confident of yourself,” Maylea said.

“Confidence has nothing to do with it. I am a Sidereal Exalt. My kind can peer into the future—*all* futures—as easily as mortals can see whatever happens to be in front of their faces. And you, Maylea, are one of us. At least, you are about to be. The time of your Exaltation is close at hand.”

Maylea felt no surprise at Gratian’s pronouncement.

Gratian went on. “The process of Exaltation can be as different as each individual who goes through it, but we often experience visions and strange dreams in the days before our Exaltation actually occurs. Forgive the simplicity of the comparison, but it’s something like a child getting a new tooth. There is pain and sometimes fever long before the tooth actually breaks through the gum.”

Maylea sensed the rightness in what Gratian said. It explained everything—her visions, her dreams, her feeling of restlessness, of being confined by Yane’s rigid caste structure...

A thought occurred to her then. “But the astrological chart drawn up shortly after my birth gave no indication that I would one day be Chosen.”

“Of course it didn’t,” Gratian said. “I’m the astrologer who created your chart, and I made certain that it contained no hint of your future Exaltation. We Sidereals carefully monitor the signs and portents, ever searching for others like us whom we may be able to protect and nurture until their





time of Exaltation arrives. My investigations revealed that a Sidereal would be born to one of the royal subfamilies of Yane, though not to which one. So, I traveled to Yane and began working as an astrologer. My charts were so detailed and accurate that I was soon sought after by the royal family, and I cast charts for them for years until the day your mother and father employed me to map *your* destiny, Maylea. As I said, I altered it so no one but myself would know what was coming. Afterward, I retired as an astrologer and began working on other projects while I waited for you to grow from an infant into the beautiful young woman you are today. But I kept an eye on you the entire time you were growing up, make no mistake.”

Though she still sensed Gratian spoke the truth, something bothered her. “From what you say, you should be as old as my father, if not older. But you seem much younger.”

“Our kind doesn’t age as mortals do. Barring accidents, we can live an extremely long time.”

Maylea had another realization. “Nothing that has happened the last few days had anything to do with Swan, did it? It was always about me.”

“Yes. I have found it... problematic to foresee events relating to the involvement of the Solar Exalted in this Age. I admit that Swan’s interference was something I hadn’t anticipated, but I was able to counter it by having the Dragon-Blood mercenaries of the Iron Fang pose as a Wyld Hunt. They gained entrance to your father’s home and distracted Swan long enough for me to sedate you and bring you here.”

Though Maylea still felt the same strange sense of detachment, she couldn’t help also feeling concern for Swan. “Is he... did he...?”

“He yet survives, remarkably. The Iron Fang kept him busy long enough for me to bring you here, however, so we may talk in peace before your Exaltation takes place.”

Another memory came back to her then, of Gratian throwing a tiny spine as if it were a spear... the spine, coated

in poison, plunging through Eurus's sword and into his eye. Of Eurus falling dead to the ground.

She looked at the man, her detachment wavering for a moment. "You killed Eurus."

"A regrettable sacrifice, but one that had to be made. Thanks to Swan, you had been placed in the thick of battle. If I were to have any hope of getting you out of the courtyard alive, I had to do so quickly. I knew that Eurus—your faithful protector for so many years—wouldn't hesitate to lay down his life for you if necessary. I assure you, if there had been any other way—"

"With the abilities at your command, you could have surely *found* a way. But you didn't even try. You *wanted* to kill him. I bet you even enjoyed it."

"No, Maylea. I had no choice. No choice, and no time. You don't believe that now, but you will understand everything soon. My words won't convince you, but you will see it for yourself. Your time is nearly here."

Maylea wanted to rage and lash out, but the emotional detachment she'd experienced since awakening in Wolf's Lair had begun to slowly return to her. "So, you brought me here, and we've talked," she said. "Now what?"

"Now, you will accompany me on a short journey. At its end, all of your questions—about who you really are and what you are meant to do in this life—will be answered."

Gratian stood and held out his hand to her.

Maylea looked at his hand for several moments, considering. Finally, she allowed him to help her to rise from the pallet.

Gratian grinned, and a strange light came into his eyes. "Excellent! Now, let us depart."

Gratian released her hand, turned and started toward the room's open doorway. Maylea followed without hesitation.



Gratian led Maylea into a large chamber that at first appeared to be a natural cavern formed from the same black rock as the rest of Wolf's Lair. Stalactites hung from the





ceiling, and the walls were rough and uneven. But the floor was smooth and polished. The chamber was lit with a dim red glow, and the air was hot and stifling. As they continued farther into the chamber, Maylea soon saw why. A round black stone well one yard high and six yards across rose forth from the floor, and as they drew closer, she could see thick orange-red lava bubbling within.

"This is the forge chamber," Gratian said. "Or at least, that was its function during the First Age. When I first discovered the garrison, there was an elaborate system of bellows and smithing equipment here, but much of it hadn't withstood the long centuries well, so I had the Black Wolves remove it. All that remains now is this well of earthblood." Gratian gestured at the lava pool. "I considered having it filled in and capped, but I decided against it. I like coming here and seeing the red glow, feeling the heat... The lava in this pit comes from deep within the earth, and it's so ancient that when I breathe the air in here, I feel as if I'm breathing in eternity itself."

Gratian smiled then, as if he were slightly embarrassed by his admission. "At any rate, this is an appropriate place for us to begin our journey."

"What do I need to do?" Maylea asked.

"Nothing. Merely stand by while I summon the Calibration Gate. Please do not disturb me during this time." Gratian sat cross-legged on the ground, rested his hands lightly on his knees, closed his eyes, and began breathing deeply and evenly. He remained this way for several minutes, during which Maylea stood quietly and waited. When he was finished, Gratian opened his eyes and rose again.

"I am ready."

Gratian raised his hands, his fingers held in mystic configurations that Maylea had never seen before, but which nevertheless felt familiar. He closed his eyes as if concentrating, and then, he began to speak in a strong, clear voice, chanting words in a language that she'd never heard before but which also felt familiar. Gratian didn't raise the volume of his voice as he chanted, but his words seemed to

hang in the air, as if they were solid things accumulating invisibly around them and slowly filling the forge chamber. A pinprick of light appeared in the air in front of them, and as Maylea watched, the light began to swirl, almost like water spiraling down a drain. The light grew larger, expanding rapidly until it had become a swirling vortex twice Gratian's height and three times as broad.



Gratian stopped chanting and lowered his hands. He looked weary, and a line of sweat had appeared on his brow. He wiped it away before turning to Maylea.

"We have only but to walk through," he said.

The girl Maylea had been only a few short days ago would've been terrified by the sight of this mystical gateway, and nothing in Creation could have made her enter it. But now, she merely asked, "Where does it lead?"

"To the city of Yu-Shan," Gratian answered. "Heaven. The home of the gods."

Maylea thought about this for a moment, then nodded. "Let's go."

Then Gratian and Maylea stepped into the swirling maelstrom of mystical energy and vanished.






CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Yseult rode her horse at a trot across the savanna. It was a clear night, and the moon and stars provided sufficient light for her to see well enough to ride faster, but she kept her mount trotting. Though she was headed in the direction of Wolf's Lair, she wasn't in a hurry to get there.

After seeing Ragnor die at the hands of the Anathema named Swan—and seeing the monster wreathed in the baleful glow of his unholy power—she'd fled into the night. She'd run through the mazelike streets of Yane, heedless of where she was going, knowing only that she had to get away. Eventually, she'd found herself in an alley, sitting against a wall, shaking with fear, face buried in her hands as she wept. She remained like that, crying alone in the darkness, unable to get the sight of the blazing Anathema out of her mind, until the sun finally came up.

She stayed in the alley until midmorning before her fear and shame had finally subsided to the point where she could move again. She rose and left the alley—which she later learned was located in a section of the city called Hearthside—and wandered the streets for a time while she tried to decide what to do next. She wasn't worried about what Xhosa would say to her. He might be an important man in the Black Wolves' organization, but he was just a mortal after all. No, she was worried what her fellow Dragon-Bloods, the men and women she commanded, would think of their leader. The mighty Yseult—strong,

 resolute, vicious—finally succumbing to her fear of Anathema. At the very least, they had lost respect for her and would never follow her again. At the most... once she returned to Wolf's Lair, she might well find herself attacked by the very same warriors she'd once led in combat. And as skilled a fighter as she was, she wasn't confident that she could prevail against all of them.

But she could think of nowhere else to go but back to Wolf's Lair, so she'd "borrowed" a horse from a wagonmaster outside the city limits and set off riding across the Southern grasslands. And now, she was dawdling along like a naughty child reluctant to go home and face her parents' wrath. If she didn't already loathe herself for the weakness she'd displayed in the royal courtyard last night, she'd—

She caught a glimpse of a flickering light off in the distance to the west. She brought her mount to a halt and stared out into the darkness. It might have been merely her imagination, but...

There! She saw it again. It looked like the glow from a distant campfire.

She knew she hadn't been the only member of the Iron Fang to flee last night, though the knowledge made her feel no better about her own weakness. Yet, perhaps some of her people had felt as she did, torn as to whether or not to return to Wolf's Lair. Perhaps that fire was theirs, and even now, they sat around it trying to decide what to do.

Yseult started to give the reins a shake to urge her mount forward, but then, she paused. If the campfire did belong to some of her mercenaries, what if they now hated her? What if they shouted at her to leave? Or worse, drew their weapons and attacked?

But on the other hand, they had fled too, so they might understand. There had been much confusion in the courtyard last night. It was possible that they had no idea she'd fled. They might even be afraid of what *she* would think of *them*!

Perhaps—perhaps not. There was only one way of finding out.

Yseult took a deep breath, shook the reins, tapped her heels against the horse's flanks and started riding toward the campfire.



"Swan told us not to build a fire."

"And you said we wouldn't have to worry about predators with an Exalt around," Declan said. "In case you haven't noticed, that situation has changed."

The two men sat before the small fire, Ravenwing with his wrists still bound. Declan had a collection of twigs piled up at his side, and he was slowly feeding them into the fire one by one.

"I don't suppose you'd consider untying me to so that I might sleep more comfortably," Ravenwing said.

"You mean so your hands will be free for you to slay me while I sleep? I don't think so." Declan put another twig onto the fire.

"I *am* a professional assassin," Ravenwing pointed out. "If I wished to, I could kill you whether my hands were tied or not."

"Which is why I plan to also tie your feet before I retire for the night," Gratian said.

Ravenwing opened his mouth to offer a reply, when suddenly he cocked his head to the side.

"I hear hoofbeats," he said.

"Nonsense. And even if you do, it's probably just a zebra."

"Do zebras even have hooves?"

"Stand, both of you. Now!"

Both men jumped to their feet at the sound of the woman's voice, though Ravenwing had a slightly more difficult time rising with his hands tied.

She rode into the light of their campfire, sitting on the back of a brown mare that seemed too small to carry such a tall woman.

"I am Captain Yseult of the Iron Fang. Who are you, and what are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere?"



Declan knew this woman. She was Shadi's killer. He wanted nothing more than to draw his sword and take revenge in Shadi's name, but he stayed his hand. He knew Yseult would likely kill him before he could get his sword halfway out of its scabbard. Instead, he gave her his best haughty look, as any royal would do upon being challenged by a newcomer. "I am Declan, Firstborn Prince of House Volscha."

Yseult smiled as if she'd just seen a monkey perform a simple but amusing trick. "I now know your name, Declan, but not what you and your bound friend are doing here. You have until I count to ten."

"Our business is our own," Declan insisted. "And I can't help but notice that you didn't mention which of the Great Houses you—"

"One."

"All right," Declan said. "This man owes me a debt. I've captured him and am taking him back to Yane."

"I don't believe you," Yseult said. "Two."

"You wrong me, Captain. I—"

"Three."

A line of sweat began to trickle down the back of Declan's neck as he tried to think up a better lie. "I..."

"Four."

Declan's voice took on a desperate edge. "Be reasonable, Captain. I only—"

"Five."

Ravenwing broke in. "There's no need to keep counting. I can tell you what you wish to know."

Declan couldn't allow Ravenwing to give Yseult any information. If she knew that Swan was on the way to the Obsidian Valley in search of Maylea, she most likely would try to stop him. And if Maylea was to be saved, Declan needed Swan to remain alive.

The prince drew a dagger and lunged toward Ravenwing. Declan was fast, but he was only mortal. Yseult had no trouble riding closer and grabbing his wrist before he could stab the assassin. She squeezed Declan's wrist until he gasped

and released his grip on the dagger. The blade fell to the ground, but Yseult didn't stop squeezing. Declan felt his bones begin to grind, and he cried out in pain, knowing his wrist was in danger of snapping like kindling.

Yseult let go before she broke any bones, and Declan gently rubbed his injured wrist.

Yseult then turned to Ravenwing. "What is your name?"

"I go by Ravenwing. I am an assassin by trade."

"Of course you are. Tell me what you know, Ravenwing, and quickly. My patience—of which I've never had an overabundance—is running in short supply."

"Of course, Captain, but first, we must settle on a price."

"Traitor!" Declan struggled to draw his sword with his left hand. Yseult's hand lashed out and struck him at the juncture of neck and shoulder. As darkness rushed in to claim him, he had the sense that he was falling toward the ground, then he knew no more.



"Did you... kill him?" The one called Ravenwing stared down at Declan's unconscious form, and despite professing to be an assassin, he seemed taken aback.


Yseult found the man's sudden concern for the one he was willing to betray amusing. "No. If he truly *is* a member of Yane's royal family, it's possible that I can yet make use of him. I do not yet know if I can me use of *you*, however. Convince me."

Ravenwing swallowed, and though he tried to remain calm, Yseult could hear a slight quaver in his voice. "There's still the matter of my price. I'm a businessman first and foremost. I'm only riding with Declan because Lord Anbeyssa promised to reward me if I could help find his daughter. Reward me quite handsomely, I might add."

Yseult ignored that last statement. "Anbeyssa's daughter?"

Ravenwing considered for a moment, then walked over closer to Yseult's mount. "All right. Let's call this a free sample. Someone abducted Maylea last night while



 you and your people were attempting to capture the Anathema called Swan. And failing, I might add. Swan intends to rescue Maylea. That's why we're out here in this damned wasteland. Declan and I needed to rest, but Swan rode on ahead."

Yseult stared at the assassin, attempting to determine whether he was telling the truth or lying so that he might drive up the price of his information.

"Continue."

Raw, naked greed shone in Ravenwing's eyes. "Swan is headed for a place called the Obsidian Valley. That's where he believes Maylea's abductor has taken her."

"I see." Yseult wasn't certain who this supposed abductor was, or what he might want with Anbeyssa's daughter, but she did know one thing: The Obsidian Valley was the location of Wolf's Lair.

"Now, if you want to know where the Obsidian Valley is—"

Yseult drew a dagger and brought it down in a single swift stroke. Ravenwing gasped in fright, but Yseult only cut through the leather straps binding his wrists. He grinned in relief.

Ravenwing began massaging his wrists. "My thanks. That leather was starting to chafe something awful. Now, as I was saying—"

Yseult slammed the hilt of her dagger against the side of Ravenwing's head, and the assassin fell to the ground to join Declan, just as unconscious and just as helpless.



Ravenwing awoke in darkness with the rank smell of blood thick in his nostrils. He attempted to sit up, but when he tried to move, lances of fiery pain pierced his legs and he screamed, his cry degenerating into a ragged sob.

"Don't act like an infant," Yseult said.

Gritting his teeth against the pain in his legs, Ravenwing managed to roll onto his side and prop himself up with one arm. He saw Yseult sitting on her horse, the still unconscious

prince lying across the back of his mount, his hands and feet bound. The camp fire that had led her here was now out.

Yseult nodded past Ravenwing, and the assassin turned to look where she indicated, wincing as the movement sent fresh bolts of agony shooting through his legs.

Lying only a few yards away, he saw the corpse of his mount. The horse's throat had been laid open by a sword, and blood soaked the hard earth it lay on, turning it into soft reddish mud.

Fear gripped the assassin at the sight of the mutilated animal. He wasn't sure what Yseult had in mind for him, but he knew it couldn't be good. He turned back to face the Terrestrial Exalt in time to see her toss Declan's dagger toward him. The blade thunked to the ground only a few inches from his right hand.

"Before you reach for that with the intention, I'm sure, of throwing it at me, consider two points. One, no matter how fast you are, you're only mortal. You'll never hit me, but you will lose your only defense. I removed all your other weapons—sword, shuriken, concealed daggers of varying length and kind—from your person. Second, you'll need that dagger if you're to have even the slightest chance of survival, for as you might've guessed by now, I've broken both your legs."

Panicked, Ravenwing looked down at his legs. Both were bent at stomach-turning angles, and his black pants were wet with blood.

"Don't worry; the blood's not yours. I smeared some of the horse's blood on your pants. On the front and back of your shirt, too."

Ravenwing glared at the hateful soldier. "You lied to me, you bitch! You promised to reward me!"

"I did not lie. I *have* given you a reward: a chance to survive."

"How?" Ravenwing demanded.

"If you're strong and fast enough, that dagger will be all you need," Yseult said. "You lie near a carcass, one that is fresh and yet to be picked over by predators or scavengers."





But the scent of spilled blood will draw them, rest assured.” She grinned. “I hope you’re good with a knife. *Very good.*”

Yseult pulled the reins and urged her mount to turn. She then kicked her heels to its sides, and the horse took off at a trot, pulling Declan’s horse and the prince along with it.

Ravenwing lay back and stared up at the night sky and wondered what he could do to save himself. He almost wished that he hadn’t told Swan and Declan about the Obsidian Valley. By doing so, he’d fulfilled his obligation to lead them to Maylea, and the oath he’d been tricked into giving had been fulfilled. If he’d still been oathbound, perhaps he would’ve been prevented from giving in to his temptation to betray Declan and Swan. But it was too late now, wasn’t it?

It didn’t take long for the predators Yseult spoke of to arrive. Ravenwing heard them out in the darkness—a stealthy padding through the grass, a snuffling *hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo* that sounded something like a cross between the cry of a monkey and the whine of a canine. And then, they moved out of the concealment provided by the tall grass and into the moonlight, and Ravenwing saw what they were.

Through he’d lived in the city all of his life, he was still a Southerner, and he recognized hyenas when he saw them. Blunt noses, mouths opened in what seemed to be grins, spots scattered across their tawny-gray flanks, rear legs shorter than the front, and almost no tails to speak of. They were scavengers for the most part, but where vultures would wait for their meal to die before approaching it, hyenas didn’t mind helping their prey along the path to the next life.

Ravenwing’s fingers frantically reached for Declan’s dagger and closed around its hilt just as the first of the grinning beasts came padding toward him, tongue lolling and dripping saliva, as if the beast could already taste his flesh.

Ravenwing looked his death in the eye as it came for him. “What are you laughing at?” he sneered. “I’m going to retire a rich man and buy my very own island.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The main entrance to Wolf's Lair was cleverly constructed to look like part of just another rocky outcropping. There were no seams visible, thanks to the precision of First Age engineering, so there should be no way for Swan to locate the entrance, especially at night. But that didn't make Lycean feel any better. Swan wasn't some mere enemy soldier passing through the Obsidian Valley. He was Anathema, and who knew what diabolical powers he'd used to lead him this far? He was only a few dozen feet away as it was. Finding the entrance to the lair would be child's play for such a monster.

Lycean stood on his tiptoes, peeking through two tiny eye openings in the entrance door. He'd been standing here looking out ever since Gratian had taken Maylea with him to... wherever. Good thing he had, too. For here came Swan, riding up on horseback, just as Lycean had feared. He drew back from the eyeholes. They'd been designed to be unnoticeable from the other side, but he didn't want to take any risks, not with an Anathema so close by.

What should he do? Gratian had said Swan would never locate Wolf's Lair, but he had. And Gratian had also said that the remaining mercenaries could handle the Anathema, but what if Gratian was wrong about that as well?

Lycean wished Gratian were here to tell him what to do. It was true that he was better at improvising than following a script—always had been—but even so, Lycean



functioned better with at least a modicum of direction. Now, he was on his own. Even if he wanted to go in search of Gratian for instructions on what to do, he had no idea where to find the man.

Lycean sighed. He now regretted the day Gratian had found him, drunk and sleeping face down on a table in a filthy Rookery tavern, after yet another attempt to drown himself in cheap ale that tasted worse than curdled cat piss. What good to Creation, to Yane, to *himself*, was an actor who couldn't memorize lines? An actor who no theater owner would hire? So, when Gratian had offered him work, saying that Lycean's talent for improvisation was just what he needed, Lycean hadn't turned him down. *Couldn't* have turned him down.

All right, then. If he wasn't going to get any direction, he'd just have to do this on his own. He tried to calm himself and once more get in touch with his character. What was Xhosa's motivation in this situation?

A moment later, Lycean was running down a corridor shaped from black stone toward the troop quarters, calling out for the Iron Fang mercenaries.



Sometime near midnight, Swan rode into a small valley, barren for the most part, save for trees with sparse, thistlelike leaves growing near a series of small murky ponds. Frogs, dozens of them, sat on the banks of the ponds, basking in the moonlight. The walls and floor of the canyon were covered with black rock that looked something like coal, only smoother and speckled with crystalline flecks that caught and intensified the moonlight, making the rock seem almost to glow. The canyon floor was crisscrossed with fissures, some tiny cracks, others much larger, big enough for a man to fall into if he didn't watch his step. Puffs of vapor jetted from the fissures as Swan rode past, filling the air with the rank smell of rotten eggs.

Swan was certain this was the Obsidian Valley. Not only did it lie where Ravenwing said it would, but the black

rock was a sure indication. However, the most telling details were the frogs. Gratian had said the amphibians were native to the Obsidian Valley.

Swan dismounted and led his horse by the reins over to one of the ponds. The frogs' skins looked like mottled patterns of grays in the moonlight, but Swan knew they'd prove to be bright reds, blues, greens, yellows and oranges in the light of day. Unlike the amphibians in the Painted Frog, these weren't silent. They croaked softly to one another, the noises they produced oddly high-pitched and musical.

He was beginning to fear that his instincts had steered him wrong. He'd ridden the perimeter of the valley once already, but he'd seen no sign of anyplace where the Black Wolves might be hiding Maylea. No encampment, no caves... Nothing but rocks, trees, ponds and frogs.

Still holding onto his horse's reins, he squatted at the edge of the pond and listened to frogsong as he tried to decide what to do next. If he started back now, he'd reach Declan and Ravenwing before sunrise. Perhaps the three of them could—

Swan broke off in mid-thought as he heard the sound of rock sliding against rock. He turned back in the direction of the sound and saw a section of a large rock formation swung outward—just like the door to the hidden chamber in the Painted Frog. Swan let go of his mount's reins and rose just as the first mercenaries came rushing out of the opening in the rock.

At least now he knew he'd come to the right place.

The light from the moon—along with the way the rock crystals reflected it—provided enough illumination to see by. There were twelve mercenaries in all, two of them Dragon-Blooded and the rest mortals. Swan recognized the Dragon-Bloods from the scene last night in the royal courtyard. He could almost hear Arianna's voice. *You should have killed them when you had the chance*, she might say. But Swan had no time to regret the restraint he'd shown, for the one of the Dragon-Bloods was almost upon him.





It was the Wood-aspected sickle-wielder, and her curved blades shone in the moonlight with the same dangerous metal thorns sprouting from them. She came leaping toward him, her face twisted into a cruel mask of fury, and Swan knew the woman was eager to avenge her defeat and erase the shame she had incurred last night. As she came flying at him, she hurled her sickles one after the other, and the curved blades became a pair of spinning blurs as they streaked toward Swan.

Swan dove forward and rolled under the path of the blades, catching the Dragon-Blood unarmed and by surprise. He sprang toward her and struck out with the heel of his hand, hitting her on the jaw. Her eyes rolled up to the whites, and she lurched back toward the frog pond. Her body hit the shallow water with a splash, sending terrified amphibians hopping for their lives in all directions.

Swan landed gracefully and turned to meet the next attack. The other Dragon-Blood was nowhere in his line of sight, but the mortals pressed in, trying to surround and overwhelm him. They were armored in thick breastplates and pointed helmets, and they each carried two broad chopping swords. Yelling in what was either battle-lust or terror, if not both, they ran toward Swan. The young Exalt moved with the soldiers as they mobbed and surged around him, dodging their blows with the slippery, sinuous grace of a serpent. He could feel the breeze created by their swords, but none of them did more than tear thin holes in his clothing. Still, it was only a matter of time before one of them got lucky, so he leaped, pressing his hands onto the top of the closest soldier's head and pushing off. The mercenary was thrown off balance to stumble into two of his compatriots, and Swan soared into the air, toward the branches of a nearby thistle-leaf tree. He landed on a limb and perched there momentarily. The limb should have been too slender to support his weight, but his divine grace buoyed him as if he weighed no more than the clothing on his back.

One of the soldiers was faster than Swan expected, though. That one hurled one of his swords at the branch


upon which Swan crouched. Swan saw the blade coming and leaped off the limb just before the sword sheared it, but as he descended, the other Dragon-Blooded mercenary intercepted him in the air, slamming into Swan so hard that the breath was driven from his lungs. The Terrestrial circled his arms around Swan's midsection and held on tight as they fell toward the earth. Swan recognized the man as the trident-wielder from last night. It seemed he'd decided to take a more hands-on approach this time. It also seemed like he hadn't learned anything last time.




Swan knew the man intended to use him to break their fall—and perhaps break his back in the doing—so he smacked his forehead against the soldier's, eliciting a grunt of surprise and pain. The Terrestrial held on to consciousness, but his grip relaxed enough that Swan was able to pull free and spin the man around so that he was between Swan and the rapidly approaching ground. Just as they were about to hit, Swan put his feet on the man's stomach and pushed off. He flew into the air once more while the force of his jump sent the Dragon-Blood smashing into the rocky surface of the Obsidian Valley.

Swan somersaulted in the air, and when he landed, he saw a flash of steel as a sword blade came swinging toward his neck. He bent backward almost double, and the sword sliced through the air above him. Another soldier tried to capitalize on his partner's failure, and he brought his blades straight down at Swan. The young Exalt continued his dodge into a handstand and then a back flip, and as his feet came over, he caught the swords between them. He twisted his body to the left as he came up, and the mercenary had such a strong grip on his weapons that he spun around in midair before falling to the ground, stunned.

Swan leaped to his feet, glanced behind him and then fell into a defensive posture. The sickle-wielder had risen and gathered her weapons. She blinked several times to get her eyes to focus, then she glared at Swan, roared a battlecry and rushed him, sickles spinning wildly. As the Dragon-Blood attacked, Swan grabbed the woman's wrists,

 pulled her backward, planted his feet in her midsection, then used her momentum to throw her straight at the thistle-tree in which he had been crouching a moment ago.

 The Dragon-Blood struck the base of the tree hard in a shower of bark and splintered wood. She lost her grip on her weapons, bounced off the tree and fell to the ground. After a moment, she rose up on one knee, then the other and finally made it back onto her feet. She glared murderously at Swan the entire time.

“You’ll pay for that, Anathema!” she growled as she picked her weapons.

Swan’s only reply was to smile and leap into the branches of the thistle tree once more—choosing a much thicker one to land on this time, however. The Dragon-Blood spun around to face him, but Swan shoved off the branch and once more launched himself into the air. The mercenary turned to track him, but paused when she heard a loud cracking sound issue from the base of the tree. She looked down and saw the trunk—which had been badly damaged when she’d hit it—snap in two. She cried out as the thistle-tree toppled toward her, but she didn’t cry out for long.

Swan landed at almost the same instant as the tree struck the ground. He turned to face the remaining mercenaries, all of whom were mortals. They stood close to the entrance in the rocky formation, too afraid to come any nearer to the Anathema. Swan stomped his foot, and the mercenaries jumped in fright, turned and plunged back through the entranceway. Swan dashed after them before they could shut the door.

He found himself running down a corridor shaped from black stone. Oil lamps hung from hooks in the walls at regular intervals, lighting the way. Swan assumed that this place was the Black Wolves’ headquarters and, if fate was kind this night, he’d chance upon Maylea hidden away somewhere in here. If not, he could probably get one of the mercenaries to tell him where Maylea was being kept prisoner. *If* she was still alive.

No, she's alive, he told himself. *She has to be.*

Swan pursued the mercenaries down one corridor and then another, slowly gaining ground on them but not quite catching up. Finally, they came to a stone door at the end of a corridor. They pulled the door open and—with a last frightened backward glance at the Anathema chasing them—ran inside, leaving the door open behind them.





Swan was young, but he wasn't unschooled in the ways of the world. He knew better than to follow the soldiers into the room, he really did. But he'd been through much in the last couple days, and he was determined to do whatever it took to rescue Maylea. So, despite his better judgment, he ran into the room without slowing down. As soon as he was inside, the door slammed shut, and he heard the sound of a lock being engaged. He turned to see one of the mercenaries standing by the closed door, a feral grin on her face.

"Welcome to Wolf's Lair, Anathema," someone said in the center of the room. "More specifically, welcome to its armory."

Swan turned back around. This room was quite large, and like the corridors, it was lit by oil lamps hanging from wall hooks. The walls were covered with other hooks, though, only these held up weapons: swords of all lengths and types, axes, spears, maces, hammers, flails, daggers, staves, shuriken, lances, bows, chakrams, javelins and so many more. The workmanship was ornate, handles and pommels wrought into decorative shapes and designs, and the gleaming metal of blades was engraved with glyphs in the language of the Old Realm. Fortunately, though, none of the weapons appeared to be of true artifact quality. They were just normal weapons, though of superior design and craftsmanship.

Yet for every weapon, there was an armored mercenary standing by, ready to take it up. There were many more than the twelve who had come to face him outside, and like the man who'd locked the door, they were all grinning savagely. And standing in front of them all was the one who'd spoken—the Air-pected Terrestrial he'd

 wounded last night. She stood ready with a thick steel chain, from the ends of which hung a thick, jagged blade and a heavy steel ring. If last night's wound bothered her, she showed no sign of it now.

 "Surrender now, monster," she said. "If you do, we'll make your death as quick and painless as we can."

Swan took a deep, calming breath before he replied.

"Permit me to offer a counterproposal."



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The transition was seamless. One moment Maylea and Gratian were standing in the forge chamber, and the next, they were at the end of a long hallway made from smooth white stone. The air was much cooler here than in the forge room, and the sudden change in temperature was a relief to Maylea. Behind them swirled a vortex identical to the one through which they had just stepped. Ahead of them...

Despite her current state of detachment, Maylea was taken aback to see three large creatures sitting at the other end of the hallway. They appeared to be lions, but though they wore the form of the great cats, these were no creatures of flesh and blood. They were twice the size of real lions, and their bodies were made from golden metal that had been polished to a mirror finish. At first, Maylea thought the lions were merely statues of some sort, but then she saw that they were moving—a slight twist of the head, an impatient twitch of the tail, a lifting of a paw only to put it back down again. Whatever these amazing creatures were, they were most definitely alive.

Gratian leaned over and whispered into her ear. "These are the celestial lions that guard the entrance to Yu-Shan. They are extremely proud and will devour anyone who does not shown them the proper respect."

Without waiting for her to reply, Gratian started walking down the hallway toward the three metallic creatures. After only a moment's hesitation, Maylea followed.



When Gratian was within a dozen feet of the lions, he stopped and bowed low. When Maylea reached his side, she quickly did the same, though she sensed that since she wasn't truly an Exalt yet, it was only proper that she bow lower than Gratian. After holding their bows for several long moments, Gratian straightened. Maylea held her bow a few seconds longer before doing the same.

The lions' mirror eyes blazed with fearsome intelligence, and for a moment, Maylea feared she might have done something wrong. But then, one of the metallic creatures—the one in the middle—nodded and spoke in a rich, resonant baritone. “The youngling knows her place. We are pleased.”

Maylea felt like smiling in relief, but she kept her expression neutral and acknowledged the lion's praise with a nod.

Gratian addressed the celestial lions then. “I am Gratian, Chosen of the Maiden of Secrets. I have a residence within Yu-Shan, and I ask permission for myself and my guest to pass.”

All three of the lions trained their intense gazes on Maylea, and though she wanted to turn away from their scrutiny, she continued to face them.

Finally, the same lion that had praised her a moment ago said, “You may pass.” The lions moved aside, and Gratian bowed once more, as did Maylea. Then, they straightened and walked passed the metallic guardians, who no longer displayed the slightest interest in them. With the lions out of the way, Maylea could now see a glittering glass gate, thirty feet tall, at the end of the corridor. Gratian walked straight toward it without hesitation, and Maylea followed. At their approach, the gate swung open, and the two passed through its scintillating arch.

They emerged onto the stone walkway of a vast metropolis. Buildings of unimaginable size rose into the sky, their architecture so alien that Maylea didn't have the language to adequately describe their shapes. There were crystalline towers with miles-long walkways stretching be-



tween them, other structures that seemed to be molded from solid rays of light, and still other buildings that appeared to be gigantic glass sculptures. Though it had been night when they'd departed Wolf's lair, it was daylight here. But not normal daylight. The light here was brighter, warmer, almost a solid, living thing. The colors were far more intense, too. The blue of the sky, the white of the clouds... they were so striking that the sight of them brought tears to her eyes. She took a breath and gasped. The air was crisp and pure, and it filled her lungs with an invigorating coolness.

Maylea and Gratian were far from alone, though. The streets of the Celestial City were filled with throngs of beings rushing this way and that. Most of the pedestrians appeared human, though their style of clothing varied wildly, from simple robes of flowing silk to insectlike armor that encased them from head to toe to wisps of vapor that clung—barely—to the more intimate portions of their anatomy. Others were not even remotely human. Some had the appearance of dragons, squids or other animals, while other were amalgamations of disparate creatures, such as goat-headed serpents or gigantic rodents with writhing vines emerging from empty eye sockets.

Maylea turned her head this way and that, trying to take it all in, but she was unable to completely comprehend the overwhelming deluge of sights, sounds, smells and sensations of the Celestial City.

Gratian smiled at her reaction. "I felt the same way when I first came to Yu-Shan. It's as if the world you've known all your life is but a pale shadow of this *true* reality."

Maylea wiped the tears from her eyes and nodded. "Yes, that's it exactly."

"If we had time, we could explore this part of the city, but there is something I must show you before your Exaltation occurs. We need to travel to the center of the Celestial City, but Yu-Shan is vast. So, since we are pressed for time, we must avail ourselves of a swifter mode of transportation."

Gratian raised his hand and spoke a series of words. For a moment, nothing happened, and Maylea feared that



whatever he had attempted had failed. But then, she became aware of a white mass descending rapidly toward them from the sky. Gratian, it seemed, had summoned a cloud.

It appeared as a gently roiling ball of white vapor about the size of a large wagon, but as it drew near, it flattened out into a disc shape and hovered a foot above the walkway. None of the pedestrians rushing by took any notice of the miracle that had just occurred in their midst. Perhaps, Maylea thought, such miracles were commonplace here.

Gratian stepped up onto the cloud, and though the misty white substance gave slightly beneath his feet, it bore his weight easily enough. He reached out for Maylea's hand, and she allowed him to help her up. It felt strange standing on something that seemed at once solid and insubstantial, but as they stepped toward the center of the disc, she found herself quickly adjusting to the sensation.

Gratian said no words, made no gesture, but the cloud began to rise, bearing them skyward slowly at first, then with increasing speed. Soon, the street where they'd stood was far below, and they were soaring silently forward at what Maylea sensed were great speeds, though there wasn't the slightest breeze to indicate the cloud's movement. The seemingly endless metropolis below them became a blur as they flew overhead. Maylea caught glimpses of huge palaces, canals that extended for miles in all directions, upside-down pyramids that balanced defiantly on their points... They passed other sky-travelers as well, cloud-riders like themselves and passengers in what Gratian told her were called aerial rickshaws. Wonder after wonder passed by beneath them, as Maylea struggled to grasp it all.

Maylea had no idea how long or how far they traveled, for neither time nor distance seemed to hold any meaning in the Celestial City, but eventually, Gratian said, "At last, we are here."

He pointed to a plain domed building that seemed out of place amidst the unreal grandeur of the rest of Yu-Shan.

"What is that place?" Maylea asked as their cloud transport slowed and began to descend toward the building.

“It lies at the precise center of the Most Perfect Lotus of Heavenly Designs, and though it might not appear very important at first glance, you are looking at the cradle of Creation itself, for within those walls is housed the Loom of Fate.”

Up to now, Gratian had taken the wondrous sights of Yu-Shan in stride, speaking of the marvels of the Celestial City as if they were nothing special to him. But now, his voice held a reverence, as well as an excitement, that Maylea hadn't heard since they'd first embarked upon their journey.

The dome was covered with window-like openings, and the cloud drew up to one. Gratian stepped through and then turned to help Maylea off of the cloud and through the opening. She turned and watched as their cloud soared silently back up into the sky, perhaps to await the summons of whoever should call it next.

“Come, we have but to walk to the end of this short hallway, and we shall finally be there.” Gratian's voice was filled with barely repressed excitement, and he hurried down the hallway at a fast walk. Maylea followed, wondering what among all the miracles contained within Yu-Shan could excite Gratian so.

The hallway opened out onto a balcony made from a supple white wood that Maylea didn't recognize. Gratian stood at the rail, hands gripping it tightly, as if to steady himself.

“Magnificent, isn't it?” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Maylea joined him at the railing. Of all the wondrous, confounding, and at times disorienting sights she'd seen in Yu-Shan, this was the greatest of them all.

“You know what this place is, don't you?” Gratian asked.

Maylea nodded. “I've been here before... in a vision at least.”

“Now, you are here in person, though for Sidereals, there's little difference between experiencing a 'vision' and



what others deem ‘reality.’ They’re merely different aspects of the same thing.”

They stood upon one of the many balconies in the vast chamber that housed the Loom of Fate. The same one that she had stood upon in her vision two days ago? Perhaps, though it didn’t really matter. All was the same as before. The passages, walkways and balconies were positioned at strange angles to one another in total disregard for such limited concepts as up and down. The laws of nature did not apply here, for this place was outside both mundane time and space. Indeed, this was where such things were created.

Men and women, many dressed in clothing suited to different historical periods, came and went, entering and exiting passageways, crossing walkways, lingering on balconies... Some were so intent on whatever arcane business they were about that they didn’t slow as they passed through the gigantic chamber, didn’t even so much as glance in the direction of the Tapestry of Creation spread out beneath them. But others couldn’t resist pausing for a moment or two to take in the divine beauty of the Tapestry that was Creation itself.

Large silvery spiders constantly crisscrossed the Tapestry, adding new threads to the weave, repairing worn ones, removing some and replacing them with others. They worked tirelessly, moving with quick, fluid motions, the segments of their metallic legs clacking softly as they labored.

“Breathtaking, isn’t it?” Gratian said.

“Yes, it is.”

“That is why I brought you here: to show you the wonder you are destined to inherit.”

“But that isn’t the only reason, is it?” Maylea said. “After all the trouble you’ve been going to, you didn’t just bring me here on a sightseeing tour. You wanted to show me something specific that’s going to happen here. Or that has happened already.”

“Not quite yet,” Gratian said. “Though such statements are purely subjective in this place. Outside, and in Creation, I have spent decades experimenting with a chemical pro-

duced by the amphibians indigenous to the Obsidian Valley. It's a toxin with an addictive quality far superior to any other with which I've ever experimented. Once the toxin is perfected, I intend to use it to enslave the Dragon-Blooded and raise an Empire of Blood to conquer all of Creation and finally, truly, hunt the Solars to extinction."

"Out *there* you're doing this," Maylea said, confused.

"Yes, out there. But in here—on a different level—I already *have* done it. Centuries from now, my formative ambitions are one but step removed from coming true. Few were aware of it at first because I will have been extremely subtle and circumspect, but by now, then, it will have become a virtual certainty. And the only ones who might have a chance to prevent the future I have been creating are soon to perish right here. Witnessing this event will surely sustain me through the long centuries of work ahead." He grinned. "Besides, who wouldn't want to be present at the exact moment their life's work is assured of success?"

Maylea's head was spinning just trying to untangle Gratian's explanation. "I can understand the lure of wanting to see that," she said, "but I don't understand what that has to do with me." Yet, in a way, perhaps she did. "Unless... My visions. The Eye of Heaven. She's another incarnation of me, but not one from the First Age. And she is... I am... will be, working against you."

Gratian nodded, proud of her for working it all out so quickly. "I have brought you here instead, Maylea, so that you can see my eventual victory and understand the folly of opposing me. I don't think I originally thought to do so, and that will have proved most troublesome in time." Maylea frowned again, so Gratian explained. "You will Exalt soon, Maylea, as I've known you would. I am hopeful that when you do, instead of opposing me now and in your next incarnation as the Eye of Heaven, you will be able to share in the glory that will have soon become the Empire of Blood."

"What if I don't?" Maylea asked, slowly untangling the knot Gratian's words had tied.





Gratian shrugged, though a scowl shadowed his face for a moment. “The Eye of Heaven and the monk called Atreus will still soon die before they can stop me, and I will remain victorious now and forevermore. I can’t see how it would matter.”

“So, why offer me a choice?”

Gratian mulled that one over. “Professional courtesy, I suppose.”

Maylea scanned the walkways, balconies and passage entrances for some sign of the Eye of Heaven and Atreus, but she saw none. That meant there was still time, if the concept held any meaning at all in this place. She wanted to keep Gratian talking, keep him distracted if she could.

“So, the Painted Frog down in the Rookery was never a real business, was it? It was nothing more than a front for your experiments. And Xhosa was simply another part of the façade.”

“I’m something of a scholar,” Gratian said, “and during the course of my research, I learned of a secret garrison hidden in the Obsidian Valley. I traveled to the valley intending to explore the stronghold, hoping to discover some ancient artifacts of power. Instead, I found only an armory of weapons. Useful enough, but nothing special. Mortal quality only. But outside the garrison, I found a pool containing rainbow-hued frogs, the likes of which I’d never seen before. Intrigued, I picked one up of the amphibians, and the moment I held it in my hand, pathways of possibilities opened in my mind. I saw how such a humble creature—thanks to the narcotic substance it produced—could help me preserve the way of life that we have established here. The other Sidereals and I, that is.”

“And did they see it too?” Maylea said. “The others, I mean.”

Gratian’s scowl lasted longer this time. “They didn’t agree with my assessment of the path’s chances. They said I was too excited by the novelty to parse possibilities accurately. But those narrow-minded fools only want to do just as they’ve always done and nothing more.”

“And the Black Wolves and the trade dispute with Chiaroscuro?”

“I needed a distribution system in place once I perfected my drug. As for the trade dispute, I also orchestrated it in order to destabilize the political situation in the South, both to weaken the Guild and to strengthen the Black Wolves, as well as to lure more Dragon-Blooded to Yane so that I might begin experimenting on them. That will be a few years down the road once we’re outside.”

Maylea nodded in appreciation of the vastness of Gratian’s scheme. “It seems you think you’ve thought of everything.”

“Almost,” Gratian said. “Originally, I won’t have anticipated *them*.” He pointed and Maylea looked up to see Atreus and the Eye of Heaven exit one of the passages and step onto a walkway overlooking the Loom of Fate. The furs they wore were matted and ragged, and they leaned on each other in exhaustion, just as they had in Maylea’s visions of them. She could almost feel the monk’s comforting warmth wrapping around her as Atreus comforted the Eye of Heaven.

“Fortunately for me, I now *will* have anticipated them, thanks to my future self, who will have learned the lesson the hard way.” Gratian pointed in a different direction this time toward a man garbed in a black robe. The man lowered his hood to reveal Gratian’s face, exactly the same as the one worn by the man standing next to Maylea, except that the robed man’s red beard was longer... and thin white streaks ran through his hair.

“Making contact across the gulf of time with my future self was far easier than I’d ever imagined it could be,” Gratian said. “I met him here, in the Loom of Fate, where time holds little, if any, meaning. We were quite literally coming and going—I arriving, he departing—when we saw each other just as we do now. We recognized each other instantly, of course, for outward appearances are no barrier to the perceptions of Sidereals, who can see into the essential nature of all things.”





“My future counterpart and I worked out a way to communicate across the vastness of this space, and we developed our plan. Oh, the major elements of it will already have been in place by his time, but our exchanges presented us with the opportunity to make certain improvements here and there. We’ve spoken here a few other times, but only rarely, so as to avoid any undue complications. And now, here we both are, to witness the precise moment when our mutual triumph is assured.”

The robed man looked at them and flashed a quick series of hand and body signals. Gratian—the one standing next to Maylea—returned a different sequence of gestures, and both men nodded.

“It seems all the players have taken the stage for the last act in our little drama. We have only to watch, and in a few moments, the play will end, the curtain will fall, and the future will belong to my children.”

Maylea looked up at the Eye of Heaven and Atreus, and saw the monk reach into his fur cloak and gently produce a small white ball of spider-silk. She watched in fascinated horror while Atreus handed the tiny cocoon to the Eye of Heaven, the Sidereal Exalt that Maylea would one day be many centuries hence.

And as Maylea’s future incarnation cupped the spider-silk ball gently in her pale hands, it began to split open.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lycean heard the sound of running feet, followed by that of the armory door slamming shut. He emerged from the room in which he'd been hiding, then crept toward that door and listened. At first, all was murmured conversation, cut off by a great many voices raised in laughter. Then, he heard the harsh sounds of shouted battle cries and screams of agony. It went on for several minutes before the last one faded away and silence fell once more.

Lycean's mouth was dry, and he tried to swallow, but it felt as if his throat were coated with sand. Had they done it? Had the soldiers destroyed the Anathema?

The sound of the door unlocking made Lycean jump. The armory door slowly swung open, and the lithe Westerner stepped into the corridor.

"Hello, Xhosa," Swan said. The young man's hair was mussed, but otherwise, he appeared unharmed and unsullied. On his forehead, a ghastly ring-and-circle mark glowed like a demonic third eye. For a moment, the Westerner's skin appeared to have taken on the color and texture of reptilian scales, but when Xhosa blinked, the illusion had faded. If it had been an illusion.

Lycean looked past Swan and into the armory. He saw the soldiers who'd lured Swan into their trap... at least what was left of them. They lay scattered and sprawled in heaps or individually, some of them still clutching broken weapons. The Dragon-Blood who had led the supposed ambush,



Toish, lay in the corner, tangled in her own fighting chain with her right ankle forced through the heavy steel ring at one end. Xhosa then looked into Swan's eyes, unable to keep from trembling in terror.

The young Exalt took a weary breath. "Playtime is over, Xhosa. Tell me where Maylea is. Tell me everything." Swan stepped forward until only a couple inches separated him from Lycean. "Now."



Yseult rode into the Obsidian Valley, the unconscious prince trailing behind her on his mount. She immediately sensed that something was wrong, but at first, she couldn't tell what. Then it hit her: the frogs were silent. Usually, they sang at night, a sound Yseult found somewhat pleasant, though she'd never admitted it to anyone. Then she saw the downed thistle-tree, with the arm of one of her warriors protruding from beneath. She rode over to the tree, dismounted and tethered her horse to one of the branches. She unsheathed her sword slowly so the blade would make no noise as it came free of the scabbard. She saw Cadhla lying under the fallen tree unconscious with her back bent at too sharp an angle. Not far away, she saw Leysa lying unconscious on the rocky ground.

Yseult knew at once that the Anathema had been here, but she could not imagine what had possessed these two to engage him on their own. Especially after last night.

She then looked toward the hidden entrance to Wolf's Lair and found it standing wide open.

He's in there, she thought. Swan... the Anathema... the monster... Faint screams echoed in her ears then, a man's screams, though she couldn't tell if they were Chambord's or Ragnor's. Perhaps a blend of both.

She felt a cold twisting in her gut, felt her heart begin to race. It suddenly became difficult to breathe, and she imagined that the walls of her throat were swelling shut, closing off her airway. She wanted nothing more in the world than to leap upon her horse, cut the foolish prince

loose and ride off to lose herself somewhere amidst the vastness of the Southern savanna. What she did *not* want to do was grip her sword more tightly and begin walking toward the entrance to Wolf's Lair. Yet, that's exactly what she did.

Perhaps she had been afraid for too long and was determined to face that fear and stare it down once and for all. Perhaps, like the moth that can't keep itself from flying too close to the flickering flame that is at once its greatest desire and ultimate bane, she could see no other choice. Or perhaps, like Ragnor and Chambord, it was her destiny to die at the hands of an Anathema, and she *had* no other choice.

She entered the lair and made her way cautiously down the main corridor. She listened for any sounds of battle, for any indication that some of her mercenaries yet survived and were even now fighting to destroy the Anathema. But she heard nothing other than the nervous pounding of her own heart.

She continued making her way though Wolf's Lair until she came to the armory. Like Xhosa, the first thing she saw was that the armory was wrecked and had been littered with bodies. She saw Toish lying unmoving off to the side, trussed in her own weapon of choice. She saw mercenaries whose name she had not yet learned. She even saw some of the untrained toughs who did the Black Wolves' dirty work in the seamy underbellies of the cities across the Southeast. They all sprawled in graceless tangles, victims of the Anathema who had come among them.

Yseult had seen battlegrounds of all types in her life, but no force in all of Creation could have propelled her into that room where one man had wrought so much havoc. One *demon*. She looked at the carnage one last time before turning and nearly bumping into Xhosa. She grabbed his neck out of terrified reflex and only just barely refrained from crushing it without thinking.

"Yseult!" Xhosa gasped. "Praise the Immaculate Dragons you've returned! The Anathema is here! He..."





The man glanced into the armory and paled. "You have to stop him!"

Yseult had never much liked Xhosa, and now, his fear disgusted her. Why wasn't he lying in there with his men? She lifted him off his feet by the throat and squeezed.

"Where is he?"

Xhosa struggled to reply, but his face was turning purple, and the only sounds that came out of his mouth were soft wet clicks. Yseult lowered him and relaxed her grip, though she did not remove her hand from the man's throat or let him down.

"Where is the Anathema?"

Xhosa answered between gasps for air. "He made me... tell him... Gratian took... princess to... forge... Swan... followed."

Yseult frowned. She wasn't certain what the man was babbling about. Gratian was nothing more than a servant who handled frogs for Xhosa. And what would Gratian be doing with a princess? Not that it mattered.

"You're telling me the Anathema is in the forge chamber."

Xhosa tried to nod. "At least, that's... where he was headed when... I last saw him."

"Thank you."

Yseult tightened her grip once more around Xhosa's throat, gave a jerk and heard the satisfying crack of the man's neck breaking. She then tossed him into the armory, where his lifeless corpse slumped to the floor. Without a backward glance or even so much as a further thought for the life she had just snuffed out, Yseult continued down the corridor in the direction of the cavern.



Swan stood in the middle of the cavern that Xhosa (or Lycean or whatever his real name was) had called the forge chamber. When he'd first entered the cavern, he'd seen no sign of either Maylea or Gratian. Swan had called her name, but the only reply he'd received were the echoes of his own

voice. He'd searched the cavern then, trying to find another way out, perhaps a hidden door such as in the Painted Frog. But though he searched diligently, he found nothing. Now, he stood near the lava well and tried to sort out the tangled skein of events that had led him here.

He understood that Xhosa... Lycean was a washed-up actor that Gratian had hired to be his front man while the frog-handler himself was actually the guiding hand behind not only the Painted Frog, but the Black Wolves themselves. Gratian had been the one who'd ordered the Iron Fang mercenaries to pose as a Wyld Hunt in order to distract Swan so he could kidnap Maylea. But as to why Gratian had abducted her—or what he intended to do with her—Lycean had no idea.

"I just *work* for Gratian," he'd said. "It's not as if the man confides in me."

Unless Lycean had been lying, and Swan didn't think so, Gratian had brought Maylea to this chamber. But if they weren't here now and there was no other way out of the cavern...

Swan decided to return to Lycean and question him further in the hope that the failed actor might know more than he'd told. But he hadn't gotten halfway to the cavern opening when a tall blonde-haired woman wearing plate armor and carrying a sword entered the chamber.

"Captain Yseult, I presume," he said. "If Lord Anbeyssa's description of you was without fault."

"My name is Yseult, yes," the woman confirmed as she continued walking toward Swan. She held her sword down at her side, but Swan knew better than to think this a sign of nonaggression.

"But I am a captain no longer. You've taken that away from me."

When she was within ten feet of Swan, she stopped coming toward him and, instead, began slowly circling him. Swan turned as she walked so that he continued facing her as she spoke.





“Now that I’m close enough to get a good look at you, I have to say that you don’t seem capable of besting an armed and armored soldier. Certainly not one like Ragnor. You look so thin, so young, so... *weak*.”

The Dragon-Blood spoke with an eerie tone that was hollow and devoid of emotion. From the reddish tint of her skin and the stylized flame design on her breastplate, Swan assumed she was a Fire-aspected Exalt. Those types was known for their intensity of feeling, but Yseult displayed no emotion whatsoever, not in her voice, her face or her body language. As a diplomat, Swan had been trained extensively in the art of reading people, but Yseult was a complete blank to him. The woman might as well have been a walking corpse for all he could discern from observing her.

Yseult continued speaking. “But then, your outward form is only a disguise, isn’t it? A mask to conceal what you truly are.”

“Despite what the priests of the Immaculate Order say, I am just a man,” Swan said. “I have been given great gifts by the Unconquered Sun, but I’m no less human for them.”

Yseult laughed, but the sound was completely without mirth. “As your kind uses appearances to deceive, so too do you use words.”

She continued to circle Swan, and he noticed that with each revolution, she was drawing slightly closer to him.

“You are Anathema. Cursed, reviled, shunned... An evil so great you are an offense to every living thing in Creation. A demon thrall whose only purpose in life is to destroy.”

Swan knew there was no use arguing with her. From birth, Dragon-Bloods were taught that the Anathema were the enemy of all that lived and that they must be hunted down wherever they might be, no matter the cost.

From the turn Yseult’s words had taken, Swan thought she was working herself up to attacking, and so, he tensed his body and prepared to fight. But then, Yseult looked away from him and toward the well, as if noticing it for the first time. When her revolution carried her to the

edge of the well, she stopped and stared at the lava, her expression unreadable.

She ran her free hand over the stone edge of the well. "Fire inside, earth outside. Ragnor was an Earth Aspect. Chambord, too. Fire Aspects are often drawn to Earth, as Earth are to Fire. Earth Aspects are more restrained with their emotions, more—" a ghost of a smile played about her lips "—grounded. They balance us well. Chambord died long ago, and now, Ragnor is gone, too."

Swan didn't know who Chambord was, but he guessed Ragnor was the Earth-aspected mercenary he'd defeated in the royal courtyard last night. He remembered that just before the man had died, he'd wanted Swan to pass on a message to Yseult. And now, here she was.

"For what small comfort this might be worth," Swan said, "Ragnor's last thoughts were of you."

Yseult didn't turn away from the well and the glowing red lava that bubbled within. "How do you know? What did he say?"

Swan paused, then said, "Just one word. Your name."

Yseult didn't respond right away, but at last she said, "I see." She turned around and added, "Thank you."

A tiny smile blinked across her impassive face then and vanished as if it had never been there. When it was gone, Yseult let out a cry more bestial than human and came running toward Swan, sword held high.

Swan waited until Yseult was within striking distance, then he leaped high into the air and delivered a spinning kick to the side of her head, barely dodging her sword slash at the same time. Yseult grunted in pain and staggered sideways, but though Swan had struck her with enough force to tear the head off a normal human, she didn't go down.

Yseult lowered her head and rushed at Swan. Before the young Exalt could move out of the way, Yseult's shoulder slammed into his midsection and the air was forced out of Swan's lungs in a single gust. Yseult's momentum knocked Swan backward, and the two Exalts tumbled to the ground. Yseult pinned Swan to the ground, then straddled his chest.





They wrestled for control of her sword, but Swan dislodged it with a sharp strike to the inside of her wrist. They both bobbled it, and it skittered away from them across the floor. Yseult clamped her fingers around Swan's neck instead and began to choke the life out of him.

"Die, monster!" Yseult shouted. "You may have killed Chambord and Ragnor, but you'll never kill me! *Never!*"

Yseult screamed this last word, and Swan saw pure unreasoning terror in her eyes. He understood then that she was one of those hunters who stalked the prey they feared the most, hoping that when they at last made a kill, their fear would die along with their quarry.

Swan knew he only had a few moments before Yseult claimed his life. He glanced toward her sword, but the weapon was out of his reach.

He did his best to ignore Yseult's fingers around his throat, tried to forget about his desperate need for air. He lifted his legs, pressed a foot to either side of Yseult's neck, and then brought his legs down fast and hard, Yseult's hands were torn away from his throat as she was hurled off Swan. She flew through the air, hit the ground and slid to a halt twenty feet away.

Swan rose to his feet, massaging his sore neck as he gasped for air. Though Yseult lay still, stunned, Swan knew she wasn't dead. Dragon-Bloods weren't that easy to kill. He knew that when Yseult recovered, she would come at him again... and again and again, until one or both of them lay dead. He glanced at her sword lying on the ground not far from where she'd landed. Swan was no cold-blooded killer, but he knew he had no choice if he hoped to get out of this cavern alive and continue his search for Maylea.

He started walking toward the downed Dragon-Blood's sword, willing Yseult to stay down. He intended to make her end as quick and painless as possible. Despite how much Yseult hated him and his kind—or perhaps because of it—he pitied her. When he reached her, he stooped to take hold of the sword's hilt with both hands.

Yseult suddenly raced toward him and swept his legs out from under him. He cartwheeled in midair and landed on his feet, but as he landed, the Dragon-Blood dove for her blade. Swan kicked the sword before she could get hold of it, and the weapon spun away again.

"You're fast, Anathema, I'll give you that much. But I don't need a sword to kill you."

Yseult's skin turned a deeper red, and the air around her began to ripple from the heat pouring off her body. Fire erupted from Yseult as she became wreathed in a living flame that flickered and danced but did not burn her. But Swan had no doubt that it would burn him should she manage to get hold of him.

He shot a quick glance over his shoulder, then turned back to the flaming apparition Yseult had become. He began to back up slowly, one step at a time.

Yseult kept pace with Swan, advancing as he retreated. "Who knows fear now, monster?"

Yseult picked up her pace and began to close the distance between them. Swan could feel the heat radiating from her, so intense that it was as if he stood in front of an open blast furnace.

But the young Exalt was ready for her. As she grabbed for him, he tore off his cloak and flung it over her. The cloth instantly burst into flame, but Swan didn't intend for the cloak to douse Yseult's fire—he wanted it to obscure her vision as she ran toward the stone well and the lava pool it contained. Swan stepped aside as she came, planted his foot against her flaming back, and shoved. The mercenary stumbled, arms flailing wildly, and she fell over the edge of the well into the burning depths.

Swan steeled himself for Yseult's screams as the molten lava devoured her flesh, but no sound came from within, save popping and hissing as the orange-red surface settled. Had the lava killed her instantly? Or had—

Molten liquid shot upward from the pool, and Swan stumbled backward as a figure surrounded by blazing flame leaped onto the edge of the well. Yseult grinned





wildly at him as lava dripped from her body onto the floor, the thick globs hissing and smoking as they began to dissolve the stone.

“A clever move, Anathema.” As Yseult spoke, flames flickered forth from her mouth, as if she were an actual dragon garbed in human form. “But as long as I enjoy the embrace of my mystic flame, no other fire—not even earthblood—can harm me.”

Then, with a hand coated in flame, Yseult reached over to her other arm and scooped a handful of dripping lava off of herself.

“Catch!” Laughing, she hurled the glob at Swan.

The young Exalt easily dodged the flying lava, but then, Yseult threw another glob at him, then another. He avoided these as well, but Yseult—still blazing with flame—crouched on the edge of the well and reached into the pool for more ammunition. With both of her hands, she flung a large molten mass at Swan, the lava spreading out and breaking apart into a dozen separate globs as it came at him.

Swan knew that he couldn't hope to dodge this time, so he bent down, gathered his strength, and leaped straight up. An instant later lava splattered the floor where he'd been standing, the stone sizzling as it was eaten away. Swan soared straight up toward the cavern's ceiling and grabbed hold of a pair of stalactites and held on tight, legs dangling beneath him.

Still laughing, Yseult hopped down from the well. Her flames lit up the forge chamber, revealing her sword lying halfway between the well and the cavern entrance. She leaped toward her weapon, flames trailing behind her as if she were some manner of earthbound comet. She landed, snatched up her sword, then launched herself at Swan. As she came streaking toward him, Swan released his grip on one of the stalactites and swung out to grab hold of another. He then began swinging from one stalactite to the another, speeding away from Yseult.

The Dragon-Blooded mercenary reached one of the stalactites Swan had abandoned, grabbed hold with one

hand and held on. She was laughing constantly now, the sound toneless and mechanical, and Swan knew her mind had snapped. He continued swinging hand over hand away from her as he frantically tried to think of a way to stop her. But before he could come up with anything, Yseult threw her sword at him. The blade spun through the air and struck the stalactite he was reaching for just as his hand closed around it. He'd already released his grip on the previous stalactite, but before he could reach for the next, the stalactite he had hold of broke off and he plunged toward the cavern floor.



Swan let go of the broken stalactite as he fell and spun around so he would land on his feet. But it had all happened so fast, and the flickering light from both the lava pool and Yseult's flames made it difficult to judge distance, and he came down off balance. His left ankle twisted beneath him, and he grimaced in pain as he slipped and fell hard onto his side. The stalactite crashed to the ground several feet away and broke into two large chunks.

Swan lay on the cavern floor for a second, stunned. He didn't think anything was broken, but he'd had the wind knocked out of him. He looked up and saw a streak of flame descending toward the ground. For a horrible instant, he thought Yseult intended to land on him, but she came down a dozen feet away then started walking toward him, fire blazing around her as if all her fear, fury and madness had been given physical form.

"Have you ever smelled someone being burned alive?" Yseult asked calmly, as if she were merely making conversation to pass the time. "The rank odor of burning hair, the rich stink of bubbling fat..." She sighed as if recalling pleasant memories. "There's really nothing quite like it."

Yseult grinned with flame-flecked teeth as she reached for Swan, hands wreathed in fire.





CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Maylea watched as the silk cocoon slowly opened in the Eye of Heaven's hand. A tiny silver leg poked out tentatively, as if the creature inside were uncertain whether or not to emerge.

"Pay close attention now," Gratian whispered in her ear. "The plan my future self and I will have concocted is quite ingenious."

The tiny silver leg was joined by another and then a third.

"The Eye of Heaven—whom you have so cleverly intuited is a future incarnation of yourself—hatched a scheme to eradicate my Empire of Blood by altering the past so it would never come into being. This plan will not have not meet with widespread support among the other Sidereals, but one of the last remaining Solar Exalts will have thrown in with you regardless."

A fourth leg appeared, then more until all eight were visible. Then, the silver spider legs gripped the edges of the opening in the cocoon and began to widen it.

"Through a combination of past-life memories and diligent research, they will have traced the beginnings of the Empire of Blood to me, the present-day Gratian. They will have decided that if they could somehow reach the Tapestry of Creation and remove the thread that represents my current self, history from now onward would be changed. Outside this building in that moment, that is. Should they



be successful, the Empire of Blood would have not only ceased to exist, but it never will have come into being in the first place. It's complicated."

A silver spider no larger than a walnut crawled forth from the cocoon and onto the Eye of Heaven's hand. She held the tiny creature up to her eyes to examine it more closely. The cocoon, its purpose complete, evaporated like so much morning mist burned away by the rising sun.

"They will have contacted a powerful sorcerer who could create an imitation pattern spider for them, one that could locate my precise thread and snip it from the Tapestry. Then, all they will have had to do is reach the Loom of Fate and allow the spider to do its work. Unfortunately, neither of them will have realized that this sorcerer will, in fact, have been my future self in disguise. And that the metallic spider he will have created for them will have been designed to fulfill a quite different function than the one they will have had in mind."

The spider planted its legs securely onto the Eye of Heaven's palm, then it squatted and bit her. The woman's eyes widened in shock, but she did not drop the spider. The bite immediately began to blacken and swell, and the spider itself began to change shape. Its legs retracted into its thorax, and it lengthened, grew thin, flat and shiny, its abdomen becoming a handle, its head and chelicerae merging into a sharp tip. When the transformation was finished, the silver spider had become a silver dagger. The blackness radiating from the spider's bite spread all over the Eye of Heaven's body and evaporated in an instant, as if a shadow had just passed over her. Then, as if of their own volition, her fingers curled around the dagger's hilt. All expression vanished from the Eye of Heaven's face, and her eyes took on a dispassionate glaze much like the one in Maylea's eyes as she watched.

"My future self will have learned a great deal about alchemy in the intervening centuries. Once I go outside and begin to study it, that is. The venom that spider just injected

her with is a derivative of frog toxin—though one with its own special properties.”

The Eye of Heaven looked at Atreus without a hint of recognition or emotion. Maylea understood the nature of the trap then. The spider's venom had turned the Eye of Heaven into a killer, then turned itself into a dagger so she'd have a weapon in hand when the urge to slay struck her.

“The effect doesn't last long,” Gratian said. “But it is long enough for her to kill Atreus. And afterward, once her mind clears and she realizes what she's done, she'll take her own life out of grief. And then I—and the future I will have been working to create—will be safe.”

The Eye of Heaven took a step toward Atreus. The monk looked confused, but he made no move to defend himself.

“This is what I wanted you to see, Maylea,” Gratian said. “This is why I brought you here.”

Maylea glanced up and saw Gratian's future self, hands on the balcony railing, leaning forward in eager anticipation.

“You don't have the training to recognize it, of course,” Gratian said, “but what you're seeing is the weaving of your destiny. You won't be able to stop me when you come around again as the Eye of Heaven. You most certainly can't stop me now. So, what I'm offering you is the choice to stand beside me across the course of time and help me. It's the only choice you have, Maylea. You are about to see the outcome should you choose otherwise.”

Anger surged through Maylea, breaking up her dispassionate observation. All of her life she'd been led to believe that the stars determined everything important about a person's life, that the future was set and no one had any choice about it. But they were wrong—they *had* to be! Choice *must* be possible, else what was the point of being?

And then it happened. At that precise moment stars danced in Maylea's eyes—and she made her choice.

“Atreus!” Maylea shouted. “She's under a spell! Defend yourself!”





The monk glanced in shock across the Tapestry of Creation at Maylea, and a smile of what Maylea thought might be recognition crossed his face. But in the instant that he was distracted, the Eye of Heaven struck.

She thrust the dagger toward the monk's chest. She attacked too swiftly for him to avoid the blow, but he managed to bring his arm up in time to deflect the strike. The knife bit into his forearm and released a gout of blood, but both Atreus and the Eye of Heaven ignored the wound. The Eye of Heaven attempted another strike, but this time Atreus caught her wrist. They stood thus for several seconds, the Eye of Heaven struggling to plunge the dagger into the monk, and the monk fighting to keep her from doing so. Teeth gritted, arms and legs trembling from the strain... and then, the blank mask over the Eye of Heaven's fine alabaster features began to dissipate. A moment later, her expression returned to normal, and she stared with horror at the dagger in her hand. She dropped it to the walkway and threw herself into Atreus's arms. The monk embraced her, ignoring his bleeding arm, and they held each other there, high above the Tapestry of Creation.

Maylea looked up to the balcony where the future Gratian stood. The man looked back at her with absolute and utter hatred, mixed with no small measure of horrified shock.

"You ignorant child!" the Gratian beside her shouted. He was glaring at her with an expression of hatred that mirrored the one she'd just witnessed on his future self. Only where the other showed fear, this one looked ready to commit murder.

"You haven't ruined my plans, you know," he said, though a nebula of uncertainty bloomed deep in his eyes. "Your future self and her lover still live, but they have no hope of changing our present outside those doors. They couldn't possibly have. This must all be some elaborate game my other self designed to eliminate them." He took a step toward her. "Nothing can stop my future. Nothing!"

Maylea glanced upward and saw Atreus step closer to the railing of the walkway to look down at her. He drew the Eye of Heaven toward him to point Maylea out, and when the alabaster woman joined him, her foot brushed the silver dagger and knocked it over the edge. Whether the Eye of Heaven did it on purpose was something Maylea would never know. For now, she could only watch the blade tumble down toward the Tapestry that was Creation itself.



The pattern spiders that covered the Tapestry had already converged on the spot where the dagger would land, and one of them reached out and snagged it by the hilt just before the blade could pierce the Tapestry's surface. At first, it seemed as if the dagger had done no damage to the Tapestry—that the spider had caught it in time—but as Maylea looked more closely, she saw with preternatural clarity that a singled thread had been cut and a loose end stuck up from the surface of the weave. The thread that intersected with it at that point had been nicked as well, though it had not snapped.

As the first pattern spider moved away to dispose of the dagger, four more scurried toward the loose thread, silvery legs moving them across the weave with liquid grace. The four spiders reached the thread and gathered around it. But instead of immediately beginning their repair, they seemed to examine the thread for a moment. And then, all four of the metallic creatures turned to look at Maylea.

Not at her, she realized. At Gratian.

"No..." Gratian's face was ashen, his eyes wide now with the horror that she had seen in the eyes of his future self.

One of the spiders leaned forward and gripped the loose thread with its chelicerae and tugged. The thread came free, and Gratian gasped. The other three spiders scuttled forward, and each of them took hold of a section of the thread and began tearing it into pieces... pieces that they quickly devoured.

Gratian—both of him—shrieked, their voices mingling into a single echoing cry that seemed to cut through existence itself. Crisscrossing lines of nothingness appeared



on the bodies of both men, spaces where they simply *weren't* any longer. It was as if they were being hacked by invisible swords that, instead of cutting, removed a part of their being and unmade it. The slashes of void continued, increasing in number and speed until there was little left of either Gratian. The future version was the first to entirely disappear, and she looked at *her* Gratian, the one she thought of as the present version. Only one of his eyes was left, and it looked at her with sadness, regret, anger and a hint of respect.

And then it, and the rest of him, was gone, and Maylea had to struggle to remember exactly what he had looked like.

Maylea turned to look at the Tapestry and saw that the spiders had finished destroying the thread they'd removed. Just as Maylea began to wonder how she would return home without Gratian's help, she saw the spiders turn then to the other strand that the dagger's fall had damaged. One of the spiders plucked at it, as if to test its remaining tensile strength, and Maylea's entire body vibrated from somewhere deep within. The spiders looked up at her then, just as they had looked at Gratian.

Maylea's eyes widened in dawning terror, but the sensation lasted only a moment. One of the spiders gave the strand a hard tug, pulling up a loop of it, and dizziness washed over her. She felt a pull, as if she were underwater and suddenly caught in the grip of a strong undertow, and the Loom of Fate seemed to spin around her. And then—

—she was standing once more in the forge chamber within Wolf's Lair.

Things were not the same as they had been when she had left.



Swan rolled out of Yseult's reach, came up on his feet and leaped over her head. He landed next to the broken pieces of stalactite, knelt and snatched up a club-sized chunk of stone. He then jumped toward Yseult and swung his makeshift weapon toward her head. She tried to duck, but

she was too slow. The stone club struck her a solid blow, and the impact sent her flying. She landed twenty feet away, lay there for a second and then rose unsteadily to her feet. Her flame guttered but did not die.

This was it—the opening Swan needed. If he could rush forward, grab hold of Yseult before she could reignite her flame, he might be able to throw her into the lava pool. And without her aura of fire to protect her, she would be destroyed. Hopefully...

But before Swan could begin his attack, a sudden wave of vertigo passed through him. For a moment, it felt as though the world had listed to the side, paused, then slowly righted itself. When the sensation passed, he saw that he and Yseult were no longer alone in the cavern.

Maylea stood between them.


Swan felt a number of emotions upon seeing her. Relief, joy, confusion—where had she come from?—but most of all, he felt fear. Fear of what Yseult would do to her if the Dragon-Blood reached Maylea before he could.

Swan's fear quickly became reality: Yseult ran toward Maylea, eyes wild with madness, flames once more beginning to erupt across her body.

Swan didn't hesitate. He leaped into the air, soared over Maylea, and landed in front of Yseult. As the mercenary reached him, Swan grabbed her by the wrist—ignoring the searing pain as his hand burned—and he yanked the Dragon-Blood off her feet. He spun her around, once, twice, and then hurled her straight up at the ceiling.

Yseult's arms and legs flailed as she flew through the air, as if she hoped to grab hold of something to slow her ascent. She found something, all right—a very large, very sharp stalactite. It broke through her armor, penetrated her back, then burst through her chest in a spray of blood. Yseult's flame extinguished, and she hung impaled like that for a long moment, arms and legs twitching, mouth opening and closing, though no sound issued forth, dark blood pouring out of her wound and falling like grisly rain. But then slowly,



 inch by inch, she began to slide down the stalactite until she slipped off and fell toward the cavern floor.

When she had fallen halfway to the floor, Swan jumped into the air and kicked the mercenary in the side. The woman spun through the air and landed in the well with a large splash of lava. She screamed as she sank beneath the molten surface, but she didn't scream for long.

Swan landed and stared at the lava pool for several moments, waiting to see if Yseult had, beyond all odds, somehow survived. But the surface of the lava remained still and undisturbed, and he knew that Yseult was gone at last.

He turned and hurried to Maylea. She appeared unharmed, but there was something different in her eyes, something that he couldn't put his finger on. Had they always been so blue?

"I'm not sure," Swan said, "but... did I just rescue you?"
Maylea only smiled in reply.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

"It's most tranquil here," Swan said.

Maylea nodded. "The solarium has always been my favorite place in the house." She looked up through the open glass panels at the sun above. "Now, more than ever."

They sat on a divan, surrounded by beautiful potted plants and listening to the clacking of bamboo wind chimes. A small bird settled on the back of the divan, trilled a quick little tune, then took to the air once more.

"Is that the songbird you used to keep in your room?" Swan asked.

Maylea smiled. "It is. I thought he might be happier in here. And since the glass panels are often opened to let in a breeze, he can choose to leave whenever he wishes. So far, he has stayed."

"What about you?" Swan asked softly. "Are you going to stay?"

Maylea didn't respond for several moments, and when she did speak, it was to change the subject. "A messenger arrived today with a letter from Father. He says that the negotiations with the Tri-Khan's representatives are going well and that, with any luck, he'll be able to return home in a few weeks. He also says that Declan has been invaluable during the negotiations. From what I gather, it sounds as if the two of them are getting along quite famously."

"That's good to hear." Swan had wanted to accompany Anbeyssa to Chiaroscuro, but his old friend had insisted he



remain in Yane to give the injuries he'd suffered from battling Yseult time to heal. Anbeyssa and Declan had departed several days ago, but this was the first real opportunity Swan had had to talk to Maylea. She'd kept to herself until now, staying in her room. Swan knew that something had happened in Wolf's Lair to change her. At first, he'd thought that she'd been chosen by the Unconquered Sun, as he'd suspected she might, but she seemed so withdrawn now. She was preoccupied, as if—while she looked at him as he spoke, listened, replied—her mind was elsewhere.

Maylea reached over and took Swan's left hand. She turned it palm up and examined the smooth, pink skin. "Your burns have healed nicely," she said.

"Yes. Another gift from the Unconquered Sun."

A small smile graced her lips. "One of many."

Swan couldn't take it anymore; he decided to finally give voice to the questions running through his mind. "Maylea, what happened in Wolf's Lair? Why did Gratian abduct you? Where did he take you? How did you get back?"

Maylea replied without hesitation, but her answers came almost too smoothly, as if she'd worked them out beforehand. "Gratian drugged me, so my memories are somewhat hazy and jumbled. I believe he intended to hold me captive so that my father wouldn't let the Council of Elders interfere with the Black Wolves' operation. As to where he took me or how I returned..." Maylea shrugged apologetically. "I have no answers. Perhaps my memories will return in time."

Swan looked into Maylea's eyes in an attempt to gauge her sincerity, but they were mirrors instead of windows, and he saw nothing. "I hope you will forgive me for saying this, but I have the feeling you aren't being completely... *forthcoming* with me."

She sighed, and for a moment, she once again looked like the young woman Swan had known only a few days ago. "I can tell you no more, Swan, save that Gratian is gone, his plans—" a small smile "—all unraveled, and that you played no small part in stopping him."

Swan considered this for a time before finally nodding. “Very well. And as for the rest, I suppose I shall have to content myself with living with a few mysteries.”

They were silent for a few moments after that, and then, Maylea said, “I keep thinking about Yseult. It must be terrible to live with such fear eating away at your soul. I hope she finds some measure of peace in her next incarnation. Oddly enough, I also regret Ravenwing’s death, even though the man tried to kill me. At least there was no malice in what he did. He viewed killing as merely his profession. I’m glad my father’s men could find enough of his remains to bury. I’m also glad he decided to honor their deal.”

Swan shook his head. “I still can’t believe your father bought an entire island and named it after that assassin.”

“What’s wrong with Ravenwing Isle?” Maylea asked. “But I do admit that Father has always been something of a sentimentalist.”

Swan agreed, though his old friend had his practical, ruthless side as well, as every member of the royal family did. Anbeyssa had convinced the Council of Elders to ferret out the Black Wolves and eliminate them from Yane. Swan had also convinced him to send a company of soldiers and volunteer city guards to Wolf’s Lair to round up every criminal and mercenary before any of them had a chance to recover from the beating Swan had given them and get away. At Maylea’s suggestion, Anbeyssa had even organized a smaller party to travel to destroy every narcotic-producing frog they could find in the Obsidian Valley. With Swan’s blessing, Anbeyssa had claimed most of the credit for the venture and its outcome—sharing a little with Declan in honor of the parts the prince and Shadi had played. He had also been kind enough to leave Swan’s name entirely out of it. In fact, the fight in the royal courtyard had been recast in a new mold. It was now being publicly attributed to well choreographed stage fighting and arcane illusions wielded by a sorcerer among the Iron Fang to cast aspersions on Anbeyssa, and the chief evidence presented to support it was the fact that no bystanders had been hurt in all the supposed





fuss. If any of those bystanders chose not to believe that story, none of them had made an issue of disputing it.

“Your father’s reputation, it seems, is safe again and stronger than ever,” Swan said. “One less thing to worry about. But what about you, Maylea? What of your visions? Do you still believe that we were... intimate in another life?”

Maylea looked at Swan and smiled. “Perhaps. Time isn’t quite like most people imagine it to be. It’s not a river that flows only in one direction. It’s more like a thousand rivers, all occupying the same space. And all of these rivers are only possibilities that may or may not ever be realized. Because of this, the best thing we can do is concentrate on the life we are living at this moment. Which is what I intend to do from now on.”

“It almost sounds as if you are preparing to say farewell,” Swan said.

Maylea smiled sadly. “I suppose I am. We both have our destinies to pursue in this life. There are many great deeds for you to perform, Swan, and Creation will be much poorer if you turn away from them. And I also have work to do.”

“From what you say, it sounds as if neither of us has a choice.”

“Of course we do. Remember what you told me? That while there are some circumstances in our lives that cannot be changed, we can choose how we respond to those circumstances? You were absolutely right.”

The songbird flew by again, and Maylea gestured to it as it passed. “He was born to be a pet, and he spent most of his life in a cage, but still, he chose to sing. Now, he’s free to come and go as he pleases.”

“So what will you do? Marry Declan?”

Maylea shook her head. “As much as I do not wish to hurt him, that isn’t where my destiny lies. I will be leaving Yane soon to journey to a place where I can learn about the new path that lies before me, so that I might travel it more effectively.”

“And this place is...?”

Maylea just smiled.

Finally, Swan smiled back. "So, that's it, then?"
"Yes. For this lifetime, at least."



That afternoon Swan rode away from Yane on horseback, hot dry Southern air in his face, sun at his back. He disliked leaving without saying goodbye to Anbeyssa—and even Declan—but there was no reason for him to stay in Yane any longer.

The question that lay before him now was, what next?

He found himself wondering what Arianna was up to. The reasons they'd parted company had seemed to make sense at the time, but they seemed foolish now. She'd decided to continue alone to Nexus when he'd left her. Perhaps he should look for her there.

Swan gave the reins a shake, and his mount picked up speed as it carried the young Exalt toward his chosen destiny.







Enjoy the following preview of the next Exalted novel—tentatively titled **The Carnelian Flame**—by Aaron Rosenberg. It's available in November.

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“Daggers, to me!” Rangol shouted, wheeling his horse in a circle. The other mercenaries made their way toward him and Lirat, Milch and Dyson leading their horses. Scamp’s had bolted, Gren had sent his own out of the fray, and Enjy’s had been captured by a bold farm boy with a nasty-looking sickle clutched in one hand.

“You’ll regret this, but not for long!” Milch shouted as he swung onto his own horse and turned it toward where Hud was covering their retreat. The others formed up around him, Scamp and Enjy jogging in their midst. Gren was on the outer edge, just behind Rangol, and was just pushing a peasant out of the way—

—when, to his immediate right, he saw an older woman just cowering in the street, hands over her head to avoid getting hit. Thin white hair flowed from under her cap, and her face was lined and tanned from years outdoors. She had her eyes shut tight, and tears were leaking out—

—and then she was on the ground, moaning, as one of Hud’s arrows sank into her side.

Gren didn’t even stop to think. He swerved away from the other mercenaries and dropped to the woman’s side. The arrow wasn’t in too deep, but it was solidly imbedded. If Hud knew anything, it was how to shoot a bow. A little blood was leaking out around the shaft, red but not too bright or too dark, which was good—nothing major had been pierced. The woman had fainted, and that was also good. She wouldn’t fight him. Gren grasped the shaft with both hands, took a deep breath, and pulled hard and fast, twisting it as he did so. The arrow came free, leaving a much wider wound and a steady flow of blood, but it didn’t spurt. Another good sign. Gren grabbed the woman’s cap from her head, wadded it up, and shoved it into the wound. That would staunch it for now, until someone could—

He had forgotten about the battle, and he didn’t hear the furious peasants swarming up behind him. He only registered shouting, then a sudden pain in the back of his head before his vision went dark.



The sun beat down on Gren as he slid in and out of consciousness. At one point his head had sagged down so far that it had brushed the water, and he had a mild sting as the moisture dampened matted hair and blood. Ungrateful peasants... Hadn't anyone seen what he'd done? He'd saved that old woman's life! Or had she died anyway?

The heat was intense, and Gren could feel the sweat springing up all over his body. They had stripped him to his breeches, of course—no sense wasting a good suit of armor, and boiled man would be tough to clean out. He hoped whoever got his sword would take good care of it. Insects swarmed over him, sampling his exposed flesh, and already he was covered in bites that had begun to itch mercilessly. Not that it would matter soon.

He'd opened his eyes a few times, but the sun stabbed into them, blinding him. His breath was coming in short gasps, and his lips already felt like they'd been cured into hard leather. He'd tried struggling against the ropes, but they were thick and strong, and the knots were solid. His limbs had been pulled taut enough that he couldn't get any leverage anyway. For peasant farmers, these people knew how to leave a man helpless.

As the sun rose and the heat grew more intense, Gren lost consciousness more often. His vision, when he did force his eyes open, was blurry, and random bursts of color swam before him. He was having more trouble breathing, and he could feel his heartbeat faltering. It wasn't unpleasant, though—like having a thick, warm blanket wrapped around you. His whole body tingled, and he didn't even notice the aching anymore.

And then he started to have dreams.

First it was his father, laughing and cursing as he kicked Gren out of the house. "Worthless sod, go sponge off someone else!" he shouted, his boot sending Gren sprawling in the dirt. "You'll never amount to nothing but trouble! You're nothing to me! Come by here again and I'll cut you down like a beast and toss your entrails to the dogs!" That was less a dream than a memory, exactly as it had happened



all those years ago, but it was so vivid, so real, that Gren could almost feel the tears in his eyes.

Then he saw Grendar, the mercenary who had taken him in and taught him how to survive and how to fight. “Pathetic little thing, ain’t ya?” The grizzled fighter leered, glancing him up and down with his one good eye. “I’ll toughen ya up—or you’ll die tryin’!” He owed Grendar a lot, and had even taken the veteran’s name to replace the one his father had stripped from him, but that hadn’t stopped him from hating the man for his cruelty, his taunts, or his constant beatings. Yes, Gren had gotten tough, because it had been the only way to survive.

After that were images from fights he’d been in, jobs he’d taken, stints in different groups. Each one felt as real as it had then, and each time the image changed, Gren was surprised to realize he wasn’t covered in blood after all, and that his sword wasn’t clutched in his hand.

Then he saw Rangol interviewing him for the Scarlet Daggers. “Quiet one, eh?” Rangol said, sitting across from him at the table in the back of that seedy little tavern. “That’s fine—you don’t have to talk much. I hear you’re good with that blade of yours, and you do what you’re told. That’s what we want. We’re not the nicest group, the Scarlet Daggers—some call us the Bloody Knives, and with good reason—but we get the job done, and we keep getting work. Stick with us and you won’t go hungry.” And he tossed a dagger, its blade dipped in crimson, onto the table. The heavy pommel smashed into Gren’s tankard, and he slapped it aside to avoid the ale splashing across his chest. After a second, he picked up the dagger and slipped it into his belt, then reached across the table to shake Rangol’s hand.

And then, after reliving a few of the Daggers’ jobs, the image had shifted again. Only this time it wasn’t anyone Gren knew. Or anyone at all, really.

Instead, he felt the light beating down upon his face, and upon his closed eyelids, take shape somehow. Almost like mist turning to rain, solidifying and gaining a discrete form. A voice washed over him in waves, less a sound than the pounding of the heat against his skin.

"Open your eyes, Grendis Lam." Gren forced his eyes open, squinting against the light. The sun was directly overhead, and it felt as if one beam had narrowed to a spear and was jabbing into his skull. "You have been chosen."

"Wha-what? Chosen for what?" His lips were still cracked, and his tongue so swollen Gren wasn't sure he'd really spoken. But the dream heard him clearly.

"Chosen to resume your rightful place in the world," it replied. And, at that proclamation, something deep inside Gren rejoiced—something he'd never known was there until now.

But I have no place, he screamed in his head. I'm the son of a woodsman, and even he disowned me! I have nothing, no name, no family, just my arm and my sword and my scars.

"No, Grendis Lam," the voice corrected, and Gren didn't even wonder how it had heard his thoughts. This was a dream, after all. "Your beginnings are lowly in this time and place, but that is not who you truly are. Your lineage stretches to an earlier Age. You were great once, and you shall be again."

That deep, hidden something in his chest swelled again, and Gren felt the urge to laugh, to shout with joy, to weep with gratitude. But why?

"You were rabble, Grendis Lam." The voice was disapproving, its waves striking his chest like blows. "You lived upon the pain of others, and did nothing in return." Then they softened. "But that was your youth. You learned discipline, and martial skill." And now the waves almost seemed to caress him. "And then you learned scruples."

Again Gren had images appear in his mind, scenes of various jobs with the Scarlet Daggers. Times when he had pulled back from killing someone who didn't deserve it. Times when he'd suggested less violent methods of getting the job done. Times when he'd stood up to Enjy and Lirat and even Scamp, keeping them from getting carried away.

"Yes." The voice approved of the visions, and his choices, and somehow that made him happy. "You have proven yourself worthy to be reawakened," it continued. "I restore you to your former potency, you who are now





Grendis Lam.” The voice swelled, its waves stronger but still gentle. “I cast my mark upon you for all to see, so that the world may know you for mine.” And the spear of light shifted upward, to his forehead. And stabbed him, carving deep into flesh and bone.

The pain was intense, severe, blinding—if his body had still retained any moisture, Gren would have wept. As it was, he screamed then sagged back against his bonds.

“Now go forth, Grendis Lam. Serve my will, and your own. You are needed here, to right a great wrong and prevent a great evil. Go forth, and know that my blessing is upon you.”

And then the voice was gone. And Gren gratefully let the darkness claim him once more.

He was speaking—no, that wasn’t quite right. “Speaking” wasn’t forceful enough to match his passion. He was *preaching*.

Yes. He was preaching to the multitudes. His hands were upraised, calling down the blessing of the Sun upon them all. And the crowd stood rapt, his words spilling across them like sunlight itself, brightening their hearts and uplifting their souls.

When his words were done, his speech at its end, he lowered his hands again, gripping both sides of the simple podium before him. Long, tapered fingers curled around the smooth wood—

Wait, what? Gren tried to stare at his own hands, but couldn’t move his head. It was like watching through someone else’s eyes, powerless. And that’s where he had to be, behind someone else’s eyes, because his own fingers were anything but long and tapered. Short, thick, powerful fingers, good for grasping a blade or prying open a stubborn door or, folded into a large fist, pounding sense into a stubborn foe, but not these graceful digits he saw now. This was someone else.

Now he was turning to speak to the men and women gathered behind him on the dais, his assistants and acolytes. He towered over most of them—and that felt normal, since Gren himself was tall—but something about their posture and his, and the shadow that he cast against them, told him that he was slender, almost skinny. And that wasn’t Gren, whose torso was as solid and strong as his fingers. He also caught a

glimpse, as he turned to talk to one of his senior disciples over his shoulder, of long, ash-blond hair, nothing like Gren's own battle-short crop of prematurely graying black.

Who was this man? And why, if he was so different, did it feel so normal to be within his skin?

He walked back from the outdoor amphitheater with his students, listening to each one's opinion of the sermon and thoughts about its meanings and its purpose. Occasionally he answered a question or redirected a comment, and Gren was amazed at the wisdom of this man he had become. With a few well-placed words he encouraged his disciples to focus on the true meaning of each sentence and thought, praised them for their insight, admonished them for their oversights, and urged them to look deeper and to follow his examples. This man was more than a mere preacher, he was a true priest, a link between the divine and the mundane. He was a man touched by the Unconquered Sun, greatest of the gods, and Gren felt both pride and fear at the notion that he was somehow linked to such a person, even if only in a fever-dream.

Then he was alone, the others having left him at the door to a small chamber. The walls within were simple paneled wood, plain but handsome. The floor was smooth granite. And the ceiling, the ceiling was an open square, and the light of the sun poured down, filling the room to capacity with its brilliance. The sun was almost directly overhead, and Gren felt himself sinking to his knees, face upturned, eyes open and staring straight at the sun itself, its light lancing through into his brain.

And the voice spoke to him, praising him, approving his sermon, and reassuring him that he was one of its favorite servants.

Then it gave him the knowledge he would need to finally weld his followers into a loyal congregation, the information searing into him through the mark burned into his forehead.

And Gren woke with a start, sitting bolt upright, his forehead feeling as if it were on fire. He was wholly himself again—memories of the other fading—but what had he become?







About the Author

Tim Waggoner wrote his first story at the age of five, when he created a comic book version of *King Kong vs. Godzilla* on a stenographer's pad. It took him a few more years until he began selling professionally.

Overall, he's published more than seventy stories of fantasy and horror, as well as hundreds of nonfiction articles. He is also the author of the novels *Dying for It* and *Harmony Society*, and the short fiction collection of *All too Surreal*.

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