

THE FIRST CHRONICLE
OF THE
GUARDIANS OF THE WORD

CHOSEN

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Prologue

Gradyn Vall paced in the outer room of the royal bedchambers, a room not trimmed in yellow gold like much of the rest of the Palace, but set in softer tones of cream and light blue. The other men in the room glanced at him. A few eyebrows arched upward. Of course they didn't say anything to him directly. He was the High Bishop of Cobalt. His obvious nervousness wasn't the usual persona; the calm, unruffled-by-anything exterior that he displayed in public. His stomach was in knots.

The prophecy recounted in his head and he asked for the third time since his tenure as High Bishop began, if this birth would be the one.

"It's the fourth time you asked, and I already told you it would," said the spirit Gradyn always carried.

"You told me that thirty-two years ago, too, but you were wrong."

"She's having twins."

"And they were twins then," Gradyn said, being careful to think rather than speak out loud. There was a time or two since he inherited the ghost where he'd forgotten. Being host to someone deceased for nearly a full Age had its own special difficulties.

Gradyn forced himself to stop moving, halting near a window he could look out. He watched the snow beat against the glass pane, where it stuck briefly before melting into a drop of water. A dam of ice accumulated at the base of the window, defeating the heating elements embedded in the glass. Lightning brightened the night, striking the King's Tower, followed by the sharp crack of thunder. The howling wind was almost as loud.

It was expected, Gradyn supposed, for the coming of the scions of Alurn Telaerin.

"Does he know?"

Gradyn frowned briefly. "Ambrose? That he was a twin once? No. It was a loss too early in the gestation. He was lucky to survive though. Well, you knew that."

"I suppose these births will be as difficult. The Gods rattle and shake the universe in a clash of wills against the dark forces of the world. You'd think they'd balance themselves out, between good and evil, but no, there's all this noise, snow and howling wind."

"You're the one who picked this place for your home," Gradyn said as if their location would have any dulling effect on how the universe reacted. Somewhere else there might not be a horrific blizzard, but there would be some other physical manifestation to announce the arrival of so great a shift of power.

"I'm going to go find out what the delay is. Come with me."

“No,” Gradyn said, but braced himself for his mind to be split between his body and the ethereal existence Alurn Telaerin inhabited.

“Don’t argue for once, just come along.”

Gradyn sat, and pretended to pray so no one would interrupt. Alurn took him, a feeling like dropping off a cliff, and as swiftly as that, entered the mind of an attendant in the next room, witness to the birth of the future saviors of the world.

Shalael Telaerin clutched the sides of the birthing chair, a raised, tilted affair that seemed both comfortable and a contraption of torture.

“Well those things haven’t changed very much,” Alurn noted.

Her fingers dug into the padded arms while five and then six and then seven attendants, medics, physicians, her husband moved around her in an orchestrated dance. One swooping in to dab her forehead, one to hold her hand, one to encourage her to breathe evenly, one to sit at the business end of the affair to examine the progression of the birth and so on.

Something was very obviously wrong. The first baby wasn’t coming. Every time a contraction struck, the heartbeats of both the unborn stuttered and paused. Alarms sounded. The doctors hovered, trying to determine what might be the problem and how to correct it in time.

A decision had to be made, one that went against convention and a tradition that went back hundreds of years. In all that time, or so the records stated, the future King of Cobalt was born naturally. It was just one more thing for the Princess to feel guilty over. She’d already been told she shouldn’t have more children. In order to save her and her children, the surgery to extract them was necessary.

With the concurrence of her husband, and his father, the King, the dynamic of the room changed. The chair was flattened. Medics rushed with concentrated purpose. More monitoring equipment was steered to the side of the mother. Her gaze never left her husband’s. He leaned down, holding her hand.

“It’ll be all right.”

She would have agreed, but another contraction took her voice.

She didn’t scream or cry out, somehow containing the pain that tore through her body to a small whimper. Ambrose blocked from her awareness most of the mechanics coming in to take over this once normal process. Instrument trays with laser cutters and injectors for medication and the blue sterilization lamps clicking on weren’t visible to her as he leaned over her.

The attending physician intruded gently, dermal injector in hand as the contraction passed. She was weakened by it more than normal, and the alarms sounded different.

“Save my children,” she said. “You save them, Eldelar.”

“They’re going to be fine, Shalael, and you will too. We’re going to sedate you now, so the pain is less. You might feel the first incision but it shouldn’t be too much. Tell me if it is. I’m sorry we can’t give you more.”

“I want to be awake.”

“I know you do,” he said, and pressed the injector into her neck. “You’ll only feel a little drowsy.”

The doctor kept talking, and at the same time, made the first cut along the lower curve of the round, extended belly, and then another to open the womb.

The one who should have been second born came first, pulled neatly out into skilled hands and wrapped into warmth hardly a moment later. First born. Gradyne could see the aura of power encircling the child as snugly as the blanket. Like his parents, he had fair skin and his hair, what little there was of it, was blond. They named him Dynan Alurn.

Alurn the First smiled at that, humming over it.

The child now relegated to second born still refused to come.

And here it was, the prophecy hung on a precipice. Gradyne waited, wondering if the child didn't come, if it didn't survive, how many more years would it be for another chance. Too many for his life to last. Another generation lost.

Three physicians worked over the Princess to no effect. Eldelar glanced briefly to Ambrose, shaking his head imperceptibly, his arm inside the incision up to his elbow. The vitals of the unborn child plummeted and then stopped.

The doctor put his other hand between the legs of the future Queen. His shoulder hunched forward and he leaned, pressing his weight upward. Shalael gasped and cried out. Outside, the wind ceased its incessant howling. The silence of a tomb descended.

Everyone in the room noticed it, but they didn't understand it.

"Ah!" Eldelar shouted. "I have him."

The baby emerged, eyes open, Telaerin blue, and unlike his brother, declaring his presence in the world with a sharp squall. Amid the laughter and tears of his parents, there seemed an edge of defiance to the cry. The room's occupants breathed as one.

They named the second born Dain Ardin.

And the prophecy was fulfilled, children of one mind, born in the seventh cycle and named for the father of them all.

"Poor kids," Alurn Ardin Telaerin said. "They're in for it now."

Outside, the wind howled.





Chapter 1

A swirl of snow blew in on a gust of wind. Dynan Telaerin brushed the intruding flakes away, even as he had to push blond hair out of his eyes so he could see. He wanted to uncover more of this bit of a silver bowl, or maybe it was a platter of some kind, before he had to leave the work site.

It wasn't so much that he enjoyed being frozen to the bone, but being here, on a flat spot of rock in the mountains, was preferable to being at home. When he looked down the hillside and beyond the surrounding forest, he could see the black rock of the King's Tower rising starkly against the blanket of white. Another gust of wind blew the snow again, and again, he brushed the powder off the spit of silver. This was what he did for fun, a thought that made him roll his eyes over his idea of entertainment.

All around him stood the tumbled and broken walls of an ancient room. He bent over the metal piece, lodged in a section of frozen dirt that was otherwise cleared of snow down to a patch of set stones. Laser heaters did most of that hard work, but a few shovels were employed once they'd gotten close to the surface of the find. That was hours ago and a necessary daily regimen with the blowing snow. No matter how carefully the tarps were set, they rarely survived one night of wind.

The rock cutting into his knees consisted of several shades and hues that might be a pattern of some sort. The rest of it remained obscured so he couldn't tell. What he could see of it reminded him of the Sacred Seal, the giant symbol of faith that covered the back wall of the Temple Sanctuary.

A wave of nervousness shot through him. Tomorrow, he thought, he would be on his knees again, but then shook his head. "Don't," he said to himself in a half mutter, determined to avoid facing that day until the last possible moment.

The cold permeating every layer of clothing was almost enough of a distraction, but the gazes and glances of the other people who were with him on this high slope of the Taramaik Mountains didn't help. He kept scraping, brushing, examining, starting the next section – and tried to ignore the sense of being in a fishbowl.

That was the Prince factor.

They didn't think of him as just any sixteen-year-old kid up here on the mountainside, digging in the ground. He was his father's son. His father was King of the most powerful planetary System in Brittallia; a Kingdom of three planets and four billion people who sometimes liked to know what he was doing. All of them. Frequently at the same time.

There were days he wished he could dig a hole a lot deeper than the small one he was in, and not come out again.

There were days, a lot of them, where he couldn't wipe his nose or scratch his balls without someone seeing. There were days being a Prince completely sucked. Tomorrow would definitely be one of them.

The noise of crunching through snow intruded and then a pair of polished black boots came into view. He didn't have to look up to know their owner was his guard.

Colin Fryn was a big man. He did a pretty good imitation of giving a crap about the things Dynan did, but his real job took precedence. Colin was always looking around, observing, aware of who was doing what, ready. He'd sworn an oath to die before letting anything happen to him, so the guard was serious about making sure nothing did.

"His Majesty is on his way," Colin said, squatting down to look at the metal plate.

The man bristled with weaponry - a laser rifle, a sword, a knife, and a few items that couldn't be seen. Colin was an expert with all of them. Best of his unit. At twenty, he was the youngest with that high distinction. Sometimes Dynan wondered how he felt about being a glorified sitter.

"Time to go."

Dynan nodded, but didn't stop what he was doing. While the King's visit thrilled the other members of the team - to them, that recognition was a big thing - to him, it was just annoying.

"So, are you going to try and make it up to him, or are you going back into lockdown?" the guard asked, scanning the area.

Dynan only smirked at him, channeling his twin brother, Dain for a moment and made Colin laugh. Dain called the guard, along with a couple of the others in the same unit, the Hounds. So named because it was almost impossible to get away from them. Almost.

"Not that I mind you being confined to your rooms," Colin said. "It's way easier on me. Just tell him you're sorry."

"I already did." *More than once*, he thought, and it wasn't working. Sometimes, nothing did.

"Then tell him again. As many times as it takes until he gets over it. Preferably before your brother decides to go off and do something equally stupid as stealing and then crashing a transport pod."

He was careful not to look at the guard this time, concentrating on the work at hand. Colin might read in his face that plans were already brewing.

"I know you've heard it before," Colin said. "Just saying, is all. It can't hurt."

Colin straightened and Dynan kept working.

He tugged his fur glove from his hand to get a better grip, and managed to dislodge a large chunk of frozen soil from the metal. A line of embossed diamonds appeared, similar to his family crest, and made him wonder if this was an early location of his ancestral home, perhaps built by the First King of Cobalt. Someone built the place, though why they thought this mountainside a good spot to locate was beyond him. He blew on his fingers. It was cold, down to the bone, stinging exposed skin cold.

The unexpected smell of charred wood wafted through the air. He frowned over it while he picked away more dirt, glancing around to see if there was smoke somewhere or

a fire to go with it. He ended up running his finger into an unnoticed sharp edge that sliced into his skin.

He jumped a little as an immediate flow of blood splattered on the rock. Another drop followed and another, hitting the stone in expanding bright red circles.

A deep rumble lifted toward him while he sucked the blood off his finger. The tiny bits of dirt he'd loosened bounced off the rock from the vibration. The idea occurred that a ground shift was happening, and he looked up to check on the others in the group.

The rumble grew louder, and everyone around him stood cautiously in their section of the ruins, peering nervously around and waiting to see what was going to happen. The slope of the land they were on went up to a wall of rock. Colin looked to the cliff.

The sound like a roar of a lion came from the ground. Dynan expected to see a hole open up right under him it was so loud and close.

Something odd happened then, that had no explanation at all. The red droplets of his blood vanished into the stone. He stared at the spot, a question mark forming in his mind. He must have imagined it, but another drop fell from his still bleeding finger and seeped into the rock as if it were a sponge.

"Wow. Okay, that is not normal," he said, rubbing the stone that should have been red. "It's not possible either. Colin, did you—"

A large boulder tumbled off the face of the cliff. Dynan looked to his guard to see if he noticed the disappearing blood, but Colin was watching the boulder – just before he reached down, yanked him to his feet by a fistful of his coat, and pulled him around away from the cliff. The boulder hit the ground and exploded.

The arms of the guard went around him, vise-like and inescapable. Colin braced himself, bending over him to protect him. Shards of rock whizzed by. Dynan wasn't hit by any of them, but he felt the guard jump.

"Colin?" Dynan asked. The rumbling kept on and didn't seem like it was going to end. "We have to move!"

The guard shook his head. "We can't. The ground is unstable."

To prove it, the ground shuddered underfoot as if it heard him, heaving in some places, and by the sound of it, more boulders were on the way. Colin looked over his shoulder. Evidently, he changed his mind about moving. He pushed Dynan a few steps and then a few more before once again becoming a human shield. Another boulder slammed into the ground.

This time, the bits that zoomed by were hand-sized.

Finally, after a long time to be glued to his guard's chest, the shaking eased and then stopped completely. Colin loosened the hold he had slowly, and Dynan straightened, turning to make sure the guard wasn't hurt.

"I'm fine," Colin said, smiling at the concern, but he winced. "Maybe a few bruises, is all. You weren't hit, were you?"

Dynan shook his head. "Not a scratch, well except for my finger." The sliced bit was smeared by blood. If he pressed on it, more came out, but slower than before. "Did you see it? The rock soaked up the drops."

"See what? No." Colin turned to look back at the cleared patch of ground Dynan had been working on. "Sure you didn't imagine that one?"

Before he could answer no, the two leads on the dig came rushing across the slope, trying to run through deep snow to little effect, except to look funny. There were paths

cut through that they weren't taking. One of them had a strange, almost maniacal grin on his face as he rushed forward.

"What's wrong with him?" Colin said under his breath.

"Your Highness, Lieutenant, are you all right?"

Dynan left Colin to answer and went back to his work site to collect his tools and the glove he left on the ground. After all that shaking and danger, he knew he'd have to leave even before his father arrived. They were probably calling off his visit right now. He tried to remember when there'd ever been a shifting in this area and couldn't.

He thought to ask, but stumbled over uneven ground, or his own feet, and fell. Not backward, but straight down. He threw his arms out, a reflex that didn't do anything to stop the sudden descent, except to throw him backward. He expected the ground to catch him, but he realized in a flash as the sensation of falling continued, that there was no ground. There was a hole.

It occurred to him as he went down that he ought to be more careful what he wished for.

The air whistled past him, freezing his breath. He kept expecting to hit the bottom at any moment. It was black as pitch with nothing around him. No walls to try and grab hold of. Nothing to slow him down. More moments ticked by. He knew if he didn't stop falling soon, landing would kill him.

"Dynan?" Dain's presence reached him and fear made Dynan grab hold of the only thing available to him, bringing Dain with him. "What the hell!"

Dynan meant to go to him. He was capable of it. Mentally leaving his body to join his brother was almost second nature. They were telepaths so it was easy. They even traded places on occasion, but Dynan didn't want that. He just wanted to get out of himself before he ended up broken to bits at the foot of a dark pit. He wasn't completely sure how to do it without the other thing happening and maybe killing Dain instead.

"Dynan, just take my hand," Dain said. "I'll get us both out. Take my hand."

But Dynan hesitated and then he struck.



A high-pitched whine filtered through the constant repetition of his name, both in his head and from above. The ability to breathe returned in gasping increments and with air filling his lungs, the realization came that he was alive. It didn't feel so good, but the alternative was worse. Right then, Dynan was happy to feel anything.

He blinked his eyes open, and after they cleared, he saw Colin leaning into the hole, looking down at him.

"I'm all right," he said to the guard, only the words didn't come out very loud. "I think I'm all right."

Dain was there too, only in Dynan's head, looking out through his eyes at the distant opening. The hole had opened close to a supporting wall, so it didn't seem like more of it would give way. "What happened?"

He couldn't answer. He tentatively wriggled a few fingers. He raised his arm and nothing screamed at him. It didn't feel like anything was broken. He couldn't see near at hand at all though, but then remembered he had a lamp box on his belt.

"Pop is landing," Dain told him, and the sound of the transport coming in filtered down through the hole. "And he's freaking out."

“Just tell them to drop down a rope,” he said. He lifted his other arm, and then both at the same time. The light box was still clipped to his belt and undamaged. It was an amazing relief when it came on, giving him a little square of light against the inky darkness.

“Dynan!”

He couldn’t yell an answer back, so he flashed the light at the opening that now had his father looking down. For a moment, his younger sister peered down too, blonde hair cascading down around her face. She was about to turn eleven in a few months.

“Oh that’s a long way,” she said, looking worried, and then someone pulled her back from the opening.

“Tell them I’m all right.”

“I already did,” Dain said. “Pop has to read it though. I’ll message Colin instead. Can you stand?”

“Maybe,” Dynan said, and thought he should probably try. He moved his legs around first and rolled to his side. He found out what hurt then.

“Your back? You land on it? How far down are you anyway?”

“Twenty, thirty kem. I don’t know.” Dynan groaned as he moved, guessing that every muscle in his back was pulled or bruised.

“On the bright side, maybe you’ll get out of the ceremony tomorrow,” Dain said.

“Nothing shy of death, he said the other day, so I doubt it.” Dynan had already hinted as directly as he dared that he didn’t want to go through with it. His father didn’t pay attention to that, being far too concerned with what a cancellation would look like and what an inconvenience it would be to the invitees if the ceremony didn’t happen.

“I’d say this counts.”

Dynan made it up to hands and knees. His back still hurt, but it was less than before. His head hurt, too. There was a growing knot at the base of his skull. He touched the lump as part of the inspection and found out he shouldn’t.

There were large stones from the collapse littering the ground he could have landed and died on. A sense of euphoria swept over him. He hadn’t broken anything or damaged any internals. Of course, he wasn’t completely sure about that yet. He tasted blood in his mouth.

“Great.”

Dynan turned the lamp on his surroundings. It was a cavern he landed in, made by man, not nature and the light barely cut the darkness. He sat back on his legs, testing what hurt and how much. He spit the blood out - it felt like he bit his tongue.

Right where he spit, the ground bulged upward as if it was boiling water. For a moment, he thought it was some sort of flowing liquid. Another rumble erupted all around him. Dust and dirt rained down with clumps of snow from the hole above. After back-peddling away, something between curiosity and revulsion drew him back.

“Now you’re just being stupid,” Dain said.

Dynan looked over his left shoulder where Dain stood, blond, blue-eyed and smirking as usual. With the ability to communicate telepathically, there came this visual projection. No one else could see him, of course, but there was a physical sense that Dain was right there, one hand on his shoulder.

The rumbling eased, changing to a more distant, safer crack of rock against rock, but the ground kept puking dirt. A rope whistled down near at hand, a few coils thudding to

the ground. When it started twirling around, Dynan knew Colin was on the way, but looking up wasn't yet an option.

There was something on the ground anyway, more compelling than the guard's descent. A black claw, regurgitated from within, lay on top of the dirt. It rolled along with the brown river as if pushed by an invisible force until it was in front of him where he knelt.

"Okay, that's just weird," Dain said. "Seriously, don't pick that up."

The smell of charred wood filled Dynan's nostrils - the same smell from just before he cut his finger. Something else about the talon reeked, more a feeling than an odor. It came as a sensation, too hard to define, that sent a shiver of warning through him.

This was a mystery he couldn't resist. He picked up the talon.

The black claw was almost as long as his hand, and curved to a sharp point. A ridge ran on either side. It didn't belong here, whatever it came off of. There wasn't a history of large animals of the kind that would own something of this size. Not on any of Cobalt's three planets. Not anywhere in the six Realms that made up Brittallia even. The black gleamed dully in the weak light.

A flash of thought entered his mind neither his nor Dain's, whispering that this was why he was here. Finding it was why he'd come on the expedition to the mountain ruins. It was why he'd cut his finger. Why the ground had opened and dropped him here. It was in the world now and having it would change everything.

"What?" Dain demanded in a voice full of uncertainty, even bordering on fear. "Did you hear that? Who's here?"

"No one," Dynan said, turning the talon over in his hand.

Colin landed then, and reached for him, but Dain moved in, taking over.

"You need to get him out of here," Dain said, speaking through Dynan and confusing the guard. "Right now. Don't wait for them to decide how it's to be done."

Colin pondered for a moment, looking at Dynan closer. "Dain?"

"Right now, Colin," Dain said. "Get him out of here."

"You know it's really creepy when you do this? Right? And you're not supposed to. No, don't go on. I know. I'll get him out, but I have to tell them up top—"

"I already did," Dain said, but then Dynan managed to reassert himself and push Dain out. "Colin, I'm all right. Dain is a little spooked is all."

"I gathered," Colin said, but he held up a hand while he read from the comboard. "He's not alone in that. Can you stand?"

"Yes."

"Come on then. Are you hurt? Dain says no on the comboard, but I thought I'd ask you."

"Just get him out of here, will you?"

"I wasn't talking to you, Dain. I'd like to hear it from your brother, if you don't mind."

"I'm all right," Dynan said when Dain eased off.

Colin nodded and helped him up, looking at the talon Dynan still held with curiosity, but then he was hooking him onto the rope using an extra belt and clip.

"Hold onto the rope and hold onto me," the guard said, winding a few coils around his arm after he'd clipped onto a different spot.

“How are they going to pull us both up?” Dynan asked, tucking the talon into a pocket before taking a section of the line and gripping the guard by the shoulders. It hurt to move that much.

“There are enough people up there to manage. Melgan Lon and your father are there. They aren’t going to drop us.” Colin smiled to reassure, put his arm around Dynan as if it were a clamp, and then called up, “Ready here. Pull.”





Chapter 2

Carryn Adaeryn looked out from the tower window of the Sanctuary Temple at the glistening night. To her right, the lights of Rianamar fanned outward and to her left the vast blanket of the Wythe Sea extinguished them. There were clouds coming in to obliterate the moon.

Her gaze lifted from the darkness of the water. The Telaerin Palace stood in a blaze of light on a jut of land carved out a few million years ago from the Wyvern River's run through the middle of what was now the Capitol City of Cobalt. The churn of waves against the shore came in a rhythmic cadence and the more distant boom of the sea striking the cliffs a large drum. Carryn took a deep breath and pulled in salt saturated air. The bitter cold felt good to her.

She leaned against the stone windowsill, letting her thoughts wander. When she needed to calm her mind, this room, with its spectacular view was the place she came. After hearing about the harrowing ordeal Dynan had survived in the mountains, in a shifting of all things, she definitely needed calming.

She should have seen the danger. She was a Seer. Since the time she was ten and Dynan was five, it was her job to look after him. When there was trouble, she saw it before it happened, and could avert the danger. An anonymous note to the Palace with a warning, and both boys found whatever scheme they dreamed up – very usually an escape attempt – undone. Usually, anyway.

There wasn't anything they did in all those years that she wasn't aware of if there was even the remotest possibility they'd be hurt. The pod crash on the mountain; she'd seen it, and a message went to the Palace, telling them about the stolen pod. There was an attempt on their lives last year that even the King didn't know about, thwarted by the secret order she belonged to. No, Ambrose Telaerin wouldn't let his sons out of his sight if he knew the extent of peril they faced, much less allow them to go up onto a mountainside, even if it was a mountain just behind the Palace, for a day of archeological digging.

She should have seen. She didn't understand why she hadn't. Carryn pulled in another lungful of the frigid air.

She waited through the rest of the day after the shifting, one that only affected that one mountain range Dynan was on, for the announcement that the King would postpone the oath taking ceremony his son was set to take part in – tomorrow. She found herself questioning the wisdom of His Majesty's decision when the bulletin stated the ceremony would go on as planned.

She supposed it couldn't be avoided unless Dynan was very seriously injured. He wasn't – a relief – and cancelling wasn't practical when three thousand of Cobalt's most prominent leaders were set to attend.

She wondered if Dynan would make it through it, considering his aversion to being in public.

Sudden pressure behind her eyes jolted her out of her thoughts and warned her of a coming vision. She tried to prepare herself like she did every time these bits of the future ripped into her, and reached blindly for the stone sill to steady the room. It didn't work. A hole opened before her and she was pulled through.

The King of Cobalt knelt before his throne, shackled to the floor. Blood dripped from his wrists where metal dug into skin and down his fingers. He watched, powerless, while his young daughter was raped.

They weren't men responsible for her torture. They weren't human, but creatures of the dark, some reptilian, some bestial, on all fours, salivating as they waited in line for their turn at her.

Carryn recoiled from it. Pain blossomed as a result and she fell. The vision shifted.

The city below her appeared on an overcast day. The pristine white buildings it was famous for stood in twisted ruins. Plumes of black smoke billowed up to choke her. Coiling darkness wound around the tower, like a living thing, tightening its grip until the stones began to crumble. The walls crashed to the floor and then through it.

Carryn fell with the tower, the wave of rubble carrying her to the Temple altar.

A thousand pieces of colored glass shards from the great seal spread through the apse like a carpet. On the altar, one of the King's twin sons lay tied by undulating coils piercing his skin. A man stood over him, a thin blade in hand. For a moment, Carryn thought he was the High Bishop, but then she recognized her brother, Maralt.

To her horror, he cut into the wrist of the Prince, took his hand and raised it. Maralt held a cup to catch the flow, but it wasn't blood that streamed from the wound. A white, radiant liquid ran from wrist to elbow and into the cup to fill it. She realized what it was – the essence of a telepath's soul.

Black, rough-hewn pillars surrounded her as the vision shifted again. Crushing terror dimmed Carryn's eyesight. She heard herself whimpering. A contained area of darkness stood framed by an archway of stone like the entrance to a cave. She knew the Void lay on the other side.

Another altar stood at the heart of the encircling pillars. The other twin writhed upon its surface. Another man stood over him. His back was to her, but again, he seemed like her brother. He held a thin knife in one hand, and in the other a brilliant white light streamed through clenched fingers.

More coiling strands rose from the stone floor by the altar, plunging into the struggling prince. The will to fight slowly ebbed until he was motionless. At first Carryn didn't understand why his blood ran red, but then the answer came. He'd been brought here alive.

Here was the cause of the destruction of the world. The soul of the Chosen had been taken, held in the hand of a monster. The blood of the Chosen flowed on the demon's altar at the gateway to his realm. It was the prophecy come true. It was the prophecy she'd been born to stop. She and her brother both.

The veil boiled outward toward her. Consuming darkness reached a hand to her. The ground shook as the drops of blood ran down the face of the altar. The face of evil was coming. The anti-God. A thing of such power, it would split the ground it walked. It was the demon, Belial.

Carryn turned from the horror that preceded it, trying to escape. Her arms were pinned to her side and she struggled against the smothering wave of darkness that held her.

“I’ve got you.”

She found her voice and heard herself screaming, the sound echoing around the small space of the tower.

“Carryn, it’s all right. I’ve got you. It’s all right.”

She opened her eyes to find her brother beside her, picking her up into his arms from where she’d crumpled under the window. She shook and her heart pounded against her chest. She couldn’t catch her breath.

“It’s all right,” Maralt said again, giving her another squeeze before loosening the grip he had on her. Slowly her vision cleared, returning her to the tower.

“I was at the gate,” she said, leaning against him. She clutched his brown monk’s robes in her fist. “It’s happened.”

“Nothing has happened,” Maralt said, and propped her up against the wall. “Look around you. We’re here. We’re safe. No creepy crawlies running around.”

Carry shook her head at his tone. “They were raping her,” she said. “And Dynan and Dain—”

“Carryn, it hasn’t happened. Shalis is fine. Her brothers are fine—”

“It’s going to,” she said. “It’s going to happen.”

“I’m not going to let it,” he said, making her release the grip she had on him before enclosing her hand in his. “I know what you saw. It upset you, but you’ve seen it before.”

“Not like this.”

“Exactly like this, but you don’t remember. I’ve taken it from you, Carryn,” Maralt said, tilting his head as he looked at her, raising his eyebrows the way he did when he knew he was right. “The memory of it.”

Carryn gasped and knew the truth. Sometimes the future she was shown was too terrible to endure and not go insane. Her brother’s telepathic talents were different from her own. Countless times before, he removed her memory.

“Did you see the demon?” he asked, watching her.

“No,” she said, remembering now how many times he’d asked the same thing. She pushed herself up against the stone, wincing. Sometimes she felt an old woman when she was barely twenty-one. “I saw enough. I saw you.”

“Same as always, having a nice drink,” he said and smiled. “Well that’s something. You didn’t see the evil nasty. I won’t take the memory this time unless you want, but you know, he’s likely to insist.”

Maralt meant the High Bishop, Gradyn Vall, who was probably on his way up the tower stairs. He might yell at her for that. It was a long way to climb for a man of his extreme age.

“I already told him you were all right,” Maralt said, answering her thoughts. “He’ll want to see the vision for himself, but I can show him.”

“I don’t know how you stand it,” she said, knowing already she didn’t want to keep the vision.

“It’s what big brothers are for.”

“You’re barely three minutes older,” she said. “I don’t think that counts.”

“Of course it does,” he said and smiled.

She shuddered as she saw Shalis Telaerin again, splayed across her father’s overturned throne, her eyes distant. She wasn’t screaming or struggling to get away anymore. She knew she couldn’t.

“Carryn,” Maralt said gently. His fingertips brushed against her temple with the touch of his mind inside her own. She turned to the relief he would bring her, sinking into the light comfort of oblivion that came like a blanket.

She was set onto soft ground and a field of flowers opened around her, the earthy smell of them rising to fill her lungs. The darkness faded.

“Rest here a while,” Maralt said.

Carryn turned to look for him, but he wasn’t there. The sky above her was a deep, endless blue. She smiled at it and the drowsy, almost drugged feeling that came over her. She let it take her.





Chapter 3

The Palace lights spilled through the open spaces in the draperies, cutting through the shadows of the night. Dynan wished time would stop and keep it dark. Dawn only drew the moment closer where he'd have to face the public, swearing an oath of purity before the High Bishop and billions of people watching on the live feed. Every time he thought about it his throat clamped shut.

He stumbled out of bed, moved to the couch that faced the fireplace, and dropped into it, putting his head in his hands. He felt mostly all right after a few injections to repair the torn muscles in his back. His eyes stung though, from lack of sleep. He couldn't remember a time he had such dark, disturbing dreams.

He retrieved the talon from the table where he left it, being careful to avoid touching the sharp edge. It was keen enough to cut and he'd already spilled enough blood.

"There'll be more, a lot more, soon."

Dynan looked up and saw a man beside the fireplace, standing there as plain as anything. Dynan was immediately reminded of renderings he'd seen of the First King of Cobalt, Alurn Telaerin. Alurn died relatively young, not yet thirty, though no one knew the exact time or date. The man before him seemed about the same age. He had long black hair. He was about the right height, several kel taller than Dynan and broader across the shoulder. But while his ancestors always had blue eyes, this man's eyes were dark, the color indistinguishable.

"Come find me," the man said and took a step forward. He absorbed the meager light of the room, wrapped in darkness. Dynan shrank away from him.

"Who are you?" he asked, wishing he had a comboard in hand. He could use it to call the guard, but his was across the room on the bedside table.

"We knew that you would...I knew you would come."

An uncomfortable, almost ravenous eagerness in his gaze made Dynan scramble up and over the couch, and he backed toward the door.

"Come find me, Dynan. You're the only one who can."

Dynan met the wall, clutching the talon tightly in hand. The man's eyes snapped to it and he drew in a breath, smiling in apparent pleasure. He took another step closer, through the couch, not over, not around, and stopped in front of Dynan. He breathed deeply again.

"Come for me," he said, reaching out his hand.

Even as Dynan shrank away from him, the man shifted his shape, melding into a thing of darkness, stealer of souls, a wraith.

Black clung to its scaled skin. Dragon-like, it had the ability to walk upright, and hold a weapon in its clawed hand, or so the legends said. It was winged and filled the space of the room. From it, an overwhelming sense of evil flowed.

Dynan stood, frozen and unable to move, at the door of his room, wishing it was open so he could get through it. Black eyes focused. A cruel smile spread across a protruding mouth. The thing had fangs.

Its tongue lolled across jagged teeth as if it was licking its lips in anticipation. Acrid smoke billowed into Dynan's eyes. For an instant, he stood on the side of a hill strewn with rotting corpses. Instead of one nightmare staring at him, there were six of them.

The talon clattered to the floor. Dynan whirled around, meaning to escape. He expected to see more of the monsters, but his vision cleared. There was only his room and the light still coming through the curtains.

The sound of pent up breath cut the silence. He sagged against the door, wondering what just happened. Was he hallucinating? Did the talon cause this? Could it? He looked at the talon where he dropped it, and at the slice across his fingers that oozed a small bit of blood. The way that man-hallucination-apparition-thing had reacted to seeing the blood made Dynan's skin crawl.

Hurriedly, as if it might hurt to touch it, he picked the talon back up and set it down on the table again. He started wiping his hand off on his nightshirt and then didn't know why he was doing it.

He stood for a moment, torn between trying to get a few more hours of sleep or giving up for the night. Finally, he retrieved his robe and went down the hall, through a sitting room and the study he shared with Dain, and then the dining room, aiming for the kitchen to get a mug of tea. That would help wake him up at least.

He went through the open doorway to the kitchen, and froze two steps in, blinking in the half-light to make sure she wasn't an apparition too.

She had next to nothing on except a flimsy, gossamer kind of gown that really couldn't be considered clothing. Dynan didn't think girls were supposed to wear things like that, except maybe in bed and not out wandering around; yet here she was in his kitchen in the small hours before dawn.

Liselle Tremault, his sister's lady in waiting, stood at the heating element, stirring liquid in a pot that smelled like milk and something else. She had her back to him, her brown hair loose and flowing over her shoulders. She was completely unaware that he was watching. Dynan thought before she became aware he better stop staring at certain parts of her.

He was about to turn around and leave, escape before he'd have to speak to her, but she must have heard him make a sound. She whirled around abruptly, gasping at him.

"Oh good God, what are you doing here?" she said in a rush.

He watched while she assessed which one he was, her eyes darting down to his hand, picking out the sapphire ring he always wore. Dain had an emerald one.

Dynan couldn't help where his gaze ended up. The front side was just as enticing as the back. The nightgown she had on was completely see-through. He thought looking at the floor was probably a good idea.

Liselle pulled in another breath, trying to be composed and mostly succeeded, except for the color that rose in her face. Wordlessly, trying not to look directly at her, Dynan

took off his robe and handed it over. He wondered what his attendants, or God forbid, his father would think if they happened to walk in just then.

The lady hesitated, but then took the garment, getting into it quickly. "Thank you. I don't normally...I mean I do actually, but..."

Dynan didn't know what she meant by all that, moving to get the tea. He stopped at the basin first to rinse off the cut. There were two mugs on the counter and a few spice jars, making him wonder who she was cooking for.

"I asked if it would be all right to use your kitchen. I never imagined you'd be awake at the same time in the middle of the night. I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"You didn't," he said, forcing the words out. He felt his throat clamp shut.

"This is for Shalis," Liselle said, gesturing to the mugs when she joined him at the counter. "She should be here by now. This is what we usually do when she can't sleep; come here, sit and drink our warm spiced milk. You should try it."

She filled the mugs with the warm liquid, then held one out to him. Dynan shook his head, gesturing to the tea.

"You're up awfully late," she said. "Is everything all right?"

At that, Dynan shrugged, trying to think of something else to say, or anything. Talking wasn't his strong suit, to strangers, or anyone for that matter, unless he knew them very well. He didn't want to talk about the oath he was about to take. He didn't want to talk about the talon, or the creepy ghost monster either. He didn't want her to think he was crazy.

For an instant, he saw the wraiths again, crouching on the hill, twitching as if they might spring at him. The urge to run struck him, but his legs wouldn't move.

A warm, firm hand took his and he blinked.

"Maybe you should sit down," Liselle was saying as she drew him to the small table in the corner where he sometimes had lunch with Dain. She took the tea from him and put him on the bench while his vision swirled to darkness. "What is it? Dynan?"

He wasn't sure what was happening, except to hate that it was happening in front of this girl. His voice decided to take a complete leave of absence. It was an affliction that struck any time he got nervous, but especially around incredibly beautiful women, or in front of masses of people.

When his eyes cleared, Liselle sat across from him, still holding his hand. He wondered then if her being here on this night of all nights was some sort of cruel joke. If it was a test, he wouldn't mind failing it.

"Here drink this," she said. "And I think you should eat something. No, don't argue. I promise you'll feel better."

She put the mug of spiced milk into his hands as she stood and turned for cold storage. She came out with a block of yellow cheese that she cut a few strips off of, pulled out some bread and smeared it with nut butter. She added a few green gems, ate one for herself and set the plate down in front of him.

"Eat," she said, and sat again, popping another gem in her mouth. She broke off a piece of the cheese too, nibbling a corner.

She was right. He did feel better. He sat and ate in silence while she kept up a steady stream of one-sided conversation. Dynan guessed Shalis had fallen back asleep and then forgot about her.

"I remember the first day I came here," Liselle said. "I was terrified of doing anything wrong, or saying something I shouldn't. When you come here, you know, it feels like the place and everyone are just bigger than life. The first person I met was Melgan Lon. I almost turned around and ran right back out the door."

"He's not so bad," Dynan said, his voice an almost inaudible whisper. He started shaking his head and really wished he could get out of sitting here if it meant he had to talk. He realized she was watching him too closely, and probably knew about this problem he had. Everyone knew.

"You're too hard on yourself," Liselle said, and patted his arm. "Shalis is the same way. She's only ten and she's already helping to plan these big events, like the Spring Festival. She has lists of menus, entertainment, who's coming, where they should sit. She's ten! And she's doing things that an adult would find hugely stressful. She's trying so hard to make up for the fact that her m—"

Liselle stopped abruptly. Dynan realized what she meant to say, and that she was afraid to bring up his mother.

He remembered a servant once, in discussion with another servant, and like many adults, failed to realize the children were listening. The servant intimated his mother should never have had another child after Dynan and Dain, as if being pregnant had caused her death. That servant no longer worked in the Palace, but Shalis heard her and took her words straight to heart. Despite everyone's best efforts to tell her otherwise, she felt responsible, even after being told their mother contracted one of the incurables. There wasn't anything to be done to save her. Shalael lived long enough to give birth, giving them all one last gift. Shalis was just like her.

"Don't let her," Dynan said in the same hard to hear voice. "If it's too much for her to do, don't let her."

"She's very stubborn," Liselle said and Dynan laughed.

"And you," she went on. "You fell down a hole yesterday. You could have been killed, and yet, you're going through with this ceremony today, in front of billions of people, no less. It's too much for you, too."

Dynan appreciated the indignation in her voice, leaning back to listen while she went on about how the oath ceremony ought to be postponed.

He couldn't agree more, but stopped thinking coherently beyond the mention of billions of people watching him. Really there were days it almost made him puke.

Liselle patted his hand. Again, she seemed to know what he was thinking, smiling in such a way that he found it hard to meet her gaze.

To fill the ensuing silence, she launched into the story about how she'd been sponsored to come to the Palace and then selected as Shalis' Lady in Waiting. It was more than he cared to learn about the somewhat convoluted process, but it kept her from leaving and kept him from thinking too much.

Liselle didn't seem to mind that he only managed a few words here and there. Paying attention was evidently enough to keep her happy. Finally though, she barely suppressed a yawn.

"It's getting late," Liselle said after a silence. "Or early I should say. You have a big day ahead of you and you ought to try and get at least a little rest before you have to go."

She smiled at the pained expression that came over him. He shook his head, but ended up smiling with her

“It won’t be that bad, unless of course you’re so exhausted you can’t remember what you’re supposed to say. From what I read about it, it’s quite a lot of back and forth between you and the High Bishop. Is he as scary in person as I imagine he’d be?”

Dynan had to nod. In a few hours, he would be down on his knees in front of the old man, maybe the oldest man alive, before the Altar of the Gods, swearing he’d forsake all women until he was married.

He looked at the one sitting across from him and hated the idea. He was caught again. She didn’t seem to mind being stared at. He dropped his gaze to the scraps of food left on his plate and wished for a different life.

Voices came from the long hall off the other kitchen door. Liselle was about to say something, but stopped abruptly. Her eyes widened and she turned into a statue.

Dynan wanted to make a run for it, but realized he’d be seen. Getting caught trying to escape would certainly look guilty. It made him angry too, since he hadn’t been doing anything but sitting in his own kitchen, listening while the most beautiful woman in the world talked to him.

“Is that your father?” Liselle said, her voice a strangled whisper.

“And Melgan Lon,” he said, rolling his eyes to the ceiling. It figured. “And it sounds like the First Minister and First Secretary might be with them. They tend to go around in a pack.”

“What are they doing here?” she asked, cinching up his robe to her neck. “I mean, of all the nights. I’ve only met him once, you know.”

“Well, you’re about to meet him again, and they’re coming for me, what with the day ahead and all,” he said, angry he wasn’t able to speak in full sentences an hour ago. That figured too.

Liselle groaned, clearly dreading the thought. “I suppose this is why my mother sent me to Ladies school, to be prepared for something like this.”

“You go to school for this?”

Liselle heaved a sigh. “Supposedly to be taught how to be poised and walk right and talk right and not get into compromising situations like this one.”

“Didn’t work too well,” he said and laughed when her eyes widened at the insult.

Ambrose Telaerin walked in then and halted abruptly just inside the door, dumbfounded to find Dynan with a girl on the cusp of taking a vow of purity.

Ambrose was a tall, imposing man. He had darkening blond hair and a piercing, direct gaze. It was impossible to lie to him, or bend the truth even just a little. The King’s eyes widened when he realized whose robe Liselle had on. Dynan thought it better to ignore the incredulous look he got for that. Ambrose waved Liselle down almost impatiently when she moved to get up to bow to him.

The Captain of the King’s Guard, Melgan Lon, filled the doorway next, creaking of leather and chainmail. Dynan remembered putting that badge of office on, crawling into it when he was ten and being plastered to the floor by it. Melgan stared at them, his mouth dropping open as he came in. Brendin Moch, the King’s Secretary, and Roth Perquin, the First Minister, entered wearing the same expressions. Dynan saw that Boral Sloyl was there too, bringing up the rear. He was the Palace Master at Arms. They were all large men, physically fit and intimidating. All of them had closely cropped dark hair, except for Brendin, who was the King’s double. All of these men were Ambrose’s trusted friends and Dynan’s surrogate fathers.

For a moment, thick silence filled the room, but then Ambrose gestured Liselle over to make room on the bench for him.

His father leveled him with the ice blue stare he was famous for, eyebrows raised, demanding an immediate answer.

"I couldn't sleep," Dynan said.

Ambrose looked down at Liselle without commenting.

"Shalis couldn't sleep," she said quickly for her part of it.

"She appears to be missing from the group," Ambrose said.

"She never made it this far," Liselle said, outwardly unruffled by the King's presence. "She woke up, as usual, saying she was hungry, Your Majesty."

"Still?"

Liselle nodded. Dynan didn't know what they meant.

"As usual?" he asked and his father glanced at him again. Maybe he was surprised Dynan was talking too.

"She's been having problems sleeping through the night," Liselle said. "She would get up and of course before I came, Lady Hendel was with her, but she had some difficulty...I mean..."

"Rene is getting old," Ambrose said bluntly. "Shalis was waking up in the middle of the night and wandering around the Palace alone." Ambrose stopped at that, glancing at Liselle. "Something I hoped her Lady in Waiting wouldn't end up emulating."

"You can't count this as wandering the halls, Sir."

Dynan laughed at her tone. There weren't many people who would dare rebuke the King. She didn't seem to have the same sense of reverence or awe sitting here with him that most people did. She wasn't treating him as anything more than a concerned father.

Ambrose only frowned at him. "I thought she'd have settled down by now. I'm not sure what else to do about it."

"It's going to pass," Liselle said confidently. "She's going through a growth phase. She's hungry all the time. She complains about her arms and legs hurting. Once she's through it, I'm sure she'll go back to sleeping when she's supposed to."

"And then there's the matter of her going out to the cliffs to feed the birds," Ambrose said. "One wrong step and off she'll go. We'll never know what happened to her."

Liselle nodded in agreement but her gaze shifted to the table. Dynan thought she might still be taking Shalis out for the forbidden activity. Dynan knew his little sister liked feeding the gulls. It was a case of Ambrose being over-protective and one of those commands they all typically ignored.

"I should probably go check on her," Liselle said, but Ambrose shook his head and didn't move.

"I just looked in on her. Sound asleep. Luckily."

"Yes, that is lucky. Do you look in on her often, Your Majesty?" she asked. "Not that you shouldn't, of course..."

Ambrose was nodding. "I asked Lady Rene some time ago to get you...different...night clothes."

"They're very uncomfortable."

"You'll get used to them, and for future reference, it would be better if you didn't come in here. I'm not going to forbid it, even though I probably should. I know Shalis would keep giving you the code and you'd come anyway."

“I would never—”

“Yes, you would, just the way you’ve disobeyed my wishes about the damn cliff, but if I can’t break Shalis of the habit, it’s far better you go with her rather than her sneak off without you. If I can’t keep her from coming in here in the middle of the night, I’d rather you stay with her.” He turned to Dynan then, his eyes narrowing. “You...Not so much.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“You are well aware of all the reasons why you shouldn’t have stayed. What if I’d had Governor Taldic with me? Today? He’ll be up here later to join us for the service. What would I say to him to explain the two of you, like this?”

“It’s my fault,” Liselle said. Dynan wanted to stop her. “That’s what you would say, Your Majesty. I knew I shouldn’t have stayed. We were just talking. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Ambrose nodded to that while Dynan wanted to say something that would change the sentence, not able to think about not talking to her ever again, which was what his father really meant. Dynan was afraid if he did object Ambrose would just send her back where she came from.

The King stood so Liselle could scoot out. She rose to her feet, curtsied to him, keeping her head down, but when she glanced over at Dynan she was smiling. Dynan didn’t know what there was to smile about.

Making her way by the Surrogates, she headed off to the hall. Once around the corner, abruptly her hand came back into view clutching Dynan’s robe for a moment before letting it fall.

Everyone thought that was funny, and again, Dynan didn’t see why. It felt slightly off to him, the whole thing, his father’s reaction to finding them in the kitchen, as if he’d known already. Dynan was too tired and annoyed to figure it out. He stood to leave, not interested in listening to the five of them make fun of him.

Ambrose stopped him, one hand on his shoulder. “Listen, it’s time to get ready for the day.”

Dynan shrugged him off, mumbled under his breath that maybe he wouldn’t take the damn oath and walked out.

Back in his room, the wardrobe case that contained the clothes he had to wear for the ceremony stood in the corner and his attendant was with it.

Like the men in the other room, Dynan had known Regan Trinholm all his life. Between he and Lors Weich, who was Dain’s attendant, they kept after their things, and taught them not to make a huge mess everywhere they went. They kept up with their schedules and made sure they were where they were supposed to be on time.

“What’s wrong?” Regan asked.

“I hate my life,” Dynan said, flinging himself into the couch in front of the fireplace.

“You mean the life of ease and comfort?” Regan said. “Where you’re waited on for every need and desire?”

“Yes, that one,” Dynan said, pulling in another resigned breath. Sympathy for his station in life wasn’t something he got from anyone.

“I see.”

“He doesn’t trust me.”

“It isn’t a question of trust,” Regan said. “It’s a question of judgment and always has been. I think you know why he might question your judgment lately.”

Okay, so there'd been a few bad calls. Dynan's ability to go to the mountainside and work at the ruins was due solely to the semi-official function it turned into with the King's visit. Otherwise, he was under room arrest.

"It was two months ago."

"You or Dain, or even both of you, could have gotten yourselves killed in that pod crash," Regan said. "You knew the pods were recalled. You knew they were dangerous..."

Dynan rolled his eyes again. He'd heard this same lecture seven different times. This was Regan's third go at it.

"...frozen by the time you were found."

Dynan nodded and stood, aiming for the dressing room. "Dain was going with or without me. He even suggested I stay behind. He'd be dead now if I hadn't been there."

Regan wasn't impressed and then he picked up the talon from the table and held it up. "Where did you get this?"

Dynan took it from him, suddenly unwilling to have him touch it. "I found it."

"Where, Dynan?"

"Outside," he said and turned from him, hoping that would be the end of it.

"In the ruins yesterday? Shouldn't the Arc Group hold onto it then? It doesn't seem like the kind of thing you should leave lying around here."

"I'll ask next chance I get," Dynan said as he went into the washroom. He set the talon down on a shelf without the intention of asking anyone.

"Dynan," Regan said and then paused for a moment that ended in shaking his head. "Are you all right? It was a bad fall you took yesterday. You have a long day ahead of you."

A couple of snide comments came to mind about that long day, but Dynan refrained from taking his unhappiness out on Regan. He softened his response with a smile instead. Regan looked worried.

"A little banged up is all. It could have been worse."

He finished the cleaning up part pretty quickly, scrubbing down under a steady stream of hot water. Once he was out he felt better, less chilled to the bone. His father was there with the returned robe and Dynan barely stopped himself from yanking it out of his hands.

"Are you mad at me because you know I'm right?" Ambrose said, "or are you mad because you think I don't have any faith in you?"

Dynan didn't answer, except to look at him once before going back to getting dried off and dressed. Regan silently handed over articles of clothing as required until Dynan had on slacks and the shirt with the ruffled collar, along with a pair of dress boots. Everything was white.

His father stepped in to take over then. Dynan wished he'd go away.

"I can talk to her," he said finally, knowing how much that explained.

"Really?" Ambrose said, loosening the lace collar a little. "Better?"

"Yes, thanks."

"I wasn't suggesting you not talk to her ever again," Ambrose said then, helping him on with the vest and then the jacket coat. "But—"

Dynan groaned and his father laughed.

“You know the rules, and you know the list of them gets longer when you’re dealing with a Lady. A Lady at Court makes that list exponentially more complicated. So talk to her if you want, out in the hall where everyone can see you.”

“You know what will happen.”

“You’ll have to get used to people talking about it, Dynan. They talk about you all the time as it is and they have since the day you opened your eyes and drew breath. It’s time you accepted that fact, don’t you think?”

“And is it so impossible to say, even once, none of your business?”

“It’s far easier to...You know we keep having this same discussion, I can’t remember how many times now, over and over. How many times do you think, Regan?”

“Twenty or so, at least.”

“Over the last two years so—”

“That’s because you aren’t capable of doing anything about it.”

Ambrose only raised an eyebrow at the insult and shook his head. “If you can’t handle it now, how do you expect to manage what’ll happen when you walk into the next Palace Ball with Liselle Tremault on your arm?”

Dynan stared at him, hardly believing what he was hearing. Ambrose nodded, but then immediately dashed that small hope.

“Until you come to terms with the very public nature of your position, I question the wisdom of putting you in the thick of it. I can’t do much more to help you than I already am, and despite what you think, I am. Everything the Information Bureau puts out about you I approve directly. No one decides that but me.”

Ambrose took the white ceremonial robe with its white fur trim and white embroidered crests and dumped it on his shoulders, the weight of it making Dynan stagger a step. His father came around to the front, yanking the fabric into place and Dynan along with it.

“I let them have all the little things so I can pass on the big things that you really don’t want going out the door,” Ambrose said, attaching the fasteners of the robe onto the magnetic clasps that were inside the fabric of his coat. “They don’t know about a lot of the things that you and your brother get into. I know you hate it. Look at me.”

Dynan didn’t especially want to. His father was ramping up to ‘the point’, which wouldn’t likely improve the level of resentment Dynan had building up. It wasn’t just that the intimate details of what he did every day were out there for all to see. Too many times the achievements were glossed over in favor of amplifying the mistakes.

He had to act a certain way all the time. Talking to anyone he didn’t know was an excruciating ordeal. He had to take this oath when there wasn’t any need for it – he could hardly talk to girls much less do anything else with them – followed by a reception where speaking was a requirement. One day he’d inherit an enormous responsibility he didn’t think he’d ever be able to manage. It was all of those things. On top of the fact his father didn’t think he was capable either.

When Dynan did look at him, all that anger and resentment boiling to the surface, Ambrose shook his head in weary resignation.

“All right, never mind. I’m not going to get into another long, drawn out discussion with you over this. Apparently, you already know it all. I don’t want to argue.” Ambrose adjusted the robe again, fiddling with the clasps. “Listen, I know this is going to be hard for you. I understand, but for this, you have to do it on your own. You can’t ask Dain—”

“He already said he wouldn’t,” Dynan said. “He thinks it’s pretty stupid, so he won’t help me with it.”

“Is that what you think?” Ambrose asked.

“Does it matter?” Dynan said.

Ambrose thought about it and nodded, right before contradicting the gesture. “No. Sorry. There were plenty of things I had to do that I didn’t like either when I was your age. As long as you recognize this is for you and not for Dain to say for you.”

When Dynan didn’t answer his father clamped two hands onto his shoulders. Ambrose shook him.

“You’ll be fine. Talk to the High Bishop and forget about everyone else. It’s almost time for you to leave. We’ll be along in a few hours.”

A few hours after he’d been in solitary confinement, Dynan thought. That was part of the ceremony; that he should be locked up ahead of the service for a time of quiet contemplation. They were putting him in what amounted to a cell. He turned for the dressing room to retrieve the talon, making sure his father didn’t see what he was doing.

“Maybe I should just join up full time,” he muttered at the wall.

“If it’ll help with your frame of mind, maybe you should,” Ambrose said. “You wouldn’t be the first Prince to spend a few years with the High Bishop. My father made me do it, but I thought I’d give you the choice.”

Dynan didn’t answer, recognizing a line he shouldn’t cross. He heard his father talking about his time spent at the Temple enough to know he didn’t want any part of it.

Ambrose picked up the last required adornment. The sword he held, its hilt encrusted with sapphires, had a long history, going back as far as Bremen and possibly to Alurn since it was believed to be a gift to his young son shortly before he disappeared. Bremen gave the sword to Aolrin along with another to his younger son. That weapon with its emerald hilt now belonged to Dain.

This would be the first time Dynan was allowed to wear it in public, and he found he resented that too. It would rest on the Temple altar during the ceremony since tradition dictated that it was supposed to. Dynan guessed that was the real reason he’d gotten it when he did.

“I’ll see you there,” Ambrose said, and Dynan nodded. “Go on then. It’s time.”

Dynan turned from him and walked from his rooms, feeling isolated already. Dain was still asleep. None of the Surrogates came with him. His father stayed behind.





Chapter 4

Alurn Telaerin stood at the entrance to the Room of Orbs, sensing a change to the usual intensity of evil they put off. The entities before him hadn't changed since the day he died, except to multiply. They were why he was here, bound by the oath he'd uttered as life leaked from his body.

They had to be destroyed and he vowed to see that they were.

"The sooner the better," he said to them, though the monsters inside the orbs couldn't hear him. Now, he told himself, there was a chance, a slight one, albeit, but a chance for success this time, whereas he'd failed a thousand years ago.

He looked to the room again, trying not to dwell too much on the day that happened, the massive failure that then led to the near total destruction of the world - all of them - and the death of everything and everyone he loved.

But it'll be set to rights, he told himself. Soon.

The room itself wasn't out of the ordinary. Inside, six orbs stood on white marble pedestals. They were arranged in a half circle with enough space for a man to stand in their midst.

To the non-telepathic eye, the orbs seemed only clear glass balls. To a telepath they seemed only clear glass - benign, except for the arcing bands of energy that roved through the room, seeking to connect one to the other but always stopped just shy of success. It was hard to place what was wrong.

The sensation eased, and after a moment Alurn wondered if he'd imagined it. Being a ghost made accurate interpretation a struggle and frequently impossible. After a thousand years of wandering the stone hallways, it was a wonder he could feel anything at all.

Alurn pulled in what counted as a breath even though he didn't need air. He had a body he could feel leaning against the stone archway. He knew taste still, though the desire to eat or drink didn't exist except as memory. Smells came through still. That was due to his host being a living, breathing man and those aspects of his existence filtered through. Without Grady Vall, Alurn's ability to remain in this world wouldn't exist.

The salt air from the Wythe Sea saturated everything. The smells took him back to days as a boy when he set out in hardly more than a raft, using skill and raw nerve to ride the waves. Alurn missed the sea second only to missing his wife and children.

"Maybe a few others too," he said, "ahead of sailing the sea. Polen, Grint, Faulkin. I miss you. And I wonder what tortures you've endured because of me. Will you forgive me? Will the Gods grant me the strength to see this through and you saved?"

It wasn't the first time he'd asked that question.

Alurn grunted under his breath, doubt filling his mind. It was his will that helped keep the horrors contained in each of the orbs from spilling out into the world. He knew that. It was his strength passed down through the generations, his abilities through the long years he'd waited that would mean the difference between ruin and life.

Alurn turned from the orbs, rolling around the corner to look down the hall. The same strength and abilities also resided in two young men, the last of his line, sitting a few rooms away in the Temple. He remembered the day of their arrival in the world like it was yesterday too. Alurn hoped the power they held, combined with his own, would be enough.

"It has to be enough," he said.

"It's never enough, and never will be."

Alurn whipped around, startled and then afraid of the voice he recognized, a voice he hadn't heard since the day he died.

A mirror image of himself sneered back at him. He almost looked normal. Except for the eyes. The evil he'd embraced reflected in his black eyes.

Alurn stepped back, wishing at the same time for the days he'd not been afraid of his own brother.

"Once a fool," Adiem said, standing at the threshold of the room.

Alurn concentrated and felt the barrier still in place. He didn't know how Adiem was able to show himself outside the orb that contained him. There must have been a shift of balance, though Alurn didn't know how.

"Better a fool than an evil bastard."

"The things you do call us," Adiem said, tisking. "Enjoying your half-existence, brother?"

Alurn leaned against the far wall, trying to seem like he didn't want to run at the first opportunity. He hated being afraid and hated it more that Adiem knew.

"It's nice here. Nicer than your current residence. I bet you can't smell the ocean, can you? What do you want? I know you don't have much time. I can feel the energy you're expending to be here draining off you."

"To show you something," Adiem said, and stepped back.

Behind Adiem, at the sweep of his arm, the fabric of existence shred. A hole opened, revealing a shelf of rock inside a dark mountain of stone. Alurn knew it, having been there once before.

An altar stood surrounded by black pillars and chained to one of the rough-hewn stones was a woman. When she looked up, her blonde curls hanging dank around her face, Alurn knew her.

"No," he said, his voice constricting in his throat. "It isn't possible. I don't believe you. She escaped. She's with our children right now."

"I have her," Adiem said. "She didn't make it through after you left her here. As usual, you were too easily deceived."

"It's not true," Alurn said, staring at his beautiful Fadril and trembling at the misery he saw etched in her face.

Alurn didn't want to believe it. The day he died played over again – falling in the old Temple up in the mountain, Fadril standing over him and then staggering back after she somehow managed to kill Adiem, but mortally wounded herself. They'd found

themselves awakening again in a strange, terrifying land where the monsters they'd only dreamed of were real. They realized they were in the Between, the Well of Souls, neither living, nor dead. Not in the Blessed Realm with the promise of eternal peace, but not quite in the demon's lair. Another battle for their soul's survival ensued.

Alurn remembered the High Bishop, the first one of the new age, coming to save his soul, and he thought his wife's too. At least that's what Alurn always believed, but he remembered the confusion and chaos that surrounded them, the hounds of hell that leapt and gnashed at them. The children weren't there at the gateway to the void. They'd been saved, but Alurn realized he didn't know how.

"You never did think of anyone but yourself," Adiem said, reading his thoughts. "So it's no wonder you don't know."

Alurn looked again to Fadril, terror filling his mind that she really had been taken. Alurn knew he couldn't stand the thought of leaving her there. But Adiem couldn't be trusted either. He stood torn between fear that his brother was lying and fear that he was telling the truth.

"She gave up her soul for her children," Adiem said. "Your children, who you utterly failed to protect. She is the one paying the price for your stupidity and arrogance. There's nothing you can do about it either. After all this time, I wanted you to know."

Adiem stepped back and Alurn thought the portal would close, sealing him away from the only woman he ever loved. "You bastard!"

He lunged forward, wanting to rip the smirk from Adiem's face, wanting to destroy him, and felt fingers close around his neck. He heard the gateway snap closed behind him.

Adiem laughed, an iron hard grasp wrenching Alurn's hand away. Pillars surrounded them. Fadril threw her head back, laughing, her face melting away to become another copy of Adiem, one of the six versions of him that existed.

Alurn stared at her after-image, plunged into sudden, awful realization. Adiem laughed and the other five joined him.

"Once a fool," they said.





Chapter 5

Maralt Adaeryn listened to the intoned prayers of the High Bishop of Cobalt echoing through the vastness of the Sanctuary Temple, caught and cast by the vaulted ceiling. A cleared throat, a soft word, the whisper of a gown being adjusted, all seemed magnified. The smell of burning wax drifted through the heavier scents of perfume and holy oil.

Maralt stood behind the last pew, swathed in the brown robes of a monk, at the back of the Temple in a line of similarly clad initiates, though he wasn't one, careful to keep his mind shielded and his thoughts to himself. The hood he wore was drawn closely enough to cover his eyes and cover his head. No other monk in the building - most of whom were old men - had long, black hair so his would give him away if the High Bishop happened to glance his way.

"Who am I kidding?" he said to himself. "He probably knows we're here."

Carryn stood some distance away, wearing the same thing, also trying not to be noticed. They weren't supposed to be at the service where the alleged savior of the universe, the anointed one, the keeper of the sacred flame was taking a vow to forgo having sex until he was married.

Maralt doubted he'd fulfill that one.

There were fears, maybe valid ones, that meeting the two princes before the appointed hour might cause some kind of calamity, but the old man seemed more frail than usual. Maralt and Carryn decided to ignore the edict to stay away.

Dynan couldn't see anything but the back of the apse anyway. The Prince knelt before the altar and the giant seal covering the wall. A yellow firestone blazed in the sphere's center. Seven stones, representing the seven Gods and the seven tenets, orbited in a field of color. Blue prevailed over green and white, slashing outward in powerful bands. By some means no one knew, the seal glowed from within.

Purifying one's soul took a lot of time. There were lengthy prayers for forgiveness of sins Maralt doubted Dynan even thought of committing. Not many people knew the High Bishop suggested this ceremony to the King, which meant there was some greater significance to the vow that Gradyn didn't intend to share. Maralt wondered if maybe there was some benefit instilled from it, some protection the High Bishop felt was necessary perhaps.

As he watched the service, Maralt questioned again if he believed the things he'd been told nearly the whole of his life. The idea that their worlds, all of humanity, were locked in some sort of time loop wasn't an easy concept to accept. It would continue until a specific set of events happened, or were prevented as the case may be, breaking the

cycle and restoring the true Gods. Maralt wasn't so sure he believed in the Gods. He wasn't certain he believed that Dynan and Dain Telaerin, who were just boys after all, were the ones who would save the world or fail in the attempt.

Maralt wondered too, why Dain's participation in this service hadn't been suggested, other than the fact it was too late for him.

"He's going to need the protection of the Gods even more than his brother," Maralt said in another muted whisper.

While Dynan knelt at the altar, Dain sat in comfort in the first pew. Maralt could hear Dain telepathically helping his brother get through all the responses. Dain wasn't exactly speaking for him, but he was right there with him, telling Dynan the words when he stumbled and couldn't speak. Maybe that would be enough.

A blaze of white light surrounded them both, as if two small versions of the sun had landed right on the planet. That was easy enough to believe in. Maralt wanted to explore that radiance and discover why it was. It was hard to deny there was power there.

There was something else that lay on Dynan like a shadow. Maralt saw it and felt it, but couldn't figure the cause and wanted a closer look. It was a sensation like flying, moving with only the power of his mind down the long aisle toward the altar. An ember of darkness resided inside the glowing light, but Maralt still couldn't see what made it.

Dynan tilted his head then, glancing sidelong over his shoulder. Maralt backed away, and put up a stronger mental shield to block him. Dain didn't have any constraints about turning around and searching for the source of disturbance. He would have kept looking, but the King leaned in and whispered to him. Maralt swore softly under his breath, concentrated harder and willed them both to go back to paying attention to the service.

Carryn stood close beside him then. She was slightly shorter than he, looking at him with grey eyes that in certain lighting sometimes seemed white. Her hood was back more than it should have been.

"Dynan almost saw you," she whispered. They couldn't risk communicating telepathically with each other with the twins this close. They'd probably hear it.

"He hardly noticed," Maralt said, shaking his head at her tendency to over-react.

"You aren't supposed to listen in like that," she said in his ear.

"Would you relax? Nothing will come of it."

A monk standing near them cleared his throat quietly, and Maralt became aware that silence blanketed the room. The High Bishop had stopped talking. Dynan didn't speak.

For this ceremony, there was a series of responses. A lot of them. The last reply neared an hour ago. They were close to the end of the service where Dynan actually had to take the vow.

"Tell him you've changed your mind and he'll have to figure a way out of the rest of it," Dain said to his brother.

"Not very supportive of him," Maralt said, smiling when Carryn punched his arm.

People shifted in their seats, but Dynan wasn't paying attention to them. He was looking up at the High Bishop.

"Dynan, it's the end of the ceremony. Get on with it. I'm not saying this part. I already told you I wouldn't. I don't want my soul rotting in hell. I mean, it's not like I really believe it, but—"

"There's something wrong with the High Bishop."

Maralt straightened, looking closer and realized Dynan was right. Even at this distance he could see Gradyn seemed suddenly disoriented.

"Maybe you better get this over with," Dain said. He glanced back over his shoulder again, but Maralt ignored him. "He looks like he needs to sit down."

"In sight of the Gods, in the presence of my King, and these honored guests who have gathered as witness here in the sacred Temple, this vow I freely take."

Dynan said the words quietly, and faster than the gravity of the ceremony called for, but the next instant, he jumped to his feet in a rush. The High Bishop crumpled. Dynan just barely managed to catch him.

He couldn't hold him up though. Dain was there before anyone else could react other than to gasp, and together they helped ease the High Bishop to the floor. He looked dead.

"Sir? Eminence?" Dynan said. He hadn't yet learned how to disguise his emotions and looking from Dain back to his father it was easy to see he was worried. The hall erupted into noise and motion.

"Maralt, you can't," Carryn said and grabbed his arm to restrain him when he meant to go to Gradyn's aid. "You can't."

There were a number of people already moving to help, Eldelar Elger, the Chief of Palace Medicine among them and his daughter, Geneal, who was also a doctor. Several monks too, clerics and priests, converged before the altar.

A cloud cut across the sun, extinguishing the brightness of the day, and a shadow rolled from the Sacred Seal to the back of the sanctuary where Maralt stood with Carryn.

"That can't be good," he said. On this pristine day there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

Maralt hesitated and then went through Dynan again to make sure the High Bishop was all right, closer than he'd dared before. It was like standing in a ray of sunlight on a warm summer day.

Dynan turned to look over his shoulder, but the High Bishop drew his attention back. "I'm all right," he said, glancing through Dynan right at Maralt, who was only touching Dynan's mind enough to use his eyes. Gradyn was the only one with the skill to see him.

"Are you sure?" Dynan asked at the same time Maralt did.

"I'm certain," Gradyn said. "We should go on with the service."

"You mean it isn't over?" Dain said, and his voice carried farther than he intended.

Gradyn chuckled. "Almost. Dain would you get that clear vial that's on the altar for me." He grimaced when he thought to straighten and then changed his mind. Dynan still supported him with an arm behind his back. "Everyone go sit down again. Please, Your Majesty. I'm quite all right."

Ambrose didn't seem inclined to agree. He didn't obey, though the monks around them shuffled back to their places. Dain came back with the vial of holy oil. Gradyn gestured him down beside him again with Dynan. He opened the vial and dabbed his finger. He drew the sacred seal on Dynan's forehead, a circle with a dot in the center and then to Dain's astonishment, did the same to him.

"May the Gods go with you both," he said, as he recapped the vial. "Now, we're finished."

Maralt eased back, not certain what had just happened, but knew there was more to it than Gradyn fainting. Back with Carryn, he took her by the arm and drew her through the side doorway out of the Temple with him. There was something wrong and there was only one place he knew to look for a problem.

“The Room of Orbs,” Carryn said and Maralt nodded.

They waited until they were out of sight to hurry down the outer hallway. The corridor moved by in a blur, following the line of the sanctuary and then a series of short halls, turning right, left, and then left once more as they rushed from the Temple.

Maralt didn’t know what to expect. He’d seen the High Bishop in the room on occasion, but couldn’t go in himself. He’d been warned, a number of times, it would mean his death if he dared it.

He and Carryn stopped at the entrance. A strange, low-pitched vibration came from the room. The crystals weren’t clear any more, but nearly filled with roiling black, like storm clouds accelerated in their formation. Even as they watched, a coiling band detached from one orb and joined another.

“How is that possible?” Carryn said, breathing hard more from fear than the rush to get there.

Maralt responded by pulling her behind him, and putting an arm in front of her. She looked around him to see the room when he wanted to take her as far away from this place as he could.

“The Six aren’t contained anymore,” he said, trying to fathom how that could have happened. There wasn’t any other explanation for what they were seeing. “They aren’t here in the world. Yet. I don’t know what’s stopping them.”

An undulating band came from the center most crystal, and shot forward to the entryway. Maralt thought it would keep coming, breach the tenuous barrier and enter the world. He tensed, wondering what he could do to prevent the next catastrophe.

It came right to the plane of the entryway and held there as if it was looking at them.

Carryn pulled him by the arm, making him take a step back. “What could cause this?”

“I can think of a few things,” Maralt said, watching the coil pulsing as if testing for weaknesses. It looked like the same dark bands from Carryn’s vision.

“The talisman is the only...” Carryn said. “You’re talking about the talisman? Dynan has it?”

“I don’t know.” Maralt pulled her back from the room. He didn’t like the feel of it. “We should go.”

Carryn agreed and they retraced their steps back toward the Sanctuary, but didn’t feel any lessening of the sense of evil. They rounded a corner and the veil of dread lifted abruptly. Maralt looked around for the cause, confused since they were alone, until he heard voices approaching. He saw the blaze of light advancing toward them.

“Your hood,” he said to Carryn, and pulled on his own.

Carryn yanked the hood down to cover her face and stuffed her hands into the sleeve of her robes to hide the fact that she was a woman. They both put their backs to the wall an instant before the King’s entourage came to the corner.

Maralt could see through the weave of the fabric that the High Bishop was with them, surrounded by other members of the Palace household, and trailing a line of monks. Gradyn walked with Dynan on one side and Dain on the other. Each held an arm out for him to lean on and they moved with slow care.

While he seemed all right, Maralt thought Gradyn was just holding on until everyone left. It was difficult to tell because of the glowing white light that enveloped him. Standing inside that nimbus was probably the only reason he was still on his feet.

"Forgive me for the distraction," Gradyn said, "and the disruption. The reception would have been the most enjoyable part of the day."

Dynan shook his head without looking up from the floor, though he did smile for a moment. Maralt could feel his relief.

"We don't mind, Eminence," Dain said for him. "Really, we don't."

"Of course. I suppose the best part is having it all over with," Gradyn said with a dry laugh. He patted Dynan's hand. "I think today, I completely agree. Thank you again for your quick reaction. You saved me quite a bruising. Both of you."

"Are you sure you're all right now?" Ambrose asked as he stopped at the intersection of halls. "Dr. Elger can stay if you want him to."

"No, no, that won't be necessary. It's passing. Eldelar doesn't have a cure for old age anyway."

"Not yet, though I do keep asking him to work on it," the King said with a slight smile. "All right then. We'll leave you to a much more restful afternoon, and don't worry about the reception. We'll have something in a week or two at the Palace. You can come over for that. If you'd like."

"I'd like it very much, Your Majesty. I appreciate your understanding."

Dynan and Dain let him go and at their father's nod left the building through the side door. The hall seemed suddenly plunged into darkness.

Maralt waited for all the pleasantries to conclude and for the rest of the Royal exit before moving to Gradyn's side, sensing that he was at the end of endurance. The door closed, cutting off the warble of the transfers pulling away.

Maralt wrapped his arms around Gradyn as his knees gave out. He dismissed the other hovering monks with a wave of his hand, holding the High Bishop up.

"What is it?" Maralt asked as Carryn moved to help on the other side.

Gradyn couldn't speak, though he tried to, clutching at Maralt without effect.

"The Room of Orbs—" Carryn started to say, but Gradyn cut her off.

"He's gone," he said.

Maralt tightened his grip as the High Bishop collapsed unconscious. Carryn looked with bewildered eyes as Maralt leaned and picked him up. He hardly weighed anything at all.

"Who?" she said. "Who's gone?"





Chapter 6

Maralt knocked softly at the door to the High Bishop's bedroom and then didn't wait for an answer to look in. Carryn sat in the small room by his bedside and she shook her head in response to the unasked question. They'd taken turns through the night watching over him, but Gradyn hadn't stirred. He was breathing. His heart beat as usual. A Temple physician had checked him again and found nothing wrong.

"I've got this," Maralt said. "Go get some sleep."

She shook her head again, but dragged to her feet. "What's happening at the Palace?"

"Nothing. They spent the rest of the day in their rooms yesterday. Dain was drawing and Dynan was...I don't know exactly."

"Does he have it?"

"I couldn't tell. It's hard to get near him without Dain coming right in. It's like they never separate. Since yesterday, every time I tried to reach Dynan, I ran into Dain instead. I'm not sure I could stand that kind of over-protective, constant presence."

"You're the same way with me," Carryn said.

"I am not."

"Are too," she said. "You don't even realize you're doing it. I don't mind. I imagine that Dain is the same way toward Dynan. Watching over his brother is a part of who he is, just like you watching over me is part of you. There are some things it's just not worth arguing about, Maralt, and this is one of them. What about the orbs?"

"The same. No worse. No better."

"What are we going to do?" Carryn asked.

"I could get to Dynan, and find out if he has the talisman, but I might not be able to make him forget the intrusion. Dain will be all over me, so I'll have to make him forget too. It would hurt them both to force it, quite a lot."

"I can't believe we weren't warned," she said.

"It isn't your fault, Carryn. You haven't ever had any control over what you see."

"I feel like I've let everyone down."

"You haven't," Maralt said, looking down at the High Bishop. "He would say the same thing. Go get some sleep. If things change, I'll need you here."

"Don't try to reach Dynan," she said from the doorway, and nodded to Gradyn. "He wouldn't want you to."

"The alternative is to wait for him to tell us. In this case, I'm not so sure waiting is a good idea."

"I think until we know who's gone, especially since it isn't Dynan or Dain, we don't have a choice," she said.

"You sound just like him," Maralt said.

"I do not."

He nodded instead of answering and she rolled off the door, leaving him to the watch.

"I do not," her thought reached him, and Maralt laughed over her stubbornness. She would argue if he answered, so he blocked his thoughts from her until she let it go.

He settled back in the chair by the High Bishop and waited until Carryn was asleep in her room. Maralt thought about not reaching Dynan for a moment or two, but didn't listen to the internal arguments for long. He concentrated. It was a little like tiptoeing up behind someone, hiding back in the shadows of other thoughts.

It wasn't quite dawn yet, so he didn't expect either of the twins would be awake, but Maralt found Dynan looking out one of the windows of his rooms. He was dressed for the day. He wore a cloak over a coat and gloves. Maralt knew their schedule. There wasn't anything on it to suggest they would be going out at this hour.

Again, being this close to Dynan was like standing in a pool of liquid flame, not quite being burned, but not entirely comfortable either. The eddying glow was distracting. It was intoxicating being inside it, throwing Maralt into a state of near euphoria that made thinking clearly difficult.

Dynan turned around sharply, searching his room. Too close, Maralt concentrated on the wall paneling, studying the way the grain of the wood ran in lines and loops, the shade of stain and how it saturated one area and not another. It was difficult but not impossible to hide this way, invisible to Dynan by making him see what was familiar instead of Maralt.

The Prince was sensitive, but untrained. Maralt managed the visual cover for a moment or two. Dynan frowned over it, staring hard at the wall, but then went back to looking outside.

Maralt meant to look for the talisman in Dynan's thoughts, but found he couldn't get any closer. A palpable wall kept him out. He couldn't get by it without using force and making Dynan aware of him. The shadow was still there and Maralt wondered if it was self-propagating. He shook his head at the thought. The talisman was an object, not a living thing.

Sensing Dynan was about to discover him, Maralt backed off. He realized too that he was using a huge amount of energy to stay hidden. He felt himself shaking. Fatigue flowed through him. He couldn't stay much longer and remain unseen.

Dynan pulled a comboard from a pocket and looked at it briefly before setting it down on the table by his bed. Everyone carried one, so leaving his behind was deliberate. Without it, he couldn't be traced.

Dynan turned from the window then and left his bedroom. He moved down the hall toward the kitchen, but stopped about halfway, across from a guest bedroom where a chair stood in an alcove with its high back against the wall. The next instant, Dain was there. He was wearing his sword and Maralt realized Dynan was too.

"Did you get the gold?" Dynan asked as he approached. Dain nodded, but his expression changed as he looked hard at his brother.

The surroundings melted and frayed, blending with the stone wall of the High Bishop's room. Maralt's body shook as he sat by the old man, trying at the same time to stay at the Palace.

Dain was tucking away a bulging leather coin purse into an inside coat pocket. He wore a heavy cloak too, and drew on a pair of gloves before stepping up onto the chair. He attached a small spanner to the back, which then sealed the chair to the wall with a click. Maralt didn't understand why until Dain climbed up onto the upholstered high back, and perched there while he popped the alcove ceiling out of place. He lifted the piece up above the roof beams of the Palace, sliding it out of the way. The next moment, he pulled himself up into the hole. Dynan followed him.

Maralt meant to stay with them, but his strength failed right as he caught sight of the Palace rafters. Dain was already making his way along a thick beam aiming for the far corner of the building. Maralt wanted to know where they were going, but Dain looked back. It was like getting body slammed and Maralt's vision blurred. When it cleared, he was sitting beside the High Bishop again.

"You'll find staying with them increasingly difficult," Gradyn said and startled Maralt. "They'll see you eventually."

"Maybe it's time they do," Maralt said, and poured a glass of water. His hands were shaking when he held it out.

Gradyn pushed himself to a sitting position, wincing as he moved, and took the glass. He sipped the water and shook his head. "Not like this, no."

"I think Dynan has the talisman," Maralt said.

Gradyn only nodded, setting the glass on the table and drew his legs over the side of the cot.

Maralt knew it was true before this confirmation, but it still came as a shock. "How?"

"Does it surprise you that enemies of the light have the means to so easily change what we know?" Gradyn shook his head. "I'm too old for these times, Maralt. This shouldn't have happened."

"But it has, and we have to do something to counter it."

Gradyn shook his head again. "Some things can't be changed back."

"I can take the talisman from him," Maralt said.

"The talon was a catalyst, a way to weaken the boundary so they could break through."

"I can stop this."

"No, Maralt, you can't. Not alone. You were never meant to do this alone."

"Then with who?" Maralt asked. He didn't think Gradyn meant Carryn and the old man seemed reluctant to explain. "You said yesterday that someone was gone. Who?"

Gradyn frowned over it, holding an internal debate visible in his aged face. He said often enough he was afraid of revealing something that could change the future. It was the same reaction he had when Carryn had a vision they had questions about. All his life, Maralt had seen the High Bishop struggle with this burden. He didn't want to add to it.

"It's all right," Maralt said. "Tell me or not. I'll take what comes and what help anyone wants to give, or has to give if that's the case. You needn't fear for me either way."

Gradyn smiled at that and patted his shoulder as he pushed to his feet. He moved to the narrow window that opened onto the central courtyard, a small sheltered square that divided the Temple sanctuary from the rest of the building. He stood there for a time in silence, leaning his hands against the window ledge.

"The fact of his existence is probably the greatest secret ever kept," the High Bishop said finally. "There's a danger, Maralt, in knowing too much. There's a greater danger in acting on that knowledge. The balance of our existence could swing too far the other way, and our actions give aid to our enemies."

Maralt wasn't sure what he was talking about, or who, trying to think whose existence was so secret. It didn't seem like Gradyn would say.

"They've done something I didn't foresee," Gradyn said, turning from the window. "Our primary concern for so long has been for Dynan and Dain, and rightly so. Never before have our enemies been able to cross the boundary between us. I'm not sure which one of the Six came here. Not that it matters."

Maralt suppressed a shudder, closing his eyes against welling fear. That one of the Six could cross the barrier that had contained them for countless ages was almost beyond contemplation. One of them crossed the endless dark and handed Dynan Telaerin a thing of evil. All of it was intended to pull Dynan into their realm of existence.

"It's one of their goals," the High Bishop said, reading Maralt's thoughts. "Another means to an end, *the* end. They have to have both Dynan and Dain, and one other."

"Another?" Maralt said.

"There are others," Gradyn said. "In my singular concern for Dynan and Dain, I've overlooked this danger, perhaps a greater danger. I didn't believe it was possible they could take him. I'm going to tell you something that is extremely dangerous for you to know. Once it's no longer necessary for you to have this knowledge, it will be taken from you. Do you agree to this? It's important that you do so willingly, Maralt, or the extraction will be the most painful thing you ever endure."

He was taken by surprise by the demand and the warning, but Maralt understood it, though he wasn't certain how he'd take a memory of his own. When he saw Gradyn biting back a smile, he realized the High Bishop would do it himself, even though the High Bishop wasn't a telepath.

"I didn't know you could," Maralt said, and then he nodded. "All right. You know I'll do anything I can to help you."

"Even when you hardly believe any of it is real?" Gradyn said with another slight smile.

"Yes," Maralt said. "Call it blind faith if you like."

"A thousand years ago, Alurn Telaerin died in a terrible struggle to preserve the world. He failed to stop the demon's rise. It came into the world. The Gods responded. The world was cleansed and very nearly destroyed as it has been so many times beyond count."

"I know the story."

"You don't know this. Alurn survived. He was given the opportunity to exist, not in the physical world, but here in the Temple."

"Alurn Telaerin is a ghost?"

The High Bishop pulled in a sharp breath, reminding Maralt to be careful of his choice of words. Being called a ghost was nearly as bad as being called a wraith.

"Soul spirit is the preferred term," Gradyn said with an arched brow, but then he shook his head. "But yes. Alurn is the reason I can do the things I can. Down through the ages, each High Bishop has carried this weight and this power, all to bring Alurn here to this time."

"So he can face the demon again."

"Only the Gods can face the demon. With Alurn, it's more a question of balance and order, and most importantly, knowledge."

"What's happened to him?"

"He's gone," Gradyn said. "The greater majority of his presence in this realm is missing. I'm not sure how it happened. He's been taken, or most of him anyway."

"I don't understand," Maralt said.

"Since the beginning of my tenure as High Bishop, through the years I've known of him, he's left before, to heal the destruction he feels responsible for. He leaves something of himself behind to maintain the connection to me, so I have that still. When I fell yesterday, I felt as though I was being ripped in half, only it wasn't me, it was that part of Alurn that resides with me, being torn in two. They've taken what they can of him and I fear the worst."

"What's worse?" Maralt asked, a little afraid to find out it could be more. Dynan having the talisman in his possession was horrible enough.

"Alurn is trapped at the Gate," Gradyn said. "Maralt, he was the strongest telepath the world has ever known. If the Six have him, the balance of power could shift."

"They'll have the strength to counter the Gods," Maralt said.

"They may gain the strength to destroy them if we can't get Alurn back. You can't imagine the kind of life we'll be left with."

"Carryn's vision," Maralt said, standing to move to Gradyn's side. "What would you have me do?"

"It's a terrible choice we must make, a horrible risk to take," he said. "If I could send you after Alurn I would. It doesn't matter your bravery or your strength, both of which you have in ample supply. It isn't possible. This place, the very gateway to hell, would break your mind, Maralt, and then they'd have you as well. There's only one who can go and come back without taint."

"Dynan."

"Yes."

"But not Dain?"

"We can't let both of them be taken," Gradyn said. "One of them, one of the Chosen has to go to them willingly."

"And Dain would go. If Dynan was in trouble, he'd go without thinking."

"We can't let him follow his brother."

Maralt nodded, wondering how they could stop him if it came to it. "You knew this would happen. It's why you had Dynan go through the ceremony."

"The prophecy is never quite so clear or direct as to name a place or time or specific action. Alurn feared they would try to take Dynan, and meant to give him some protection."

"But the prophecy warns they have to have them both," Maralt said. "The Six need them to open the gate."

“Yes, and they will try to do just that. I believe it will be today, in fact. They intend to take Dynan, and lure Dain after him.”

“What?”

“Some things can’t be stopped, Maralt. They can only be managed, and perhaps, with a large amount of luck, they can be altered enough toward our purpose so that their purpose is thwarted.”

“Dynan is going to be attacked and you’re saying it can’t be stopped?”

Gradyn nodded. “It can’t, and now we don’t want to, but Maralt, there is a difference between them taking him and us sending him.”

Gradyn explained then what he meant, and at first Maralt couldn’t believe it, or think he could do what was being asked of him, all for the nebulous reason of retrieving a man a thousand years dead. Maralt had a hard time believing he even existed or could possibly be worth the risk.

Gradyn looked at him, and Maralt knew he’d heard the thought as clearly as if he’d said it out loud. “I need you to believe.”

The High Bishop leaned back, using the window ledge to half sit on. The contours of his face started to change, the stance of his body straightening from stooped to upright. His hair darkened from grey to black and lengthened to his shoulders. Sagging skin tightened against the line of his jaw. His eyes sharpened to the acute blue quality his descendants all carried with them. Maralt found himself drawn in by them and the man who now leaned at his ease before him.

The blue eyes narrowed slightly. “You’re very much like him,” Alurn Telaerin said, watching Maralt in a way that was direct and unsettling. Maralt didn’t know what he meant either. Was he like the High Bishop or someone else?

“I thought you were missing.”

“I’m the connection,” he said in a tone indicating Maralt should have known that and indeed, Gradyn had already told him. “I haven’t the time to explain it all. You should trust him. He trusts you.”

“I do trust him.”

“Then don’t doubt him.”

Before Maralt could ask a single question, Alurn was gone, returning in quick reversal to the High Bishop of Cobalt, who swayed where he stood.

Maralt lurched forward to catch him.

“This thing I ask of you,” he said, his voice hardly a whisper. He hadn’t any strength and Maralt eased him over to his bed. “There’s danger to you as well, more than you think.”

“I understand.”

Gradyn rolled his eyes closed at that; the usual response to any claims of perception. “I’m not talking about physical danger, though there will probably be that, too. It’s the threat to your soul that concerns me more. You have to be careful.”

“I will be,” Maralt said, hoping to ease Gradyn’s anxiety. His face was a sickly shade of white. “Tell me what I should do and I’ll do it.”

Gradyn nodded and indicated he wanted to stand. Maralt wasn’t sure he could, but helped him up and then held him steady until he could manage on his own.

“You mustn’t tell Carryn of this,” Gradyn said. “Doing so could alter what she sees, or even alert the other side to our plans. I’ll explain it to her when the need comes. I’m

going to show you how to give a part of yourself to Dynan and Dain. It's the same thing Alurn has done with me, but Maralt, you mustn't ever do it again. It weakens you, the core of who you are. Twice is more than a man ought to manage, but you're young yet. You'll have time to recover. Hopefully. Once it's done, I don't think you can reverse it either. I don't know for certain. I've never tried."

"Dynan and Dain Telaerin are going to have a part of me with them for the rest of their lives?" Maralt said, stunned by the idea of it and a little concerned too.

"Yes."

"Will it change them?"

"A better question would be; will it change you, which is yes, probably, for a time at least. I don't think it's enough to change them, except to give them strength and us a better chance of seeing them through this."

"All right," Maralt said. The High Bishop approached with his hand held out, touching Maralt's face with two fingers to his temple to teach him what to do. "I'm ready."





Chapter 7

High Commander Gloik left the King's office and Ambrose Telaerin smiled after him in case the Commander glanced back. He resisted the urge to flop into his chair, turning instead to look out at the rising sun as light painted the eastern horizon red. Even the grey sea rolled a shade of magenta.

"It's going to snow again," he said to the windowpane. There were mountains of the stuff already built up along the walks and roads. Winters in Rianamar were a thing of legend.

Ambrose rubbed his eyes to ease his weariness. He'd been up half the night dealing with a crisis that shouldn't have been considered one. A Murian patrol ship crossed the boundary into Cobalt territory. The latest incursion was a case of a poorly trained pilot misreading his coordinates. Nothing more. A number of his military commanders didn't agree with his assessment, but in the end they did as he said. It was getting to that agreement that he sometimes found annoying. He didn't have limitless power as King, even when the covenant said he did.

The sound of someone's thumping approach made him turn from the window. Roth Perquin, Brendin Moch and Melgan Lon hardly paused at the door before coming in.

"There's a problem," Brendin said, while Roth was communicating through his comboard, tapping the face of it in rapid succession.

Melgan tapped a comboard he held, his expression more dour than usual, and he reached across the black dreywood desk to synchronize the device with the comterm embedded in the surface. He touched a final control to complete the file transfer, set the comboard down, folded his arms and stood back.

The image of a detention cell flickered into view. White cushioned walls and white padded floors reflected light back to the imager and cast a glare across the screen before it was filtered out. For a moment they were looking at an empty room.

Ambrose was about to ask what this was all about, when he heard a low mutter, followed by a man coming into view. His hair was neatly combed. He wore clothes that were clean and well tailored. Magnetic cuffs bound his wrists and ankles, making it impossible for him to move at more than a shuffle.

"What is..." Ambrose started.

"The Demon Lord. The Demon Lord. The Demon Lord. He says...he says...he says...they have to die. The Twin Princes. They have to die. He says they have to die. He'll drink their blood. The Demon Lord will rise. The darkness will come again."

The man's head jerked, his body twitching in an uncontrolled spasm. He turned to the imaging node that was in the upper corner of the room. He stared into it as though he knew Ambrose was there, listening while his sons were threatened.

"They have to die," the man said. A chill crawled up Ambrose's spine. He'd heard of the Demon Lord before, from his father – the day he died. "Dynan and Dain Telaerin have to die. They're going to die. They're going to die today."

The image flickered to black.

"This morning there've been four other reports of this same threat, almost word for word," Melgan said. The Captain glanced at Roth, who was finished with the comboard and shook his head at an unspoken question. "All of them have come from people who don't have a history of any mental illness who are now just gibbering mad. One of them was up in the mountains with Dynan at the site where he fell."

"What?"

Melgan nodded. "Ron Feldor. He's been on that project for years. Ever since Dynan found the place. At the moment, there's no explanation for these delusions."

"We've already sent out extra patrols," Roth said.

Ambrose didn't understand why patrols would be necessary since Dynan and Dain were upstairs asleep...

"The boys are missing," Roth said.

"They snuck out," Melgan said. "Again."

Roth nodded when Ambrose didn't believe it, a knot of fear centering in his stomach. He couldn't believe they'd do this again after what happened the last time with the length of the resulting punishment.

"I've recalled their guards," Melgan went on. "Their regular complement, the only ones who've ever had any luck finding them were out on a training mission. I'm guessing that's not a coincidence and the boys knew somehow, which means—"

"Dain hacked into the mainframe," Ambrose said and wanted to hit something. Instead, he put his knuckles onto the polished dreywood desk, tapping with increasing force before he stopped himself.

"I'm sure they'll be fine, Ambrose," Brendin said. "They're just in town like usual. Their friends are with them, so they aren't alone. All these people are in a cell."

"All of them?" Ambrose said. "Or just the ones we know about?"





Chapter 8

Dynan stood in a sitting room in Bronwyn Esrel's three-story home, listening to the party across the hall. A burst of laughter, a deep baritone voice - Ames Lithford it sounded like - bragging about some challenge or other he'd beaten Lyle Dowd at, followed by more laughter.

Bronwyn's home was a narrow building of stone, situated on a side street in Rianamar several blocks out of the central part of town with similar homes lined up on both sides of the road. Dain met her a few months ago, fell in love with her - though he wouldn't admit that to just anyone, like it wasn't obvious to anyone with eyes - and decided he couldn't tolerate the idea of her sleeping in a stairwell at a local pub.

Girls, it turned out, were expensive. Dain meant well, but affording this place was beyond him. Until he broke into the Crown vault, anyway, and stole a handful of gold coins that would keep everyone plush for months. Dynan didn't ask how Dain had gotten into one of the most secure places on the planet. Sometimes, it was better not knowing.

After breakfast at the bakery, lunch at the Wagon Wheel and time spent in a few other shops around town, they spent the latter half of the day with Bronwyn in quiet comfort. With the assistance of a few merchants, they managed to avoid a lot of Palace Guards.

Dynan rubbed his hand and the places where the talon cut him. The tiny wounds stung more today, bothering him much more than his back ever did. The hall faded and a dark shelf of rock opened around him, but another shout from the other room brought him back. He reached back for the wall to steady himself. He felt in his coat pocket for the talon and wondered if he should get rid of it.

"Maybe you should," Dain said, coming out into the hall. "I told you not to pick it up."

Dynan had shown him the strange visions he kept having that seemed to coincide with finding the talon. He wasn't ready to connect his blood dripping on the ground with causing a ground shift. Not yet.

The question of what it all meant remained. By mutual agreement, they decided not to discuss it since doing so didn't give them any answers. Spending the day in Rianamar with Bronwyn was a needed distraction. They'd planned this expedition long ago, well before the pod crash and the ensuing lock down, or Dynan falling through a hole in the ground.

"Should what?" Bronwyn asked, as she joined them. "What's wrong, Dynan?"

He shook his head for an answer, wishing he could get rid of the terrible visions that kept playing through his mind. It was almost constant now.

Except of course when Dain was undressing Bronwyn in his mind and sharing. She was a beautiful and well-endowed brunette with amber eyes.

"I'm going out," Dynan said silently. He knew he wouldn't want to be anywhere nearby in a few short minutes. Sometimes, it wasn't an entirely comfortable sensation knowing every little detail of what his brother was thinking and doing.

"Keeps the creepy crawlies off your mind, doesn't it?" Dain said to him, and handed Dynan the sapphire sword.

Dynan nodded goodbye to Bronwyn. She knew about their telepathy. Not too many people outside their close friends did. By Royal Order, they weren't supposed to talk about it, or let anyone else know about it. Bronwyn didn't know just how much Dynan was aware when she and Dain were together. He didn't want her to find out. He headed out the door.

Outside it was cold and snowing. The heating elements in the road and on the walk hissed as the flakes hit and melted. He took a moment to strap the sword around his waist and then cover the weapon with his cloak. People didn't wear them in Rianamar, or anywhere else on Cobalt, except for guards. Sharp, but only ceremonial, Dynan brought his so everyone could see it up close, as had Dain. Generally, they weren't allowed to have them out. They were banned from ever using them, a rule intended to keep them from dueling each other.

Dynan pulled the hood of his cloak up and trudged down the narrow street between houses to the next road, aiming back toward the center of town. After only a few moments, he heard running footsteps behind him and turned in time to see Ames and Lyle coming after him.

They were an unlikely pair, from opposite ends of the social spectrum, and fast friends. They were taller, broader and more muscled than everyone else, though that didn't mean they could beat Dain at anything except maybe arm wrestling. Ames' father was Lord Solen Lithford, a close friend of Ambrose's. Lyle's father was a farmer.

"A little close in there," Ames said, wiping his brow as if he'd escaped some danger while Lyle laughed under his breath.

"You know he doesn't like you out here wondering around by yourself," Lyle said.

Dynan rolled his eyes over Dain's over-protectiveness. He was almost as bad as Colin. There were times Dynan appreciated it and others he didn't.

"Sorry, but we aren't arguing with him," Ames said, as they turned onto the main road. "Too much of a hassle, you know. So where are you going?"

"The library."

Lyle groaned. "No, not today. Come on."

"The library?" Ames said at the same time as if he'd never heard the word.

"I'm behind," Dynan said.

"Behind?" Ames said. "How can you be behind?"

"Is this because of the pod crash?" Lyle asked and when Dynan nodded, the two looked guilty. There'd been some complicity on their part that they'd been protected from when the crap came down from on high.

"How many more projects did you end up with?" Ames asked.

Dynan held up three fingers and their eyes widened.

“No way,” Lyle said. “That’s just not...I mean it’s impossible. How does he expect you to...It’s not like it was your idea. Dain didn’t get into trouble at all.”

“That’s probably the point,” Ames said.

“You really shouldn’t be out here today,” Lyle said. “You’re going to end up with five projects now. Or six.”

Dynan nodded easily to that, well aware how furious his father would be. He knew there’d be even more work thrown at him. On some level, Dynan recognized the immaturity of his behavior in going along with this day, making his father worry on purpose, extracting payback for forcing the oath ceremony. Dynan knew he was acting like a petulant child. After this, he’d already decided to do a better job of staying out of trouble. Tomorrow, he told himself.

They were back into the main part of town already, and had to keep a hand on their cloaks to keep their hoods drawn down. There were a number of other people dressed against the cold the same way. There were also Palace Guards everywhere, three times the number who’d been out looking for them this morning.

Ames whistled. “This could be difficult.”

“The library is the next street over,” Dynan said.

He noticed a man then, walking a little ahead and entering something into a comboard before turning off the walk toward a house. The man used the optic function on the device, which allowed the user to input without using the keypad or even speak. Most people didn’t use that option, uncomfortable with it, since it seemed like the comboard could read minds, which is why Dynan noticed him.

“They won’t suspect I’m alone,” Dynan said, watching after the man for a moment until they were by him. The man laughed about something under his breath. “I’ll be fine. Go on.”

Ames hesitated only a moment longer, and then Lyle agreed too. They turned at the next street corner, leaving Dynan to go ahead past the guards. Colin wasn’t there. None of them were the Hounds, who would have known Dynan no matter what.

In the regular guards here, there seemed a level of tension that was unusual, like the number of them combing the streets. Dynan was close enough to hear them as he passed.

“You better report in that they aren’t on this street either.”

Dynan kept going, walking without hurrying and made it by them. The library, another enormous, echoing marble building was on the next street. Noted for its towering trees, Brescott Way was named after the man who’d given up his book collection to start the library a couple hundred years ago when he realized that printed books were disappearing. The street and library were two blocks off the main road that ran through the center of Rianamar.

Dynan walked along thinking about one of the three projects he needed to work on. He had a list in his head of the people he had to research; Polen Forb, Faulkin Yeld, Grint Heddly to name a few. They were all close compatriots of Alurn Telaerin, who had helped the First King win any number of battles and then secure the Throne. Dynan meant to prove that Alurn wasn’t the true hero of the realm everyone made him out to be, but an immature, reckless leader who, without those faithful men, would have led Cobalt to destruction.

Needless to say the topic wouldn't be a popular one, since pretty much everyone on the planet held Alurn up almost as a God. Because of the controversy calling him an idiot would cause, the piece was unlikely to be read by anyone but the King.

After this long day of playing truant, Dynan thought about facing his father, but decided he didn't want to envision the coming bellow-fest, or the punishment he had coming. He'd regret it all - then. Now though, walking down the road without a guard or anyone else came with a sense of complete freedom he rarely had. It felt great.

He noticed one of the side streets near the library was barricaded. Maybe there was some work being done. The grey was heavy enough to turn the street lamps on.

He heard movement from the other side of one of the mammoth trees as he went by it. The next instant, a man abruptly stepped out and startled him badly. Dynan knew him. He groaned as he was grabbed and shaken.

"You know, your timing is just for crap," Dynan said as he was let go. "Hi, Colin. How are you?"

"I'm getting a little tired of freezing my ass off for you. I guess you forgot that conversation about acts of complete stupidity." Colin Fryn took Dynan by the arm, very obviously unhappy, glancing back at the barricaded road and then started down the street toward the next alley, almost yanking Dynan along. "Where is Dain?"

"I didn't forget," Dynan said, trying half-heartedly to pull away from him. Colin was acting a little odd, moving the way he was without stopping. "Who won the pool this time?"

"Today, we all lost. Where-is-Dain?" Colin Fryn repeated, emphasizing each word.

When Dynan hesitated with the answer, Colin stopped. He looked up and down the road. Two men who were coming down the walk toward them from the library that Dynan guessed he wasn't going to get into today. Otherwise the street was empty. Everyone with any kind of sense was inside out of this weather.

"What's wrong?" Dynan asked to avoid answering him. "When did you get back from training?"

"You knew we were training? Been breaking into encrypted files, have we?" Colin asked, and shook his head over it. He seemed almost angry. "There's an alert. I need to know where Dain is right now."

"An alert?" Dynan said. "What?"

"Is he with Bronwyn?"

Dynan froze. "How did you—"

"It's my job to know what you're doing all the time, not to tell your father about it. Is he?" Colin didn't wait for the answer, taking out a comboard while he kept looking around. "Station two. Sheed, check with the occupant on Amber Place."

Like Colin, Sheed Lasser was another of the Hounds. "I'm already on my way," Sheed's voice came through the comboard.

"Station one is on his way home," Colin said and took Dynan by the arm again, still looking in every direction. He put him into the wall by the alley that was the closest cut-through to the next street, peering cautiously around the corner before pulling him along.

"What is going on?" Dynan asked, tripping a little as Colin led him into the narrow street.

"You picked a bad day to sneak out of the Palace," Colin said tersely. "Tell Dain to stay where he is until Sheed gets there. Please."

At the moment, Dynan was doing everything he could to be as distant from his brother as was possible, but Colin didn't need to know that. Dain wasn't going anywhere. Dynan only nodded. "What kind of alert?"

"The kind that means you aren't supposed to be out in the open," Colin said, looking around when he heard a noise behind him, but when he turned there wasn't anything there. "The next street over, I'm putting you on a transfer for the Palace. I'll go back for Dain so he gets home not too far after you. Otherwise you'll end up taking the brunt of it. You can thank me later. Your father is in a state I know I wouldn't cross. He's about to stroke out, so, the game is over."

"Right," Dynan said quietly. "Thanks."

"I said later. Might not work."

Dynan looked up as they made their way down the narrow walk between the buildings. It was darker than it should have been. Several of the usual lights weren't working.

Ahead, the alley opened up to a wider rectangle that the buildings went around. On the walk, the stone was a different color than the rest, and there were other stones in bands set around a central sphere of yellow.

It took Dynan a moment to realize he was looking at the Sacred Seal, like the one on the back wall of the Temple. Alurn Telaerin had set the seal here as a temporary place of worship while the Sanctuary Temple was being built. Over time, the city had grown up around it. Come to think of it, the site where he'd found the talon had stones that looked just like these.

There was a noise from behind them. Colin Fryn whipped around, yanking Dynan behind him and then took a step forward. Dynan couldn't see, shoved into the corner space, the guard's hand in his chest to keep him there, but then Colin started to reach for the laser rifle. A strange popping sound came. The guard staggered a step.

"You have to run," he said, his voice strained and hardly above a whisper as he stumbled another step. He kept Dynan behind him still.

"Colin?"

"Now, Dynan. Run, now."

The guard's legs gave out, though he tried to fight it. With his last strength he reached back, even as he fell, and pushed Dynan away.

"Colin, what..."

Colin fell to the ground, landing with a thud at Dynan's feet. Something protruded from the guard's chest, too close to his heart. His eyes were open and unseeing. The thought that he might be dead, that he was dead, slammed through the chaos of thoughts suddenly reeling through Dynan's mind.

The same popping sound echoed sharply against the buildings as Dynan tripped another step away, followed by the brief whistle of something cutting through the air. A bolt struck right beside him, bounced off the wall over his right shoulder and clattered to the alley walk. It came to a rest at the heart of the seal.

Dynan looked up, tearing his gaze from the ashen face of his guard. Two men walked toward him coming in from Brescott Way, and another came from the other direction, and they closed in around him. They all held a half-bow armed with a barbed dart, aimed right at him. Armor piercing, the thought went through his head. The kind only the military had access to, or supposedly.

Grim satisfaction and a kind of crazed enjoyment lit their eyes as they were about to fire. Dynan thought about his father and the horrifying grief he was about to endure.

One of the men jerked as if struck, the crossbow he held aimed abruptly toward the sky and fired. The other two reacted similarly the next instant, their confusion fueling Dynan's own. It was a strange way to behave if they meant to kill him.

At the same time, another man entered the alley, one hand raised, unarmed, covered entirely in black robes. Dynan knew that this man wasn't with the three attackers, though he didn't know why he felt that way.

Fear and confusion lifted, changing to relief and hope. He suddenly felt he had a chance of living through this. And he knew Dain was on his way, dragging on clothes as he raced from Bronwyn's home. Dain would bring every Palace Guard he passed to this spot, an avenging angel that these three men would learn to fear if they remained.

One of the men started screaming. He was a crazy looking, bedraggled sort with blond hair going in every direction in matted spikes. His weapon clattered to the street, and he started waving his hands back and forth as if they were on fire. The other two started backing away, even as the first abruptly recovered from whatever had assaulted him, looking at his hands in terror and relief. They all turned to Dynan's rescuer.

"Why are you with him?" one of the men said. He had albino white hair, and dead eyes. The other one beside him was disheveled too, brown hair hanging from his head in long, lanky strands. They smelled of sweat and dirt. "You're one of us."

"You protect an abomination."

"An aberration that shouldn't be allowed to exist."

Dynan stood shaking before them as his rescuer came abreast of him, stopping above the body of the guard. For a moment, he believed them, afraid his only hope to live would join them.

"Come with us," the crazy blond said, still occasionally shaking his hands.

"Take him and join us."

"If you value your life," Dynan's rescuer said, and the other three backed away from him even though he hadn't moved, "you'll run right now. Do you hear the dogs? They're coming for you and they're going to tear you limb from limb."

The crazy blond gasped, his hands rising to his head. The other two reacted as if they were in some unspeakable pain. It finally occurred to Dynan what must be happening, that his rescuer was a telepath. Somehow, he was controlling these men; making them believe they were being tortured.

"Dynan run," Dain's thought reached him through the fear that clothed his mind. He seemed so far away. "You have to get away. From all of them. Run. Right now. Run!"

The others were already moving and Dynan thought getting away with them was a good idea, but he was held in place and then he couldn't hear Dain anymore. Something stopped him and his head started hurting.

"I'm sorry," he was told. The man turned to him, looking up from Colin's body. Dynan shrank away from him. "I don't mean to hurt you."

"Who are you?"

He shook his head. "I haven't much time to explain."

The man leaned down and picked up one of the discarded crossbows, and then the spent bolt that lay on the seal, looking at the weapon with dread on his face.

"Dain?"

"I can't let you talk to him right now, so you should stop trying. It'll only make this worse. You have to do something and believe me if there was anyone else who could, we'd send them instead. You're the only one." He looked up over Dynan's head and around him as he spoke, pulling in a breath. "There's something I have to do first."

He didn't explain what he meant by any of that. He turned on Dynan abruptly and pinned him to the wall with the hand holding the crossbow, while touching his forehead with the other. Dynan expected pain, but nothing happened that he could tell, while this man seemed locked in deep concentration. He breathed the next instant, blinking rapidly while he struggled to catch his breath.

"All right," he said almost to himself. "Well, I hope that worked."

Dynan tried to reach Dain again, but met a wall. He tried to move, but something locked his limbs. Dynan felt it in his mind, a kind of mental binding. There was incredible strength there, unbreakable.

His rescuer shook his head. He seemed reluctant to go on with whatever his plan was, but then he turned, and he pressed the crossbow into Dynan's chest.

"What are you doing?" he said, his hands locking around the other's arms in an attempt to move the bolt off his heart. The certainty he was about to be killed came in, when he thought he was being saved from it only moments ago.

"You have to find Alurn Telaerin. This is the only way to reach him."

"What?"

"He's in a place no one living can find. You're the only one who can go and get back out. Find him. When you do, look for me. Dain and I will get you out. I swear it on my life. I'll get you back out." The man closed his eyes, teeth gritted together. "I don't mean to hurt you. I'm sorry."

"Wait," Dynan said, and tried to fight him off again, but he pulled the trigger.

Instantly, vision narrowed to a long tunnel. Dynan couldn't breathe. The fact that the immediate bloom of darkening material on his coat was blood didn't register at first. It was coming out of him so much faster than he thought possible. The tightness in his chest expanded. He could hear in his head the labored strangeness of his heartbeat. He heard Dain screaming after him, not too far away, but Dynan still couldn't reach him.

He was caught as he fell by the man who'd just killed him. It didn't make sense what he said, about finding Alurn Telaerin. It didn't make sense that this man, who was easing him down to the stone, looked at him with sorrow and remorse in his eyes.

Dynan felt hands on him, his pockets searched as he fought for air. A sense of weight lifted from him. He saw the talon, turned and examined, and then tucked away.

"Better you don't have this where you're going."

It seemed the world turned over, slanting the buildings at an odd angle. Dynan could smell the rock, hear the gentle hiss of the snow touching down, see the pattern of the Sacred Seal blurring.

He couldn't breathe around the blood in his mouth. It dripped out as he coughed. He fought for air and then he heard a groan from deep underneath that came up through the stone. Just like it had on the side of the mountain in an ancient ruin. One of the wide bands of the Sacred Seal rippled. Light evaporated. The dark came in.

"Find Alurn, Dynan. Find him and bring him back."





Chapter 9

The saturating light dimmed and then darkened, sucked almost instantly into nothing. On his knees beside him, Maralt watched as Dynan pulled in a last gurgling breath, and fought down the sudden urge to be sick. He didn't win that battle and his stomach emptied.

Fear of what he'd done combined with the spasms wrenching through him. The High Bishop was wrong. Dynan wouldn't survive. He wasn't breathing and when Maralt put his fingers to his neck, there wasn't a pulse.

The next instant, Dain arrived.

He came in fury and consuming panic. The air around him cracked with a frenzied kind of energy. And he came armed. He had a sword in his hand, the glittering emerald one he'd worn at Dynan's oath ceremony, perilously sharp and deadly.

Without thinking, with no time to get into a defensible position, Maralt took the sapphire sword from Dynan. Dain beat him back in a blazing rage that nearly smashed the weapon from his hand.

Maralt fell back four steps and managed not to die. He struggled to keep up with the rapid flash of the blade aimed precisely at his heart, stopping each attack only just. Dain shook from grief and fear, but that didn't diminish the legendary skill he wielded. In desperation, Maralt concentrated and entered his mind.

"Stop."

The command had no effect, except to surprise Dain that someone else could get inside his head. It only made him madder. Maralt fell back again, stumbling into the wall of the building behind him. He saw the tip of the sword coming at him, flashed his own around in time to deflect the weapon, but not far enough. The blade pierced his shoulder, sending a shock of pain through him.

"Not until you're dead," Dain said in a voice quivering with anguish and laced with hatred.

Maralt tried to think through fear and pain for anything that would make Dain stop or slow him down even a little. Blood soaked through his shirt, but he guessed if the wound were fatal he'd already be on the ground. Their swords locked and Maralt thought he might be dead far sooner than he ever imagined.

"Kill me and your brother won't survive," he said aloud and in Dain's mind. "You're making a mistake. I'm the only one who can bring him back. He's not dead, and won't be as long as you listen."

"You put a bolt through his heart, you son of a bitch!"

He was beyond reasoning with. Maralt saw that and knew what he had to do. There wasn't a choice. The noise of men shouting reached him, many of them, converging on them. In the instant after Dain disengaged to plunge his sword forward, Maralt reached inside his mind.

He ripped into him with a force he hadn't contemplated using before, transferring and magnifying the pain in his shoulder to him. At the same time, he pulled energy off of him. It was all around him the same way it had been around Dynan, laden with of a kind of strength Maralt couldn't resist taking. Dain was frozen in place, paralyzed by sudden agony.

In quick succession, he batted aside Dain's sword, willing him to succumb. When he fought it, Maralt punched him across the face. When he only staggered back a step, he cracked the sword hilt into the back of his head.

Maralt almost went down with him when Dain finally crumpled, but fell back against the wall instead. He put a hand to his wound. His fingers came away awash in red and he swore. He hadn't counted on getting hurt.

He didn't have time to waste. He collected the two swords and tucked them into his belt. With a last look at Dynan, who lay still as death on the seal, he yanked Dain up using the right side of his body as much as he could. It still hurt and Maralt wasn't sure he'd manage it, but he dragged the Prince up and over his shoulder. He started running in a half shuffle that was more a staggering walk, his shoulder throbbing with each step.

He wondered as he rushed for the street corner, how many others he'd have to turn on his way back to the Temple. He couldn't be seen, or remembered being seen carrying one of Ambrose Telaerin's sons off while the other lay dying in an alley.

He reached the street, peered around the edge of the building to make sure he wouldn't be rushing into a squad of guards, and then slipped around the corner as Dain's friends arrived, followed immediately by more than a few Palace Guards at the other end of the alley.

Brescott Way was still empty, though Maralt knew it wouldn't be for much longer. More guards were coming in from every direction. He doubted he'd be able to run all the way to the Temple with Dain slung over his shoulder.

Snow poured from the sky. Running wasn't possible. Dain didn't have the same heft as a grown man, but carrying him wasn't so easy either. He seemed as heavy, and the light around him was just as compelling. When Maralt breathed it in, it gave him strength. He shuffled down the road as fast as he could, trying to ignore a growing desire to take more of it, maybe even all of it for himself.

He was sickened that he could want such a thing. Maralt didn't understand where the compunction was coming from. The power Dain held was the thing that kept him alive and kept the world from darkness. Maralt should only want to protect that light, not steal from it.

He shook his head at himself, put the thought aside and kept going. Ahead at the next street corner, a black transfer pulled up. The emblem of the Temple of Faith was emblazoned on its side.

"You! Stop!"

Maralt glanced back over his shoulder and saw a Palace Guard charging after him. He rushed away, ignoring the guard long enough to get the transfer door open and Dain thrown in.

Maralt turned around in time to see a laser rifle being drawn and aimed. He wasn't wearing a shield; a device that had all but negated the use of laser weapons in battle. Only certain, elite Palace Guards carried them, which meant this guard would use it if he had to. Maralt didn't know what else he could do to keep from being shot down where he stood. He concentrated.

"I'm not going to hurt him," he said quickly, willing the guard to stop using mental exertion.

Maralt instantly learned that Ralion Blaise was one of the Hounds. He was tall, brown-haired, brown-eyed, muscled and came at him with a kind of intensity that went beyond loyalty. He only slowed a little. He wouldn't have any difficulty running down the street with both twins slung over his shoulder. The level of dedication this man had for his duty overcame the growing pain in his head, caused by Maralt trying to make him do something against his nature. Ralion fully meant to take Dain back and didn't have the slightest compunction against killing anyone who stood in his way.

"I'm taking him to a place where he can be protected," Maralt said.

"Step back from the transfer," Ralion said, his hand reaching for an alert pin attached to his collar.

"Stop moving," Maralt said, concentrating harder. The pin, Maralt knew, would send out a signal giving the guard's exact position. "I'm a monk with the Temple and I stopped to see what the problem was. Dain isn't in this transfer. You aren't going to remember my face. I'm wearing robes that keep you from seeing me. Turn around. Now."

Ralion winced this time and hesitated, the laser rifle still pointed at Maralt's head. Ralion had a will unlike most non-telepaths. If Maralt's concentration faltered at all, the weapon would activate.

"Your place is with Dynan," Maralt said through clenched teeth. "He's dying. You should go back to him. Do your job this time and protect him. He's still in danger. Dain isn't here. I'm a monk from the Temple."

The laser rifle wavered, but remained aimed. Maralt thought he couldn't hold him off any longer, but then Ralion lowered the weapon just as strength evaporated.

"There's a priority alert," the guard said. His hand rose to the side of his head and he looked at the laser rifle as if he didn't understand why he had it out. "Everyone is asked to get indoors. Be on your way."

Maralt nodded and tried not to collapse against the side of the transfer. He watched the guard turn abruptly, walking and then jogging back down the street to the alley. By the time Ralion looked back, Maralt was inside and the transfer moving.

Momentum knocked him over and he almost ended up chopping himself in half on the exposed swords. He discovered he was shaking and his head was pounding. He looked at Dain, lying unconscious in a pile beside him. Inside the swirling yellow flame, Maralt felt better, pulling in whatever energy this was. He was renewed by it and laughed.

"Maybe the old man is right about you after all," Maralt said, half to himself, watching the flame move in eddies around the interior. He looked out the transfer and saw the Sanctuary Temple towering. "I think you're going to find out. All of us. Just what all this is for."

He waved his hand through the glow, cutting the current. The aura had substance, clinging to his fingers like a liquid, but there wasn't any sense of moisture. Maralt

brought his fingers closer, but he couldn't smell any odor to it. Something suggested in the recesses of his mind that going further with this insatiable curiosity would lead to danger, or something worse.

He looked at the substance on his finger, at Dain, at the light around him. He put it on his tongue, tasting it. A sudden surge coursed through his body, and he gasped from it, startled by its intensity. In awe and then in doubt, he looked at the boy lying at his feet and couldn't believe he had the strength or wisdom to wield such power.

He thought he would take that power for himself. He would know better than a child what to do with it. Vast kingdoms opened before him. He sat on a throne of diamonds in a hall of light in command of millions; Kings, Queens, worlds at his feet.

Maralt pulled in a breath as the vision faded, and then he didn't know what he was thinking. There wasn't time to sort it out either. The transfer pulled through the gates of the Temple.





Chapter 10

The smell of smoke filled his nostrils, mingled with dirt and some other putrid stench. Swarms of flies buzzed over his head. Dynan heard people weeping, others crying out in pain and anguish. A baby's wail rose and then abruptly cut off. A woman screamed.

The angle of his body suggested he was on a hill, though Dynan didn't know how he got there. He didn't know where he was. He couldn't remember at first where he'd been before.

An alley flashed into view, pulling him off the hill. The same man who'd stabbed him stood over him. Dynan heard Dain calling for him, but couldn't answer. His heart made a strange thrumming sound in his head. The darkness returned, swallowing him and then spit him back out. He was on the hillside again and this time it held him there.

The sounds of people dying filled the air. Dynan was afraid to move from all the noise. He didn't want to look, but his eyes blinked open and focused.

The entire hillside was covered in bodies, some of them charred to lumps that didn't resemble a human being. Some were still smoldering. Some were barely touched by whatever flame had scoured this hill. Some lay without a mark on them, lifeless eyes staring at him.

Beneath him, near the base of the hill, a wraith touched down on a protruding rock. Wings arced upward before they folded. It shrieked as it landed, a piercing cry that hurt and made Dynan cover his ears.

He scrambled to his feet, choking on the smell of burnt flesh that was very much like the smell of a slab of beef the Palace cooks pulled off the grill for his dinner. Intent on getting as far away as he could, he aimed for the top and then the other side of the hill. He clawed his way up using clumps of dead grass for purchase.

The moment he moved, the wraith whipped around. Even as Dynan looked back over his shoulder, it launched at him. With one sharp sweep of its wings, it was halfway up the hill before Dynan moved barely a few steps. He tripped over something because he was looking behind, a body it turned out, and fell into the ground hard. The wraith swept by over his head, and a wave of rotting stench filled his lungs. One of its legs raked over him, drew across his back and barely missed his head.

Thinking only of escape, Dynan made ready to move again while trying not to be seen at the same time. The wraith had already turned around, but for some reason, it didn't pinpoint where he was right away.

“It can’t see you among the taken,” a voice said to him from a couple bodies to the right. “Unless you move.”

Dynan froze in the act of rising, wanting to believe it, but didn’t see how that was possible. He didn’t know where the voice came from, or who it was, or if the speaker could be trusted.

The wraith was looking directly at him, sniffing the air. It threw its head back, a strange kind of bark coming from it, high-pitched and loud, as if it was telling other creatures exactly where he was. Dynan decided the nameless voice couldn’t be right and started to get up again.

He was tackled from behind this time and plastered into the hillside by the weight of someone on top of him, his face pressed into the fetid dirt. Dynan tried to heave upward, but couldn’t.

“Stop moving, or you’re going to get us all taken,” he was told.

Dynan tried looking at who was on top of him, but all he could see was a hand pressed into the ground beside his face. The fingernails were darkened by dirt, and in the places that weren’t covered in tattered wrappings, the skin was torn, red and flaking off as if diseased.

The wraith stopped barking, hissing instead. By the sound of the wings cutting through the air, the hot blast of wind that smelled of death that came down on him, Dynan could tell the thing had taken to the air again. A moment later it started shrieking, but it was further away.

The man on top of him relaxed and shifted his weight a little, rolling over the body next to them to reach a clear space in the carnage. Another man detached from the ground, looking not much different from the dead scattered around them, and started up the hill at a low scrambling crouch. There was another behind, and he too clambered upward. He was wrapped up the same as the others with flaking skin.

“Stay down and follow, or stay here and wait for it to come back,” the one who’d tackled him said in a voice of gravel and air. “Your choice.”

Dynan didn’t want to go with these three strangers, watching while they went up the hill at a crawl, seemingly unaffected by the slaughter of bodies they were using as handholds. He didn’t want to stay where he was either, looking at the bloated, blackened face of a woman, her eyes eaten from her head.

Dynan rolled away from her, staring up at the leaden grey sky instead. He was shaking uncontrollably. He remembered what happened, but didn’t have any idea how he was supposed to find Alurn Telaerin and then bring him back.

He remembered Dain screaming after him. He thought the only way back would be through his brother like he’d been told. If it was true and there was a way back. If he wasn’t really dead.

Dynan concentrated as hard as he knew how and found nothing.

“Kid,” someone said. The man with the gravelly voice looked back. “There are other things that can take you as easily as a wraith.”

Fear and grief kept Dynan from moving, even when he saw that there were other creatures snuffling along the base of the hill. A pack of dogs with hairless, grey bodies, and with a fan of spikes around their heads, nosed through the carnage. Dynan knew this place. He’d just taken an oath warning he’d end up here if he broke it.

Acceptance of the horror of it, the thought he could be here forever, wasn't possible. He didn't know what he'd done to be sent here. He wasn't a murderer. He wasn't a thief. He hadn't broken that vow. He hadn't done anything to deserve dying in the first place. He shouldn't be here.

"It can't be real. It can't be happening," he said. "I'm going to wake up. I'm going to wake up."

"I'd just as soon leave you," gravely voice said in his ear, making Dynan jump, "but somehow I think it might come back on me if I do. You'll get used to the idea, boy. It's better if you do it sooner than later."

With that bit of advice, the man, if he was a man, took Dynan by a fistful of jacket and started hauling him up the hill. Dynan didn't want to go with him, but he didn't have any leverage to pry him off. He was only able to get a hold of the man's wrist, which had no deterring effect at all.

The man readjusted his grip and kept going. That Dynan had a jacket to grab struck him as odd, since he thought having one wouldn't be necessary in the afterlife, but there was a lot about this afterlife he hadn't expected. He was dragged up the hill, over rocks, over bodies, over other things he couldn't identify.

They reached the top of the jagged, rocky mound and Dynan was slung over to the other side of it. There were even more bodies. Dynan yanked away from his captor this time before he could be dragged down the hill, but even as he wrenched free, the man pulled his hand back and stared at it, turning his hand over while he flexed his fingers. He looked at Dynan and then back to his hand, scraggly brows of grey and brown drawn down in awed confusion. All Dynan saw was a normal hand.

"Pol," one of the others called, the younger of the three. He had a yellow scarf wrapped around his neck. It was hard to tell what color the rest of his clothes were except dirty. "There's something coming. I think it's...You should come look."

Pol glanced back at Dynan, adjusting the strap of the leather pack he wore. "Stay there," he said gruffly, and crawled back to the top of the hill. He peered over it, but only for a moment, cringing back down.

"Is it?"

"The Six, yes," Pol said and he looked to Dynan again, swearing. "We need to get under cover right now. Run. Get into the scrub at the bottom of the hill. As far in as you can. Move!"

The other two scrambled up, no longer worried about staying low, and started leaping down the hillside. Before Dynan could decide to go or not, Pol had him again, not giving him a choice and shoved him down the hill until he went on his own.

"Faster than that, boy," he said, but stayed with him. He kept looking back over his shoulder.

The scrub was an expansive patch of short, bent trees with dead-looking foliage that covered a wide plain before running up against a rocky hill and a forest of taller trees, if they could be called that. Those trees didn't have leaves at all and stood as blackened sticks against the horizon.

The first two reached the scrub and ducked into it. They didn't stop, scrabbling along the ground almost on all fours. Dynan didn't know what or who the six were, but understood that these men were afraid of them. Pol pushed him again and kept him from falling at the same time. They reached the bent trees and scrambled for cover.

Pol raced back out and grabbed one of the bodies that lay scattered like wood at the base of the hill, dragging it back with him. Dynan started to run from him, having no desire at all to be around the dead things any more, but Pol reached him and pulled him down to the ground again. Pol shoved the body on top of Dynan and then threw himself on the ground beside him, an arm over Dynan's head, pushing him into the dirt.

"Don't move," Pol said, the gravel voice a harsh whisper.

The next instant Dynan was seized by the desire to get up and show himself. A sunlit field, a meandering brook, and a meadow of long, green grass awaited him if he came out into the open.

"Don't believe a thing they show you," Pol said, his teeth clenched together. "It's all a lie, boy. There's no such thing as Paradise. Not here. Don't listen to them."

Dynan squirmed under the heavy arm and the weight of the dead on top of him, knowing without a doubt that Pol was lying to him. He had only to get out of these twisted trees, and he'd be saved, taken to a place where the dead didn't exist. He'd go home.

Off in the distance, someone screamed. He and Pol looked up as the sound rose into the air. Dynan recognized one of the men who'd gone into the trees ahead of them, thrashing in the claws of a wraith until abruptly his screams cut off and he stopped moving. The wraith took up the scream, its voice rising to an unbearable pitch as it tossed the body aside.

Dynan stopped trying to get away, covering his ears with his hands, his body curling into a ball in an attempt to be as small as possible. Off in the distance, a crack and crash reached them, followed by the thud of the body hitting the ground.

The command to show himself went on as the wraiths wheeled by, swooping in low to the ground. Before too long, Dynan started shaking from the effort to ignore them. If Pol hadn't been there, periodically telling him not to listen, Dynan would have done it. He would have gotten up and gone out into the open where he was certain they would take him. Not to a good place. Maybe a place worse than this.

Finally, it eased, leaving him panting on the ground, spent. The wraiths moved off. Through a break in the scrabble of branches above him, Dynan could see them wheeling through the sky a distance away. He squirmed out from underneath the dead body, and crawled over to the nearest scrub tree he could lean against.

He couldn't seem to get his hands to stop shaking. His eyes burned, but when he wiped them, there weren't any tears, only the stinging sensation that meant they might come. He wanted to curl up in a little ball and never move again. He wanted this to go away. He wanted to be home, wished it so hard it hurt. At the same time, he knew he wouldn't ever see home again.

Unless that man who sent him here was right, and if he found Alurn, somehow doing so would get him a way out of here. Dynan wondered if Pol knew anything about it and at the same time didn't want to ask. He was a rough looking man. Despite the fact he'd just saved him, Dynan was afraid of him.

"We have to move," Pol said.

He had a rope out and he was tying it around the torso of the body. He flipped his hand front to back again, examining it, and he grunted over it. Pol stood to a half crouch. That was as far as he could straighten under the branches. He tugged on the rope to check it.

“Right now.”

Pol didn't wait to see that Dynan followed, but set off under the scrub, dragging the body behind. It hurt to move, but Dynan pulled himself to his feet, crouching down under the hanging limbs, and went after him.

The body thumped along in front of him. The smell coming off of it was immense. Finally, Dynan couldn't stand it, unable to take his eyes off of it, and dodged around it to catch up to Pol. He glanced back once and wished he hadn't. The flies were starting to follow.

“You get used to it,” Pol said, and Dynan found him watching.

Dynan only shook his head, the thought of being around this long enough to get accustomed to it sickening him even more. Pol didn't try to convince him. He kept the pace without slowing.

The landscape didn't change. The bent trees remained bent. The floor of the thicket was clear of underbrush. The smell of putrefied leaves hung in the air, but after a while the stink eased to something less gag inducing. Every now and again, Pol changed directions, veering off to the left or right, going that way for a time, and then aiming back the original direction, always toward the base of the distant hill.

Dynan didn't think he could go much further without stopping for a break, or even just a moment or two. His legs were shaking from the exertion of staying constantly bent to get under the trees. Before long, he was back with the body.

He ended up falling over it when Pol finally came to a halt. By then the light had started to fade, though it didn't get completely dark when Dynan thought it should. He back-peddled away from the corpse only to end up with his back against a stack of them.

A small clearing opened up where the scrub trees ended, and the hill and the forest of sticks began. A rock wall rose over Dynan's head by a few kem. At its base there was a hole. Around the hole, and all around the clearing the dead were piled up, for protection, Dynan guessed, since the bodies of these taken souls seemed able to trick the eye of the wraiths.

He maneuvered to his feet as best he could, finding it painful to stand up straight. A noise not far off made him jump. Pol instantly moved to him, pushing him toward the hole in the rock.

Before Dynan could react though, Pol was already relaxing. The noise came from the other man who'd been with them on the hill. He had with him the body of the third, who'd been taken by the wraith.

“Did you see?”

“Yes, Grint,” Pol said and moved to help. “It's good that you brought him. He'd like that. We'll post him as sentry.”

Grint didn't want to hear that. He was angry and crying at the same time, though again, there weren't any tears. His face was all twisted up, and he turned a glaring eye to Dynan. He came at him, still carrying the body, shaking it at him so that the head jogged back and forth.

“This is your fault,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Grint, no it isn't,” Pol said, and moved to stop him, but Grint was already right in front, shoving the body at Dynan.

“You did this. Faul's been here from the start and you come here, and now he's gone because of you, pulling the wraiths after us...All six of them! It's your fault!”

With that he shoved the body of Faul at him. Dynan put his hands out to defend himself, but ended up catching the dead man. The weight of him dragged Dynan to the ground with Faul on top of him.

Grint followed him down, and put his hands to his throat. "I'm going to snuff out the last little bit of life in you," he said. "It should have been you anyway."

Dynan wondered if it was possible to die twice and then knew it was. Hands clamped down on his neck cut off air to the point little black specks started appearing before his eyes.

The next instant though, Grint was ripped away from him. Pol threw him off, across the clearing and into the other pile of stacked bodies. "You don't know what you're saying, Grint, and you don't know what you're doing."

Pol went on, trying to calm Grint down. Dynan shoved against the body, but couldn't get it to budge. After struggling with it, he gave up, and lay for a moment without moving, half trapped. He tried to fathom why he was breathing, and why there was pain when he thought being dead took those things away. The thought crept in that maybe he wasn't dead after all. He put his hand to his neck. There were welts there.

Faul groaned in his ear.

Dynan jumped while Faul sucked in a breath. He blinked his eyes open, raising himself up enough to look down at Dynan with confusion, and then wonder in his eyes.

Pol and Grint stopped arguing. Faul rolled off and sat, looking at his hands, and feeling his face. Both were clear of lesions. He started laughing next, a sound that seemed to send a shudder through the air, a ripple of discontinuity that made everything stop and listen.

"Faul?" Grint came over, and took his hand to help him up.

"Yes, Grint, I'm all right."

Dynan rose cautiously to his feet, and edged away from them.

"But what happened?" Grint asked.

Faul looked at Pol, and pointed a questioning finger at Dynan, eyebrows raised in expectation. Pol nodded and Faul laughed again. "So then it might be time, finally?"

Pol nodded again. "At last, it might be."

Pol thought of something then, looking to the piles of the dead. He went after Dynan, who'd gotten only a few steps away, and took him by the wrist. Pol dragged him over to the bodies and forced his hand down on one of them, waiting and watching expectantly.

Nothing happened. Dynan thought the person might wake up like Faul had, but it remained a motionless body. Pol grunted under his breath.

"So only the recently taken," he said, and grunted again. "That's still something."

He took him to Grint then, who was the only one left with bumps and flaking skin. Pol forced Dynan to touch him too, his hand flat against his chest. Grint grabbed his wrist when Dynan tried to lurch away. The scars on Grint's face melted from sight, absorbed back inside him. The flake of skin along side his nose went away at the same time, and he pushed back the wrappings to feel his face, laughing as he did.

"You're still just as ugly," Pol said to Grint who turned to Dynan.

"I'm sorry about what I did," Grint said. "I didn't know. I mean, I thought my friend was gone. You won't hold it against me, will you?"

Dynan backed away from them again, only this time he was hemmed in against the wall of rock and the bodies. He wanted to run. He didn't know how he could have been

the cause of Faul's resurrection. Dynan shook his head again, and backed himself into the wall.

"He's awfully young, Polen," Faul said and Dynan started at the name, a number of realizations coming in.

"Polen," he said. It was the first word he'd spoken to them, and they all stopped to look at him. Dynan knew them then, remembering their names. He'd only just been thinking about them a few moments before being stabbed, thinking about them because he had to write a report on them, these men who helped secure the Telaerin Throne a thousand years ago. "Faulkin Yeld. Grint Heddly. And you," he said to Polen, who nodded, smiling because Dynan knew them all.

"I'm Polen Forb," he said. "And you...you are a son of Alurn Telaerin."





Chapter 11

A trail of blood, in drips and long drizzles led from the road to the door. Ambrose Telaerin looked up from it into the glare of lights and a sea of faces. The Information Bureau was out in force, but he didn't pay them any heed, along with the rest of the gathering crowd who'd come for news. The Lord Chancellor was taking care of information dissemination, and the old man went off to do that, reading the official Palace statement as they discussed in the transfer on their way over.

Melgan Lon preceded Ambrose on his right, leading him off the path to avoid the blood. Roth and Brendin followed. Ambrose ignored the string of questions being called to him, and went into City Medical through the side door.

The blood trail led down a long corridor, through a number of turns left and right, smeared from an attempt to clean it off the floor. Ambrose was taken finally to a set of rooms immediately off one of the critical care units where surgery was performed. The trail stopped there. A young man was down on his knees mopping up.

His eldest son, Kamien was there too, staring at the floor. Recalled from the Rianamar Base where he was stationed, still in the dark blue uniform that made him seem years older than twenty-three, even with his red hair so closely cropped. Ambrose could see he was worried, and angry, too, though he was trying not to show either emotion. He didn't get along with Dynan and Dain so much, and hadn't for some time. He didn't want to act like he cared, when of course, he did.

Ambrose looked to the door of the surgical unit. Kamien started shaking his head, and then grabbed him to stop him.

"You can't see him yet. They have him cut open on a table right now. They won't let you in. Even you. Eldelar Elger is here, and Geneal. They're doing everything they can."

Ambrose didn't want to accept that, but knew he had to. He didn't want to accept any of it, struggling to hold down a growing rage. It was the only thing he had left to keep despair and fear from overwhelming him.

"There's still no word on Dain," Kamien said, easing his grip but not letting go. "It seems likely that Dynan's attackers took Dain with them when they ran. No one saw anything."

"The one time in their lives when it would have been helpful," Ambrose said. He turned to Melgan, Roth and Brendin. "I want that crazy bastard questioned until he begs for mercy, and the others too. I want answers, Melgan."

"Ron Feldor too?" the Captain said evenly.

Ambrose turned from him. Really, he didn't want anyone tortured for what they knew, locked in their suddenly deranged minds. Ambrose had known Ron for years, ever since Dynan started working with him.

"We're going to get the answers," Melgan said quietly, and then gestured to the room again.

Ambrose looked back to the other door, and resisted the overwhelming desire to go through it, moving instead to the place where they wanted to tuck him away. He supposed there were safety concerns. Maybe the same men wanted to try and kill him too. Ambrose wasn't concerned they'd succeed, since City Medical was surrounded by a hundred Palace Guards, all of them from the King's Guard, their training mission cut short. Nothing shy of a brigade would satisfy Melgan though. Ambrose relented.

Kamien followed him into the sitting room that was just off the hall, the first of many rooms. The apartment sized space was designed a long time ago for the Royal Family's use should the need ever arise. Ambrose tried to remember, as he took a seat in a large leather chair in the corner, if it ever had been before and couldn't.

"Their friends don't know anything," Kamien said of Ames Lithford and the others.

Kamien stopped when he heard the alarms sounding from the hall and the rushing of footsteps. Try as he did to remain detached, he was as worried and afraid as everyone else that his brother might die.

"They weren't with him," Kamien went on. "They walked him about half-way to the library—"

"The library?" Melgan said and rolled his eyes over that.

"—and left him to go the rest of the way on his own. Dynan walked right by the guards. Colin Fryn found him on Brescott just outside the library. The next thing, a minute or two, the guard hit his alert pin, the one that automatically triggered the priority alert."

Kamien paused, looking around the room and behind him to double check who was listening. "Dain knew something had happened almost exactly the same instant. He outran everyone else trying to get there, so no one saw what happened. Ralion Blaise was the next guard there. He found Colin dead, no sign of Dain anywhere, and Dynan lying in the center of the old Sacred Seal, blood everywhere."

Ambrose breathed at that, having not heard this before – his father's very last words, coming back to haunt him. Ambrose remembered thinking, that in the throes of dying, Dionin had gone out of his right mind. He warned Ambrose about his son's blood spilled on the Sphere of the Gods. He'd been afraid of it. He said the end of the world would come if it happened. Dionin tried to tell him something else too, something Ambrose hadn't believed at the time. Believing in demons was for children, not grown men. The words came back, brought to mind by the ravings of a lunatic.

"What?" Kamien said, seeing his reaction and Melgan shaking his head.

"This has nothing to do with—" Melgan started, but Ambrose cut him off. Melgan had been in the room, too, when Dionin died.

"It's nothing, Kamien," Ambrose said, his tone more abrupt than he intended. "Ghost stories. What about the men who did this?"

Ambrose could tell Kamien wanted to ask what he meant, but let it go to give the rest of the report. "There's no sign of them. The city is locked down. We've started a door-to-

door search for Dain. That will take some time. All but official transports or transfers are grounded until we say otherwise. You're not telling me something."

Ambrose nodded. "I can't right now," he said, leaning on his knees. He didn't want to think about it. There were more pressing issues to deal with than a dying man's gibbering last words.

A soft knock came at the door, and Geneal Elger entered. She was the daughter of the Palace Chief of Medicine, who'd told Ambrose at the age of four she wanted to be a heart surgeon. Sixteen years later, graduating two years ahead of schedule, she was already considered an expert in her chosen field.

She looked tired and worried, glancing around the room before she said what Ambrose feared she would say.

"We have to put Dynan on full support."

This might as well have been a precursor to her saying he was going to die. Support systems were used to prolong the inevitable almost always. Ambrose felt his throat clamp down and he tried to swallow.

"This is different," she said, and came and sat with him. She pulled up a footstool, putting her hand gently on his, this child woman, trying to give him comfort when there was none. "This isn't to delay death so you can have time to be ready for it. We need to do this to give Dynan's heart the chance to repair and recover. The medicine is working, but it isn't working fast enough to keep him alive."

"For how long?"

"It won't be permanent. At least, that's not the intention. These are new techniques that are being put in practice, Your Majesty, and they are the only chance we have to save him. My father needs your permission."

"He has it," Ambrose said, and had to clear his throat when what came out was half a whisper. Geneal patted his hand again.

"Don't give up. Dynan hasn't," she said and stood.

Ambrose didn't respond except to glance at Brendin Moch, who would go with Geneal to act as witness. There were procedures that had to be followed because of who Dynan was, even in this. It was even possible that the succession committee would have to be informed, and their representative, the head of the committee, would end up here at City Medical asserting his influence, or attempting to, in what treatment he thought appropriate for the Crown Prince. Melgan, who wasn't a diplomat, would very likely refuse Governor Alse entry to the building.

Ambrose couldn't think about any of that now. He could hardly think at all, except to wage the constant battle to maintain his composure, listen to the doctors, and keep some shred of sanity intact.

Geneal left, and Brendin followed her, and a lengthy silence ensued. Melgan paced back and forth, the hauberk of chain mail clinking together as he moved. Hours went by and nothing seemed to change. Dynan fought to live. There was no news about Dain. His captors had vanished without a trace. Dynan was put on a full support system that breathed for him, and pushed blood through his veins.

Hours later, they let Ambrose in the room, after going through the sterilization dome that guarded his son's life.

Dynan lay half under a sort of tent structure that covered his chest. They hadn't bothered to close him back up and wouldn't until they took the tubes out, or the morgue came for him.

The light in the room dimmed. Ambrose sat heavily on the stool beside the bed. He'd seen death before, during the war at countless funeral services the King felt he should attend, when his uncle died, and then his own mother and father. He thought he was looking on it again in the grey face of his son. There were dark circles under his eyes.

"I know it looks bad," Geneal said, and her father nodded in agreement. They were the only two in the room except for Melgan, who stood by the door looking at the monitors.

After a moment of watching, Melgan turned to Eldelar Elger and Geneal. "Don't lie to him," he said, bluntly suggesting that they were. "I'll be out in the hall."

The Captain closed the door softly behind him. Eldelar, who knew Melgan well, shook his head. "We're not lying to you, Ambrose."

"We've been here before," he said, hardly able to say the words.

"This is different. This isn't caused by war. This isn't caused by old age or the inexplicable. I want to show you something. I want you to look at this, and be prepared to be shocked, Ambrose, but it's working, and it's the only chance we have."

Eldelar gestured him to Geneal, who remained at a long counter that ran the length of the wall. Ambrose saw that there was a kind of container near at hand to her. There was liquid, a pale, diluted color of red, bubbling around something inside the box that Ambrose couldn't make out. There were tubes attached to it. Periodically, Geneal glanced at a set of controls that rested on the counter beside the box.

Ambrose stood at Eldelar's urging and as he moved closer, realized the thing inside was a heart, followed by the instant realization that it was Dynan's heart.

"What—"

"When we put him on the support machine, his heart completely stopped functioning. The force of the machine couldn't be reduced enough to prevent further damage. We bypassed the heart. The support is working. Dynan is alive. I want you to see what progress has been made. The first image is horrible, and will make you wonder how he survived at all."

Eldelar waited a moment, allowing Ambrose to absorb that information before the doctor nodded. Geneal activated another monitor that showed Dynan lying with his chest cracked open, doctors with their hands inside his body trying to staunch the flow of blood. Ambrose stared, and the air left his lungs again.

Dynan's heart was nearly shredded from the barbed dart. It seemed impossible that he could have survived.

Ambrose looked back to the monitors above Dynan's head, and noticed that his brain wave pattern wasn't there. It was a line that didn't move. Ambrose didn't know what that meant, and he didn't ask, afraid to hear the answer.

"Look at his heart now. Look at your son's remarkable heart."

The fact that it was a whole heart took a moment to get through. Ambrose thought at first that the heart in this box wasn't the same heart from his son. It couldn't be, but then he noticed the almost finger like quality to the scars from the barb, even lines that cut across quivering muscle. Ambrose gasped at that. The heart was beating.

"How is that possible?"

“There’s an electrical impulse we’re sending through the liquid, to keep the muscle stimulated,” Geneal said. “It helps in the healing process. This liquid is infused with medicines that help accelerate that healing, and all the things the heart needs to be healthy. I think we’ll be able to re-insert in about three hours, maybe a little less.”

“He’s going to survive?” Ambrose said, still unable to believe it.

Eldelar didn’t want to say it either, hesitating with his answer. “We don’t know.”

“Yes,” Geneal said, smiling when her father looked at her in apparent dismay. “There are a lot of things that have to go our way, obviously. The procedure is dangerous. It’s difficult. Everything has to happen just so. The success rate isn’t what it ought to be, but in this case, yes. I think he’ll survive. I think this time in another week, he’ll be awake and wanting to get out of here. While we’re in this room with him, it’s a good idea to keep saying it, even if you may not believe it. Tell him he’ll be all right, Your Majesty, and keep telling him.”

“She’s young and ridiculously optimistic,” Eldelar said with a slight smile over his daughter’s head. “But in this case, hopefully, she’s right.”

Ambrose looked to his son’s heart quivering regularly, and back to the monitors and machines that regulated his life. This hope was so tenuous, he almost couldn’t bring himself to believe, but couldn’t face the alternative.

“I want to stay,” he said, moving back to the stool between the beds. “I want to be here for this procedure no matter what happens. I’m not leaving him alone again.”

“All right,” Eldelar said.

Ambrose nodded, turning back to his son. He took Dynan’s hand, wondering if he thought long and hard enough, if he could wish his child well. He looked at him and thought he wasn’t so much a child anymore. Ambrose wanted to stop time, take it all back to the day he was born. He looked to the monitor, and the unmoving line, and feared it.

He leaned over Dynan, one hand smoothing over his hair, whispering, “Hold on, Dynan. A little while longer. Hold on.”





Chapter 12

Maralt dragged Dain inside the Temple just before he woke up, returning to quiet consciousness. Quiet that lasted one moment only. Dain started thrashing against him, striking out in an attempt to escape. He started yelling at the top of his voice too, calling for help, for Palace Guards who wouldn't come since there weren't any, only attracting the attention of a few monks who came to see what the commotion was about. Luckily, the Temple was closed for worship, so there wasn't any help there either.

"Would you shut up," Maralt said.

Dain only planted his feet, got some leverage, and slammed Maralt back into the wall of the corridor they were on. He kept slamming him, to the point it was difficult not to reciprocate. Maralt held on, trying to ignore the out of control rage coming from Dain. The light around him was there, blazing as ever.

Abruptly, Dain froze, giving Maralt the chance to get a better grip on him, while he stared dumbstruck at the High Bishop.

"Let him go," Gradyn said calmly.

"No," Maralt said, and Dain struggled against him again, though with less effort than before. He was completely confused why the High Bishop would be involved, staring at him as if he weren't real.

"He killed Dynan," Dain said, and forced his arm free enough to elbow Maralt in the ribs. Keeping him still was impossible.

"He did no such thing," Gradyn said, and that stopped Dain again.

"I know what I saw!"

"I know what you think you saw. If you want answers, if you want to help save your brother, you'll stop struggling and listen. We need your help, Dain, and we don't have time for delay. Now let him go."

Maralt still wasn't certain he should, but then he heard Carryn. She called out, her voice filled with alarm. Maralt stopped worrying about what Dain might do, and left him.

Carryn was down the next long corridor around the corner. She stood with both hands out, her full weight leaning forward, palms flat, pressed into an impenetrable wall of advancing black. It was a consuming darkness that she wasn't able to stop. It seemed even, if she stood there much longer, the darkness would swallow her.

Maralt stared back at the High Bishop for confirmation of what he already knew. Gradyn was talking to Dain, trying to explain why he was there, and what he was needed for. Dain wasn't inclined to listen. Gradyn cast Maralt a nodding glance.

The darkness came from the Room of Orbs. Dynan Telaerin and his forefather were on the wrong side of that wall at the same time together, setting up an imbalance that allowed the Orbs, the Six Manifestations, access to this world, maybe permanently. If no one was there to stop them.

Maralt swore at the thought, hesitating between going to Carryn or back for Dain, aware that he was out of time. He swore again, a term hardly appropriate to use in front of the High Bishop. When Maralt went to Dain, he tried to jerk away. Maralt grabbed him, avoided a wild swing, and dragged him to the corner so he could see. The sight of all that black coming at them finally stopped him.

"Your brother is on the other side of that. If it reaches the Sacred Seal, the living seal, he'll never get out again. Do you believe in Hell, Dain? If you don't help us, Dynan is dead, and his afterlife won't be like anything you've ever been told about, and well, neither will yours."

Maralt shoved him back, putting some space between them in case Dain thought to come at him again. Maralt was more concerned now with helping Carryn, who was sliding backward, her shoulder into the dark wall.

"Maralt, no," Gradyn said. "Show Dain what to do and then come to the Temple."

With that, Gradyn turned and left them.

"Who are you people?" Dain asked, backing away when Maralt moved toward him.

"Guardians of the Word," Maralt said, knowing how little that explained.

"What? What word?"

"True ones," Maralt said. "Are you going to help, or not?"

For the first time, the anger in Dain's eyes lessened while uncertainty took its place. There was doubt he'd be able to face this, and fear and grief for his brother.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Evil," Maralt said when that was too simple an answer. "You'll know when you touch it. Now, be still. There's something I have to do."

"What?" he asked, unwilling to take anything Maralt said uncontested.

"I have to give you something."

Maralt wished he'd shut up for once, and do what he was told. The constant light and the desire to take it set him on edge. He found himself holding his breath to avoid it. The evil nature of the talon was there, too, working against him, and he tried to ignore it.

"Give me what?"

"Me," Maralt said. He put his hand to Dain's head, two fingers to the side of his face even as Dain reared away from him. Maralt followed, commanding him to be still while he concentrated on implanting the small seed of strength and will Dain would need to fight this thing. Maralt wondered if a little wisdom might help, too. Dain fought him, but it didn't matter and then it was done.

Maralt took Dain's memory of it happening next. There was a physical sense to it that surprised Maralt. It was like swallowing a drop of an intoxicating drug he couldn't get enough of. There was the sensation of the memory entering his mind, filling him with raw power.

"Maralt, hurry."

He blinked, focusing again and found Carryn struggling against the dark and Dain trying to push him off.

“Get away from me,” Dain said, trying to wrench free. “I don’t want anything from you.”

Maralt barked out a laugh. “Suit yourself,” he said, grabbed him up again, and turned him to the wall of night advancing toward them. He forced Dain to hold out his hand, and stood behind him, walking him toward the boiling black. “Focus your will, your strength, all this anger you walk around with, here, against this.”

Dain gasped when his hand met the solid force of energy as if it were a physical barrier, invisible but palpable.

“Don’t let it come any further. Don’t let it get away from you, either. Do you have it?” Maralt asked, letting him go in increments in case he didn’t, but Dain nodded, the exertion already starting to show in his face.

Maralt moved to Carryn, who was only barely aware of them, but as he meant to pull her away, he looked into the darkness.

A beautiful castle sat gleaming in the light, and he saw himself again sitting on a throne of power. Hundreds bowed on their knees before him. He saw and was overcome with desire to step into that world, and make it reality.

He felt a restraining hand on his arm, and found Dain Telaerin, not so much a child anymore, watching him, aware of his weakness.

“You should leave,” Dain said, one hand against the darkness and the other pulling Maralt back from it. “And take her with you.”

Carryn was looking into the dark too. Maralt jumped for her at the same time Dain gathered himself to push. The dark gave way a step. If Maralt hadn’t put both arms around her, Carryn would have gone with it.

“I’m all right,” Carryn said.

Maralt watched in awe while Dain pressed ahead. The light around him grew until it was blinding. The only thing he could think was how much he wanted to take it.

“Maralt,” Carryn’s voice intruded and he looked down. He still had her tightly in his arms. She cast him a look and smiled. She patted his arm while he loosened his grip on her, aware that he was breathing hard now, almost shaking. “We should go.”

She moved around him, and started pulling on him, drawing him away. He thought she was probably right, even when he didn’t want to leave. An opposing force of reluctance to allow it rose until he wanted to push her off to stop her.

“No, Maralt,” she said in a gentle voice, taking his face in her hands and drawing his attention from the brilliant flame that stood against the dark. “We have to go.”

She took his arm again, telling him not to look, talking to him for each step until the desire of it left him and he could breathe again.

“It was a nice castle though,” she said, hugging his arm as they reached the corner and went around it. The stone walls returned to their usual dull, damp state. “And all the worshiping minions to do every little thing I ever would want. Nice touch.”

“You felt it too,” he said, surprised and ashamed for his weakness when she seemed more able to ignore the temptation.

“Yes.” She looked back over her shoulder to Dain. “Do you think he will?”

“He’s too arrogant.”

Carryn laughed, a sound like rain falling on a cool spring day, refreshing and relieving. Maralt breathed again.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re right.”

“No, I’m the one who’s arrogant. I’ve done something terrible, Carryn.”

“You’ve done what you had to. You brought them to this place and this time where they need to be, so they can do what they were brought into the world to do.”

“To save us all,” Maralt said, looking back to the hall, and the soft glow of light coming from it. “I believe now.”

The High Bishop came from the other corridor, greeting them with the usual skepticism.

“A miracle that,” he said and turned to Carryn. “You should stay with Dain, but only as close as you can safely go, Carryn and no closer. It’s still possible he could fail or falter. We’ll need to know if he does. Maralt, come with me.”

Maralt didn’t want to, afraid the High Bishop knew of his failings too. Gradyn glanced at him, a brow raised.

“It would be nice if just once I could tell you in my own time,” Maralt said.

“I’m not that patient,” Gradyn said, but he smiled, the lines on his face relaxing a fraction. “We all have weaknesses, Maralt. We’re fallible and imperfect. It was a terrible thing I asked of you, a terrible risk to you, and to Dynan. You experienced something you didn’t expect, and now face a kind of guilt for it. The allure will always be there. Did you take the talon?”

Maralt didn’t hesitate with the answer. “He didn’t have it with him.”

Gradyn stopped, his hand on the door latch that would open onto the Temple Sanctuary. Maralt studied the wall. “Your first thought should have been that you know better than to touch it. The thing is all together corrupt, Maralt. If you risk it and fail...You’ll ruin us all.” Gradyn poked a finger into his chest, jabbing him a few times for emphasis, fortunately not near the place he’d been stabbed. “Guard your mind against your own follies. Now come with me.”

He took him into the Sanctuary where on the altar the Book of Truth sat open in a shaft of light that came down from the ceiling. Gradyn put a hand on Maralt’s shoulder, pressing downward until he lowered himself to his knees.

“Stay here, Guardian of the Word. Guardian of the Sacred Seal. Open your mind. Listen and wait. I’ll return soon.”

“Where are you going?”

“A King is in need of comfort, and his son needs the protection of the Gods if he has any hope of succeeding in his task. Stay here.”





Chapter 13

“Is there any water?”

Dynan turned around in the cramped, cut from the stone cave at the sudden cessation of movement. Polen, Grint and Faulkin looked at him as if he’d said a dirty word. Polen shook his head.

“You breathe,” he said, unwinding one of the bandages on his hand that he didn’t need any more. “You feel pain. That’s about the extent of any similarity to living. Like I said before, you’ll get used to it.”

“No, you won’t,” Grint muttered. He had a carpet of freckles across his face. He had hair that might have been red blond, but was so covered in dirt it was hard to say.

Grint reminded Dynan of Kamien, minus the freckles. They might have been the same age, or close to it, looked enough alike, seemed alike, except that Kamien was very much alive at the moment. Kamien was bigger, too.

Grint started tearing the wrappings off, turning his hands over and back. He kept laughing.

“All right, Grint, settle down,” Polen said, but he was smiling, and while Grint moved off to examine himself, rubbing his fingers all over his face, Polen moved to Dynan. “You have to forgive him. It’s been a long time, beyond the count of years that we’ve been around the living.”

“Living?” Dynan said, and Polen nodded.

“You can’t be dead. Not with what you can do. It’s no wonder they sent the Six after you. Now we just have to figure out what you’re here for.”

“I’m supposed to find Alurn,” Dynan said, and that stopped them too. “I have to bring him back.”

“Alurn?” Faulkin said. He was brushing dirt from the brown vest he wore, straightening the fabric where it had gotten rumpled. He had brown hair to match, equally rumpled and cut close to his head. “He’s not here. It’s not possible.”

“We’d know it if he was,” Grint said, and turned to Polen, who didn’t discount the possibility outright, even though he was shaking his head.

“It isn’t impossible,” he said. “But it isn’t probable either. It would mean something beyond bad for you both to be here. Who told you this? Who sent you here?”

Dynan couldn’t answer, except to stammer out a confused story about a man he didn’t know who’d saved him from certain death only to take his life the next moment.

“And he told you to find Alurn?” Polen said. He was quiet after Dynan nodded, but then he swore. “Damned priests. That sounds about right for their ilk. Alurn never should

have trusted them to begin with. Half of the whole damn catastrophe is their fault. Mishandling people's lives without thought to the consequences."

"Priest? I don't think he was from the Temple," Dynan said. "I mean, he wasn't dressed like one of them, and I can't believe the High Bishop—"

"They're the only ones who know, so he had to have been. They sent you here instead of letting you be taken by the other side. That was the first attack they stopped. If they hadn't...well, you'd be holding open a gateway from this side right now, or worse."

Polen rubbed his face with his hand and paced around the room, while everyone watched him and waited.

"With the Six aware that you're here," he said and then didn't go on, except to swear again.

Dynan hesitated, glancing around at each of these men. Contrary to everything he'd ever read about them, they seemed consumed by fear. "Who are the Six?" he asked.

"It's best not to talk about them," Faulkin said, and Grint agreed. "It's enough to know they're evil."

"He has a right to know, and a need," Polen said.

"I'll go check the entrance," Faulkin said. "One of them just had its claws in me, Pol. I'd just as soon not hear it."

Grint pointed after him. "I'll just...I'll make sure he comes back." The two disappeared down the narrow passage.

"Don't mind them," Polen said. "They think talking about it will draw them to us. Of course, they could be right in this case."

Polen Forb looked down at his hands a moment, rubbing a finger where the skin used to be flaking off, and then he looked at Dynan, his eyes narrowed, examining him.

"You are awfully young," he said under his breath. He took a seat for himself on a boulder, nodding to an outcrop of stone next to it, so Dynan sat with him. "What's your name, son?"

"What?"

"Your name? I know you're a Telaerin."

"Dynan," he said. It was the first time he'd ever met someone who didn't know who he was.

"And the rest of it?" Polen said.

"Alurn. Dynan Alurn."

Polen grunted at that, nodding as if he'd known it. "All right then, Dynan Alurn. How long has it been since your namesake ran the place?"

"A thousand years, or just about."

"Really? That long. And people still know who I am? I'll be damned," he said. His laugh trailed off into a grunt.

"There are a couple of books written about you," Dynan said.

"Oh I bet they got it all wrong. Not too many of us lived to tell the tale. Bremen was only a boy. Alurn didn't tell him about the real struggle. Did you know he had a twin brother?"

"Alurn? No."

"Not too surprising considering how it ended up. I suppose you have one, too."

"Dain."

“Dain Ardin, right? So you were both named after him. Do you trust him with your life, this brother of yours?”

“Yes,” Dynan said, wondering why Polen asked, and why he didn’t seem to believe the answer.

“And you’re a telepath. I know the kind. The big secret. Well, maybe it’ll turn out differently this time. Alurn and Adiem started out that way, living for each other. They were given a task too big for either of them when they were barely older than you. A mission no less than saving the universe from itself, trying to right a mistake made who knows how many thousands of years ahead of them.” Polen shook his head and stood up from his rock chair. He started pacing, glancing down the passageway toward the entrance as he turned.

“They failed. Adiem failed. He was taken by it, corrupted by it almost instantly. Alurn lost his brother to the darkness. He spent the rest of his life fighting him, trying to make it right, trying to get him back. Adiem is...The Six are all part of him, and as great an evil as you can imagine. The demon took him a long time ago.”

“The demon’s rampage and the wrath of the Gods.”

Polen looked at him. “You’ve heard the stories then, couched as a child’s tale, no doubt. You’ve not heard all of it though. The demon escaped because Adiem let it. And it destroyed all the worlds, because he wanted it that way. He was told, you see, that he’d get to rule us all. He fell for the lie, and nothing Alurn said changed Adiem’s mind, or turned him from it.”

“But—”

“The Gods scoured the planets clean after it happened. They had to. And they will again. It weakens them though, every time they have to come here and fix our mess. Maybe this time they won’t be strong enough. We’re running out of chances to get it right.”

Dynan shook his head, hardly able to believe it, or really understand except to be afraid. He’d heard the stories. Kamien used to tell them at night when they were younger, about a demon escaping the void, scaring them to the point they couldn’t sleep. But they begged him to tell them more. It was a long time ago, before Kamien stopped talking to them, or having anything to do with them, before he stopped being the brother they knew.

“Why do you call them the Six?” he asked, and put Kamien out of mind.

“It’s what he did to survive,” Polen said. “They killed each other, Adiem and Alurn. You never would have known they were brothers. The priests took Alurn somehow, took his spirit; to protect him, to save him from this place, maybe to give us all another chance for later on. Adiem didn’t have that option. He was less inclined to leave his life than Alurn. He wouldn’t take what they offered him. He had a son, and so to escape the void, he went to the boy instead. A part of him anyway, probably the worst part. He joined with him, a sin greater maybe than all the others he committed. Took his own child’s life. Lived through him. For generations it went on, moving one to the next, getting stronger every time until the priests realized what was happening.”

“Here? On Cobalt?” Dynan asked. He’d never heard this part before, even as a bedtime story. There was no mention at all in any history text Dynan ever read that Alurn Telaerin had a brother.

“And other places. Every time they found one, they contained it, sent it back to the Void where he can’t reach the real world, or couldn’t until now, and now there are six.

The Priests guard them, or maybe it's only Alurn with that job. Each is as evil a thing as you'll ever encounter. Each has a power of its own, abilities to warp what you think and what you know. You felt something of it when they were looking for you. You'd fall before them if you were to face them all together, or maybe even one, unless you're made of sterner stuff than you seem."

Polen glanced back to the tunnel again. Maybe there was something there he didn't like, or his thoughts disturbed him.

"Something has happened now to change the way of it. Maybe it's as you say, and Alurn is here. If it's so, and you're here to find him, it's best you get on with it. With you both here, all they need is one more."

Polen didn't explain what that meant even after Dynan waited for it. Alurn's old mentor was getting more nervous by the moment. "Or what?"

"It all happens again, boy, or haven't you been listening? They know you're here. It won't take them long to break our defenses and take you. Your loving brother will try to come save you, won't he? He'll be the weak link. They'll count on it."

"Dain?"

"Rash," Polen said as if he knew. "Impulsive. Reckless. Immature. Doesn't really have much thought for anyone but himself, except when it comes to you. He'd die for you. That devotion makes up for most of the flaws and imperfections. Yes?"

That was Dain, to some degree anyway, on all counts, but Dynan refused to agree with the assessment. "He isn't weak."

"Just where they need him to be. They have you. That's going to be their plan to get you all. The priest sent you here to find Alurn because you're the only one who can. You just got the anointment, didn't you? And they kept your brother to get you back out, if he'll stay. The longer you're here, you and Alurn, the worse it'll be for those in the light. The land of the damned isn't for the living. We should get started. Where is he?"

"Alurn?" Dynan said. "I don't know."

"They had to have told you something," Polen said. "You've forgotten it. Think."

Dynan shook his head, knowing he hadn't forgotten anything. But he did stop to think about it, and the answer came when he looked again to Polen Forb.

"They sent me here and you found me. You taught Alurn everything. You were with him for years. You know him. You tell me where he'd be."

"Well how am I supposed to..." Polen stopped and grunted something about Telaerins always telling him what to do, but his grey-flecked brows drew downward over his eyes as he thought about it. "It's going to depend on what they drew him here with. He wouldn't have come for just anything, and I don't think they could force him. Your side obviously wouldn't have sent him."

"He had more than one child, didn't he? What happened to them, to his family?" Dynan asked, thinking that would be the only thing that would make anyone volunteer to come here.

"He had a daughter, Riella, about seven, and year-old boys. Twins. They all died together. Trapped. Adiem meant to take the children but...Fadril stopped him."

"Take them?" Dynan asked. He hadn't known that the first Queen of Cobalt died with her husband.

"Their souls," Polen said, his voice lowering. "Alurn was already half dead, like the rest of us. The children were gone – dead. Adiem was...well, I'm not going to tell you

what, but it was the most horrifying thing you can think of. He wanted those boys. Fadril was mortally injured. She was the last of us standing. She took up her husband's sword and somehow, against all odds, she got through. I remember the look on Adiem's face when he realized he would die, that his plans wouldn't succeed. And then the dark came in. When I next looked, it was us here – Alurn, Adiem, Faulkin, Grint and myself. We made Alurn take the way he was offered. The children and Fadril died, a violent death, but it was a real death, and not by the touch of a wraith. They can't be here."

"If you don't know where he is, or what brought him, then I can't tell you," Dynan said.

Polen nodded to that, looking down the tunnel. "We're going to have to figure it out on the move."

"What? Why?"

An instant later, Dynan heard yelling coming from the tunnel. Pol took him by the jacket, yanking him around and pushing him the opposite direction from the noise.

"Go down this way," he said, pointing, but looking back over his shoulder at the same time. "Not too far. There'll be a shaft. Climb it. Stay with the dead, and don't listen to what the Six tell you. If you see something pretty, it isn't real."

"Wait."

"They're coming. Go. Right now, boy."

"I can't find Alurn without you."

"Look for the place he died," Pol pushed him again, harder this time, and Dynan staggered back.

"I don't know where that is!"

"Is there anything you do know? It's in the mountains behind where you live. I suppose that might not be the same these days. In the Taramaik Mountains, if they're still called that. Near the summit of the tallest peak, there are two cliffs that shelter a meadow. Find it and you might find him. There's a Temple there. Go in it."

"Come with me."

Polen smiled at that. "I'll try and catch up with you. I swore an oath to protect him and all his kin. You're the last of them. Even in death it holds. Be careful of the river crossing. It's treacherous. Go on now. Run while you can."

The yelling down the tunnel turned to screams then, full of fear and terror. Polen headed off that way at a run, toward the danger, and Dynan thought he'd never see him again. He wanted to go with him to help, but fear stopped him cold. The shriek of a wraith echoed against the stone. He thought about Faulkin and Grint who blamed him for bringing this terror down on top of them.

He heard Polen's voice then, rising in a cry of defiance, but that changed to one of fear, and then one filled with pain, a gagging intermittent noise that made Dynan think Pol was being pulled limb from limb. The desire to go see, to do something, anything, grew to a pitch he couldn't withstand as the screams rose.

"Ru—"

The last scream shook through him. A shadow cut across the tunnel stones, coming toward him. Dynan turned, stumbling backward, trying to move when his limbs were locked. He fell and scrambled back to his feet, blindly racing away.

He forgot what Polen said about the escape shaft until he came on a dead end. He couldn't think what to do except to know he'd just ended his brief existence here, maybe

in the world too. Turning around and going back, going toward the thing that was after him wasn't an option. He couldn't make himself do it, but the realization that his survival depended on it came in and forced the issue. He had to get to that shaft and up it before one of the Six reached it first.

Dynan moved in sporadic fits, stopping to listen, his fingers gripping into the wall. He needed something to hold onto to stay standing. He remembered to look up after he'd come back more than halfway.

The air around him turned cold. He saw a layer of darkness advancing where the chamber widened ahead. It pulled light from the air as it came.

Dynan looked up in desperation, and saw it, the shaft, barely a break in the dome of rock overhead. He started climbing to get to it, aware he was out of time. He reached the hole, and looked back.

The man he'd seen before as an apparition in his bedroom walked into the narrow chamber, looking immediately to Dynan, his black eyes lighting with pleasure. He didn't seem like a maniacal monster. He seemed only a man. Dynan had expected the wraith.

"Come down," Adiem said, his voice calm and unconcerned, even pleasant. "You don't need to run away. I'm not going to hurt you."

Dynan almost did what he said, muscles relaxing as he perched on the edge of the shaft, half in and half out. There wasn't much point of running, was there? He reached down and put his hand on a lower hold. Adiem smiled, his teeth locked together. Dynan heard him pull in a breath through his nose, and the pleasant smile widened.

That stopped him. Polen told him to run and not listen to the Six. This man was definitely one of them. Trying not to telegraph his intentions, Dynan glanced upward as he lowered himself down another notch, looking for the means of escape that would get him up that hole. Adiem was coming closer, his hand outstretched.

Dynan lurched upward for a protruding boulder, landed on one foot, and surged to the next, hopping from boulder to boulder like a mountain goat. He grabbed hold of a ledge and hauled himself up, scrabbling to get up and get away. He drew his legs up after as soon as he was all the way inside the shaft.

Adiem was right there, moving with unnatural speed, not smiling any more, and grabbed him by the ankle. Dynan was dragged downward. If he hadn't already wedged himself in he'd have fallen at the first haul. It felt like his leg was being ripped off his body. He knew then that Polen had been pulled apart, bit by bit.

Trying to wrench away did nothing except make it hurt worse. He screamed because of it, but he held on, using his free leg to keep himself from being dragged down farther, and then the heel of his boot to smash it into Adiem's face and even into his own ankle to get the hand off. The thing beneath him was snarling after him.

Freedom came the next instant. Dynan used it to throw himself upward, hands and feet propelling him deeper into the shaft as fast as he could move. He heard Adiem fall, and then come back, tearing away rock, growling as he came.

The light failed the higher Dynan climbed. His teeth clenched together to keep welling screams from bursting out. Something way worse than death was coming for him. Despair and fear of failing clothed every movement.

He ran into something soft in near darkness. Adiem was right behind him. Trapped, Dynan pressed upward using both hands and his last remaining strength. He broke

through, and realized the soft thing was a body. There were stacks of them piled up around him. He scrambled out of the hole and didn't hesitate.

He dove into the grisly mound, shoving aside the dead, worming his way under them, around them, even through them to escape the thing that exploded from the hole behind him. It wasn't a man anymore, but monster, frenzied, tearing into the dead and flinging them away.

But on the wrong side. Trying not to breathe, Dynan looked back beyond an arm, the bridge of a nose, between a set of splayed fingers, and saw the wraith across from him. It was in the wrong place.

He didn't look long. Turning, he dug in farther, squirming his way through, stopping only to cover his ears when the wraith started screaming. He ignored the images that assaulted him, the beautiful green meadow his whole body ached for, the white castle gleaming in the light, and worst of all, images of his family that Adiem had plucked from his mind, standing around as if they were waiting for him.

Dynan saw his mother looking out expectantly, long blonde hair tied in a clasp. Shalael called his name. He was taken back to a day he remembered being with her in the arbor, one of the few true memories he had of her. He'd gone off after a flying lady wing or a bug of some sort. He saw her coming around a bush down the garden walk, calling to him when she didn't see him. He heard her calling now, sounding just like she did when he was four.

He wanted to hear her voice, but he tried not to listen. He wanted to stay and see her, even when he knew it was all a lie. He held in the tearless, painful sobs until he was shaking from the effort to suppress the noise. He kept crawling forward, inching his way along, moving in and around and under cover of death until he was far away and the wraith couldn't hear him anymore.





Chapter 14

It took a long time to stop shaking, longer than he wanted to spend curled up in a ball in a hollow among the dead. Their faces were all familiar now. Dynan knew it was an illusion the wraith had planted in his mind, but it didn't matter. Dain, three different versions of him, lay twisted in a heap, one on top of the other. His father was there. Shalis was there. Kamien. His mother. Everyone he knew lay in a pile all around him while he used them to hide.

In this place crying didn't bring anything but more pain instead of release and relief. The agony of it finally forced him to stop. The effort to do so left him shivering. His breath came out in a visible plume, rising and dissipating.

Dynan shrank down into the bodies as the realization of danger came, and he reached for the arm of his fake father to draw over top of him. He took one version of Dain next, pulling until he was able to move his brother's body over his own. He hid underneath, as first one wraith came snuffling up over a stack of bodies hardly four feet away, and then another and another.

Dynan breathed into the frayed jacket his brother wore, and squeezed his eyes closed against the sudden compunction to get up and show himself. His body was on fire. A weight landed on his chest and released, followed by another compression that squeezed all the air from his lungs.

The bodies on top of him collapsed under the pressure, the taloned foot of the wraith sinking through. The only thing keeping it from touching Dynan was a layer of threadbare cloth, and he thought if the talon did touch him, they'd find him.

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't move. He couldn't make a sound. He thought he couldn't stand it anymore, and had to have some air. Finally, when black spots started playing behind his eyes, the wraith moved off.

Dynan gasped. He couldn't stop the sound. The wraith spun around, sniffing the air for him, and pouring out mental commands to show himself. Dynan shrank inward, trying to think of anything else.

Its own impatience saved him. After it moved off, Dynan sat frozen, waiting until he was certain it was far enough away that he could risk getting up.

Carefully, watching the three wraiths searching among the dead, he crawled out from underneath the bodies. There were three more out there somewhere, so he moved slowly, cautiously peering over the edge of an arm at the top of the heap.

Beneath him on one side stood the forest of sticks. Behind him on the other side, the land sloped downward until it met a narrow plain before climbing again. There were a lot of hills and dells. Everything was covered with the dead.

Dynan tried to find some correlation to where his home should be, but couldn't do it. He couldn't place where he was at all. He thought maybe to get to the other hill, but that meant crossing an open space that had fewer bodies to hide under, and going the same way as the wraiths.



The dead man behind him was very giving. The long plain was slightly less terrifying with him, but no less difficult. Dynan crawled the entire distance, pulling the body along by an arm until the arm came off. The other arm didn't last much longer. The legs held up better, but it was harder to move, until Dynan tied the limbs together at the ankles.

"I'm sorry," he said to the corpse as he went, and wondered what kind of soul he'd have left if he ever made it back home.

He kept low and moved carefully, keeping an eye on the wraiths already on the ground ahead of him. He used the body to take cover whenever they turned around.

It was the ones flying overhead, raking by without warning that were most difficult to avoid. Dynan kept still when they were aloft. He even fell asleep, or some version of sleep that meant he closed his eyes and didn't move. He saw things though, grotesque recreations of death and dismemberment that jerked him back awake and made him not want to close his eyes again.

He reached the other side of the plain covered in grime and other things, stinking of it, but all in one piece. He left what remained of the dead man's body at the foot of the hill. Using the dead already in place, he climbed to the top to look over.

A dry wind blew up from the base, carrying with it the smell of something he couldn't place. He didn't know it, except to know it was foul. He thought instead, about the wind off the Wythe Sea hitting the tall cliffs the Palace stood on, rattling the windows. The desire to breathe the salt rich breezes from his home was so suddenly overwhelming it made breathing in the stench unbearable. There was physical pain with the thought, like hot stabbing knives. It was a punishment for seeing a thing of beauty in this place of horror. He forced the thought of home out of mind.

There was some benefit to making the arduous trek across the plain and up the hill. He recognized where he was. It still didn't have much correlation to Rianamar and the Palace. Everything was backward or slightly off where it ought to be. The city didn't exist. Neither did the Palace or the Temple, but the land was mostly in the right place. It made him feel like he was in some kind of alternate universe, but then he supposed purgatory qualified.

Cutting through the low valley, as it did through Rianamar, was the Wyvern River, only there seemed something distinctly different about this version. Polen said there wasn't any water and yet there seemed to be a river of it.

The dryness of his mouth intruded. Thinking about water was a bad idea, too.

He became obsessed with it, the thought of it driving him down the hillside and halfway across the valley toward it before the realization that he was out in the open

struck him still. Slowly, Dynan sank down to his knees, willing himself to be as small as possible.

There weren't any bodies all the way to the riverbank. The longer he sat out in the open, the faster the Six would find him. He lost track of them the moment he came down the hill. He didn't know where they might come from next.

He pulled to his feet and kept going, hunched over, half running and then racing to get there, the hair on the back of his neck standing up. When he turned around, still running, there was nothing there when it felt the Six were right behind him.

He reached the riverbank, recoiling as the realization came. He understood the saturation of salt in the air. He wondered how he'd ever be able to live with the smell of the sea again, standing there on the edge of a river of blood.

He started throwing up from it, only there wasn't anything inside to come up. He leaned over his knees, retching in spasms.

The desire to drink didn't leave him. His mouth was parched. His tongue felt twice its normal size. He didn't have any spit to swallow.

Dynan sat and hugged his knees on the riverbank beside a pile of something that resembled bodies but was distinguishable only by a jumble of protruding limbs. Polen had been right about getting used to it.

"I'd like to know," he said under his breath, "what the hell I did? Was it sneaking out of the Palace a few times?" he asked the air and then didn't know why he was talking out loud. "Getting my guard killed?"

He put both palms into his eyes to try and stop what was coming, and succeeded to a degree.

"I really wish you were here," he said of Colin Fryn, but then couldn't believe what he was thinking.

The idea of bringing anyone, living or dead into this horror ought to have been the last thing on his mind. He tried hard not to think about Dain, afraid Polen was right about that, too. Dynan was alone though, with no one to rely on but himself. He didn't know how he was supposed to accomplish the task he'd been given, or even how he was going to get across this river.

Nearly drowning at the age of three meant he avoided water at all costs. The rest of his family enjoyed the annual trip to the beach. It wasn't that he didn't know how to swim. Dain made him learn, and then later, just last year, Dynan decided to get better at it. He forced himself into the pool and practiced, but Dain was always with him. It was the only way he could do it.

Dynan hugged his knees a little harder. There weren't any bridges. There wasn't any wood to make a raft, or even a few boards to string together to hold onto. He doubted the bodies would float. Dain wasn't there.

It hurt more than was endurable to cry without crying. It made him want to pull his eyes out of his head to get rid of the agony.

"Bad idea," he said.

Dain would know what to do. Rash, maybe, but Dain was fearless, too. He was smarter, stronger, better at everything. Dynan didn't begrudge him that, wishing he could trade places with Dain permanently. He'd be King instead, and be better at it.

Dynan looked at the flowing blood, a deep brownish red, the current swirling in places, but mostly sluggishly meandering. He wished for even a little of Dain's courage. His brother wouldn't think anything of this, except as an impediment to the objective.

"I don't know why I have to cross the damn thing anyway," Dynan said. "Getting to the other side doesn't count as a good enough reason. Maybe finding Alurn isn't good enough. Well nothing seems good enough if I put it that way. What the hell."

He closed his eyes against another round of gagging nausea that was more painful than tearless crying. He wondered if he'd make it across without taking a drink, suddenly afraid if he did, he'd never escape the place. He'd stay here, damned for all time.

"All right," he told himself, trying to drill up the courage to get on with it before he really was driven to pull his eyes out. In this place, nothing horrible was impossible. "You've been in the pool at home dozens of times now. It'll be like that. Well not really, but...All right, really, it's not like that at all. It doesn't matter. You have to do it anyway. Just start. You can do this."

"Great. Now I'm talking to myself."

"At least I'm talking, so shut the fuck up, already."

"And I'm telling myself to shut up. I guess that means I've lost my mind, too."

"How about you just stop talking. Stop talking. Boy, I didn't think I'd ever hear myself say that. Just get on with it, would you? All right, I'm going. Right now. I'm going to get in this nasty river. And I swear, by the Gods, I will never swim across or in anything, ever again. Ever."

The bank was slippery with little to grab hold of that wasn't a grisly mess. He went up to his waist faster than he wanted, and when his feet hit the bottom and slipped, he almost didn't stop himself from going under. He dug his fingers into the muck, regaining his balance slowly.

Fumes rose around him, gagging in their intensity, filling his nose and mouth with the taste of rotting flesh. He couldn't stop breathing. He started throwing up again. He retreated backward, defeated already, but the bank was too steep to climb out.

His sole purpose became getting to the other side as quickly as possible. His boots weighed him down and he thought he should have gotten rid of them. The bed of the river was uneven. Up to his waist in blood, it was hard to walk without tripping, and too shallow to swim. He couldn't tell what he was walking on until they started bobbing to the surface.

Bodies. Heads. Dismembered limbs.

"Oh no. Okay, just don't look at them. What is that? Another head. And a hand to go with it. That's nice. Oh, wait a minute. They're...Shit..."

It was his imagination, he told himself. "No, they're not. They are not. They are *not* alive."

The hands really weren't trying to grab hold of him, but the next instant he saw one clutching his shoulder, latched on like a leech.

Dynan started rushing, not caring what he stepped on, as the grasping bodies surrounded him. He shoved past them, half swam, half ran across the riverbed, kicking up more of them as he went. Before too long the whole river was covered with them. He was only halfway across.

He wrenched off the clinging hands, throwing them away from him. They came back and they started to pull. At the same time the bottom fell out from under him. He went in up to his neck.

Panic set in. These things, dead, mutilated and somehow sentient were trying to drown him. It was his greatest fear.

Something latched onto his leg, crawled up to his knee, tightening its grip as it went. He had the presence of mind to pull in a lungful of air the instant before he was pulled under.

He kicked and thrashed against it, trying to ignore the need for air that grew more desperate by the moment. Dynan opened his eyes, a mistake, and couldn't see at all. He couldn't tell which way was up.

He remembered Dain telling him to relax and he'd float, but Dynan couldn't follow the advice. The next instant he was going to breathe and fill his lungs with blood. The hands on him rose up to his shoulders. He tried one last time to get them off, and met a whole body.

His head broke the surface and a hand clamped over his mouth just as he dragged in a gasp of air, trying to avoid sucking in a mouthful of blood.

"Don't make a sound," a voice hissed in his ear – right after it was too late.

Faulkin Yeld shook his head at him and pulled him back under. Just before he had to squeeze his eyes closed, Dynan saw a wraith wheel around, aiming for them.

Relief flooded through him anyway, even as the presence of the wraith increased to a pitch, swept over them, and then lessened. Faul tugged on his arm, and met him at the surface.

"One more time," Faul said. "Swim toward shore. And whatever you do, kid, don't drink it. You'll be puking it back up for days. Pol is already across."

"How?"

"There's more than one hole out of that tunnel. When you get to the shore, get out and get under cover. The Six are half-blinded by the taken, but you're a damn magnet to them. Go under."

The news that Polen was all right made it easier. The wraith turned another way the next time up, and didn't come back. Polen met him on the bank.

As Dynan reached his hand up he saw for an instant in Polen's face something that made him hesitate. Polen had his teeth together and he breathed through his nose. There was something else in his eyes too, but Dynan was so happy to see him, the realization didn't come until it was too late.

Polen reached for Dynan, taking his hand. Abruptly, he melded into Adiem Telaerin.

Dynan was yanked from the river. Another hand descended to take him by the throat. The Six stood around in a disjointed circle, some as men, some as wraiths coming in to land. He wouldn't escape them this time. Everything Polen Forb had feared would happen. They'd get all three of them, Alurn, Dynan and Dain, and they'd release the demon on the world.

Adiem reached down and drew a finger along side Dynan's face, grinning in delight, and showed him what was coming.





Chapter 15

There was a lot of screaming.

There was darkness, pain and anguish combined.

There were visions.

People were packed into a space not large enough to hold them. Thousands of them jostled for a more comfortable position when there weren't any places left to stand. They walked over top of others who'd given up. Every one of them was naked to the elements. It rained in some places, snowed in others, both falling red. There was hail and lightning, all squeezed together on a plain of misery.

Dynan knew he would spend the rest of eternity there.

The terrible vision faded. The sound of moaning stopped. There came the sensation of movement and awareness of being carried on something. He was shaking again while the rocks slid by. They were trudging along a stone path, climbing up into the mountains, though Dynan didn't know which mountains.

The rock was as red as the river. Grey light was sucked from the sky, replaced by black swirling inky darkness that obscured sight. An occasional patch of light came through and told him what caused the dark. Adiem smiled down at him.

Dynan instantly moved to roll off the cot carried by four untaken men, but he was shoved back down. Adiem shook his head. "It's best if you conserve your energies. You'll need them later. The river crossing took quite a bit out of you."

Dynan looked down, following Adiem's gaze. A black worm the size of his finger had attached to his hand. It was fat and dug into skin. When Dynan tried to pull it off, skin started to come with it, and it wouldn't let go. He saw another on his other hand, another on his wrist, under his shirtsleeve. He felt one at his neck. They were all over him. He could feel one sinking into his leg.

Adiem laughed when in a panic Dynan kept trying to get them off. "They don't come off," he said, pushing him down on the cot again. "Not for you."

Dynan tried to jerk away when Adiem took him by the wrist, but the effort was useless. Adiem took hold of the black worm, twisting it between his fingers. The back of it detached, but the head remained embedded. There was an inner shell to the thing, and as Dynan watched, it started to fill up again.

Adiem was absorbed with the other part, rolling it between his fingers, before he suddenly put it in his mouth. His eyes closed in obvious pleasure. He threw his head back, laughing.

“Now that is an exquisite delicacy, my young friend.” He leaned over Dynan, pressing him into the cot. “And now you have some idea what you are here for. You’ll be feeding us for quite some time to come. Ages, in fact.”

He plucked off another worm, and popped it into his mouth like he was eating a piece of candy. Dynan shrank away from him, thrashing against the iron grip on his wrist. Adiem took another of the worms, bit it in half and tossed it over his shoulder where a pack of spike-headed, hairless dogs fell to fighting over the morsel.

Adiem laughed at him, and then let him go.

The next instant, strands of rope threaded around Dynan’s arms and legs, moving by some invisible command to tie him to the cot so he couldn’t escape.

Adiem was in his head the next moment, showing Dynan more horrors, and then tortured him with visions of water and food he couldn’t get to. Hot knives, barbed spikes, and hooks sank into him. In his mind, his arms and legs were torn off one by one.

The dark was always there, but the dark didn’t bring any relief. So he traveled, strapped to a cot of tattered cloth, screaming and thrashing from terror and pain.

He didn’t know how long they moved that way with Adiem walking beside him while Dynan lay in writhing agony, only that it went on and on. So when they finally stopped, and he was set on the ground and released, anticipation of worse to come filled his mind.

As the realization came that he wasn’t being tortured anymore, anger replaced fear, and a kind of resolve that started deep down within. He thought if he could do nothing else in this long nightmare, he’d not give them any more satisfaction. He wouldn’t cooperate. He wouldn’t help them do whatever it was they wanted without fighting them, even if fighting them didn’t work.

There wasn’t any purpose to being afraid anymore. He’d gotten through the horror of the river, and reasoned he could get through anything else after that. Of course, it was easier thought than accomplished. Not knowing what was next didn’t help tenuous courage, but he pulled himself up from the cot cautiously, body taut, ready for whatever.

A sheltered cove of rock situated among the greater boulders of the mountain surrounded them. There remained the half-light of monochromatic grey mixing with the ruddy color of the stone. Around Adiem the dark gathered like a cloak.

Half amused and with a look of curiosity, Adiem watched him. The four men who’d carried the cot were fawning over him at his feet. The dogs followed him. Adiem waved his hand impatiently at them all and they scampered away, crying in their fear of him. They hid themselves in a corner of boulders.

“What do you want with me,” Dynan said, hoping he could find a way out of it, or at least be ready for it. He gestured to the worms still hanging off him. “Other than the snacks?”

Adiem laughed, a sound that sent a shiver up Dynan’s spine. It made him want to hide in a hole too. “Well, in a short time, shorter than you’ll like, you’re going to call your brother and bring him to us. And then we’re going to fulfill a thousand year prophecy that I foresaw so long ago. One of you alive so that we may slake the altar with living blood. One of you dead. That would be you. You’ll spend the rest of existence holding open the gateway. It isn’t going to be very pleasant for you, but that’s what you get when you’re a son of Alurn.”

"All of this is so the demon can get out," Dynan said, trying not to sound terrified of it.

"Yes."

"The Gods won't let you."

Adiem scoffed. "They can barely contain us as it is. This time will be different, little Princeling. There are six of us. It's why you were born and why others were born to counter our numbers, but there aren't enough of you. After we're finished of course, there won't be any. Your ignorance weakens you. No one bothered to prepare you for this. I suspect no one even told you what you are. It's the way they operate. So no, the Gods won't be capable of responding. You see, we're going to kill one of them. That will change things quite a bit."

"Kill one of the Gods?" Dynan said. "How do you...It isn't possible. You're only going to succeed in bringing them down here to destroy you."

"You're wrong. You'll see. Soon."

"I'm not going to do it," Dynan said.

"You will." Adiem seemed so much more confident of his answers than Dynan was of his.

He shook his head though. "I'm not going to bring Dain here. He won't come."

"He'll come. He thinks he can save you."

"I'll tell him not to," Dynan said, hoping against hope that maybe this time Dain would listen. "He isn't stupid. He'll see the risks. He'll see right through you. But that's only if you get through to him without me."

"He'll come when he sees what's happening to you," Adiem said, and smiled about it.

Dynan thought he was probably right, which meant he had to convince Dain, somehow, as quickly as possible not to believe anything he was seeing. If Dynan could get through to him, he might be able to stop him. He just had to get him to believe that it was all a trap, and coming would only make things worse.

Dynan had to stop himself from thinking that Dain being here with him wouldn't be worse. He thought having him here might be the only way to save them all.

"He'll come," Adiem said. "You want him here."

"What happened to you?" Dynan asked to get him off the subject of his brother. "Polen said you didn't start out this way. You and Alurn used to care about each other."

Adiem stopped smiling, but his teeth still showed under a snarling glare. Dynan backed away from him as he approached. He wanted to run, but the wall of rock stopped him.

"Alurn never cared about me. Ever. He only cared about amassing as much power as he could. He didn't care what he did to get it. Do you know how many people died because of him? And when I found out he was being used as a means to an end, when I found out the truth, I warned him. Did he listen to me? No, he came back with these wild excuses about how I was causing all of it. And then he made a pact that would allow him to survive, but would leave me here. Every time they found one of us, they put us in here, one by one. Look around you. Don't you want to get out?"

Adiem took him by either side of his face, his breath smelling of death. "You of all people should know, you can't believe everything you hear. Such a trusting soul. Now, no more talk of Alurn. We're going to sit here quietly and wait."

“It’s funny,” Dynan said before Adiem could step away. “No one knows who you are. No one knows Alurn even had a brother. And here you sit, still trying to be better than him, to take the Kingdom he made that’s lasted a thousand years. I almost feel sorry for—”

Excruciating pain cut off his voice. He wanted to scream, but he couldn’t get any air to make a sound. His body jerked in spasms, but he was held on his feet. Through the haze of agony, he thought maybe he’d just succeeded in ruining their plans.

Everything was exploding from the inside, and being a lump of charred nothing wouldn’t bring Dain here. Dynan held onto that thought, concentrated on it as hard as he knew how so that he wouldn’t start begging Adiem to stop.

It didn’t take more than a moment longer for thoughts of self-sacrifice to vanish. Dynan knew he’d do anything they wanted him to, and he wanted more than anything to tell Adiem he’d changed his mind, except he still couldn’t breathe to form the words.

He felt the ground then. He hit his head against it when he fell, which meant he’d been let go. He managed to gasp out the one word he’d been trying to say, at the same time he realized the pain had already stopped.

He lay shaking for a moment longer, afraid it was going to start up again, but then there were hands on him, gently picking him up. It was so incongruous to what he’d just gone through, it forced his eyes to focus.

Adiem wasn’t leering or smiling manically. He wasn’t angry, but seemed almost sorry for what had happened. Dynan knew this one wasn’t the same. This was another of the Six.

This version of Adiem frowned briefly as he helped Dynan lean up against a boulder before sitting back to look at him. “I thought he wasn’t the one for this. I told them not to underestimate you just because you’re so young. We don’t always agree about the details. They didn’t listen and so you were able to throw the Fourth into a blind rage with amazing ease.”

“The Fourth?” Dynan asked when he didn’t mean to say anything at all. This one was so relaxed and uncreepy it was easy to forget who he was.

“I’m the Second. Third is off dealing with another quadrant of the realm. I’m probably the last one you’re going to want to deal with. The First – now *he* is a cold, cruel bastard. I suppose that’s why he’s so well loved around here. I’m not quite like him though.”

Adiem stood and went to the place in the shelf where the boulders weren’t so high, and looked out. It was still darker than usual. As soon as he moved away, Dynan rolled to his feet and started looking around for a way to escape. There was only rock, and no clear way out. What he wanted now was a ledge to throw himself off of. At this point, anything was better than facing their plans for him. He was certain now he wouldn’t be able to.

The thought crept in that he and Dain together might be able to face it and maybe even stop them. Dynan realized that’s what they wanted him to think and could be telling him to think. Adiem smirked then, half laughing to himself.

“You are perceptive,” he said. “I told them that, too.”

“I’m not going to do it. I don’t care what you do to me.”

“You certainly are my brother’s son,” Adiem said. “Some would call it stupidity to exhibit such determined defiance in the face of certain defeat, but with you, I’d say it was

genetically engrained. You remind me of him. It's unfortunate that you'll meet under less than ideal circumstances."

Adiem frowned and shook his head. "It doesn't have to be like this, Dynan," he said. "It doesn't have to be this horrific, torturous end you've imagined, or maybe been told about."

"The other guy said you'd be feeding off me for Ages, so why should I believe you, after what he did?"

Adiem thought about it as he walked over. "I'm Second and he's not? He said it to frighten you. He's jealous of the power you hold. He's insecure. Deranged. I could go on. Of course, he's wrong. No one is going to feed off you. Though it is tempting. It's not good news for you."

"I know what you want to do."

"Do you? Your brother is going to come through to us whole. We need his living blood, and we're going to get it. Once that's done, we'll take your soul, the source of all that power. I'm sorry to say, you don't have much more time to accept the situation."

He reached over and pulled off one of the dangling worms. Dynan willed himself not to cringe away from him and only partially succeeded. The step back was involuntary.

Adiem took the worm and crushed it in his hand until it burst. What came out, dripping through his fingers and across his open palm was the same viscous, glowing substance the dogs went after.

"This," Adiem said, holding out his hand. "This is life, and you're going to give it to us."

"You're going to take it from me," Dynan said, feeling the distinction was a pretty important one.

"All right. Yes. True."

"Why do you have Alurn?"

"We need him, as much as it pains me to say it. Surviving among the living, his spirit gives them power and takes power from us. You'll be taken before him, so you won't have to watch, last as he was first. And now, you know what to expect, not that it will help much, but it might give you enough courage to face the end of your existence," Adiem said, gesturing to the center of the shelf and then purposefully guided Dynan to stand there. "It's time."

Adiem nodded, and then pointed to a space a few kem in front of them that was suddenly different from everything else, distorted around the edges and expanding.

"Your brother is here," Adiem said, putting a hand on Dynan's back.

It was true. Dain stood inside the distortion staring in growing, stunned awareness.

Dynan meant to tell him to run, but the ability to speak was taken from him. Pain descended, but he was forced to stand and endure it.

"Dynan?"

"Tell him you need him," Adiem said quietly. "Hold out your hand to him. Do it. Now."

His arm rose, his hand reached, while his mind screamed from pain and knowledge that Adiem was right. He saw it all happen in a flash, Dain here with him, dying on an altar of blood, Dynan's soul taken, a separation that would last an eternity.

"Tell him," Adiem said, the pressure and pain increasing.

“Dain, I need you here,” he said, and saw his fingers curling open. In moments, it would be too late to stop him.

“Who is that?” he asked, and Dynan saw that he was distracted by something, or maybe someone with him.

“Tell him you found Alurn.”

“I found Alurn, Dain. He needs your help to come back.”

“That was a nice touch,” Adiem said and let him breathe.

The instant the pressure eased enough that Dynan could gasp he jerked his hand closed. His fingers balled into a fist. He formed a single thought, reaching across the chasm to his brother, who heard him as clearly as if he was standing next to him. In a flash of wordless images, Dynan showed him that it was all a terrible trap.

Adiem yanked back on him, snuffing out the air he’d only just drawn in, and then threw him to the ground in an effort to get around him, reaching for Dain.

Dynan grabbed hold of him, wrapping himself around Adiem’s legs to keep him from moving. Pain erupted in his arms, spread to his neck, down his back. Through narrowing vision, Dynan saw someone – the flash of a face of a young woman – dragging Dain back and away from the gateway.

“Don’t come here,” Dynan said, trying to get through when he saw Dain struggling against her.

Adiem reached down for him, the cool countenance gone.

At the same time, a strange whirling sound, several of them, whistled through the air. An arrow slammed into the ground a kel away from Dynan, followed by another and another. One struck Adiem, and he reared back, falling to the ground.

Several more arrows flashed in, pinning Adiem where he was any time he tried to move. It didn’t seem like they were hurting him in any way, except to annoy him. He pulled out the two that hit him, and rose, growling, to his feet.

From to the rocky heights above the shelf, several archers stood, raining arrows down onto the shelf, aimed at Adiem.

Dynan looked back to the open gateway, to his brother. Thoughts of escape cut through the fog of confusion. Adiem reached for him, but Dynan was already rolling away from him.

At the threshold of the gate, facing his brother, Dynan stopped. If he managed to escape, he’d damn the world. Dynan didn’t want to care about finding Alurn Telaerin, and hated it that he did. He thought, in the moment he had, if he really was the only one who could find Alurn, he’d end up getting sent back.

Another barrage of arrows kept Adiem from reaching him. Dynan scrambled to his feet, torn between rushing to Dain or staying. He knew what he wanted to do and knew what he had to do, two thoughts diametrically opposed. Dain gave him an incredulous ‘don’t be stupid’ look, yelling at him to come on.

He turned from freedom and ran. Dain screamed after him. A loud crack echoed against the rocks, cutting off his brother’s voice. The gateway closed.

Dynan dodged out of Adiem’s grasp and raced toward the crevasses where the archers stood, still shooting down arrows. Adiem was hit several more times, and it slowed him. Not a lot, but enough.

Dynan gained a rocky shelf above the clearing, and managed a few added paces in front of Adiem. Ahead there was a narrow chasm. He jumped across and from there,

scrambled up a slanted incline. People wrapped up in rags the way Polen Forb had been, stood with bow and arrow at the ready.

They started to fall back though, and one by one turned and ran. Dynan couldn't blame them. Madness flowed after him, a blazing anger reaching out to shred courage.

Adiem was coming. Not the crazed Fourth or the mild Second. This was the cruel, mean bastard. A sense of encompassing terror preceded this one, and everyone fled before it.

There was one archer, though, who remained, dropping the bow and arrow to sweep out a sword from its sheath. As Dynan rushed by, he thought his rescuer too short and too slight to fight off the monster coming on his heels. At the same time the wrappings fell away. He caught the glint of yellow-gold hair and blue eyes, fearlessly facing the nightmare, and he thought for an instant, she was his mother.





Chapter 16

“Fadril, you bitch!”

Dynan peered over the lip of rock he’d just slid down, clawing his way back to look. He didn’t understand why Adiem was calling her Fadril, but as he watched he realized and understood who she was. She wasn’t his mother, except at the same time, she was. The very first. The desire to stay with her didn’t leave him. Fear kept him from rising to her defense. Adiem towered over her, but she didn’t flinch.

“I see you haven’t lost even a little of your charm, Adiem,” the First Queen of Cobalt said, and nodded her head toward Dynan. “You can’t have him. He is one of my sons. You can’t have him either.”

There was an intrinsic sense of safety in her presence. Dynan believed it. The thought of her standing alone against the First cut him to the soul. He pushed off the rock, fighting down the huge desire to run, and moved to her side. He tried keeping his breath even, but he felt himself shaking.

“You see?” she said, even as she gestured to stop him from getting any closer.

“Yes, another of your sniveling, weak, little brats. You should have heard him screaming for mercy.”

“And yet, here he stands against you despite your best efforts, untaken and unbroken. He’ll never turn to you. He’ll defy you the whole of his life. What will your master say, Adiem, when he learns of your failure to bring his prize.”

Adiem’s face blazed with rage, and he took a single menacing step forward. Dynan was seized by another wave of terror. He started to think she was completely crazy, standing there and facing madness.

“Yes,” Fadril said. “Do come closer, please. I’ll send you back to your makers, and the Gods will extinguish your miserable existence, once and for all. Once and for all, Adiem, so please, cross the line.”

Adiem stopped short and to Dynan’s amazement drew back by several steps. The next instant he wasn’t a man, but mutating into an impenetrable cloak of darkness that melted into a wraith. Its neck arched, and it roared at them.

Fadril didn’t move except to extend her arm, and by extension the sword in it to the fullest, keeping the point in line with the beast’s head as it rose above her. Her courage gave Dynan a measure of his own, but the stench of the wraith forced him back a step. The beast roared again, opening its mouth to bare its fangs, as sharp as the sword she held, and glinting dully in the light.

Dynan didn't know what line she meant. The only thing he noticed was the coloring of the rock they stood on was different than it had been. It was normal, slate grey, instead of ruddy, dark red. He feared the wraith might come ahead and accept the dare.

It stood not at the utmost edge of that line, but back several kem while Fadril was at its edge. The legs of the wraith bunched, muscles tightening, preparing to spring. It could reach her, and she wouldn't have any place to go.

Dynan jumped forward and reached Fadril the moment before it struck, dragging her down and under the sweeping wing that blasted by overhead. The wraith tried to stop the turn, knocking itself slightly off balance. He saw an opening, and snatched the sword from Fadril.

He dodged under the curling wing, around the arm and lunged forward, leading with the sword. It struck and the blade almost jarred out of his hand. Dynan wasn't sure if sticking it with a sword would have any greater effect than sticking it with an arrow.

He didn't wait to find out. He yanked the weapon free, turned and ran. He tripped, fell and managed to scramble back to his feet. He didn't dare look to see what damage he'd caused, or if he'd done anything other than piss it off.

There was a lot of scrabbling behind him and the excruciating shriek of the wraith suddenly filled the air. Dynan made it four more running steps back onto grey rock before the sound dropped him to his knees. Covering his ears didn't do anything to relieve the terrible pressure. He thought if the sound didn't kill him, he'd never hear again.

Laughter, something alien and unexpected in this horrible land, replaced the screech of the wraith. Arms went around him. Fadril's exuberance almost knocked him all the way over.

She laughed again and hugged him. "It's all right. He's leaving."

Dynan almost couldn't hear her past the ringing in his ears, but he saw the wraith, some distance away now, flying in a lopsided manner. Dynan wondered if he actually hurt it. Fadril hugged him again.

"That was magnificent," she said, and kissed his cheek, finally making him smile. She looked so much like his mother. For a moment, all Dynan wanted to do was pretend that she really was.

The peace of the moment didn't last. Fadril looked off after the wraith, her face hardening. She retrieved the bow she'd dropped. Dynan started to hand her the sword, but she shook her head.

"Keep it," she said. "It suits you better than me. This is my weapon of choice."

She held up the bow, drawing back and taking aim at the distant, retreating target before lowering it, and then slipping her arm through to carry it.

"History doesn't say much about you ever fighting," he said, as he climbed to his feet, and she looked up at him.

"Really? Well that's because history and society in general discounts the achievements and abilities of women. It's a certainty if women ruled the world then none of this would be going on."

Dynan gaped at her, really not meaning to offend her by the historical lack. But then she patted his arm, pointing him up the slope of a boulder, and then down into a gully between the rocks.

He didn't know where they were going, but there was a sense of safety that existed in this place that hadn't been there before. There weren't any bodies, for one thing, but not

having a body to hide behind made him nervous, telling him something about how far into hell he'd descended.

"It was a long time ago, wasn't it?" she said as she led the way.

"A thousand years," he said, and that seemed to surprise her.

"It doesn't seem that long, but at the same time, even longer."

"Polen was wrong about you," he said. "He didn't think you were here."

She frowned a little at that. "I bet history didn't ignore his accomplishments," she said.

"There's not so much about him, either."

"And yet, you know of him," she said. "And well you should, since he saved us all. It's interesting what manages to survive through time. I'm guessing, since you've not heard about me, that the story Polen was writing about me wasn't one of them."

"He wrote about you? No, it didn't. There's a lot that didn't."

"He tried to chronicle everything that happened. He was constantly writing it all down. For a military man it was unusual. Some thought so anyway. He carried everything around in a pack. He had it with him when he died."

"He was never found," Dynan said without thinking. She and Alurn were never found either. Polen even told him they'd all died in the same place.

"Well that might explain a few things," she said quietly, running her hand along the rock wall as they continued on the downward slope of the ravine that now rose above their heads. The rocks closed in to become a tunnel.

"I'm sorry. I'm not...You don't seem like..." He shook his head. Nothing he was thinking would sound right.

"Like I'm dead?" she said. "You're young and you're alive. It's no fault of yours that you think of death in a different way."

"I think about it," Dynan said almost too quietly to be heard, but she seemed to understand.

"We're almost there," she said. "You'll have a chance to rest."

He was about to ask her where they were going, but he saw something on the rocks he didn't expect, considering everything else he'd seen in this place. There was green moss growing, and blades of grass, and weeds protruding out of rock crevasses along the bottom of the ravine tunnel where dirt had gathered. It was brighter too even though it felt like they were underground.

He stopped short then. Out of sight but not too far away, with a sound like music, he heard the trickle and drip of water.

Fadril reached back and took his hand, pulling him down the now widening ravine. "It's just a little further beyond that set of boulders there."

"Is it real?"

"Oh yes. Things are different here than what you've seen. It's going to seem like paradise to you at first, but you'll—"

He pulled out of her grasp. Polen Forb warned him about paradise and things of beauty. Dynan thought it might break his heart, the realization that she might be disguised and leading him into a trap. She might be one of them.

Fadril leaned down and plucked a grass weed from among the rock. It looked like a stalk of wheat only it was green. She twirled it in her fingers, showing it to him.

“They can’t create,” she said. The simple fact of that piece of green seeped in. “They only destroy and distort what already is. I don’t know that I can help you find the courage to come see for yourself. It must be difficult to believe in anything of beauty after the horrors you’ve been through. It is real, and happily, it isn’t going away. You can wait here a while if you need to. You’re safe here.”

She handed him the weed stalk, and he took it before he thought to back away. She turned without another word, making her way toward the sound of drizzling water, around a corner of rocks where she disappeared.

Dynan stood torn between fear and wanting to believe her more than he had feared or wanted for a thing in his life where he was held for quite a long time. It occurred to him after a while, through the haze of confusion that if this was some sort of elaborate trap, then they’d sacrificed the First to bring him here. They could have had him, he told himself. They did have him, and letting him go didn’t make sense.

In the end, fear of being wrong didn’t leave him. It was the sound of water that drew him the last few steps down the ravine and around the boulder. Above him, the tunnel opened.

It was there, welling out of a crack in the rock, drizzling down to a hollowed out shelf that made a bowl for it to gather. The clear water continued on a path over the lip and down to a patch of ground. A tiny green garden of ferns and moss cushioned the drips before the overflow drained off through the cracks in the rock. The sound of it moving under the ground seemed magnified, turning to a river somewhere deep beneath the surface. Fadril leaned against the rock and watched him.

Dynan put his fingers to the surface, afraid the water wasn’t real. The blood washed clean where the water touched, and he realized he was still covered in it. His clothes were caked dry in places and still damp in others from the river crossing. None of that mattered when he stuck his face into the water and almost drained the small bowl completely, gulping down as much as he could. For the first time in his life, he wished for a river of it to dive into. Drowning didn’t seem like such a terrible thing.

“Come look,” Fadril said, pulling on his sleeve. “You shouldn’t drink so much all at once.”

She nodded when he looked at her, and she reached up with a corner of tattered fabric to dab away the drips on his chin. He had an instant flash of memory of his mother doing the same thing, only she’d been wiping away tears.

Fadril took him by the hand, moving to an opening in the rock where the boulders dropped down to just below waist height. A breeze came up, bringing with it the smell of growing things.

Below them a field opened up, covered from one end to the other in green grass that undulated in waves from the wind. A small brook wound through it. Beyond the brook and field, a forest grew, a normal looking, alive forest.

“What is this place?” he asked, hardly able to believe what he was seeing.

“This is the Between,” Fadril said. “What’s left of it the way it ought to be, what the Six haven’t been able to reach from the Void. It’s the place your soul comes after crossing through the Hall of Transition. No, you’re not dead, but only you. You’re a telepath. It isn’t your destiny to come here. You see, some people have a difficult time letting go of their physical shell, and so, this is a place between the real world and the next. It’s a place to find acceptance.”

"It isn't my destiny?" Dynan said.

Fadril only shook her head. "There's a lot you don't know, and unfortunately, I can't tell you. I'm only repeating what Alurn told me and it was a very long time ago. I don't know either. I don't."

She left him to make her way down the remaining rocks and Dynan followed, eyeing the glowing ribbon of water. The sky lightened. The pall of grey lifted as they went. The beauty of it was jarring.

"Alurn didn't tell me much about what was happening to Adiem or the struggles they both faced," Fadril said when Dynan caught up to her. "It was hard for him to accept, and harder for him to talk about. We were both so young."

Dynan wondered if she knew Alurn was here. He wasn't sure he should tell her. Telling Polen and the others seemed to have led to the Six coming down on them almost immediately. He didn't know if that's why they came, but he didn't want to make the same mistake, so he didn't say anything, and kept his silence down the hill.

There was a bridge of stone over the water. There didn't seem to be much of a current, evidenced by a curled green leaf that slowly wafted by. Dynan looked down at his blood-soaked clothes, but he hesitated on the bank, remembering what had happened the last time he tried to cross a body of liquid.

"Is it safe to get in?" he asked when Fadril noticed he wasn't following anymore.

"Yes," she said.

"How deep is it?"

"Less than four kem," she said, "but it isn't necessary to...we have baths."

He was already in up to his knees and then his waist by the time she got that out. He sat back in it next, and went under all the way, feeling the slime leave his skin. He rinsed most of it off, though not all, leaving his white shirt a mottled brown and pink. He went under again to run his hands over his head a few times, then his face and hands and arms. He remembered the black worm things and discovered they were gone.

He took his jacket off, swirling it through the water a few times. A trail of liquid red flowed from it, polluting the water. He stopped, and tossed the coat onto shore, and then clambered out.

Sopping wet felt incredible, as did the grass he lay back into. He looked over and saw a white moth fluttering from green stalk to flower.

"There are bugs in the afterlife?" he said as Fadril joined him and she laughed.

"You'll find many similarities to the world, but differences too."

He grunted at that, having already seen a few of the differences. There wasn't any direct light, for one thing. It was brighter, but the sky was an obscured monotone. He wondered if it ever got dark, and what the stars might look like, if there were any.

"Are there other people here?" he asked, prying off his boots to empty out the water.

"Yes. They're mostly in the city. Through the woods and down the hill. You may see the sentries when we reach the forest."

"Guards?" he said, rolling over to look that way.

Beyond the field the forest stood, and under its boughs near the middle a path could be seen. He saw two men standing just inside the wood line, probably discussing them. Then he wondered something.

"Is my guard here?"

Fadril looked down at her hands, and shook her head. "Probably not. It's difficult to reach."

"You mean he's out there, with them?"

"He might not have needed to come here."

Dynan stood and faced her. She didn't want to look at him. "Does that happen?"

"Not too often. Only with people of great faith. But if he was your guard, he was a trained professional, and he'll have a better chance of reaching this place than most."

"What happens to the taken?"

She didn't want to answer that either, and started walking, making him scramble to catch up. "It isn't a very good idea for you to know too much."

"What happens?"

"There's a place," she said after pulling in a breath. "Most of the time it isn't visible, but every now and then it appears as a gaping hole filled with misery. I've seen it once. Some call it the Well of Souls. The demon has been busy filling it."

"Is my mother here?" he asked, and the words choked in his throat.

"No. She never would have seen this place. The rules are different."

"What rules?"

"There are issues of balance and equity. The stability of life depends on it. Our family has a tendency to alter that balance because of what we are. You're a telepath."

"My mother wasn't," Dynan said.

"It's very likely, I would even say a guarantee that she was. Not to the extent you are, but it was there, in her, just as it's in your father, and in your grandparents. The same way it's in me. It's the way the ability is passed on. If your mother was here I'd know it, here, on the taken side, anywhere. I'd know it."

"Alurn is here," he said to refute her thinking that she'd know. If she didn't know about him, she might not know about anyone else, including his mother.

Fadril stopped abruptly, almost angry that he'd say so, and shook her head. "He isn't."

"It's why I was sent here."

"Sent?" she said. "You were brought here by the Six. They lured you here."

"I was sent by a man who said I had to find Alurn and bring him back. My brother is with them. I saw Dain through that portal that came. I'm pretty sure he was at the Temple. Polen Forb says the one who sent me is a priest."

"It isn't possible," she said, but she didn't sound too sure anymore. "But that would explain some things, too." She looked up at him. "Where?"

"I don't know. Polen said to look in the place he died."

Fadril grumbled something under her breath that Dynan didn't catch, and she started off for the woods again. He followed her. "Of course he would. That was just a way to get you here. Alurn isn't there."

"How do you—"

"I was there yesterday." She gave him a look, daring him to counter her, but he wasn't daunted.

"How do you know my mother isn't here?" he said. "If you don't know about—"

She set her hand on his arm. "I was there when she crossed. I was there when your grandmother and grandfather died. It's what I do. I make sure they aren't taken so that the

imbalance doesn't get any worse. It's what I've done down through the Age. I'm sorry, I know it isn't easy—"

"No, it's all right," Dynan said.

He realized it was. He still missed her more than he thought he would after ten years, but he had accepted the fact of her death a long time ago. He realized he had knowledge now that not many could claim as a fact.

"As long as she's not out there, in that, it's all right."

"She isn't."

That answer brought him a kind of peace he hadn't thought possible and certainly hadn't expected to find here. He looked down at this woman, so like the image of his mother he had in his head, and thought himself doubly blessed.

They reached the wood line. The path they were on was wide enough for them to walk together, and of firm packed ground lacking in dank, rotten anything. It seemed every bit a real forest as the one behind the Palace. Dynan felt like he was being watched, but he didn't see the sentries.

"So why do you do it?" he asked, and watched her. She looked off to the woods. "Why do you stay here and not go on? You must know how if you've been there when others have gone."

She nodded at that, but didn't answer. "I had a son like you. Twins. They even share your names. Dynan and Dain. They were only babies, completely innocent, but that didn't stop Adiem from wanting to take them. He wanted all my children, my daughter, Riella. We only just managed to get Bremen to safety when Adiem came. And then the rest of us were killed. When you first die it comes as a bit of a shock."

"Um, yeah."

"You're not dead."

"That's what everyone keeps telling me," Dynan said, but when she thought to convince him, he held up a hand. At the moment it didn't matter, since he was stuck here. "You stayed because you were getting your children to safety, and Alurn was on the other side."

"Through this portal that came, taking them from me, yes. And the Gods granted their passage from the world, but for the rest of us it was too late. Polen and his men stayed so that Alurn could get out. They intended for me to go through, but I knew there wasn't time."

It was an incredible sacrifice she'd made, giving up the promise of a peaceful eternity and being with her children. Dynan realized he still didn't know why she stayed, and guessed she wasn't going to tell him, or maybe she didn't want to talk about it. He wasn't sure what to say anymore. The conversation seemed to make her sad, so he dropped it.

They went through the trees in silence. The woods ended not much farther on, making it more a small glade than a forest. On the other side, there was a wide valley that reminded Dynan immediately of the valley outside his home that held the city of Rianamar. There was a city of sorts here, though not of huge buildings of marble. These were made of wood and far more modest, with few rising above two stories.

"Everything is backward here," he said, looking the way they'd come.

Fadril shook her head. "We've had to move. More than once. The river used to be the boundary, but they took that too. The terrain has changed, and other things have

happened.” She angled toward one of the larger buildings that sat at the center as they came out of the woods and down the hill. “Is the Palace built?”

Dynan smiled at her tone. She probably had a few complaints about how long it took to build a home for her family. Alurn started the Palace, but it wasn’t completed until Aolrin, over a hundred years later.

“Your grandson finally finished it. Bremen didn’t live there until near the end of his life.”

“Tell me about him,” she said suddenly. She didn’t look at him, and Dynan started to wonder why she didn’t want to hear more about the mission to find her husband.

“I only know what I read about him,” he said, which he realized was obvious right after he said it.

“You read about him though,” she said, “and that’s more than I know about his life.”

“All right. I’ll tell you what I remember. Bremen was considered a great King. He was Crown Prince for eight years since he was only ten...you knew that part. He had a group of men with him who kept him alive and protected his claim when there were a lot of factions trying to stop him.”

“Rison Forb, Polen’s younger brother?” she asked and Dynan nodded.

“And the brothers Vel and Jais Hindryn,” he said, glad he’d paid attention in history class so he could bring her this information. “Quiton Borr was appointed Regent.”

“He was my cousin,” Fadril said and laughed. “And a good man. The Hindryns were family friends. Yes, that’s good to know. We thought they could be trusted. It’s so nice to hear it as fact instead of constantly telling myself it was so. I’ve never known for certain. It’s not something you ask of others who are passing through.”

“They made it through the young years. Not a lot is known of the time. There have been rumors of a book Alurn wrote, but nothing’s been found, so a lot of people are just guessing.”

“Adiem wrote it. I never read it, or even saw it, so my knowledge is second hand,” she said. “Adiem was a Seer. I think what he was given of the future made him mad. He lost hope. He couldn’t see a way to avoid what was coming. Maybe it was too much for him. When the demon came to him, he saw that it would be easier. Or that’s what he thought. But go on, you were talking about the building of Rianamar.”

Dynan nodded as they reached the foot of the hills, and came to a wider path that turned into a road that led into the town.

“Bremen is credited with building much of it, or rebuilding it I guess, which is one reason why the Palace wasn’t completed until a lot later.”

“Who did he marry?”

“Her name was...uh...Liriel and they had four, no five children. Aolrin was the heir and he’s usually called Aolrin the Great since he won a lot of battles. Bremen fought for most of his life, too. We were constantly being invaded by other Systems. Did you know about them? Yomir and Suma?”

“Yes. And Rynald and Thylin. There was one System that was friendly to us.”

“Trea,” Dynan said. “They still are. Things are different now with all the Systems. My grandfather, Dionin finally ended the wars and created the High Council that all the Systems belong to. They’ve all agreed to meet when there are disputes. There are non-interference laws now that prevent one System from meddling with another. Or they’re supposed to anyway.”

“So there’s peace,” she said.

“There are still occasional, and supposedly accidental, skirmishes here and there, especially with Yomir. I’m not sure we’ll ever get along with them. They don’t seem to want to get along with us. There haven’t been any all out battles in forty years.”

“And the Murians?”

“We still have problems with them, but they’re considered part of the Cobalt System so it’s an internal matter for us to deal with.”

“And make the same mistakes, over and over,” Fadril said. “You can blame that mess on Alurn.”

“I’d have to rewrite all the history files, and no one would believe me. The Murians didn’t become a known factor until Aolrin and the first Great War when everyone picked a side and fought until the bitter end.”

“Great War,” she muttered. “Is that what they really call it? You know there’s nothing great or grand about it, don’t you?”

Dynan was guilty of thinking of it that way, of bravery and amazing feats, and glory given to the men who fought, but he nodded anyway. He thought he might get a lecture if he didn’t agree.

“No, you don’t,” she said and heaved a sigh. “I suppose I can blame that on genetics, too.”

“Yours or his?” Dynan asked. He smiled when she shot him a look. “You are the one who went after the Six with a bow and arrow.”

She couldn’t deny it, and started laughing. “All right. Yes.”

“I thought that was incredibly grand, especially since you saved my neck,” Dynan said. “And I think I forgot to thank you for it.”

“You’re welcome. You did pretty well with that sword,” she said. “You got through. I think you’re the only one who can.”

Dynan didn’t believe it did any good. “What stopped him back on the rock?”

“This place is protected,” she said. “They haven’t found a way to pollute it yet. It would hurt him to cross the boundary. He remembers the last time.”

“Can they be killed? I mean, they’re already dead, so I guess not. Contained then? Stopped?”

She didn’t answer except to cast him a glance, which was answer enough. Instead, she pointed to the first set of buildings that the road went between.

“There are going to be a lot of people. They’re going to be curious. Word of you will spread like the wind. As fast as you can imagine.”

Dynan nodded, having seen the phenomenon before where people appeared out of nowhere to get a glimpse of him, or of his father, or the whole family. He never understood the fascination people had. He didn’t think he ever would.

“It’s good that you’re not comfortable with it,” Fadril said. “It’s a tremendous power you have.”

“I don’t really feel like I have any.”

“You shouldn’t ever let yourself be easy with what you can do.”

He wanted to ask her what it was, what was the power he supposedly had, but then they turned a corner after a whole street of colorless wood buildings. There was a long, wide road like the one that ran through the center of Rianamar, only not as long or grand

in any way. It was just a road. But filling it, from one side to the other and as far as he could see down it, were the people she warned him of.

There had to be thousands, and the silence that suddenly blanketed them when they saw him was deep and shattering. They started toward him, not walking normally, but they came forward in stumbling, uncertain steps as if they were afraid to get too close, but couldn't resist the desire at the same time.

"What..."

"I'm sorry," Fadril said. "I should have told you. Don't be afraid. They won't hurt you."

"What do they want?"

The first few people were reaching out as they came, some of them both hands at a time.

"To touch you," she said. "It'll protect them, so you should let them."

He remembered what had happened with Polen, and Faulkin, and Grint, how they'd been healed instantly when he put his hands to them.

"We're going to need as many of them as you can reach, Dynan."

"Why?"

"If you're right and my Alurn is here...There's only one place they could have taken him where I wouldn't know it." She nodded to the masses coming at them. "We're going to need an army to get him out."





Chapter 17

Ambrose sensed someone in the room with him and opened his eyes to discover the First Minister standing over him with a blanket ready. Roth wadded it up and chucked it into the couch and flopped down into the other end.

“Don’t tell the mother hen I disturbed you,” he said, and then held up a hand when Ambrose thought to pry himself out of the corner he’d sunk into. “There’s no change. I’m sorry I woke you.”

He didn’t bother to respond to that, looking to the monitors for confirmation. It wasn’t quite true. The changes were incremental, none of them good. Dynan was still on full support. They’d put his heart back into his body, but couldn’t get it to beat on its own, and he wasn’t breathing without the assistance of a machine. The longer he stayed on these devices, the less likely he’d ever get off them.

The body had to work to maintain its strength. It didn’t take long for the degeneration to start. After three days or however many it was, the weakness was pronounced. His skin was ashen. His cheeks were hollow. His eyes were sunken. He didn’t look sixteen anymore. No one knew how many more days it would go on, and despite trying to keep the reality of it from him, Ambrose knew it couldn’t be much longer.

Geneal Elger was the only one who talked as if Dynan would wake up the next moment.

Ambrose pulled himself to the edge of the couch, pausing there to lean on his knees. He glanced over at Roth, who was lost in his own thoughts, raking a thumb over his beard. The First Minister looked to the empty bed where Dain would have been – had he been found.

“What is it?” Ambrose asked. Roth seemed perturbed over something, but he only shook his head. “Did Eldelar say something to you? Is there something—”

“No,” Roth said quickly to allay his fears. “It isn’t about that, about Dynan.”

“Then what?”

Roth hesitated again, wincing the way he did when he was about to bring difficult news. “People have started asking questions about where they were. Some have come forward claiming to have seen them, some that are legitimate.”

“And the problem?” Ambrose asked.

“There was a girl,” Roth said. “That alone wouldn’t be the worst to come out, but this particular girl...Dain was taking care of her in a way that’s either admirable, or incredibly stupid. I haven’t sorted out which it is yet.”

“Roth—”

“Dain put her up in a house, Ambrose. He paid for her clothes, her food, everything. Her name is Bronwyn Esrel. Sweet girl.”

“You met her?” Ambrose said, hardly able to believe what he was hearing, though in a sense he wasn’t completely surprised. He already knew about Dain’s various activities with all the ladies fair. “How old is she?”

“Seventeen,” Roth said.

“Her parents—”

“Her father is Lord Poiver. Her mother, Murva, had a three-year affair with Poiver that resulted in two children. The young lady has an older brother. After she was born, Poiver moved on. The mother did too.”

“They were abandoned.”

“They don’t know who their parents are. I was able to piece it together from one of the places that kept records. You know, I always thought there were laws about these sort of things, but a lot of places and a lot of people don’t follow them at all, so you can add that to the list of things your father didn’t bother with. The two went in and out of various shelters and homes. The brother was difficult, even as a young child, and in trouble more often than not, wearing out their welcome wherever they went.”

“And now? Where is he?”

“Stationed at Colonia in the middle of his conscription. I talked to him, too. He’s not so much a troublemaker any more. He wants to stay in the military and make a life of it. He sends her what he can to help, but—”

Ambrose scoffed. “A conscription wage is barely enough to pay for beer.”

“Dain met her three, four months ago in the Temple Park. He was there drawing in one of his sketchbooks. Your children escape this place to do the damndest things, Ambrose...They talked. There was a connection. She tells me that a time or two later, he found out she was living under the stairs at Haverts and decided he wouldn’t have it.”

“How does Dain have a house in Rianamar without the world knowing about it? Forget about me not knowing it for a moment. How did he do it?”

At that, Roth reached into his coat pocket and produced a gold coin that he examined for a moment before handing it over. Ambrose saw the stamp and realized where it came from, and also why Dain had come to visit him the other day getting ready for dinner. “Will it do any good at all to change the code?”

“Probably not,” Roth said. “We already have the smartest people on all three planets working on the equations that determine these codes, so if Dain can break them, he can break into anything. It’s your fault they ended up so smart.”

“Not smart enough to realize he can go into the finance directory and give himself a larger allowance without having to break into the vault. That’s a lot of stairs to go up and down and around in that tower.”

“He didn’t know the Chocolate Shop owner would recognize where this came from,” Roth said.

“Zinder is still there?” Ambrose asked.

“His son runs the place, but the old man sits behind the counter and talks to everyone. When he heard what happened, he brought this in to let us know there may be a trail of them to follow through town. So far there’s just one other at the art gallery. Dain had some of his paintings framed.”

“If he had a house in Rianamar in his name, Roth—”

“Ames Lithford set it up for him, and Dain paid him. He’s the only one of them old enough to make a contract. Solen is going to put it out for us that he gave Ames the apartment as an early graduation gift, and if necessary say that the girl was a housekeeper he hired to keep the place up, a well dressed housekeeper, but it’ll hold. And then he plans to have a conversation with Ames about exercising better judgment.”

Ambrose shook his head at that, feeling like he ought to be mad about it, but couldn’t manage it. “He’s in love with her,” he said quietly of Dain, trying not to think she might be the last girl that ever happened with.

“It seems so,” Roth said.

“Where is she now?”

“In a town on the other side of the world,” Roth said, and Ambrose noted that he didn’t mention where. “I bought her a stake in a local dress shop and changed her name. Her brother, too. He’s being transferred to another base.”

“Buying them off for their silence? I swore I’d never do this to them,” Ambrose said and Roth nodded.

“Well, you swore it to yourself when you were seventeen and your father threatened to make a public spectacle of your remotely similar situation. A threat we now know he never intended to follow through on. You’re not like him, Ambrose. If you’d found this out under normal circumstances, you’d talk to your son and get him to realize the relationship would never work. Beside the fact that they’re children. Dain will understand in time. And Bronwyn will have a chance at a much better life this way. Marry, settle down, have children. She’d never have that with Dain.”

“She agreed?”

“Reluctantly,” Roth said. He leaned on his knees, rubbing his face a moment. “She always knew it would end eventually. This way, with this new life, the ending won’t be so difficult. For her, at least.”

“Maybe it won’t matter,” Ambrose muttered when he’d meant to keep that horror to himself.

Dain still couldn’t be found. There wasn’t a trace of him - anywhere, despite the massive number of people scouring the city looking for him. Every day that went by without finding him alive the probability rose they never would.

Ambrose looked to the monitor and brain scan readings that remained unmoving, and the thought crept in that it might already be the case. Dain was dead. Because of the connection they shared, the unbreakable bond that mystified so many, Dynan had gone with him. That was why his brain scan was nonexistent. It was only a matter of time before the official declaration would have to be given. They wouldn’t let him keep Dynan on artificial support indefinitely.

Roth pushed himself to his feet and Ambrose watched while he moved to Dynan’s bedside where he took his hand, frowning for a moment at the slight cuts across his fingers before folding his hand around his. “Governor Alse was here last night—”

“No.”

“He wanted to see Dynan.”

“No.”

“Xavier convinced him to back off of it. Governor Taldic issued a statement that he’d seen Dynan. But you know it won’t be but a few more days of this before Alse will come back, demanding—”

“I’ll name Shalis and then when Dynan is better—”

“Alse wants you to name Kamien,” Roth said quietly, and Ambrose couldn’t answer for a moment.

“All right,” he said when he could trust his voice. “I don’t have a problem with that, but as you know, the Trameil haters will come out in force. There are quite a few of them left even after all this time. Not to mention there is that declaration signed by my father, and the succession committee, and the First Governor making that marriage void and Kamien ineligible for the Throne. Can’t someone remind Governor Alse that his father - in order to avoid the more serious charge of conspiracy to commit murder - went along with the whole thing? Shall I go remind him?”

“Probably not a good idea,” Roth said, and sat on the edge of the bed.

“No, probably not.”

“I’m sorry,” Roth said.

Ambrose pulled to his feet, suppressing a groan at the stiffness of his joints. He felt old. It was an affliction that had come on him overnight, brought on by lack of sleep, no food and anything remotely resembling comfort.

“I’ll talk to Xavier,” he said, clapping Roth on the back to make him feel better. Of all the Surrogates, Roth was taking it the worst. “Will you stay with him?”

“Of course.”

Ambrose left his son’s room for only the second time and found the hall outside just as jarring as the last. It was brightly lit. There were people everywhere. Granted, he knew them all, but didn’t have any capacity to deal with them.

In the next room he found his youngest crying in the arms of his oldest while her Lady in Waiting sat on a footstool holding her hand. Shalis had been brought to City Medical yesterday. Ambrose didn’t want to leave her at the Palace alone. He looked to Kamien for an explanation for the tears, but he didn’t want to give it.

Lady Liselle moved out of the way and Ambrose took her place on the footstool, pulling his daughter into his arms while he waited for Kamien to come out with it.

“She overheard Governor Alse,” he said, and Ambrose understood his reluctance.

Shalis looked up at him, sniffing and hardly able to speak. “He said Dynan...wasn’t going to live...and the sooner people got used to the idea...the sooner we could move on and solve the problem...of who would be heir. He said Kamien had to be, but he won’t.”

With that she reached over with a balled fist and hit him on the leg. “I can’t do it, Shalis,” Kamien said to her. “And I don’t want to.”

“I don’t either. It’s supposed to be Dynan. It can’t be anyone else. He can’t die.”

She tried to hit him again, but Ambrose caught her by the wrist.

“And he isn’t going to,” he said as calmly as he could manage, trying to put away a seething anger toward Governor Alse for putting his daughter through this anguish. “Shalis, stop. The Governor doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Dynan is going to make it through this.”

“Do you promise?”

"As well as I can. I don't want you to think any thing else, please. Your brother needs us all to be with him and be positive. So no more crying. You can't see him when you're upset like this."

"You're going to let me see him?"

"In the morning. You need to sleep now. You have to stop getting up in the middle of the night like this."

He gathered her up and stood with her, something that was getting harder to do since she was getting taller every other day. He put her back in the room they'd prepared for her that had a bed and a chest of drawers, tucking her under the covers. Her Lady in Waiting dutifully followed, wearing something that completely covered her this time.

"Now go to sleep, Shalis. Dream that your brother is going to be better in the morning. Keep dreaming it."

"All right, Poppé."

"Go to sleep."

He waited a moment or two while her eyes drifted closed, putting off anger until he was sure his daughter would stay put. It didn't take long. The combination of exhaustion from the tears and having her hair smoothed worked quickly.

He glanced at Liselle while he waited and saw her wiping tears from her eyes. She noticed and tried to hide the fact she was crying. For women in her position, displays of emotion were frowned on, an institutional belief Ambrose found ridiculous. He couldn't blame her for being raised that way.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"He is going to be all right," he said, and found that saying it made him feel better about it being possible. He thought of something that might bring her some level of comfort. "He said he talked to you."

Liselle adjusted the covers around Shalis and nodded. "A little. Once he stopped worrying so much, it wasn't too difficult. Or it didn't seem so."

"You'll have to watch out for Dain," Ambrose said, and then had to rub his own eyes. That was more from weariness, he told himself. "It will seem like he can't stand you. Don't take it personally. He's rebelling against the culture, or something. I don't know."

"I'm not worried about Dain," she said, and her eyes dragged closed.

"Well, if he doesn't drive you off by insult, he'll turn those considerable charms on you. It's how he gets what he wants."

"I noticed," she said, and then looked to see if Shalis was asleep. "When you asked me to come here and help Dynan, I wasn't prepared to like him so much. He's very sweet. It may not mean much coming from me, but, you've raised your son well, Your Majesty."

"Just the one?" he asked with a slight smile.

"Just the one is all I'm concerned with," she said and suppressed a yawn. "Goodnight, sir."

Ambrose nodded to that and left her.

Kamien was waiting. There were days Ambrose couldn't look at him without thinking about his first wife. His oldest took after his mother quite a bit in looks, but he lacked the conniving aspect of her personality and her murderous inclinations. It wasn't so long ago that Kamien learned the full nature of her betrayal. Thinking of her brought

thoughts of Governor Alse to mind, considering his alleged involvement, along with anger over the audacity of the man.

“Did Alse really say those things?” Ambrose asked as he walked. “Here?”

“Shalis and I were coming back from a walk and a drink of water. Alse was talking with Governor Vindal and Governor Messeric,” Kamien said quietly, “and he shouldn’t have been, obviously, but you—”

“I’m not going to have it. I’m not going to stand talk of it.” Ambrose stopped a moment because of the nature of this particular subject. “You know if I could change what my father did, I would.”

“It’s a binding resolution,” Kamien said. That meant it couldn’t be changed. Not without all the Regional Governors in agreement. Even trying would throw into question the stability of the monarchy, and thus the Cobalt System.

“You know I would change it,” Ambrose said again. “This isn’t about you, or your place in this family.”

“It’s about Governor Alse’s bid for power. I know. I don’t want the job. No one believes me when I say that, but I don’t. I’ve grown up knowing it would never be my job. I’ll go to Governor Alse and tell him I’ll refuse it even if it was handed to me, if you’d like.”

Ambrose nodded to that. “You’re the only sane one among us. I’ll talk to the Governor.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“I’m going to anyway,” he said.

Melgan Lon was the next to suspect a problem. Ambrose hadn’t left Dynan’s side for three days, except once, so the Captain was surprised to see him now, and by the way his eyes shifted back and forth he was trying to think why. Melgan was as politically astute as the next guy. He reasoned it out.

“Wait.”

“I’m going for some air.”

“No, you’re not,” Melgan said, though he didn’t try to stop him.

Brendin was posted at the far corner and he knew. “I’m sorry.”

Ambrose waved him off and kept going. Alse wouldn’t have gone too far. It seemed likely he was counting on Ambrose hearing about this affront, and would fully expect some sort of response.

Ambrose stopped just short of the exit from the family section, which was nothing more than one hall intersecting with another, and paused to consider that last thought. “Where were they?”

“Here,” Brendin said. “He walked in with Vindal and Messeric. I was at the other end of the hall until I realized what they were saying. Shalis was in this little side room. I don’t think Alse knew she was—”

“He knew it. She wasn’t the target though,” Ambrose said, and glanced back at Kamien who was following.

“What does he think Kamien is going to do?” Brendin asked. “Alse knows what’s in the resolution.”

“Maybe he thinks he can have it overturned.”

“Governor Taldic would disagree.”

Ambrose nodded. "Maybe that's the point, the ulterior motive to the whole thing; to put me at odds with Governor Taldic."

"Or with Kamien," Melgan said, glancing back at him too. Kamien's response to that was to roll his eyes.

"All aimed to give Alse the leverage he wants," Brendin said.

"That's only if he can actually have Kamien reinstated," Ambrose said. "If he really has the support for it. He knows I wouldn't oppose it."

"He's trolling," Brendin said. "And if you go out there—"

"I'll put myself in the position of having to listen to him," Ambrose said. He turned around and started walking back the way he came. "Melgan, I want the perimeter expanded to include the closest exit and all the halls from here to there. No one but Palace staff, Medics, and family beyond that point. There are health concerns about possible contaminants being tracked in. That'll be my answer to Governor Alse."

He stopped at the doorway that would take him back to Dynan's room, weariness descending like Melgan's chainmail across his shoulders. Ambrose leaned against the doorframe, activating the first of three decontamination fields. They couldn't be avoided, there to fight the real danger of infection that could kill his son.

Ambrose decided just then that he really did need some air, and turned back around again. Kamien almost ran into him. "What now?"

"I'm going out."

"You're looking for a fight," Kamien said.

"Melgan is going to go make sure the area is clear of anyone I shouldn't be around right now," Ambrose said, looking to his Captain, who turned to go do that. "Care to join me?"

"Not really." Kamien nodded to Dynan's rooms. "I'll sit with him."

"What will you do when they find out you were worried?" Ambrose said, smiling at the glare he got for that.

"They won't believe you, so say whatever you like."

"Send Roth out. I know he needs some air."

Kamien nodded, and a moment later Roth took his place, walking with him down the hall toward the door. Ambrose stopped at the new demarcation line, which was another intersection down another hall.

Glancing that way, beyond the very large guard posted to keep everyone out, Ambrose saw the High Bishop talking to a man and woman. She was crying. Gradyn was trying to give her some comfort, speaking to her in a low tone. Whatever affliction had struck him during the oath ceremony, he seemed to have recovered. For the last three days, the High Bishop had remained, coming into Dynan's room every morning to offer up a prayer for his recovery.

"I wish he'd crawl back into his cave," Ambrose muttered to himself, but Roth heard him and chuckled under his breath.

"It's not every day that regular people have the attention of the High Bishop. They've been extremely grateful for his presence."

"Meaning I ought to be?" Ambrose said, and turned the corner for the door. More guards were on the other side, standing out in the cold. "I don't like that he's waiting here for news, good or bad. There are too many memories."

“He’s just trying to help,” Roth said, looking out at the glaring lights that brightened night to day on the other side of the property fence.

Masses of people stood waiting on the other side, and behind other barricades that had been erected to keep them back. The Information Bureau was set up and broadcasting on a continual basis.

Ambrose had known and approved it, but he hadn’t known about the sheer numbers of people who had gathered. They were everywhere he looked. A line of them snaked into the compound to a place where the guards stood, stopping them while the King was outside. They carried flowers in their arms by the bundle or by just one. They had notes in hand and candles waiting to be lit.

“You should have told me,” Ambrose said.

He hadn’t been thinking about being seen. There was a sense of vulnerability in being in front of these people that he hadn’t known in a long time, not since he was Dynan’s age. He remembered what it was like being that exposed, and thought about the things he’d said to his son about it.

“Like the High Bishop,” Roth said, “they are only trying to offer what comfort they can, even if it’s only a prayer.”

“I told him he had to get over it,” Ambrose said, thinking of Dynan, and then he had to explain. “I told him the day of his oath and he was mad when we all barged in on him the first time he’s ever talked to a girl. He was mad because he didn’t want to take that oath as the High Bishop...the High Bishop suggested.”

His voice trailed off and he heard his father’s voice telling him of the death of the anointed child and his eternal torture on the altar of darkness.

“Ambrose?” Roth set a hand on his arm.

“Maybe we should go back inside,” Brendin said.

“No, I’m just tired,” Ambrose said, shaking the images from his head and chiding himself for allowing coincidence to so affect his thinking. “That’s all. The cold feels good. I’m fine.”

“Then you should go look,” Roth said, pointing down the side of the building to an area made for people to go sit in fine weather. There were walkways and benches and trees that were now completely bereft of leaves, but in warm weather provided ample shade.

In every space off the walks there were flowers and printed messages. There were piles and piles of them stacked up in the snowdrifts along the iron fence that went the length of the block, eight feet deep and at least three high. They were imported from the other side of the world where it was spring. The fragrance of them filtering through the frozen air was pungent and full of memories.

“There are thousands of them.”

Ambrose turned, and Melgan came over, a few of the notes in hand. Ambrose stood at the corner of the building looking down the block at the display. “You should get Ames and Lyle, and the rest of the boys out here to collect the notes. Give them something to do other than sit.”

Melgan held up the cards in his hand, pulling one out to hand over. “One of these is from a twelve-year-old who wants to marry him. She left her contact id. Another is a regular get well soon note. The other is indecent, from a sixteen-year-old. That’s the one you have.”

Ambrose laughed at the graphically detailed proposition and handed the note to Roth. "Someone needs to talk to that girl's mother."

"Well, that'll make him feel better for sure," Roth said, and gave the note to Brendin, whose mouth fell open and eyes widened as he read. He was the least jaded of them, and retained the capacity to be shocked.

"There's no way she's sixteen knowing about that," he said and read it again.

Everyone laughed. It felt surprisingly good to have a moment of amusement. Melgan looked behind him. "The High Bishop is coming over," he said, and left to do guard things, stationing himself a short distance away.

Brendin handed the explicit note back to Roth as if he expected the High Bishop to catch him with it, making Ambrose laugh again. But they both abandoned him with deference to the old man as he joined them. It was difficult not to groan out loud.

"Your Majesty." Gradyn nodded his head, looking to the display of flowers. "It's quite an outpouring, isn't it?"

"Yes, Eminence," Ambrose said. "It's nice."

"And perhaps a comfort for you. Clerics from around the System and indeed all through Brittallia report Temples overflowing and prayer books filled to capacity. The whole Kingdom is thinking of you and your sons."

Ambrose nodded to all that, but didn't know what to say. It didn't feel as much of a comfort as it should have. Maybe it was the reminder for the same outpouring that came in for his young wife...a few days before she died.

"I couldn't help but discover the reason for Governor Alse's visit," the High Bishop went on.

"I want to ask you something," Ambrose said then, wondering at the same time if he should. "You were there when my father died and heard what he said. He was consumed by fear of it. As you know, Dionin wasn't a man frightened of much."

"He wasn't."

"Nearly all the things he warned me about have happened."

"The world has not ended, though I imagine it must feel that way to you," Gradyn said, leaning down to pick up a single blue rose to smell. "I don't know where Dionin had the idea it would."

"He got it from Alurn," Ambrose said, careful to keep his voice down. "Dionin heard it from his father, who was told by his father, and so on back down the line all the way to the First King is where."

"Yes, I'm aware of those stories. I ask you to recall the games you played as a young boy, tell the secret, pass the secret or some such as that, where the end result sounded nothing like the original whisper. Think about the hundreds of people these stories have traveled through to reach us."

"So it's all just coincidence and not Alurn foretelling the end of time?" Ambrose thought those two choices were seriously lacking. He wanted other options, but the attack on his son seemed to have nothing of coincidence to it.

"How could Alurn know?" Gradyn said. "There's little true evidence to make a reasoned judgment with. There was a group once."

"Yes, the Disciples of Alurn," Ambrose said. "They later changed their name to Disciples of the Word, who raised him up to be something more than a man. Some suggest they exist even today."

“They thought of him as a God,” Gradyn said. “They claimed to have his written word and protected it with their lives.”

“They were executed for attempting to usurp the Throne,” Ambrose said.

“The book they claimed to have was destroyed, or so they believed.”

“Or taken from them,” Ambrose said.

“After all this time, there’s no way to know what Alurn said, or anyone else from that time. I don’t hold him up as a God, despite previous teachings from previous High Bishops who started that whole movement. Dynan will recover from this, and you’ll find Dain. The men responsible for this atrocity will be found and dealt with to the utmost extent of the law. The world will go on. It wasn’t ever in danger of stopping.”

Ambrose nodded, embarrassed now that he’d brought it up. Still there were stories that persisted down through the ages, of mythical creatures and savage times.

“You mentioned Governor Alse,” he said to get off the subject.

“I feel my presence here has given people the wrong idea, and maybe you as well. I would never want to do anything that caused you more difficulty. And if I may offer you some advice, which I know you don’t need, but if I may, I would suggest to you that there is no reasonable call to have Dynan removed as your heir, even while some question his survival. I hope you don’t listen to them.”

“I wasn’t planning to.”

Gradyn seemed relieved to hear it, but he only nodded. “I’ll return later today for a visit, if you feel it appropriate.”

“Of course.”

“Then I’ll take my leave of you and wish you a pleasant morning,” he said, nodding to the sky and the coming dawn.

It really was exactly what Ambrose wanted. He wondered how the old man knew. “Thank you,” he said as the High Bishop turned. “We may not always see things the same, Gradyn, but I appreciate your being here.”

Gradyn smiled at that. “I will do whatever you need of me, Your Majesty. Rest assured of it.”

It was difficult to suppress the sigh of relief that welled up, but Ambrose managed it while the High Bishop was within sight and then still while the IB imagers recorded every movement. It wouldn’t do for the entire System to see him happy over the old man leaving.

Ambrose wasn’t left alone long. The other old man in his life joined him in the wake of the High Bishop’s departure. Xavier Illothian wasn’t as ancient as Gradyn Vall. No one was. He was the only Lord Chancellor in Cobalt’s history to serve two Kings, which made him old enough. His hair was solid grey, but his eyes were clear and his mind still sharp as ever. Ambrose considered him more a father than his real one had been. Nothing ever seemed to rattle him. He had never, in all the years Ambrose had known him, raised his voice in anger.

At the moment though, his lips were pursed and his brows drawn down. He glanced after the High Bishop’s transfer that had already pulled away, lost from view behind a sea of people.

“I just spoke with a gentleman,” Xavier said, “who tells me that on the night of the attack, he saw a man carry Dain to a transfer marked with the seal of the Temple and that a Palace Guard saw this too. The guard talked to the monk and then let him go.”

“That’s...No, that’s not possible,” Ambrose said, unable to believe it, except he knew Xavier wouldn’t bring him something like this if it weren’t true.

“I hope that it isn’t,” Xavier said. “At the moment, I’d like you to come inside where you’re less in the open. Now, please, Your Majesty, in case the guard is compromised.”

“You’re saying the High Bishop has Dain? To what purpose?”

Xavier didn’t answer, taking him by the arm in a surprisingly firm grip, urging him to turn and move. “There’ll be time for questions in a moment.”

The movement drew Melgan’s attention, and Brendin and Roth, who immediately followed. “Xavier?” Melgan asked.

Instead of answering, Xavier drew out his comboard and using the optic function, sent them a silent message that stunned them all.

“The King’s life is at risk.”





Chapter 18

Carryn stepped back, afraid to try and stop Dain, he was that out of control, smashing his fist into the barrier, once, twice, three, and then four times before the pain of doing so seeped through. His knuckles were bloodied.

The wall encroached on them, until he gained some measure of control and pushed back. He was shaking from anger, and for a moment, when he turned on her, she thought he might strike her.

“Who was that man?” he said, and stopped in front of her, as close as he could get without touching her. She felt exposed. For a moment, she wished she had a weapon. Dynan’s sapphire sword stood leaning against the wall. Dain looked at it, too. All his anger evaporated, or most of it. He took a step back from her.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It was just darkness to me.”

His eyes narrowed at that, but he read the truth in her mind. Over the last three days, she let him explore her thoughts, or some of them. He’d never been in anyone else’s head but his brother’s, so it was new to him, alien and enticing.

“You don’t know anything do you?” he said. “You just follow them, blindly going along with it.”

“I know some things,” she said, backing up a step. It was like being in a hot oven having all that rage directed at her. “I know that if you go through the vortex, the world will end. Literally.”

“He said he found Alurn.”

“The First King?”

“No, the butcher down the street. What other Alurn is there?” he said. “What does he have to do with any of this? He’s been dead forever.”

Carryn wasn’t sure she should guess. She didn’t understand how it would be possible that Alurn Telaerin was held there, but it made sense if he was and that was why they sent Dynan. She didn’t want to believe it either since having the two of them together just made the world that much more fragile. She realized this was information being withheld from her, and didn’t know why.

“I...”

“Don’t know?” Dain said. “Like I said.”

The wall took his attention again, and took her mind off things she didn’t want to think about. He was getting better at it, holding his concentration while he did other things like accuse her of being clueless. This time, it took some effort for him to make the advancement stop.

She wondered as she watched him what made him so angry all the time, not over this situation, but in general. Her vision blurred and she was shown Dain as a young child of five, walking behind the bier of his mother with Dynan right beside him, deep into the tombs under the Palace for her burial. The pain of that moment struck her, but while Carryn wondered if this was an answer to the question, the vision shifted to the present. The King stood outside in the glare of lights with the Lord Chancellor telling him that Dain was at the Temple.

"Oh...that's...not..." Carryn blinked in the dull light, the stone wall returning into focus, replacing candle flame and flowers. "That's not good."

"What are you muttering about?" Dain said, and before she could stop him from reading these thoughts, he had them all.

"So, my father has figured it out," he said, leaning against the dark wall, his arms folded as if at his ease. "You better think of what you're going to do about it fast. There are going to be a lot of guards swarming all over the place very soon. They might be a little pissed off."

She shook her head, but she was afraid he was right. "He won't send guards to the Temple based off the story of one man, who in a short time won't be able to remember what he said."

"Is that what you do when the truth gets in the way of your plans?" Dain asked. "Make people forget? That's convenient."

"It's necessary."

"You change a man's memory and make him seem a fool, or even crazy to suit your purpose. What about changing the Lord Chancellor's memory? You're going to have to. He's already checked this guy out. If he took it to my father, Xavier believes him. Now you have to change the King's memory, and all the Surrogates too. The entire top tier of Cobalt's government. Didn't you people get in trouble a few hundred years ago for this kind of thing? Come to think of it, there were a lot of executions, weren't there?"

Carryn wanted him to stop talking. It was hard to think past the terrible list of actions he set out before her, measures she knew she'd have to go along with in order to stop a catastrophe.

"You need to come up with a different plan, lady," he said, and turned back to set his hands against the darkness. "The guards are already deployed. When those men think that there's danger to the King, they act pretty fast."

Dain pushed against the barrier and gained a step. He was almost to the corner of the hall with the Room of Orbs. Carryn wondered how they would hide him.

"So what are you going to do when they get here?" Dain asked. "Have that plan yet?"

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "Leave?"

"You people kidnapped me, brought me here, put me in front of this thing, and said stop it."

"We had to."

"And you nearly killed my brother," he said. "Exactly what do I owe you?"

"Dain—"

"It was the only way to get Dynan where he needed to be." Maralt was already half way down the hall before they noticed him. Carryn didn't think he was supposed to be there after what the High Bishop said. "We had to."

"We? I seem to remember you were the only one there," Dain said, leaving the wall again and going right up to him.

Carryn feared they would start fighting.

"All right, *I* had to," Maralt said without backing down. "If I hadn't, he would have been taken straight to the Gate. You would have followed him, which is what they want. They sent the talon to your brother to weaken him. It infected who knows how many others to their cause just by being here, in this world."

"The talon," Carryn said. "Where is it?"

Maralt turned to her. "I have it."

"No! Maralt you can't have it here."

"You really *don't* know anything," Dain said, glancing at Carryn.

"I couldn't leave it on him," Maralt said. "He wouldn't stand a chance with the memory of it. So I took it..."

For a moment, silence filled the hall, the only sound a distant drip of water and the strange high-pitched whine the darkness emitted.

"...after you attacked him," Dain said, his hands balling into fists.

"So he would know he didn't have it anymore."

Carryn took Maralt by the arm, turning him from Dain to her. "Does the High Bishop know? Maralt, I can't believe—"

"I lied about it," he said. "He'd tell me to give it to him, Carryn. He doesn't have the strength for it. I'm aware of the dangers. I'm guarding myself against it as best I can. We'll figure out what to do with it later."

Dain was shaking his head, looking back to the wall. "If you can guard yourself against the evil influence of this thing, then why not you instead? You're older. You're stronger. You actually know what the hell this is all about. Why did you send Dynan?"

"I volunteered to go in his place. I was told I couldn't. You're different from me. I'm not stronger. And there are other reasons I can't tell you," Maralt said while Dain was still talking. "It might make things worse."

Maralt glanced at Carryn and she realized he was keeping something from her on purpose and she immediately blamed the talon for the deception.

"That's not it," Maralt said in answer to the thought. "The old man told me I couldn't tell you, not the talon. It's not like the thing is sentient."

"Why would he do that?" Carryn said, not believing him. She wondered if it was true about Alurn, but managed to keep that thought to herself.

"Because no one knows. Gradyn isn't going to let me keep the knowledge either. He's going to take my memory of it."

"You're the only one who can take memories, so how can you take your own?"

Maralt realized he had given away more than he should. He didn't understand why it had to be secret anyway, especially since the knowledge would be taken. Carryn read that much before he stopped her.

"He said it would hurt," Maralt said in an effort to dissuade her. "If I tell you, he'll make me take it from you, Carryn."

"You've never hurt me when you've taken my memory."

"You let him?" Dain said, and started muttering under his breath.

"She sees things."

"I know," Dain said, smirking a little over the fact he knew something Maralt didn't.

“Some of the things she sees are extremely unpleasant. When they get to be too much, I take her memory so she doesn’t go insane from it.”

“Maralt,” Carryn interrupted. “Tell me.”

“They have Alurn Telaerin,” he said. “We have to get him back out before his presence there causes an imbalance we won’t be able to counter, and Dynan is the only who can do it.”

Carryn glanced at Dain waiting for him to make some snide comment about her knowledge base.

“So the crazy lunatic with him, the one trying to get to me was Alurn Telaerin?” Dain asked.

“No, it couldn’t have been,” she said. “How was Alurn even here?”

“The High Bishop, all of them down through history, has been holding him here,” Maralt said. “You saw him?”

“When the hole opened, Dynan said he found Alurn, but she says no,” Dain said. “So you sent my brother into the pit of doom to rescue a dead guy. A really ancient dead guy, who you only just found out was wandering around as a ghost. That’s just fucking great.”

“If Alurn stays there,” Carryn said, “it will weaken the Gods themselves, Dain. Maybe it already has. The day of the Oath when Gradyn collapsed, that had to be when Alurn was taken from him.”

“And sending Dynan, who knows nothing about what you’re talking about seemed like a good idea?” Dain said, ignoring her. “What if he isn’t strong enough to do this?”

“He’s stronger than you think,” Maralt said, and went to him, standing with him at the wall of dark. “If you could see yourselves from our perspective, the way we see you, you wouldn’t have quite so many doubts. Why do you suppose you’re the only one who can stop this wall, Dain? Carryn can’t. I can’t.”

“Why can’t I help him?” Dain said.

“You are helping him,” Carryn said. “Having you there is what they want. Having all three of you there would be...well I don’t know what would happen, but it wouldn’t be good.”

“Just another road to the end,” Maralt said. “There’s a growing list of ways they can manage it and we have to stop them all. For right now, we have a couple of problems about to come through the door, don’t we?”

Carryn nodded. “Someone saw you with him.”

“So Dain,” Maralt said, turning to him. “What are you going to do when the guards get here? They’ll search the whole place. If you want to be found, you will be.”

“I’m not leaving,” he said. “Dynan is on the other side of this thing. I don’t know how you’re going to hide—”

“I can blind them,” Maralt said. “As long as you don’t call attention to yourself they’ll think you’re just another monk.”

Dain rolled his eyes at that, snorting about pretending to be a monk, and went back to pushing against the darkness. He backed off of it the next instant though.

“What is it?” Carryn asked.

“It feels different,” he said, putting his hands to it as if touching it burned him.

“Dain?” Carryn thought he looked sick.

“Maybe you two should back off this. Go down the—”

Even as he spoke, starting to motion them away, a black finger-like band bolted out from the darkness, bunching at its apex before it shot forward. It struck Maralt, hitting him square on the chest and knocked him to the floor. He was in immediate pain from it, eyes rolling back, struggling for air in strangled gasps.

Carryn reached for him, dropping to her knees beside him, afraid he was about to be pulled through the vortex. The moment she touched him, she too was consumed by excruciating pain. Her arms and legs were being torn off. It felt like a hot knife cut across her belly, spilling out the contents. She couldn't breathe.

Through the narrowing scope of her vision she saw Dain lunge forward, his arm sweeping upward, silver arcing along the line of his arm, the glitter of green at his hand. The ability to breathe returned, leaving her gasping on the floor beside her brother. Maralt rolled onto his side, swearing between gulps of air.

"Are you all right?" Dain asked, looking down at them. He held out his hand to Carryn, but she didn't take it.

A crushing desire to run came over her, a thing that reached out and clothed her mind in abject despair. It drilled fear into her, blinding her to reason.

"Dain run," Maralt said though his voice seemed weak and inaudible. "Don't look. Don't look at it."

Instead of heeding that advice, Dain turned around. The sword slipped from his hand, clattering to the stone floor. The great horned head towered above him, filling the hallway. A deformed, gnarled hand reached from the swirling dark and took him by the arm. The darkness surged forward swallowing him the next moment.

The dark retracted, escaping down the hall back toward the Room of Orbs. Carryn could see, but couldn't command her body to move. Maralt managed to stagger to his feet, grab up Dain's fallen sword and charge after the retreating wall. Carryn forced herself to her feet, and followed. She thought Maralt would try to throw himself through the portal before it closed. If he managed it she thought he'd never get out again.

For it was closing. They had what they wanted now, all three of the Chosen. She wondered how long the world had left.

She made it around the corner and found Maralt standing just outside the Room of Orbs in strained concentration. He held out his hand toward the last fragments of the darkness, his fingers curled into a fist. For an instant the portal remained. Maralt was soon shaking from the effort. Sweat beaded on his forehead, dampening his hair, and he pulled in irregular gasps.

A loud snap like a bolt of lightning hitting close by cracked against the stones.

Maralt fell forward, pulled it seemed like, but he caught himself against the stone. Carryn rushed to him at the room's entrance and saw that the darkness was gone. It was just a room with six orbs in it.

"Carryn?"

She turned at the sound of the High Bishop's voice. He was at the corner intersection, and then he was beside them looking into the room. He was carrying Dynan's sapphire sword they had left behind.

"What has happened?" he asked, putting a hand on Maralt's shoulder. "How is this possible?"

"Dain was taken," Maralt said. "Carryn had a vision. I came to see them. I shouldn't have. I know it's my fault. I have the talon, and somehow it struck because of that. It

broke through because I have it here. I'm sorry. I was afraid to give it to you. You warned me and I didn't listen."

"Yes," Gradyn said, his voice calm. "We'll have to assess the depth of the catastrophe, but in a moment. What else?"

"They found out about Alurn."

Gradyn closed his eyes at that, and only gave Maralt a stern look. "You'll have to take her memory of it."

"The demon came."

"No," Carryn said. "I don't want the memory taken."

"Did you see it?" Gradyn asked, ignoring her. "Did she?"

"She did. I didn't look. I tried to hold the gateway open, but..."

"You couldn't," Gradyn said. "It's beyond our capacity, Maralt. You'll have to take her memory of the beast, too."

She shook her head. "I'm all right. It was barely an instant."

"And that is all that is needed," Gradyn said. "It's only because of the integrity of your soul that it hasn't overcome you already, but it has started."

"Eminence!"

A monk came shuffling around the corner moving as fast as his robes would allow. Gradyn glanced at Maralt and then Carryn because they hadn't managed to forewarn him about the guards coming.

"The Captain of the King's Guard and Lord Chancellor are both here. They demand to see you."

"Then let them see me."

"But there are guards. A lot of them. I - I think they mean to search the Temple."

"Broud, see that they are shown in, directly," Gradyn said.

"Someone saw Maralt with Dain," Carryn whispered.

"I gathered," the High Bishop said.

Maralt looked down to the floor and leaned quickly, retrieving Dain's sword. He tucked it away out of sight under his arm just in time. He pulled the hood of his robe over his head, rushing to draw it down to cover his face. He posted himself to one side of the entrance to the Room of Orbs acting as a sentry.

Carryn followed suit, taking Dynan's sword from Gradyn and hiding it. The High Bishop turned to look into the Room of Orbs as if he'd been standing there some time, even as Xavier Illothian and Melgan Lon came around the corner.

There was a man with them, who looked uncomfortable and nervous, staring around him at the walls as if he expected they'd close in on him.

"My Lord Chancellor," Gradyn said, moving to them. "Captain. What has happened? Is it Prince Dynan?"

"No, his condition is unchanged," Xavier said. He had a voice almost as deep as Gradyn's. "It does concern a matter of some delicacy, Eminence. This gentleman has reported he saw a monk putting Prince Dain in a transfer marked with the Temple seal."

While the Lord Chancellor explained, Melgan Lon walked to the doorway of the Room of Orbs, looking inside. He stood by Carryn smelling of leather and metal. It was readily apparent there wasn't anything, or anyone inside the room except the orbs.

"Of course you have complete access," the High Bishop said as Xavier finished. "Broud, have all the clerics and monks gather in the Sanctuary. Look as long as you feel you need to. I wish Dain were here, but I'm afraid, sir, that you are mistaken, or misled."

Gradyn gestured them all back down the hall and Xavier turned that way, though Melgan did not. "What about these two?"

"I would ask that they remain, Captain," Gradyn said. "It is a function of our faith that this room be tended at all times."

"I'm sure that'll be fine," Xavier said, glancing back to Melgan. "Our witness should have a look at them. But in a moment. I'd like to ask that the guards who came with me be allowed inside. The weather has turned. There's an unexpected storm. Thank you for your understanding, Eminence. I want to assure you that there is no disrespect intended toward you or those that serve you."

"We all serve the King, and pray for both his sons," Gradyn said, and gestured the witness to Maralt and Carryn. "Take back your hoods, please, and let this man see you. I do need to ask that you keep to yourself that one of these two is a woman. She was abandoned here with her brother as an infant. We decided not to separate them. But her reputation could be harmed if it came out that she was here and not with the Sisters of Faith."

"Well it wasn't her," the witness said. He rubbed the cuff of his sleeve.

"It wasn't me either," Maralt said to him, in his mind but so that Carryn could hear him, and the High Bishop too. "The monk you saw was dressed all in black."

"The monk I saw was dressed all in black."

Melgan nodded. "Yes, and had long black hair."

"I don't know... That's what I said before but, I'm not sure now. This isn't the man. I saw his face clearly and this isn't him."

The witness put a hand to his forehead, rubbing the side of his face. He looked at Carryn, but wouldn't look at Maralt again.

"Very well," Melgan Lon said, but he was looking at Maralt along the left side where he had his arm clamped down on the hilt of Dain's sword to keep it from falling. Carryn saw that his robe had opened, showing a flash of the blade when he moved to cover his head again.

"There's nothing there," Maralt told him in his head.

Carryn was frightened by how easy it was for Maralt to enter the mind of a non-telepath. It seemed almost second nature to him, as if he'd had years of practice when she knew he hadn't had any. It wasn't something he should do at all.

"It's a string of silver beads hanging from the belt. Initiates get them when they pass their scripture evaluations."

Melgan reached down, picking up the line of beads, perilously close to revealing the sword, but he only frowned after looking at them, watching the light hit them. He nodded abruptly and let them fall.

Satisfied, the Lord Chancellor and the High Bishop walked away together. Melgan stood for a moment longer before he too turned. Carryn kept her breath pent up until they were all well around the corner, and their voices receded into the distance.

Carryn stood for a time without moving, recovering from fear they'd be caught and now afraid Maralt would carry out the High Bishop's demand to take her memory when she didn't feel it was necessary. At the same time, she didn't know what was going to

happen now that Dain was taken. She kept waiting for something horrific to come, and when it didn't, she didn't understand it.

"Maybe he's wrong," Maralt said, leaning against the stones and pulling his hood back. He looked at Dain's sword and the emeralds in its hilt, rubbing a finger over them. There was still a stain of red at the tip of the blade. Carryn realized it was Maralt's blood.

"He isn't wrong," she said. "Some condition just hasn't been met that could happen at any moment with the three of them there together."

"They took Dain by force," Maralt said, and set the sword down, leaned up against the wall. He took the sapphire sword from her and set them together. He nodded. "He was supposed to go on his own."

"Dynan stayed of his own will," she said to counter him.

Maralt smiled for a moment. "He got away, Carryn. They had Dynan, but he escaped. Maybe that's enough to save us, at least for a time."

"What are we going to do?" she asked, knowing the odds of Dynan staying free weren't very good. She felt they all stood at the precipice. One slip and they'd all go over the edge.

"I'm going to open the gateway again. And then I'm going to go get them out. I don't know that I can do it, but I have to try. There's no way I'm trusting my life here, your life, or the rest of the world's existence to the abilities of two untrained, sixteen-year-old telepaths. Strong enough or not. There's no way."

He turned to her, pulling her out of the doorway and put both arms around her. She knew what he was going to say next.

"But before I do that, there's something I have to make sure of. I know you don't want me to. I'm not going to take the memory of Alurn from you, even though the old man wants me to. In the end it'll be taken from you, but not now, and not by me, but the other thing, you can't keep."

"I'm all right."

"I know you're stronger than any of us, but this you can't resist. It will start to eat at you, twist your judgment, change who you are. I couldn't stand it to lose you. Don't fight me."

"Maralt—"

"Don't fight it, Carryn. I don't want to hurt you."

He didn't wait for her permission. He was in her mind as he'd been so many times before, only this time she didn't want it. She knew he was right, and still she didn't want to lose what she thought she had learned. She'd seen a monster and it hadn't shattered her mind. She wanted to be able to face it again, and to know it, but Maralt was there, taking that from her too.

There was pain, and a kind of darkness she'd never known before. There was a sense of something else coming from her brother she didn't recognize, but that too was erased. There was noise for a time of screaming, though the hall outside the Room of Orbs was as quiet as a tomb. And there was the sound of Maralt, weeping as he eased her down to the floor. And she didn't know why.





Chapter 19

It was an incredibly weird sensation, watching as if he was a spectator while masses of people went by him, running their hands over him, across his chest, down his arms, over his head, holding his hands. After a while Dynan stopped trying to acknowledge them, or do anything except stand there and let them touch him.

Some who approached him were deformed and they stood facing him, sometimes with both hands on him, head bowed as if praying. He watched in amazement while they were transformed back to a normal, undistorted person. It was too overwhelming. He couldn't believe anything he was doing was making this happen to these people, these souls. He didn't feel like he had special powers to heal them, but heal they did, right in front of him.

To his surprise, some of them disappeared, dissolving to nothing, a horrifying thing to witness before Fadril came and explained they were just going on, crossing over, as she put it. They had what they were seeking at last. It was amazing, and gratifying, and more incredible than watching people be healed.

He stood for a long time, and then he leaned against a big rock when he was tired of standing, until finally Fadril came and stopped the flow of people. She told them he had to rest. They didn't complain. They let him go and went back to doing whatever they'd been doing before.

"There's someone I want you to see," Fadril said.

She pulled him into a building that had a rectangular interior courtyard open to the sunless sky. Steps of three led down into it where there were long benches and a central fountain surrounded by smaller pools. There were three men there, talking together, but they turned to him when he entered.

Dynan stopped on the top step, halted by unexpected suspicion and fear. Polen Forb, Faulkin Yeld and Grint Heddly were standing there, joking with one another, smiling as they turned to look at him.

Dynan remembered Polen telling him that Fadril wasn't here. The image of him holding down his hand right before his face melded into one of the Six made Dynan wonder if he really was Polen or one of them. Faulkin Yeld had helped him across the blood river, sending him straight into the trap. In the cave, it had sounded like they'd been torn limb from limb. Dynan didn't know how they could possibly be standing here now.

"What is it?" Fadril asked, but Polen was nodding his head.

"We saw what happened at the crossing," he said. "We were all watching. We tried to get down to you and we couldn't."

"All three of you?" Dynan asked, his eyes flicking to Faulkin.

"All of us," Polen said, confused by the question, but then he guessed. "One of them was in the river with you, when you went under and then they 'saved' you. Well it wasn't any of us."

"You mean he thinks we were with them?" Grint said, looking from Polen to Faul.

"They made him think we were, Grint," Faul said, folding his arms and turning to the fountain. "Can't really blame him."

"How did you get out of the cave?" Dynan asked, not at all convinced, but the question angered Fadril.

"I trust these men," she said as if that should be enough for him.

"So did I," Dynan said.

"Fadril, it's all right," Polen said but Grint didn't like it.

"You mean now you don't trust us?" he said. "For something we had nothing to do with? I sure hope he's who you say he is, Your Majesty. He's starting to not be worth all the trouble."

"Grint," Polen said. "Try using your head. Look at your clean fingers and close your mouth."

Dynan kept himself from stepping back when Polen joined him on the stair. "How did you get out of the cave?"

"The same way you did, through a hole," Polen said.

"I heard—"

"—what they wanted you to hear, son."

Dynan heard in his head the echo of their screams, the feeling of hopelessness and terror, and realized that Polen was right. The Six would want him to feel like there was no one left to help him and had the double purpose of making Dynan happy to see them at the river, and maybe a third purpose in making him not trust them here. The Six knew they weren't taken.

"You lied to me," he said, wanting one last answer, but he thought he already knew it, and glanced to their Queen.

"I had to be sure of you," Polen said, looking with him. "We don't talk about her, especially out in the wild. I swore to protect her, too."

Dynan nodded, accepting his word as the truth, and then felt bad for doubting him, along with a rush of relief that he was still Polen Forb. There was a sense of safety that went around him. He knew if Polen could do anything to help him, he would.

"I'm sorry."

"I hear you did all right without us. Saw it, too," Polen said. "You faced off with the First. You got through. That's a thing that hasn't happened in...well, more years than I can count. And you kept that brother of yours from coming here."

"It was someone else," Dynan said. "On the other side."

"I'm pretty sure I saw you walking away from your only way out of here," Polen said, clapped him on the back, and then nodded to the Queen. "And now you have to help me stop her from doing something rash."

Dynan looked with him. "You want to keep her from going with me."

“With us,” Polen said. “I’m not letting you face the pit on your own, even if it means the end of me, and it might. No, you can’t save us all. Where we’re going, you may not be able to save yourself or Alurn, but that’s the point. You can’t let anything or anyone get in the way of that. Including Her Majesty over there.”

Dynan knew he was right, but he didn’t think he could do it. “Maybe I should go alone,” he said.

Polen scoffed at that. “And you’d be about as dim-witted as Grint if you tried. Don’t listen to him. He’s a lump from Heecs.”

“Heecs,” Dynan said. “That’s a farm town along the northern range - still.”

“Grint wasn’t a farmer. That’d be an insult to their intelligence. The war rolled over him and we rolled him up. You point him where the fight is and that’s what he does. There’s not a whole lot upstairs otherwise. So don’t act like him.”

“I’m not going to risk—”

“You are. You’re risking everything, yourself included. Get used to the thought, boy. We’re going along with you. It isn’t up for debate, so wrap your mind around the concept. What is up for discussion, and an argument with her, is how she plays into it. She wants to take an army to the Gates of Hell. You noticed we don’t have a lot of soldier material here.”

Dynan had noticed. The people he saw who came to him were mostly women, children or men who were too old or too young. He wondered how Fadril planned to make an army and couldn’t believe she meant these people.

“Polen, stop plotting behind my back,” Fadril said, coming over to them.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Your Majesty,” he said.

“You would.”

“So you believe it now,” Dynan said, “that Alurn is here.”

“I’m afraid not to believe it. If it’s true, none of us have much time left. You strengthening our people gets us more, but it won’t last. We have to get you both out of here before we lose everything we have left. This place will stop existing as an oasis. So regardless of what you think of as a qualified soldier, Pol, these people are doomed if they do nothing.”

“Even the babies?” he asked.

“I’m not taking the babies, or the women who tend them. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You’re the one being ridiculous. You think you can take them to the gate without them ending up as fodder?”

“With Dynan protecting them, yes. What choice do we have?”

“Something that doesn’t involve leading these people to a place where they have no chance of escaping.”

“You could use them as a diversion,” Dynan said then, recalling a lecture from one of his strategic mechanics classes taught by Boral Sloyl. Fadril and Polen stopped arguing and looked at him. “If we need an army, then I’m guessing they have one too. Creatures and whatever. We take the strongest of ours with us, the archers you used to save me and anyone else who’s good enough. We move fast and under cover. The rest we send out on a parallel course out in the open. They’ll be a large enough looking force that the Six will send at least the same number to meet them, or if we’re really lucky, their whole force.”

“What are they going to fight with?” Polen asked.

“They don’t have to fight,” Dynan said. “They just have to run. They need to be able to scatter like the wind and then hide.”

Fadril liked the idea enough to give him a kiss on the cheek, smiling until he gave her his next suggestion.

“You should lead them,” he said.

“No.”

“They’ll need someone to help get them through.”

“No,” Fadril said even when Polen agreed with him. She patted Dynan’s arm. “I’m coming with you. I’m going to help save my husband. I want to see him. You can’t talk me out of it, Polen. I understand the danger.”

“I don’t think you do, and you’re asking me to break the vow I took, that damned oath that’s bound me to your side since the day I met you.”

“Yes. Our souls are already damned.”

“Wait a minute,” Dynan said to stop the argument. “What are you talking about?”

“She swore she would never leave this place, for the souls of her children,” Polen said while Fadril turned away. “Alurn doesn’t know she’s here. If he sees her, he won’t leave her here again, which means he won’t leave.”

“He isn’t going to see me,” Fadril said. “Polen, we don’t have time for these questions and doubts. Get everyone together, explain it to them. We need to move.”

Polen hesitated to obey her. Dynan recognized the authoritative tone. Polen did too, and didn’t argue, but he didn’t go without grumbling under his breath. He cast Dynan a glance on his way by. Grint and Faul went with him. Fadril moved to the fountain and sat there, staring down into the water.

Dynan knew he was supposed to try and talk her out of going, but he doubted it would work. He remembered the accuracy of her bow. Polen was being unnecessarily over-protective. He moved to sit with her, running his hand through the water, relishing the feel of it.

“Who did you swear to?”

“To a force of pure evil, and I’m bound by it,” she said, and he knew she meant the demon. “There isn’t anything you can do.”

“Maybe you only think you’re bound by it,” he said.

She wouldn’t be convinced otherwise. She was afraid if she attempted to leave with Alurn, or follow her children into the Beyond, they would be brought to the Gate. Dynan shook his head at her stubbornness.

“I always thought once you made it to the Blessed Realm you didn’t have to worry about anything bad happening ever again. Fadril, are the Gods still stronger?”

“Yes, or we’d be lost already.”

“The Gods aren’t going to hand your children over,” he said.

“What if there isn’t a choice?” she whispered.

“What if there is? Are the Gods stronger? Do you believe it? Here, where we are right now seems about two steps away from them. Maybe you should ask them.”

He patted her hand, took a last look at the water flowing around the fountain and left.

Outside, he found Polen and the others getting everyone organized, which was easier managed than Dynan thought it would be. They seemed to already know. There were no arguments or seemingly any fear. The ‘army’ lined up in rank upon rank, composed primarily of older men, more women than he was comfortable with sending off into

danger, and a lot of young boys, some younger than he was. Many were fashioning clubs out of wood or long staffs that were generally associated with walking and not fighting. There were a few archers, but that was all the weaponry they had.

The idea, and Polen agreed it was the only option, was for them to put themselves into the mouth of the beast, and once they had its attention, run like mad. There was a little debate on how close that had to be, but in the end, everyone agreed on a narrow plain just outside the gap that would take them to the Gates.

The incursion force was taking the mountain route, which was a shorter distance, but because of the up and down nature of the trek, they'd all arrive fairly close together. In any case, the smaller band would wait for the diversion before striking. Dynan started doubting it would be enough, since there could be a demon involved.

There were other creatures, like the dogs with spikes, and there would certainly be six incredibly nasty copies of Alurn's brother. Dynan wondered what defense there was against them. There was a nervous, unpleasant sort of sensation in the pit of his stomach over the whole thing. Most of it was his idea. He hoped it worked.

Fadril gave Dynan a sheath for the sword she loaned him. Polen came up with a set of hardened leather armor that might keep any enemy arrows from hitting him. Grint found him a pair of arm bracers as an apology. Faulkin only smiled at Grint's discomfort and clapped Dynan on the back as he went by.

It was a strange, disquieting ritual; getting ready for war. Dynan looked around him as he put on the things he'd been given, tightening straps, adjusting the sword belt and sheath. There were others going about the business of preparing. He knew why he was there and what he had to do, but for these others, he didn't know why they fought, considering their half-existence.

It was disturbing to him that even in death there were still wars and battles. Then again, maybe that's what these people had to do to move on as Fadril called it. Maybe at the end of it all, he'd turn around and they'd all vanish.

There was also the danger of being taken, something he couldn't fathom anyone would willingly risk, since it was for eternity. Maybe that was what the healing powers he had would prevent. He frowned over it and thought to ask Fadril about it. She was just coming out to join them.

A wind came up and blew across the road where they stood in various stages of readiness. Dynan glanced up as there came on the air, the slightest hint of decay, like the dead smell of a rodent expired behind wood paneling, or tucked in the corner of the barn. Everyone else was looking too, and a murmur of disquiet ran through them.

Someone ran up to Fadril, talking rapidly in her ear and she started looking to the sky, causing everyone else to look with her. She walked to the edge of the road and jumped up on a log, shielding her eyes as she looked out beyond the trees.

Something warm spattered against Dynan's face and on his head and hands, like rain. The droplets swirled red and the mutters turned to cries of revulsion.

The idea of blood raining from the sky in this place was horrifying and didn't have an explanation. People stood uncertain for a moment, but the desire to get out of it overcame their hesitation. They started to move for cover. Dynan thought if this was happening here in this pristine land, then something terrible had happened to cause it.

The answer came the next instant. Dynan saw it as clearly as if he was right there. Dain lay chained to an altar, weakened, trying to free himself without effect. Adiem stood

over him, a thin knife in hand, using it to slice into Dain's arm. A flow of blood drew a long line down the face of the stone.

Dynan grabbed his bicep, feeling the sting of the blade as it cut across skin. The falling rain of blood grew stronger, splattering against the road, the buildings, everyone and every thing. Off a great distance away, Dynan thought he could hear Fadril shouting something, but he couldn't tell what. He didn't care either, focused on his brother.

"Dain."

Adiem turned around, a deranged grin spreading across his face. Dynan's immediate surroundings faded away while the area around the altar clarified, sharpening to the point where he was almost there on the shelf surrounded by pillars.

Adiem reached a hand toward him, cackling under his breath.

Dynan was drawn forward, but something knocked into him. Arms wrapped around him, pulling him down and away from the reaching hand. He was dragged and his vision shifted. The road reappeared, only he was lying on it being pulled along by Polen. Fadril had her arms wrapped around him and she was being pulled too.

"They have Dain," Dynan said, trying to get Polen to stop.

People were running in every direction trying to escape the gaping hole that had abruptly opened, but then Grint was there with a bow and arrow, determined and sure. He took aim and loosed the shot. Something between a shriek and a howl erupted from the darkness and then the hole closed.

"Dain!"

Dynan wrenched away from all the hands holding him and rolled to his feet. He didn't want the portal to go away, even when he was terrified of it. His brother was on the other side and in trouble. Dynan started looking around for another way to get there.

Fadril scrambled up after him. "They won't kill him until you're there. You both have to be there at the same time."

"So it's okay for them to torture him until then?"

"No," she said, and took him by the arms again.

He pushed her off and then pushed Grint out of the way, looking for any hint of the portal, but there was nothing. He thought about how it had opened and concentrated, trying to reach his brother again.

"Don't," Fadril said, getting in front of him. "Adiem will be ready this time. He'll pull you through. If you want to witness Dain's death, followed by your own, then keep trying to reach him. I'm telling you they aren't going to kill him until you are there."

What she meant, and what she was suggesting, finally registered. Dynan started to shake his head. "I can't."

"We have to wait. If you go now, through the portal, which is what they want, you'll go alone and you'll die alone."

"I'm not waiting. This rain is...it's his blood. They're going to torture him. They *are* torturing him."

"But he'll survive as long as you aren't there to fulfill the prophecy. We go on our own time, in our own way, together, and we have a chance to save you all. Alurn, you and Dain. We can destroy the world, or save it. Dynan, it can't be any other way." Fadril shook him by his arms. "Don't you think I wanted to go to Alurn right then when you first told me about him?"

Dynan knew she was right. She understood the desire to go, a constant demand that made him want to get to Dain any way he could as fast as possible. It was the wrong thing to do, but the alternative was to leave his brother to suffer at the hands of a sadistic monster.

“How long?”

“Too long for you to stand. It’ll take us two, maybe three cycles to get there, traveling through the mountains like we planned.”

“Cycles?”

“It’s not exactly equivalent to a day. As you know it, there isn’t night here. It will seem longer than it really is. That’s part of the agony of this place. Time doesn’t behave the way you’re used to.”

A sudden rumble grew in the distance, growing to cover them. The ground shifted under their feet, shaking violently for several long moments, knocking some people down.

Fadril turned to Polen even before the sound receded, considering her words before she spoke. “We need to move. We should take all the women and children with us to the Temple. We’ll go through the underground pass.”

Polen didn’t like that idea. Dynan agreed with Fadril. It meant they were getting started. He didn’t know what the underground pass was, or the Temple, or what good it would do the women and children to be there. Maybe it was a holy place that would protect them somehow. Dynan had a hard time believing there were any sacred places here, or any protection.

“I told you I’d never set foot in the place again,” Polen said.

Pain lanced across Dynan’s other arm. The blood kept falling. Fadril held her hands out to it, catching it in her palms. “It’ll be faster. I don’t think we have a choice.”

She didn’t wait for him to approve. She turned, and taking Dynan by the arm, started him toward the front of the line of people, the army, who were already on the move. Crossing through, she admonished a few to be safe and wished them good luck. Dynan couldn’t talk, fighting off another contact surge from Dain. It wasn’t something he was accustomed to doing and left him shaking when it passed.

“It’ll be all right,” Fadril told him and kept a hand firmly around his wrist.

Others followed them, Polen, Grint and Faulkin among them. The archers were there, who it turned out were mostly girls, except for one. There were a couple other fighters, but fewer than Dynan expected. He realized Fadril had sent the rest with the army so they had a better chance to protect themselves. Doing so left the incursion force very small. The women came, carrying the infants and the children who were too young to walk. The ones who could, scrambled along after them, or were whisked up by one of the fighters.

They left the road and the masses of people on it, cutting through the trees and then across a field. The rain started to turn the grass a shade of dark brown, but it was black in other places. Fadril’s fear that this small oasis would be taken over by evil was coming true. Dynan didn’t know if getting out with Alurn and Dain would save it. He started to think that even if they escaped, everyone else left here would be in the wild. Everyone who came here, who died from now on would be subjected to terrible horrors.

The land rose sharply, mounting upward with rocks dotting the landscape. There was again the sense of the familiar, and as they climbed, the feeling grew until he realized

where they were. He turned back, looking through a haze of red, and expected to see the Palace sitting on its plateau beside the Wythe Sea.

Fadril tugged on his hand, refusing to let him go even for a moment. “We shouldn’t stop.”

“These are the mountains behind the Palace,” Dynan said, remembering what Polen had told him to look for. Fadril nodded. “There’s a Temple? Where?”

“I’ll show you. It isn’t likely to have any correlation to the world you know. A thousand years wears down the land.”

She was right and wrong at the same time. The mountain rose up on either side of them into sheer walls, creating a sheltered canyon. He knew the meadow that stretched between the cliffs when they reached it after climbing for what seemed a long time. He recognized the place where he fell through the hole in the ground, caused, he now knew, by his blood. The stones in the ground weren’t the same though, not exactly. There was a ruined city, and made him wonder how far back in time the beginning of the city went. He thought if he looked, he’d find a stone tablet of the Sacred Seal just like the one in Rianamar.

Through a growing torrent of blood that turned the land slick and treacherous, they kept on. Dynan tried not to think about the grossness of it, preferring to think his brother’s blood could only give him strength.

They reached the far end of the meadow. This was the place where Dain crashed the transport pod against the towering wall. If he’d gone the other way it would have been off the cliff. There should have been a series of caves in the left face of the mountain, but instead there was a kind of stone doorway built out from the rock. The interior was carved stone and didn’t resemble the caves Dynan knew at all.

They moved out of the blood rain. Once under cover, they dried off as best they could. They were all soaked with it. Dynan thought of Dain again, and felt the torture he endured. He closed his eyes, hating himself, and shut him out again.

Fadril squeezed his hand and led the way through a cavernous hall. An arched entry opened over a steep set of stairs that disappeared downward. As with the other cave Dynan had been in, this one grew lighter the farther in, instead of darker.

He was about to ask why that was when they reached the bottom of the stairs. Before him, a huge set of stone doors stood closed. They were thick and at least ten kem tall. Fadril searched the stone face on the left side for a moment. She touched a stone three in from the door in the bottom right corner, pushing inward. Half of it dislodged and slid backward. A lever came down in its place and she pulled it all the way forward. Off somewhere over their heads, something started humming, sounding strangely out of place. The next moment, the doors started to move.

When they were open all the way, Fadril hesitated on the threshold.

The room was oblong and it took Dynan a moment to realize it was shaped like a diamond. The floor was cut stone. There didn’t seem anything special about it, but then he remembered what else Polen said about the place.

“This is where you—” He stopped, unable to say this was where she died. She didn’t seem dead to him. None of them did.

Polen heard him though, and came to the entrance where he stopped with Fadril. He glanced over his shoulder to Grint and Faulkin. “We all died here. Let’s just get through it and into the passage.”

“I’m going to find this place,” Dynan said. “When I get home, I’m going to find it again and I’m going to make sure you’re...”

“Properly laid to rest?” Polen said when Dynan’s voice faded and he scoffed. “You won’t find anything but dust, boy.”

“I’ll find more than that,” Dynan said, certain of it. He smiled. “You’re too stubborn to decay, old man. You’ll get that royal funeral you were promised.”

“I was never promised that,” Polen said, but he was laughing.

“You are now,” Dynan said, and looked down at Fadril, nodding to her. He saw by the glint in her eyes that it was important to her. He put both arms around her. “I’ll make sure of it. For all of you.”

“I know you will,” she said. She patted his arm and gestured to the room. “The passage is on the other side through a small hidden door. You, Polen and the others go ahead. I’m going to make sure everyone is settled. I’ll catch up to you.”

“Why don’t you just stay?” Polen said, but Fadril only shook her head.

“Why do you think this place is safe?” Dynan asked, thinking that where her life ended wouldn’t be on that list.

“Adiem won’t come here,” she said, and nodded them on.





Chapter 20

Getting into City Medical wasn't as hard as Maralt thought it would be. Turning the mind of a guard wasn't especially difficult, although Maralt really hoped he didn't run into the one who'd seen him with Dain.

He had taken the memory of that lone witness and jumbled it up enough that the man was no longer sure who he'd seen, saving Ralion Blaise a great deal of trouble he didn't deserve.

He considered for a moment that he wasn't supposed to do this, erase memories the way he was. He'd been told it was wrong the whole of his life. Here in this circumstance, it seemed the only way to manage and the High Bishop hadn't seemed angry about it. Maralt told himself he'd stop – once they got everything back to normal – *if* they got everything back to normal.

He could hear the wind howling outside. Everyone else called it a storm, an especially violent one, but only the weather being strange. Maralt knew better. Really, it was the precursor to the end of the world. Throughout the System, on all three planets, reports were coming in of abnormal floods, violent storms and even blizzards in places that didn't usually have them.

And here, everyone thought the Gods were such benevolent beings.

"I'm not sure what's worse," Maralt said under his breath as he reached a corner and glanced around it.

He saw a guard standing at the head of another hallway, signifying the entrance to the Royal section of the Medic Center. Maralt decided he needed a disguise to help him remain unnoticed. It would really be a lot simpler if he didn't have to turn everyone. He wasn't wearing his robes, but regular clothes.

He found the uniform storage room after plucking that information out of the mind of a third rank Medic. It was surprisingly easy and didn't appear to cause the young man much more than a passing wince. The greatest difficulty was making sure he didn't press too hard. After a brief search through the stacks of clothes, Maralt picked out a Medic uniform that fit him, consisting of a jumpsuit and a lab coat. He found a comboard of the kind that Medic's used, and felt he'd make it through the halls without too much trouble.

"Hope so, anyway," he said to the rack of lab coats.

Once back out in the hallway and on his way toward the Royal section, he concentrated on seeming like every other Medic in the building. He started searching the mind of the guard who would stop him, finding out that very few Medics, or anyone else,

were allowed in. Dr. Eldelar Elger and his daughter Geneal were the only physicians and they were handling mostly everything themselves.

There were exceptions. The people who changed the bed linens went in twice every day.

Maralt looked down at the lab coat. He turned around, going back to the storage room where he found another coat that matched what the bed linen people wore. He left again, this time with a stack of sheets in hand. He didn't go all the way, finding another empty room to pause in.

He had to find out if Dynan was alone, or at least who might have to be turned. He didn't want to try that with the King, guessing Ambrose Telaerin would be extremely resistant to it. Maralt would have to expend a lot of energy and effort to erase the King's memory. The more they fought, the worse the pain. If Ambrose suddenly started suffering from an extreme headache, others would notice. Suspicions were already high.

He sat in front of a desk – he supposed it was a physician's office – tried to relax, and concentrated.

He found a Medic out in the hall going the direction he wanted and tagged along. When the Medic turned away, Maralt went into the guard next and then waited with him. The guard was thinking about a conversation he'd overheard between two physicians who seemed convinced that the King would have to make a decision soon about taking Dynan off the support system.

"What?" Maralt said without thinking about how the guard might react to a voice in his head asking him questions.

"I know. I can hardly believe it," the guard thought, answering the question as if he was having a conversation with someone else. Maybe that's what guards did to keep themselves occupied on the watch. "It's the fourth time I've heard it in the last few hours from Medics and Docs. I saw what he looked like when they brought him in. All the blood everywhere. Some of the Docs are saying Elger and his daughter don't want to tell the King it was already too late then. Maybe they're right to wait after everyone he's lost, but he has to face it someday. It's going to break him, losing them both like this, without even knowing what's happened to the other one. I'd like to get my hands on the men who did this."

Maralt meant to leave the guard before his thoughts devolved into threats of retaliation, but the man's attention shifted to a young woman walking toward him. He was well trained enough not to look at her directly. Even so, he had her undressed in a flash and as she passed him, his eyes shifted to watch after her.

The man had an imagination. An accurate one.

Maralt slipped into the mind of Geneal Elger and found her completely ignoring the guard, her thoughts only of Dynan Telaerin. She paused in mid-step though and glanced behind her. Maralt thought about Carryn's mind, the mind of a woman, to disguise the alien presence of a man inside this woman's being. Geneal drew in a weary breath and took him straight to Dynan's room.

Roth Perquin sat in a chair in the far corner reading a comboard. He looked ten years older than the last time Maralt had seen him at the oath ceremony. The First Minister glanced up at Geneal when she came in, and nodded to her briefly. His eyes shifted to Dynan for a moment before he went back to reading.

The body in the bed no longer resembled that of a young man. The change in Dynan's physical appearance was stunning, and made Maralt acutely aware of the passage of time. They were running out of it and he thought there might not be enough left.

"Stop thinking like that," Geneal said to herself. "He's going to make it through this. No one is giving him enough time. It's a small miracle he lived through it at all. His heart just needs more time to heal, and it will. I know it will."

She told herself that a couple more times, asking herself what else she could do to make that wish a reality. She started going over the repair procedure in her head and Maralt found himself in the midst of a graphic recreation of a bloody surgery that turned his stomach.

Geneal put a hand to her temple, frowning. She'd never in her life experienced revulsion or even nausea over any medical procedure she'd ever done. That kind of thing didn't affect her and she couldn't understand why it was now.

"You're just tired," Maralt whispered, careful not to implant that thought too strongly, or she'd end up collapsing.

It was the truth anyway, since she hadn't slept much since Dynan was brought in. "I must be," she said, answering the idea. "Silly though. Now let's see what we have here."

She leaned over Dynan, peeling open one eye and then the other. She ran her fingers over his forehead and touched the back of her hand to his cheek. She started pulling back the covers to inspect the bandages and the wound.

"You should take another sample of blood," Maralt said to her, thinking it would be handy to have her do it and bring the vial to him. Easier for certain.

"Why would I want to do that?" she said, and then muttered over the way she was thinking.

"Geneal," Roth said. "You're talking to yourself."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "I do that sometimes."

"Why wouldn't you do it?" Maralt asked, persisting. He really needed that vial and didn't want to traipse all over City Medical to find it.

"I don't need any more of his blood," she said. "There are vials of it already."

"Geneal?" Roth said, setting aside his comboard and standing. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said quickly. "I'm just having some sort of strange internal debate that...well I don't know. I'm just tired."

"Where are the vials?" Maralt said even more quietly than before, daring to push her for the answers he needed.

"Where they've always been," she said to herself this time, and Maralt saw a visual of a room that looked like a lab and had several storage units installed. That didn't help him enough, so he asked for the specific location.

Geneal whirled around looking for someone standing behind her, but found only Roth looking at her in concerned confusion that was growing to something more than that. Maralt supposed it was the mention of blood that set the First Minister on edge.

Geneal pressed her hands to her head, fighting the compunction to tell Maralt what he wanted even when she didn't know what she was fighting. He extracted the answer just before the pain in her head became the only thing she could think of.

Maralt heard someone talking right next to him then. When his eyes cleared and his mind came back to himself, a man was standing over him, shaking him.

“Are you all right?” The man was a doctor and this was his office. The badge he wore on his coat matched the nameplate on the desk.

“Yes, I’m fine, thank you. I’m sorry,” Maralt said and pushed to his feet. “I’ve been working three shifts and I felt a little unsteady, so I came in. I must have fallen asleep.”

“Understandable under the circumstances,” Dr. Korin said, moving around to sit at his desk. “You should go home and get some rest. I’ll alert your superior that it’s necessary. What’s your name and section?”

“No, that’s all right,” Maralt said. “I’m fine now. I’ll just go back to work—”

“I noticed you weren’t wearing your identcard, which is grounds for dismissal. Especially right now.”

Maralt feigned to look for the thing hoping to avoid entering the man’s mind to change a few things, but he saw the doctor’s fingers resting too closely to the companel in the desk and discovered that he was about to alert the guard.

“That isn’t going to be necessary,” Maralt said in his head. “Move your hand from the controls. I’m going to leave and you’re not going to notify anyone. You never saw me. There was never anyone in your office. You’re just tired. You’re going to—”

Maralt stopped. The last conversation the man had was playing through his mind, and it was all about Dynan. The whispers he heard were alarming. Maralt forgot about being gentle and extracted the sum of the discussion.

There’d been a meeting between Eldelar Elger and a number of doctors, who accused the Chief of Palace Medicine of being too closely tied to the patient and his family to make an impartial decision. His heart had sustained too much damage. His brain scans were flat. He was dead already. They all believed the time had come to end the young Prince’s struggle, or at least discontinue the support systems that were keeping him alive.

“Where is this coming from?” Maralt asked the doctor. “Who’s behind it?”

“Governor Alse.”

“You agreed?”

“Yes,” the doctor said. “The Governor is a family friend.”

“You’re going to change your mind,” Maralt said. “Yes, you are. You’re going to support Eldelar in any decision he makes unless it involves cutting off those systems. This isn’t about political discourse, doctor. This is about the life of a young man who’ll survive if he’s given half a chance. It was only four days ago since he had his heart cut in half. Go tell Eldelar you’ve changed your mind. Now.”

The man dithered behind his desk for a moment before popping up as if on a string. He fought it, but gave in. “He’s already on his way to speak to the King. It’s going to happen within the hour.”

“No, it isn’t. Go tell Eldelar you’ve had a change of heart.”

Dr. Korin left the office as commanded while Maralt stood uncertain what to do other than stop this catastrophe from taking place. He wasn’t sure how he’d manage it. He couldn’t imagine Ambrose Telaerin allowing it, but the risk that he might was too great. He had to be told something that would stop any consideration of it. He had to be given hope that his son would survive despite what the doctors might tell him.

Maralt moved to the door, hesitating and abruptly keyed in the lock mechanism instead. He went back to the chair in front of the desk and sat down again.

“Eminence,” he said in thought, reaching across the city to the Sacred Temple.

"Maralt," Grady answered almost instantly. "Where are you?"

"At City Medical," he said, and then gave him the explanation, but before the High Bishop could start berating him, told him the rest. "I have to talk to Ambrose Telaerin. He needs to hear the truth."

For a moment there was nothing but silence and a curtain that cut off Grady's thought process so Maralt couldn't tell what he might say about it.

"Eminence," Maralt said again when he thought enough time had gone by. "They're going to speak with the King right now."

"If you tell him, Maralt, the consequences could be larger and worse than you imagine. Will he believe you? Will he be silent? Will he allow events that must happen to occur?"

"How else can I stop them from turning the machines off?" Maralt asked. "Aside from going in there and forcing them not to do it. Is that what you want?"

"Of course not, and you know it wouldn't work, but telling the King the truth may not work either, particularly since I only just told him that none of it was real."

"I'll tell him why you had to. I'll convince him not to speak of it, and I'll make him see what has to be done."

"And how will you do that, Maralt, with the King?"

"By talking to him. I won't use any other method except at the outset when he'll probably want to call the guard."

"How many have you turned today?"

"A few," Maralt said. "I know I shouldn't."

"It's a rare drug, isn't it?" Grady asked him.

"It's just easy," Maralt said. "I don't have time for anything else."

For some reason, Grady smiled at the answer, and he nodded. "I've faith that you'll do what is necessary and what is right."

Grady stepped back and there was a slight mental push that meant the conversation was over. Maralt realized he hadn't gotten an answer. He thought to talk to Carryn about it, but then changed his mind. He was afraid she'd talk him out of it. His nerves were already failing. Getting caught was only part of it. He couldn't afford to fail. With the survival of the whole damn universe in the balance, the stakes were immense. Fear of being wrong kept him from moving.

"I think I like it better when he just says do this, or do that, or this other thing," he said to himself. "Well, I can't stand here and do nothing, can I?"

At least the answer to that was easy.

He walked out of Dr. Korin's office and almost ran into another linen carrier, which was serendipity.

"I need to borrow this," he said, and took Medic Poole's id, and the stack of bed sheets. He made him forget about it and then made his way to the checkpoint. He wasn't stopped or even noticed.

The guard at the corner took his id number and put it into a comboard, which meant only certain bed changers were allowed into the family complex. Maralt prepared himself to alter the guard's perception, but found himself waved through the next moment.

"Make it quick," he was told as he started away. "The King will be back soon and he won't want you in there. Not after the news he's getting."

"What news?" Maralt asked, wondering how many people knew.

“Just do your job and move on.”

Dynan wasn't alone. While Roth and Geneal were gone, four of his friends were in. They spoke in feigned amusement, talking about the notes and cards they'd collected, joking about some of the content. The laughter was fleeting. They knew to expect bad news as well.

“I need you to leave,” Maralt said and that was all it took for them to get up and file out, no mental push required. They were trained to do as they were told by figures of authority. He supposed a Medic counted as one.

The door closed and Maralt turned to Dynan, who looked even worse in person than he had through Geneal's eyes. A labyrinth of tubes and bandages surrounded him. He lay completely still except for the forced rise and fall of his chest. Maralt had hoped he'd find some small spark of light around him, but it wasn't there.

Maralt saw himself stabbing him again, the shock in his eyes, the look on his face, the blood pooling out of his mouth. Being responsible for Dynan's death was more than he wanted to endure should it turn out that way. He'd sworn an oath to protect him. He closed his eyes against the rise of revulsion and fear.

Ambrose Telaerin walked in and closed the door behind him. Maralt remained backed into the corner waiting for Melgan or one of the others to come in with him, but the King remained alone. He leaned against the door and Maralt thought he might break down, but he only pressed his palms into his eyes and then held his head a moment. Maralt waited for him to move to time his introduction when the King wasn't standing next to the door and easy escape, or the companel in the wall.

Ambrose was an astute man though, and turned abruptly at the foot of Dynan's bed an instant before Maralt meant to speak. The uniform confused him a moment, but Ambrose realized quickly that Maralt wasn't a Medic.

“Your Majesty, my name is Maralt Adaeryn. I'm from the Temple. The High Bishop knows I'm here. I'm a telepath like your sons. I know where they are. Please, let me talk to you and explain.”

Ambrose regarded him, unafraid, taking in his appearance and judging him in one glance. It was the first time in his life Maralt was completely intimidated by anyone.

“It's all true,” the King said, watching him closely and Maralt could only nod.

“Everything your father said to you before he died, yes. All of it, and more. It's worse than you think. And if you tell anyone about this, Sir, even your closest friends, it will cause the end of the world. All the demon needs is a whisper now to come here, less than that. You can't tell anyone about this. You can't let them remove Dynan as heir. And you can't let them turn off these machines.”





Chapter 21

The shelf below was a large circle of barren rock, studded with rough-hewn pillars arrayed around a central altar. It was dark; full of shadows even though it was open to the air. Large, jagged walls of rock rose to enclose it, making access to it difficult. The driving rain of blood had stopped, but a heavy mist of it hung in the air.

Dain was chained to the altar, unmoving, blood oozing from the cuts in his arms over the surface of the rock. His eyes were open, but sightless. For an instant, Dynan thought he was dead.

Fadril set a hand on his arm to remind him to be still and wait. It was impossible to do, sitting there watching. The urge to go down to Dain was so nearly overwhelming that Dynan had to stop looking. He turned and slid down the face of the boulder he was behind, cutting off the terrible view. He studied his hands instead, and imagined them holding a sword.

There was no sign of Alurn, which meant they were holding him somewhere out of sight, or somewhere else entirely. There wasn't any easy way to find him, but then Dynan realized he could probably communicate with him since he was a telepath. Fadril didn't want to risk it yet, just like she didn't want to risk it with Dain.

There was no sign of Adiem either, or any of the five other parts of him, or the other creatures that inhabited this world. The shelf was empty except for Dain. It probably wouldn't stay empty for long, Dynan thought, if he took the chance to go down there,

So he sat and waited, and tried not to think too much about the pain his brother was in, or wonder about Alurn. He thought about the research paper he'd been writing, a lifetime ago it seemed, and felt like he had it all wrong again. Certainly, Polen Forb was responsible for much of Cobalt's success in battle, but he and Faulkin and Grint were men who would follow Alurn to their death. They already had. They didn't think he was immature or reckless. They believed in him.

A flash of Alurn surrounded by stone reached him. He was chained hand and foot, and unable to move. He looked exactly like Adiem and Dynan almost ran from him until he looked up. The eyes of his father looked back at him.

Alurn recognized him, acknowledging his presence with a nod. He seemed to expect him. There was a hint of relief in his face. He showed Dynan where he was in relation to the shelf. Alurn took him on a path cut through the rocks, winding his way out of his prison. The entrance was beneath them.

"Are you all right?" Dynan asked, curious about him and a little overwhelmed that he was meeting a legend.

"I've seen better days," Alurn said and smiled. "I'm better now. I hope you have a plan."

"Sort of," Dynan said. "Hold on a minute."

Dynan turned to Fadril to tell her he knew where Alurn was, and realized his mistake the next instant. Alurn was right there with him, looking at his wife. Dynan didn't stand a chance of blocking out the flood of emotions that raced through his sixteen-year-old mind.

"Hey! She's like my grandmother," he said to him.

Alurn smiled at that. "Is she all right?"

"She's fine. Stop it, would you? You'll get to talk to her in minute."

Fadril's voice intruded on the silent conversation. "Are you talking to him? Dynan?"

Dynan found himself pushed aside of his own mind, unable to keep Alurn from taking over, even while part of him remained chained in the cave. Dynan did his best to ignore what was going on. He didn't really want to know what it was like to kiss Fadril. He concentrated on not finding out.

"He shouldn't have told you," Fadril said, realizing easily enough who was kissing her.

"I'm going to get you out of this place," Alurn said and wrapped her up in his/Dynan's arms again. "Why do you think I came here? I mean, originally the bastard twisted it up to lure me in, but I found out you were really here. I'm not leaving without you."

"Seriously, this is not right," Dynan muttered, annoyed he was being ignored.

"It isn't possible, Alurn," she said, running her fingers down the side of his face.

"It will be possible," Alurn said. "I'm not leaving you. Don't ask me to. I can't believe you stayed."

"We've both fought in our own way," she said. "It was necessary."

Dynan intruded into their sphere of existence. "This is beautiful and all, but could you maybe wait until I'm not right here for it? Mother. Father."

Alurn laughed and put an arm around him, putting him between the two of them. "I'm sorry. But it's been time beyond—"

"The count of years," Dynan said. "I get that. Where's Adiem?"

"The Six have gone down to the plain to meet your army and destroy it," Alurn said and then looked at his wife. "Where did you find an army?"

"They aren't an army," Dynan said. "It won't take long to find that out. It's a trap, isn't it? The shelf."

"Yes. They'll know the moment you set foot there." Alurn frowned, his brows drawing downward and he looked over his shoulder. "But there might be a way. Have you and Dain ever mentally switched places?"

"Yes," Dynan said, and started to see what Alurn might suggest.

"You'll have to do the same thing here, only you won't switch, you'll take over."

"Take over?" Dynan repeated. "Me, take over Dain?"

"Yes," Alurn said. "He won't be the same. His strength has been taken, maybe to the point he won't ever get it back. You'll have to ignore the screaming. The demon brought him here, Dynan."

Fadril gasped at that. "Then Dynan could be taken too, the moment he touches his mind."

“Not if he doesn’t allow it,” Alurn said and turned to him. “Don’t doubt your abilities. You’re first born.”

“I wasn’t supposed to be,” Dynan said.

“But you are. I know; your brother had some difficulty getting himself born. Not to get too detailed about it.”

“Yes. How did you...No one knows that.”

“I was there,” Alurn said. “I’m wondering who told you.”

“Kamien.”

“Ah,” Alurn nodded. “Interesting. Well, I can tell you without doubt that your birth happened for a reason, just the way it did. Maybe this reason, right now with Dain and what you’re faced with. Here you are and there he is, damned if you don’t save him. Once you’re physically joined with him, you can come get me. I’ll face Adiem when the time comes once I’m free. Go, before you lose your nerve. Don’t think about it too much.”

But Alurn stopped him a moment longer, looking to his wife. Dynan swore under his breath and tried to be invisible and unknowing again.

“I’m not leaving you here,” Alurn told her, caressing her face. “You can’t ask me to.”

“I don’t have a choice,” she said. “But it won’t be for eternity, Alurn. When you finally put this to rights, when your namesake succeeds in the long fight, I’ll be free of my vow.”

“The Gods will release you. I talk to them quite a bit. They aren’t so cruel, or so weak.” He looked up and saw Polen, Faul and Grint watching. “I won’t leave any of you here.”

“You will if it means we stop this,” Polen said. “Don’t be a fool.”

“I’m not listening to you, old man,” Alurn said. He glanced at Dynan. “I’m not really known for it. You’re coming home, or we’re all staying for the party.”

Dynan decided to interrupt. It was time to get on with it. “What about the demon?”

“This isn’t its lair. Close, but not quite. We’re at its gate but not in the Void. If we’re lucky, Adiem won’t be able to summon it. They have to have the strength for it and despite what they’ve been saying, they don’t. They used it up already bringing Dain here. They could get it back from you and I. Don’t let them take you.”

“Could you let her go now?” he said and then forced the issue before the kissing started up. “Just wait until I have Dain. He won’t mind so much.”

Alurn laughed at that, but didn’t argue, or stop Dynan from pushing him. “You’ll understand one—”

“Don’t,” Dynan said. He heard that enough already. Alurn could probably tell he’d never been with a girl.

“I’m the one who set it up that way.”

“What? Why?”

Alurn shrugged at that. “Some things you just have to wait for. Go get your brother.”

Dynan let that go, but hesitated a moment longer, afraid Alurn was wrong and nothing they did would work. It was a fact, though, that Dain’s life depended on Dynan. He decided not to think about the rest of the world. He could save his brother.

He concentrated and reached for him.

Pain assaulted him. His arms were on fire where they'd been cut. There were other strains too, injuries that joined together into a dull throb. He expected screaming, but for a moment there was only silence, as if he'd entered an empty shell.

Dynan blinked, eyes focusing on the pillars that towered above him. He turned to look for the opening Alurn had shown him, but that side of the shelf was obscured by darkness. That told him the cave was there in the heaviest shadows.

He was weighed down by something, glued to the altar, but set his mind to break through it, gritting his teeth as he pushed himself up. The sense of lethargy increased even as he managed to get one shoulder off the stone face. Muscles tore, sending more pain through his arms, down his back, everywhere, but he didn't stop. If he didn't get off the thing, that was it.

He forced his hand over to the edge, able to use the side for leverage. Dynan didn't actually care if he managed to stand up. Rolling, prying, falling off. It didn't matter as long as he managed the off part. He pried his other hand free and then moved a leg over the side. He kept telling himself it would work, the pain would stop when he was free. He rolled onto his side and no further, frozen in place. He couldn't move.

"Dain," he said in desperation. "You have to help me. Dain!"

"Ruuuuuuunnnn! Run, run, run, run. Ruuuuuuuunnnn!"

Suddenly, that's all Dynan could hear. He couldn't stop it either. He had to ignore it just like Alurn said, but that too was difficult since Dain was right there. Dynan started separating from him, which would have put him on the shelf and attracted the Six, or worse.

Dynan didn't know what else to do, feeling the passage of time, still stuck to the altar, unable to reach Alurn. His strength seemed like it was draining away the longer he listened to the screams. Shutting Dain out wasn't possible. The next alternative came to him.

He turned inward, searching for the voice, the thought that was his brother. It took longer than he had to spare. Dynan finally found him curled up in a corner without light, trying to hide from the fear the demon had put into his mind, moaning from terror while his own screams echoed through a hollow chamber.

Dain didn't know him. Dynan started to understand what Alurn meant and then what to do about it. He wondered if Dain would remember and hoped not.

Before Dain could run, Dynan grabbed him up, trying to contain his panic, talking to him, hoping to ease the terrible sense of fear that gripped him. Nothing worked and Dynan knew he was out of time to be gentle about it. Dain didn't show any awareness of it when Dynan started apologizing to him, right before he cracked his head into the surrounding stone just hard enough to knock him out.

He cringed as he eased Dain down to the ground, a dirty stone floor that made him wonder what kind of prison he'd put himself in. Dynan looked around at the plain, windowless room and thought he might be safe here.

He went back in full control of Dain's body.

It was different from the times they had switched places. There was always awareness of himself to his own body. That connection now existed to Dain. Dynan could feel the difference between them, sensing how Dain was physically stronger, more coordinated and way faster.

“Everything I need to be right now,” he said, never happier over his brother’s obsession with being better. With Dain’s strength combined with his own, Dynan broke the invisible bonds that held him to the altar and stood.

Dynan found Alurn in the cave. He took him by the hand and pulled him in so that all three of them were together.

“This is just what they want, you know,” Alurn said.

“Which is why I’m not going to stay,” Dynan said. “Be careful with my brother, will you?”

Alurn nodded to that and Dynan left him, finding it harder than he expected to let go and turn himself back into an insubstantial shade.

Almost the same instant, Adiem appeared right in front of him, and reached.

Alurn yanked Dynan back. For a moment, the two faced each other, absolute despite in their eyes. Polen was right again. Even looking exactly alike, it was hard to tell they were brothers.

And then they started fighting.

Dynan cringed away, stunned by the ferocity that they attacked each other with. Neither had a weapon, but that didn’t matter. Bolts of light energy came from their hands, sometimes striking, but more often deflected away by an invisible shield that surrounded them both. The noise of it was incredible, sounding very much like lightning, only going off right beside Dynan. One jagged bolt shot over his shoulder. His ears popped and started ringing.

Something, an arm, wrapped around his waist and yanked him down to the ground.

“You do attract trouble like maggots to meat, boy,” Polen said in his ear and then slung him around behind a pillar. “Those energy bolts are what sent me here. Take one from the wrong side and it’ll be straight to the pit for you. A place I hear is worse than here if you can imagine that.”

Fadril skidded into them, her bow at the ready. “How about next time, you let us know what you’re going to do *before* you do it?”

“There isn’t going to be a next time,” Polen said, ducking as another light bolt blasted by them.

“How about you tell me about things like *this* before they start exploding over my head?” Dynan said at the same time.

Her lips pressed tightly together, the Queen ignored that challenge, peering around the pillar for a shot to take. Alurn and Adiem were moving around each other too much and stood too close.

“If they change—” Polen said, “—we’ll have to come up with a different plan.”

“I don’t know that he still can, Pol,” Fadril said. “He *is* dead, after all.”

“He has a body now,” Pol said. “And being dead hasn’t stopped Adiem.”

“It’s an evil power Adiem uses. It’s different and you know it.”

Dynan didn’t know what they were talking about. He was starting to wonder where the other five versions of Adiem were. He wondered too how they were going to get out with Alurn and Adiem locked in battle.

Dynan peered around the edge of the pillar, the increased pounding of his heart warning him that things were about to change. As he looked, the entire shelf abruptly filled with creatures of the damned, the dogs he’d seen before and other things even more grotesque and twisted.

The other divisions of Adiem came next.

"We need a new plan," Polen said.

Dynan didn't wait to hear one, knowing that time was at an end. Fear shook through him. He didn't think he'd survive, but there wasn't anything else to do. He took a knife from Fadril, dodging out of her grasp when she tried to stop him, and then he walked from behind the pillar. He heard Polen swearing behind him, but they followed, along with Grint and Faulkin. Dynan shook his head.

"Get her away from me," he said. "All of you, get as close to Alurn as you can. I know what I'm doing, Pol."

Dynan glanced at him to make sure he would listen. If they weren't where they needed to be, they risked being left here. That was something Dynan didn't want to contemplate.

Polen nodded sharply, and then charged into battle against a pack of dogs. Grint and Faulkin were with him, keeping Fadril between them all to protect her. The other archers stood in crevasses above them, shooting down arrows that slowed the attempts to encircle them.

Dynan took Fadril's knife and slashed it across his palm. He clamped a hand around his wrist and squeezed, hoping to speed the loss of blood, or energy, or whatever the white glowing stuff was that oozed from the wound. Every creature was instantly aware of it, even before he held up his hand and let it drip out.

Dynan started moving, leaving a trail of it behind. The dogs, lizards, malformed bird creatures, and everything else on the shelf fell to scrabbling on the ground.

All the Six turned on Dynan just as he knew they would. The Fourth charged at him, his face twisted in rabid, eager desire. Dynan started shaking, and fought down a massive need to run.

"Wait," Alurn whispered in his mind, which didn't help much against the surge of terror rising to consume coherent thought.

The Fourth was almost there, followed closely by the First, and visions of being ripped limb from limb shook through Dynan, an implanted sight that sucked away the ability to speak. The pain of it felt real enough, and he thought if he had to endure it much longer he'd start screaming. Just before sight failed him, Dynan looked beyond the coming nightmare and saw Fadril nearly to her husband.

"All right," Alurn said, took his hand and mentally transported Dynan to him an instant before the Six would have reached him. The First King laughed when they couldn't stop their momentum. Dynan still felt like he was being torn apart, but Alurn took it away. "I've got you. I'm sorry. Sometimes, they aren't too smart."

"They're going to come back."

"Yes," he said, and pushed Dynan a step behind.

At the same time, Fadril arrived, but instead of greeting her husband again, she turned and kept shooting at everything that slithered or crawled. Polen, Grint and Faulkin stood with her.

The Six whirled around. Alurn leaned over to Dynan. "Don't get in front of me," he said, and took another step away.

The man standing next to him suddenly stopped being a man. While he curled inward, the body of a dragon expanded to fill half the shelf. It was large, blue and loud, roaring as it sprang into existence.

Dynan stumbled and fell. Every time the dragon moved the stones under his feet shuddered. Polen ducked under a massive wing and grabbed Dynan by the collar, once again dragging him out of harm's way.

Fadril moved to the front of the dragon's wing where she grabbed hold and climbed her way up the broad shoulders. Once there, she turned and started shooting.

Polen slung Dynan out of the way just as the dragon released a solid stream of liquid fire, hitting the Six full on as they advanced. Three disappeared under the onslaught. Dynan wasn't sure if that meant they were destroyed, hurt, or just ran away.

"They can't be killed," Polen said in his ear, in response to the cheer that escaped him. "They'll come back as wraiths, or worse, they'll join and come as one. Alurn won't be able to stand against them joined."

Dynan started concentrating, hoping to find that way out before it was too late. He wasn't sure how it would work since he didn't have a name, on top of the uncertainty of whether or not the man who sent him here could be trusted. That man was now the only way to freedom.

Polen and the others were fighting off an endless supply of beasts and monsters, coming at them where they stood behind Alurn in dragon form. The creatures couldn't be killed either. They dissolved into the black rock by the altar when they were wounded and another appeared in its place. As Polen predicted, the Six became wraiths, three of them joined as he feared.

They attacked Alurn from all sides, ripping into him with their claws, or striking him with light bolts. Grint and Faulkin tried to help him, braving the terror of them. The archers who'd come through the underground passage with them rained arrows into the shelf, but before too long, they didn't have any left. Dynan wondered how the army had fared and hoped they'd gotten away.

Dynan tried to concentrate, but nothing happened. He thought nothing would unless he knew who he was trying to reach. And then it occurred to him.

"Alurn, who sent me here?" he asked, hoping he could talk to a dragon and the distraction wouldn't hurt him.

"Gradyn Vall sent you here."

That was news to Dynan, but it matched up with what Polen said about the priests being responsible for it all. "He was a lot younger than him. Black hair. Grey eyes."

"Maralt Adaeryn," Alurn said, and dodged what would have been a lethal blast of energy from one of the wraiths. He instantly sent back one of his own that didn't miss. The wraith vanished. Dynan guessed it would join with the other two and Alurn would keep blasting them until they were down to one. He didn't want to still be here when that happened.

"Thanks," he said and concentrated again. "*Maralt!*"

The man who'd stabbed him in the heart looked back at him with grey eyes that were immediately filled with relief. As if he were stepping through a door, Maralt reached out his hand to Dynan, but turned to speak to someone beside him.

"Carryn, take this and only use it if you have to. I'm going."

"Maralt, wait—"

"I'll be all right. There isn't any time to wait," he said, and the next instant he was standing beside Dynan on the shelf. His eyes widened when he saw the wraith and the dragon with Fadril still fighting from its shoulder.

Dynan was about to explain who was who, but the ground under their feet heaved sideways and then kept shaking. As he was thrown down, Dynan saw Fadril fall and the dragon stumbled. Alurn re-emerged, dwindling back into himself and clutching one arm to his side. Fadril rushed to him, falling to her knees beside him.

The wraith changed too, becoming Adiem the next instant, but he didn't attack again. He turned instead, staring at Maralt.

Maralt was staring too, from Alurn to Adiem. It seemed every creature froze for a moment, waiting in anticipation. The shaking stopped. The silence of a tomb filled the shelf. Adiem ignored Alurn and walked over to Maralt, who backed away more than a few steps. He was facing the First, the sum of them all.

"What is this?" Maralt whispered hoarsely when he bumped into Dynan. They were backed up against one of the pillars and couldn't go any further.

"He knows you're a telepath."

"Who is he?"

Dynan didn't want to tell him, suddenly afraid that something very bad was about to happen that would change all the rules again. Adiem approached, intent on Maralt, not maniacal or even very different from Alurn in the way he looked.

"We've been waiting for you," Adiem said, smiling as he came to a stop in front of them. "For a very long time in fact. Why you're here with them we'll sort out later, but—"

"I'm here to get them away from you," Maralt said, keeping Dynan behind him.

Adiem's smile faltered, but came back. "You've been misled. Yes, that's it. You've been with the old man, haven't you? He's lied to you all your life about who you are, who you'll be, hasn't he? I know he has. It's the way he gets people to do what he wants. It's the way they've all been, down through the long passage of time, lying about all of it. Come with me and I'll show you the truth."

"I'm taking them back with me. You can't stop me," Maralt said. "Why should I come with you?"

"I'm your father." Adiem smiled again, while Maralt gaped at him, unaware at first that it was possible. The dawning realization that it was the truth came next. Not that Adiem was Maralt's physical father, anymore than Alurn was Dynan's, but they were descended from them both.

"It's funny," Dynan said and stepped in front of Maralt, terrified, but knowing he had to do something to get away from Adiem. "Even your own ancestors have never heard of you."

Dynan pushed Maralt to the side, almost knocking him down to get them both out of the way. The Fourth came out, lunging at them.

Alurn recovered from whatever had injured him and threw himself at his brother. Polen dashed by, stabbing and running. Grint and Faulkin followed, and Fadril kept shooting arrows, one after the other just to slow Adiem down even a little.

The ground started shaking again and Dynan feared it, the pounding noise sounding very much like footsteps of something large and terrible coming. With all of them there at the Gate, the Six, Dynan, Dain, Maralt and Alurn, the demon had the strength to take them, and maybe even reach the Gods themselves. It was coming to do so.

"We have to get out of here right now," Dynan said.

He shoved Maralt again to get him away from Adiem who was still intent on reaching him. Alurn stepped in front of them both, a bolt of light exploding from his hand.

“We’re taking them all with us. All of them.”

Maralt nodded, still shaken from what he’d been told, but he looked to Alurn. “He has Dain?”

“Yes. They have to go through first.”

Maralt held out his hand. “Then you need to come with me.”

Dynan hesitated only a moment, unsure enough of Maralt, the man who’d put him here, to be afraid of what it might be like to join with him. A coherent thought answered. Maralt had also come to get him back out. Dynan took his hand.

He was different from Alurn, far less certain of his actions. Dynan was aware of all his insecurities and the fear that evil would overcome him. The thought that he really might be related to the wrong side was shattering to him, and behind it all there was a gnawing, growing hunger that seeped into every thought, of taking everything Dynan was for himself.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Maralt said. “I took an oath to protect you.”

Dynan saw the ceremony, a deeply binding one in a flash of thought. “You’re not like them. I know that. We have to go.”

Maralt agreed, and moved to get closer to Alurn, who was still fighting off Adiem, their hands at each other’s throats. The shaking was so much stronger Maralt fell down twice. It was getting darker too, rapidly.

“We have to get out,” Dynan said, the level of fear rising to a pitch almost beyond endurance.

“I’m working on it!” Maralt said.

He finally made it to Alurn, standing near the altar at the heart of evil. Grint was there with him and Faulkin, but Polen and Fadril were separated from them.

“Carryn, now!”

A distortion appeared in the air right behind them, splitting down the middle and then opening. Dynan looked through and saw a woman he knew as Maralt’s twin sister, who was holding a glass vial, standing on the Sacred Seal where Maralt had stabbed Dynan to send him here.

“Is that my blood?”

“Alurn!” Maralt said, calling to him and then jumped between them to get him away from Adiem. Maralt punched Adiem in the face, knocking him down.

Alurn turned from Maralt. “I’m not leaving Fadril!”

“You have to go through first. My sister can’t hold the portal open for long.”

“I’m not leaving Fadril here either,” Dynan said.

Again, Dynan left his host’s body, which was even harder this time. It was like being ripped in half and made him scream to do it.

As he did, Adiem stood, reaching. Dynan dodged under his grasp, twisted away from the jaws of a dog and jumped over a group of snapping lizards to reach Fadril and Polen.

“Go!”

Maralt grabbed Alurn and shoved him through the already narrowing portal. Dynan saw Dain fall away from the First King, collapsing in a heap on the seal, injured but alive. Alurn stood over him, his hands spread, holding the portal open.

“Take her and go,” Polen commanded, but Dynan ignored him.

“I’m taking you both, old man. No arguments.”

Dynan grabbed Fadril by the hand and Polen followed, fighting off the hordes. Dynan wished Dain could see the way he fought, the mastery of technique and sheer strength combined to make him unstoppable. Their enemies couldn’t defeat the love Polen held for the woman he’d spent eternity protecting, or her ancestor.

But it seemed like an impossibly long distance to make up to get back to the portal. Adiem was right on their heels. Grint and Faulkin charged through the gateway. Polen argued about going before Fadril, but she made him. Fadril followed him just before Adiem grabbed for her, and barely missed.

His face was twisted, lips pulled back to a thin line, teeth bared. Stumbling after Fadril brought him up face to face with Maralt.

Alurn reached in and grabbed Maralt up, yanking and pulling him through the portal. Adiem tried to follow, but Dynan lurched forward, grabbed him and spun him around. An encompassing rage boiled up to the surface over what he’d done to Dain, to himself, and to everyone else, and Dynan beat him across the face, once, twice, three times.

Adiem fell to the ground, but he was smiling and then he started laughing.

Dynan whirled around, watching as the portal snapped closed in his face.



He stared after the departing hole, stunned that his only means of escape didn’t exist anymore, and thought it could not possibly stay that way. He searched frantically for it, knowing the rift would come back any moment now.

Laughter behind him brought him up short. The voice was deeper and distorted, lacking any sort of human component. Dynan should have known, but he turned and looked when he shouldn’t have.

The dark came in, eating away coherent thought. He looked in its eyes and saw the history of civilization crumbling, pounded to dust. He saw the end of an Age. Death was everywhere. He couldn’t stop it and grief rose to swallow him.

There was another voice, very small, his own, telling him it wasn’t true. The world wasn’t destroyed. His home still stood shining on a cliff by the sea. The light of it drew him there. Something clamped around his throat, a hand once maybe.

“It’s all a lie,” the demon whispered in his ear.

“It’s not a lie. It’s the light of the world and it will endure. It has for thousands and thousands of years. You won’t ever defeat it.”

A roar cut off the rest of what he wanted to say and the dark came right back in. Dynan was thrown and decided standing back up was a bad idea. It seemed incrementally safer down here on his knees where praying came naturally. Through terror, through the dark, hope remained in the recesses of his mind. He knew someone would come back.

“No one will come. No power remains that can defy me.”

“The Gods are still stronger,” Dynan said, remembering what he’d asked Fadril. She wasn’t here and her children hadn’t been sent back. He had an answer. “They broke the bonds you claimed. The Gods are stronger.”

“But they don’t care about you.”

He was small and unimportant in the grand scheme of things. They cared more about Alurn. The demon was right. The Gods wouldn’t hear him from this dark pit anyway. The

ability to resist the pull of despair left Dynan and he waited for the terrible end, being torn apart, or devoured, or whatever the plan was. No one was coming after all.





Chapter 22

The demon roared again, in triumph Dynan thought, but then he heard another voice. A deep baritone spoke behind him that he should have recognized. The incongruity of hearing that voice here in this place kept the truth hidden, until Dynan looked up.

"This one isn't for you," Gradyn Vall said, standing over him.

"I'll take what I wish, old man."

"Your power doesn't exist over him. You've failed, as you always will. The Gods are stronger just as he said. They are here with me now, even here in the darkest of realms and it is under Their protection that I take back Their servant."

"I'll take you both."

Gradyn held down his hand to Dynan and he clambered to his feet. He stood in front of the High Bishop, feeling like he ought to protect him from the monster before them, except Gradyn didn't seem like he needed any help. Dynan couldn't look up. He didn't want to.

"Touch either of us and the Gods will see you destroyed, Belial."

The demon roared for a third time, but there was a lessening of menace, an uncertain note that lifted the terrible weight from his chest. Dynan felt something warm on his back and turned, unafraid for the first time that the demon could hurt him.

There were seven points of light arrayed in a half circle, filling the darkness. They appeared as men and women, robed in soft colors. There were some with dark hair and light hair and black skin, or tan, or white or brown. They were every kind of people and when Dynan looked again, shading his eyes, they were different again, changing to reflect all the variations. There were even some kinds, non-human kinds that he'd never set eyes on before, or imagined could be.

There was a sense of saturating contentment in their presence. Fear didn't exist. One broke from the arc and came toward him, the light blinding until Dynan couldn't see anything but white. The space around him started humming almost, the level of energy was so intense.

"Don't leave anyone here," he said, thinking about the army of people and the archers left on the shelf who'd dared to help him. "Please."

A smile broke across the face before him. Something brushed against his chest over his heart, precisely where he'd been stabbed.

When the light dwindled, he was no longer standing on the shelf. The memory of it faded, and the demon with it. Terror receded on a light, fragrant wind.

A stone colonnade opened onto a garden. The High Bishop was gone. Off in the distance an army of people stood, milling about, dropping the crude weapons they held and taking in their surroundings. Dynan felt their relief wash through him, erasing recent anguish. Finally, he stopped shaking.

Nearer to hand, Alurn and Fadril stood together, embracing tightly. Off a short distance away their family stood waiting for her.

The two boys were still infants and their daughter was just a young girl, but Bremen, who'd lived into his nineties, stood in this realm of existence as a grown man of around fifty. He was older than his father, in his prime. There was a woman standing behind Bremen that Dynan couldn't see at first and he thought was the second King's wife.

Fadril let her husband go, smiling through tears of pain and joy as she turned to her children, falling into their arms. Alurn didn't watch.

"How can you leave her?" Dynan asked as he came into the room from the garden that stretched on for as far as he could see. The colors were saturated, richer than anything he'd ever seen.

"I know I'll see her again," Alurn said.

"Why don't you go with her?"

"I can't. I have to bring Adiem. That is my fate. Just like you, there's work to be done. But, thank you for saving her for me. It's a horrifying thought that she's been there all this time, when I didn't know it. I'm in your debt for it. Go tell her goodbye."

"Nice dragon," Dynan said, deciding not to ask about what work was left, or other questions that crowded his mind. He wondered if he could turn into a dragon, too.

Alurn laughed. "It's a talent, and no, you can't. Yours is a different kind of power."

Dynan didn't understand what he meant by that. A list of different questions intruded until he turned back to the garden. He didn't want to say goodbye to anyone. He wondered what happened to Polen and the others. Dynan saw them then as if in answer to the thought, walking together as they came around a tall hedge.

They looked like they always looked, only in perfect clothes. Dynan wondered if this was another kind of between place, where souls wandered until they were ready for whatever was next.

Polen nodded him toward Fadril where she remained with her family, her arms full of children. Dynan didn't want to intrude or say anything he thought might bring her a moment of unhappiness. He was an outsider already. He didn't belong. There was an underlying, tangible pull against him to leave this place and go home.

Bremen spoke to the woman beside him, and then moved so Dynan could see her. For a moment, he couldn't breathe again.

His mother smiled and held out her hands, coming down the slight slope that led to the colonnade. She stopped when she reached the walk while Dynan stared, hardly able to believe she was real.

The next instant he was with her, pulled into her arms and held. He was taller than she, but her face, her hair, the way she smelled of apples and honey flowers, everything was the same.

"I'm so proud of you," she said, putting her hands on either side of his face, looking at him all over.

"Mother."

"I got your notes. Your father always came and read them. I can hear his voice every now and again. Come, sit with me a moment. It's all right. It's different for you," she said when he hesitated where the lawn began. Dynan wondered if he crossed the boundary if he'd be able to return. "You can stay a while. Not too long, but time enough."

"I don't want to leave – ever. I won't. I can't do it."

Shalael shook her head; blonde curls dancing as she pulled him to a bench beside a stand of low bushes. "You don't have to yet, and you'll be all right when you do."

Dynan didn't believe that, but she only smiled and made him sit. For a time – he didn't know how long – she held him until grief turned to something else. She told him again he would be all right.

"Tell me about my family, about Dain, about Shalis," she said, after he straightened. "I feel her the least and want to know her the most. How is she?"

"She looks just like you. She's a little pain in the neck," Dynan said and made her laugh. He used the sleeve of his shirt, a pristine white shirt free of stain, to wipe his eyes. "She gets away with everything. Pop and the Surrogates can't say no to her."

"How is he? Your father? How is he as King?"

Dynan didn't want to tell her the real answer, but by hesitating he did anyway. "It's hard for him. I don't think he likes it very much. We don't see him a lot, except with a bunch of other people around."

"Tell him to cook dinner for you. It's what we used to do together when you and Dain were first born. Dionin had him out almost constantly, so we decided that once a week we'd have dinner alone together as a family and your father would cook. Tell him."

She patted his hand and leaned against his shoulder, making him feel a grown man for the first time in his life. Dynan never imagined himself big enough to sit with her and talk like this.

"Tell me about the girl you met," she said and smiled at his embarrassment. It was amazing and comforting that she knew. "Is she pretty?"

"Yes," he said and told her all about Liselle Tremault in a rush.

"I remember Liselle's mother from Beren; the Argentars. They were friends of my mother's. That's probably why your father chose Liselle to come to the Palace. She sounds lovely."

Dynan agreed and she asked him about other girls he may have noticed and about Dain and Kamien too, though Dynan didn't have much to say about him. She didn't press the issue. She asked him about the things he did and liked, about his life, and while they talked he became aware of the passage of time.

Dynan felt the pull to leave this place, centered in his chest as if there were a rope tied to him, drawing him away. He worried about Dain the more he talked about him, wondering what had happened to him.

In this place, thought became reality. Dynan saw Maralt standing in the room, looking around himself as though he hadn't expected to be here. Dynan knew what was coming.

His mother did, too, and she stood when he didn't want her to. She took his hand again and pulled him to his feet. "Remember I said you would be all right. You were so little and here you are, all grown. You see that it's true. You've come from there to this place in your life. You've accomplished so much, and just now, you've done something remarkable. You have the rest of your life ahead of you, Dynan. My beautiful son."

You're so strong. Don't forget that," she said and turned to Maralt. "Don't take that from him."

Maralt opened his mouth to speak, but reconsidered. He thought about it, and then nodded. "I will take only what I must, my Lady."

"What?" Dynan said.

"Dain is waiting for you," Maralt said. "We need your help with him."

"Take what?" Dynan said.

"You've been here too long," Maralt said. "You're dying, you know, and we need to get you back before it's too late. I can't explain, all right? Not here. So will you please come with me?"

"You have a choice to make," Shalael said softly. She turned him to her. Dynan didn't want to leave her and live. "I think you already know what it is. Your father needs you. Shalis adores you. Kamien cares about you whether you believe it or not, a great deal, Dynan. Dain would be lost without you." She put her hand over his heart and leaned up to kiss his cheek. "I'll always be here. Where I've always been and always will be. The bond between us can't be broken. If you listen carefully, you'll hear in your heart the answer."

Dynan thought it might really break his heart to go, but he knew she was right. Once the decision was made, a strange, unexpected peace came over him. He'd managed before to survive the separation and he knew now he could manage again. It was more comforting than he expected, knowing he'd see her again. He found himself hoping it wouldn't be for a long time and then felt bad for it. His mother laughed though.

"You'll be all right," she said. "So will I."

Dynan nodded to that, and wrapped his arms around her, hoping against hope he'd be able to keep this too. He let her go and left her.

Maralt watched behind him and Dynan vowed he wouldn't look back, afraid the courage to leave wouldn't last, but he couldn't stand it.

"Don't," Maralt said and stopped him. "She's already gone."

Maralt wouldn't let him look, restraining him for long enough. The white room melted away, changing to a small square space that looked very much like the room Alurn had once occupied, and Dain too.

"I have to take your memory," Maralt said the moment they were there.

Dynan already knew it and couldn't think of anything to stop him.

"If you fight it, I'm not sure I can..." Maralt stopped, abruptly turning from him. "It does something to me and I'm not sure I'll be able to stop myself from taking more than I should. Now I know why, at least."

"Because of Adiem?" Dynan said. "You're nothing like him. If you're really from him, then you're from Alurn too. Besides, it doesn't matter. You have control over your own actions. You came and helped us get out. If you hadn't—"

"The world would have ended," Maralt said. "My motives weren't especially altruistic. You don't understand and you aren't—"

"What do you see?" Dynan asked. "You look at me sometimes, but you're not seeing me. What is it?"

"There's a light around you that's like some kind of pure energy. Around Dain too. I can see it. I can feel it make me stronger when I breathe it in and when I—" He hesitated

to go on and Dynan thought he knew. He'd seen how the dogs and other creatures had reacted.

"Desire of it drives you mad," Dynan said. "It's like blood only not. I guess there's some kind of energy to it."

"It's your soul," Maralt said, as he moved to the far wall and leaned against it. "I don't know why you have it and I don't."

"Everyone has a soul."

"Not like this."

"I won't fight you," Dynan said, moving to stand beside him. Maralt pushed off the wall and moved to the other side. "I won't fight you, but you have to leave me two things."

"Your mother," Maralt said. "You nearly died so it makes sense that you'll think you saw her. I may have to alter some of the details. What else?"

"I'm not finished yet," Dynan said. "You said I had to find Alurn."

"You did find him."

"His body is missing. I know where he is now and his family with him. It won't be finished if I don't find him. All this will happen again."

"It'll happen again if I leave you any of it. The knowledge you have now will eat at you if you keep it," Maralt said, but then he frowned over it when Dynan refused to back down. "Where?"

Dynan almost smiled. He explained and then showed Maralt the Temple. "I promised."

"I don't know how," Maralt said, but then he muttered under his breath, thinking it through. "I could leave you the compunction. You won't understand it. It'll only be a feeling that you need to go look. But it won't happen until spring so it'll have to last."

"Spring? Why?"

"If we don't get this over with," Maralt said, "you might really die before I can put you back in your own body. You're going to be weak. I stabbed you in the heart. They basically glued the thing back together. I doubt you'll be on your feet for a very long time."

"You could have asked, you know," Dynan said.

"It wouldn't have worked," Maralt said. "The gateway would open, sure, but you would have gone through straight to their altar. It would have been like handing you right over to them. The way it was done put you in the right place with the right people."

Dynan knew that already and joined him on the wall again. This time when Maralt meant to move, Dynan stopped him. "It doesn't hurt me. You breathing."

"It makes me want more."

Just like Adiem, Dynan thought, shivering from the thought.

"You know I can hear you, right?" Maralt said.

"I know. Sorry. He was crazy. I mean an evil, scary kind of crazy. All six of them are. They tortured me. I'm not going to mind forgetting about that. And all the dead bodies."

Maralt looked up and Dynan saw that the edges of the room were blurred. A monochromatic grey seeped across the ceiling. "You need to stop thinking about it."

"You're not like them. You're not going to torture me. I'm not going to fight you."

"Yes, you will," Maralt said.

Dynan saw a conversation replayed that Maralt had with Alurn before coming here, Alurn telling Maralt that Dynan would beg him to stop. He saw too that Alurn would take Maralt's memory and he'd fight it just like they thought Dynan would.

"Will it ever be mine again?" Dynan asked, wondering what the point was if he couldn't keep what he'd learned, not even so much the facts of history that were lost and would remain so, but of himself.

"I think so. When you're older and you've been trained."

"Are you going to teach us?"

Maralt shook his head at that. "I don't think I can. My sister, Carryn, can do it. She's probably better suited for it, and she's completely in love with Dain, so they'll get along at least."

"Figures," Dynan said and eased himself down to the floor. There was still pain in this place. He was sore all over. "Will I see you again? Know you? Remember you ever?"

Maralt hesitated, but sat with him. "Not for a while."

"You're mad he didn't tell you," Dynan said of the High Bishop. "About who you are. He probably couldn't."

"I know. It doesn't help. I'm going to go and find a few answers for myself. I'll see you when I come back. When you need me most, I'll be there."

Dynan nodded to that, and sat in silence for a moment, afraid of what was to come. He figured the longer he thought about it, the more afraid he'd get, so he nodded. "I'm ready."

Maralt didn't speak for a while, but he pulled in a breath finally and turned to him. "It started when you took the talon. I'm going to begin there."





Chapter 23

Ambrose watched Maralt leave the way he'd come in, walking out into the hall as if there weren't a dozen guards standing in his way. Melgan was there a kem off the door and looked at him as a linen changer, a third rank Medic departing after performing his duties. The fact he was carrying away clean linens registered, and the Captain turned sharply to look in the room. Ambrose gestured him over.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know anyone was in with you," Melgan said, but Ambrose brushed that off.

"I need you to do something for me," he said, turning to Dynan, terrified everything Maralt said was true. It was hard to believe with his son lying there nearly motionless. "The doctors are going to be in soon."

"Ambrose—"

"No, just listen. I'm not...I'm not going to do this, Melgan. The doctors, not Eldelar or Geneal, but the other doctors who owe Governor Alse whatever they owe him, and who disagree that more time is needed – they're going to be in here—"

"Not if I don't let them," Melgan said.

Ambrose smiled slightly at that, envisioning a few of those doctors with their heads knocked together at Melgan's hand. "I know. It isn't going to come to anything like that, a physical confrontation, though I am asking you to stay here. Roth and Brendin too."

"What are you talking about then?"

"There's probably going to be a move to have me declared incompetent."

"Governor Taldic won't—"

"Alse could have a majority," Ambrose said.

"He doesn't."

"He could," Ambrose repeated. "And I'm certain he'll have a number of doctors to back him up. I'll have to go to the Governor's Hall and answer their charges."

"This is insane," the Captain said, growing angrier by the moment. "When are we going to do away with that son of a bitch?"

"I keep trying," Ambrose said. "Alse knows how to hide his activities too well, and he has a following. If it comes to it, if they succeed—"

"They won't."

"If they do, I need you to stay here and defend my son." His voice cracked as he spoke. In front of Melgan it didn't matter, except to make him angrier.

"You don't need to ask."

“There are forces at play here...” Ambrose didn’t finish the thought out loud, afraid of the possible repercussions. He sat on the edge of Dynan’s bed. He found it harder and harder to stay on his feet. “I need Geneal Elger in here. Eldelar already knows what I need from him.”

“It isn’t going to happen.”

“I think it will. Else may have enough support and he’s using this to inflict whatever damage he can. I’m not going to let him succeed, but Melgan, I’m afraid to leave.”

“Then don’t,” the Captain said. “Don’t do it. Don’t go. Send Kamien and send Xavier with him. They’ll both speak for you and speak well. Xavier is a master of persuasion. No sane man would expect you to leave your son.”

“To protect him, I have to protect the Throne.”

“And it will be,” Melgan said. “For this, you’ll have to let others do the defending. Just be a father. It’s the right thing.”

For the last two years, he hadn’t managed to be much of a father at all, leaving that responsibility to others. Hearing the admonishment from Melgan, who knew the kind of pressures Ambrose faced better than anyone, cleared his mind. He nodded, looking to his son. “His life depends on how well we all do our jobs today. Ask Xavier to come in, and Kamien.”

The hours dragged by. Ambrose watched over his son, and watched his eldest speaking in the Governor’s Hall with passion and a kind of anger Kamien wasn’t prone to display, declaring his father in full command of his faculties. Everyone had a laugh when he said, “He doesn’t have any trouble ordering me around, for certain.” Else thought to use him without regard for his reactions, or abilities. The Governor sat in stony silence, listening to the speech, his eyes shifting about the chamber, trying to gauge the reception.

Ambrose listened while Xavier, who for once in his life bristled with anger, berated the Governors for their lack of faith and lack of support. He pointed out by name those members who Ambrose had stood by through one crisis or the other, until many of them couldn’t meet the Lord Chancellor’s gaze any longer.

Their speeches ended and the testimony of the doctors began, one by one, coming forward to condemn Dynan to death, unable to fulfill his duties as heir, followed by the ones who said it was too early to make such a judgment, until there was an even number between them. A doctor rose at the end of a long line of them and went to the podium. Ambrose knew him to be a friend of Governor Else. He seemed in pain almost, wincing periodically before he began speaking.

“It isn’t proper,” Dr. Korin said to the chamber, “that we should sit here in judgment of a father’s right to decide what is best for his son and for his family.”

A murmur of surprise moved through the Governors, though it was quickly hushed. Korin didn’t wait for them to settle, but seemed more pained than before.

“I’ve seen Prince Dynan, and yes, his condition is dire, and it’s hard to imagine he’ll recover from such grave wounds. But he does continue the struggle to live and it is our duty as physicians to assist him by any means possible. This isn’t about the King’s judgment being impaired, but a father’s devotion to his son. It is our duty to help him face the unimaginable and rejoice with him, if, as we all hope and pray, the unthinkable is forestalled. We shouldn’t attempt to rob him of these moments, especially if they turn out to be the last ones. As a physician, I will refuse to have anything to do with an attempt to

hasten the end of one so young until all hope has failed. I don't believe that time has come. Thank you, Governors for your considerations."

Dr. Korin stepped down and a moment of silence followed his departure. The imagers fixed on Governor Alse, who was busy whispering to one of his compatriots. He looked angry.

"Governor Taldic," he said, rising to his feet. He was a big, over-fed man. "I'd like to hear the testimony of Dr. Brith again. I've a question about one of his statements."

"Dr. Brith has already left the chamber, Governor Alse," Taldic responded. "The request is denied. I move we get on with the debate and the vote. Please blackout the imagers."

A swift voice interrupted Alse's intent to protest. "I concur."

"Thank you, Governor Peroll. So moved."

Time leached toward morning. The counters ticked over, telling of moments gone, one by one. Ambrose sat, occasional tremors shaking through him. He'd never felt this kind of exhaustion, so that even his bones ached.

There came a soft knock at the door and Melgan looked in. "Xavier is here," he said, followed by the Lord Chancellor entering the room.

"Governor Taldic and Governor Alse are here," Xavier said before the door closed again. "Governor Alse tells us that if he is allowed to see you and to see Dynan, he'll have the matter dropped."

"Well that makes no sense at all," Ambrose said, dragging himself to his feet.

"Taldic is here to ensure that's all he wants."

"He wants to talk to me," Ambrose said. "He wants to try and convince me that I'm wrong, or he'll go back out and claim I'm out of my mind or something, Xavier."

"Governor Taldic will then refute those claims, if needed."

"This is some kind of trick," Ambrose said, and sat back down, on the couch this time, and wondered if he'd be able to get up again. Xavier came and stood over him.

"I don't know what it is, honestly. I'm inclined to agree with you, that there could be some nefarious purpose at work. However, there was enough doubt during the proceedings today that make accepting Alse's demand more necessary than not, Your Majesty."

Ambrose groaned. Anytime Xavier came out with the title it meant something. Sometimes it meant more than one thing at the same time. In general, it indicated Ambrose shouldn't ignore him or refuse his request.

"For a moment only then," he said to his Lord Chancellor, who nodded easily enough.

"I'll have Melgan come in, too. No need to make the Governor comfortable," Xavier said and made Ambrose laugh. There was a history there between those two men, Melgan and Alse, that went back to childhood.

"Before you go, old man, I need a hand up out of this couch," Ambrose said. He wasn't kidding and with an amused smirk, Xavier came over and helped him up.

"You need to sleep."

"Yes, well, the obvious eludes me."

Xavier departed to retrieve the Governors. Ambrose sat at the side of Dynan's bed again, on the stool this time to avoid the need of future assistance. He could get off the stool well enough and not collapse.

“Governor Alse wants to come look at you,” he said aloud to Dynan, not sure why he was, except to cover the noise of the machines. “One day, maybe you’ll get to deal with Rueben instead of his father, the bothersome old...And the feud, or whatever you’d like to call this constant dispute between us will finally be over. Maybe.”

The door opened, and Shalis came in instead of Governor Alse. Her Lady in Waiting followed. “Good morning, Poppé. Dr. Geneal said I could come in.”

She had a glass in hand and held it out to him. “Shalis, Governor Alse is coming in and I don’t want you—”

“You can’t let him,” she said and set the glass down so the juice sloshed to the rim. “He said Dynan was going to die.”

“I know. This is official and you can’t be in here for it, and if you see the Governor in the hall, you may not speak to him, little girl. I know he upset you.”

Like her mother, Shalis had a temper, hardly more than a brief spring storm at this age. Governor Alse wouldn’t appreciate a ten-year-old berating him. Shalis considered the request, really not looking like she would listen. Also like her mother, she was difficult to read. She picked up the juice again and handed it over.

“I brought this for you. I want to talk to Dynan first.”

Ambrose considered an argument and decided it would be easier to say yes and delay Alse instead. “Just for a minute. Maybe you can berate him into waking up.”

She climbed onto the railing, and with Liselle behind her, started to do just that. “You need to stop worrying everyone so much and wake up,” she said to Dynan, while Ambrose took out his comboard to let Xavier know he should hold the Governor off a moment. “You’ve had enough time now. I want to go back home, Dynan.”

“Why don’t you try telling him how much you miss him,” Liselle said quietly, “instead of yelling at him.”

“I told him that already and it didn’t work.”

One of the machines hummed and the tone of it changed. Ambrose rubbed his eyes as he glanced up at the monitor, looking at all the indicators of his son’s life the way he had every day since this started. Nothing was different about them, except the machines were making a different noise still, not an alarming noise, but operating as though on a different frequency.

And then he saw it – a blip on the brain scan that had been for days and days as flat as the floor.

“Did you see that?” Liselle asked. “Keep talking to him, Shalis.”

“Is it working?”

There was another tiny rise and fall of the data set, a mild scribble.

Ambrose crossed the room in three steps to the Com system that would immediately alert the doctors that they were needed and then stood behind his daughter, grabbing her so tightly she squirmed. “Dynan, we’re right here.”

He let Shalis go some as he leaned over his son. Another blip rippled across the screen. The next instant, Geneal Elger flew through the door, ignoring everyone else but Dynan, her gaze eating up the readings. Her face was tense, concentrated, but then she heard the noise and saw the blip.

An alarm went off.

Ambrose thought his heart might stop. “Geneal?”

“He’s trying to wake up.”

She started operating the control pads of various monitors and the machines that regulated Dynan's life, looking from him to the screens and back again.

"He's not really supposed to be able to do that," she said while Ambrose was still trying to process the first part. "We have him sedated."

She seemed at a loss for a moment, on the precipice of some doctorly opinion, her eyes shifting back and forth as though trying to recall an obscure fact. Ambrose was shaking when she turned to him.

"I need to take him off the support system. I can put him right back on," she said quickly. "But we have to find out if his heart is trying to take over and if he'll breathe on his own. The risk is minimal, the benefit huge."

"All right," he said in hardly a whisper, and then motioned to Shalis. "Come here."

"She's all right," Geneal said and started the process of taking Dynan off the thing that had kept him alive for seven days. "You could keep talking to him."

"I'm too scared," she said and ran to Ambrose.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Geneal said with all the confidence of someone who believed without doubt in her words. "He's going to be all right, even if taking him off doesn't work right now. This is progress. I didn't actually expect to see this for days. I'm ready."

For several excruciating moments it didn't seem like anything changed at all, except for several indicators plummeting. Shalis buried her face more and Ambrose couldn't help the sharp intake of breath. Geneal started giving Dynan injections.

"It's a stimulant," she said tensely and her teeth clenched together. "Come on. I know you can do this."

The little blips on the monitor changed to larger blips and then everything started to climb upward. Geneal waved them all over.

"Talk to him," she said. "It's working. His heart is beating. There's good lung function. He's waking up. Talk to him."

Her eyes lifted to the door and Ambrose saw the two Governors standing there with Alse in front. "Is he dying?" the Governor asked and thought to come in, but Melgan was there too, with a hand flat into his chest.

"No, Governor," Geneal said, and moved out of the way so Ambrose could reach Dynan's side. "He most certainly is not."

The sound of running came and Roth shoved by Governor Alse to get into the room. "We found Dain."





Chapter 24

The day outside was bright and inviting. Off in the distance, clouds obscured the jagged peaks of the Taramaik Mountains. Dynan looked through the viewscreen attached to the wall of his study at the pristine view, glancing up from the parchment he was trying to finish writing on Alurn Telaerin's rule of the Kingdom, his fingertips covered in black ink. No one wrote like this anymore, but for this project, it seemed appropriate.

As he dipped the pen into the ink well, Dynan wondered what Polen Forb would think of his conclusions, and then didn't know where the thought came from, or what caused the ensuing headache. He'd already spent too many weeks trying to sort it out, to no avail. None of his questions had answers. Dynan didn't know anything, except to know he didn't remember what happened.

Dain's memory was worse. He remembered meeting Bronwyn Esrel and nothing else. Dynan was afraid to explain the extent of their relationship because of the pain he knew it would cause. Maybe it was better, since she was gone. Dain's injuries were less severe. The cuts on his arms were completely healed, but he remained in more pain. He hardly had the strength to stay out of bed more than a few hours. He was sleeping now.

Dynan looked down through the opening of his shirt at the scar, a spidery, many-fingered thing that covered the left side of his chest. Everyone said it was a miracle he was alive. Dynan didn't remember getting stabbed. When he thought about it, or tried to, the near constant pain in his head rose to a pitch that sent him back into bed or sometimes onto the floor.

He knew something drastic had happened to them both. He knew the information they were given about it was carefully monitored. Their friends were told not to talk about it and they didn't.

Dynan set the engle pen down and decided he'd done enough. The only constant in his life was the amount of class work he was required to do. He'd been given extra time, considering he'd only been out of bed for the last two weeks out of almost two months of it, but it was still expected.

He looked at the viewscreen again, feeling the call to go to those mountaintops. He knew the meadow he kept seeing in his sleep, and in almost every waking hour now. He'd been there before, but now there was a sense that it was a different time. Dynan knew he had to go back and find something. He had no idea what.

He rolled the pages of parchment together after they dried enough and tied it up with a piece of string. He took the package to the door and thought to attempt the delivery

himself, but the guards stationed there, Ralion Blaise and Sheed Lasser, wouldn't let him. They told him they would see that Master Cribbe received the report.

"Is my father in?" Dynan asked, nodding across the hall to the King's door.

"No," Ralion said. "He'll be up in a few hours."

"Dinner?"

"Formal," Ralion said. "He'll have a few minutes."

"I don't know that I'll be awake for it," he said, and kept the rest to himself. Ambrose was as unavailable as ever. Another constant Dynan could have done without.

"I'll tell him," Ralion said and closed the door for him.

Dynan made a decision then, a rash and possibly dangerous one. He was tired of waiting. He wanted to do something, anything, to get rid of the nagging sensation of unfinished business that sometimes kept him awake at night. He went back to his room and changed into warm clothes. As an afterthought, he strapped his sword on – he was going out by himself without a guard after all and the last time...

He didn't want to continue the thought, but it came in anyway. The last time, his guard had died. Images flashed through his mind, coming to him in chewed up bits; Colin Fryn pulling him into an alley and then staring into the dark with lifeless eyes.

Despite his culpability in the death of his guard – and Dynan knew he was responsible – he couldn't remember it, but he knew it – the pull of finding whatever this lost thing was couldn't be resisted. He had to go.

Dynan told himself nothing would happen this time. He wasn't leaving the Palace grounds. It would be all right, but he kept the sword anyway.

The ceiling panel was less easily reached. The strength he needed to hoist himself up into the eaves wasn't there. He ended up half jumping, half pulling, and half using the wall for leverage to get up there. He ended up knocking over the chair and leaving a mark on the paint. After all that noise, he slid the panel back in place, hoping Regan and Lors wouldn't report him missing too soon.

Getting the rest of the way outside left him winded and cold in a snow bank. Winter kept its grip on the Palace and the mountains, even though they were closer to spring. Dynan didn't turn back, trudging through the piled up mounds to reach the barn. It was situated off in the far corner of the grounds with rolling, snow-covered fields behind it.

The barn was warm. The horses were in and already had their exercise for the day. There were a lot of stable hands to manage the fifty horses the King owned. At this hour of day, they were all of them at lunch.

Dynan found his horse, a giant Frielian stallion he'd gotten last year, snorting in his stall. He started prancing the moment Dynan reached the gate. His name was Galarin.

He maneuvered the bridle on, but couldn't manage the weight of a saddle. He didn't need one, despite that his father insisted on it. Galarin was as well-trained an animal Dynan had ever owned. He retrieved a couple thick horse blankets, one for the animal and one for him, that he wrapped up in underneath his cloak.

It was fortunate that the large stable doors were on a keypad. Dynan questioned whether or not he'd have the stamina to make it all the way up into the mountain, but the moment the door was open, Galarin went through it out into the lane behind the barn. The stallion knew where they were going and headed off at a light canter.

They came to the patch of woods behind the Palace, trotting along the main trail that someone kept clear of snow so that the King's children might not kill themselves riding in the winter.

Dynan pulled back on the reins on the other side, standing on the edge of the wood line, listening. He thought he heard something, another horse maybe, and was afraid someone was behind him, a guard probably, following the trail.

He kicked the horse into motion and he carried Dynan up beyond the second patch of woods, through the gorge between two humps of mountain, by the drop that would kill them both, closing on the meadow an hour later.

Dain tried to reach him. Dynan managed not to answer, and not to give away any indication of where he was. It helped that Dain wasn't trying too hard, since a ship could still reach Dynan in very little time and stop the whole expedition.

Dain tried again just a few minutes later. Dynan could easily imagine his brother being told to use the ability his father constantly told them not to.

"I'm aware of the irony," Dain said. "Where the hell are you? Have you lost your mind? Do you have any idea the state of panic you just threw the whole government into?"

Dynan tried not to let Dain see anything, but it wasn't possible.

"You're riding? Riding a horse? What the—"

"I wanted to get out of the Palace for a few hours. I'm fine. I'm just out in the rink."

"He's riding. I don't know why," Dain said to their father. "You've had him cooped up in here for months is why. Where are you?"

"I already said—"

"You're not in the rink. He'll know that in a matter of minutes. Where-are-you? Dynan, he's losing it. This isn't funny."

"I'm going to find something, Dain."

"Find what?"

"I don't know, but I have to, so I'm not telling you where I am."

"I know he's not in the rink," Dain said. Dynan could almost hear their father raving at him. "He won't tell me. It's not like I'm a comterm."

"I'll tell you about it later," Dynan said.

"You better not push me out. I'm not kidding."

"Bye."

It took more energy than Dynan thought he had to keep Dain from getting back in his head. After the first two tries though, Dain quit. Dynan could always count on him for diversion. He would stall their father and take the grief for it, leaving Dynan to take the punishment that was sure to come later.

It worked long enough. Dynan reached the meadow that lay between two tall cliffs, past the ruins and the still gaping hole. He remembered falling, but not much else. He paused at that, thinking about the days before falling. He remembered the pod crash clearly enough.

He wondered what had happened down in that hole, but knew he wouldn't try to find out. Tomorrow maybe. Not today. He nudged the horse and kept going.

A series of caves dotted the left face of the cliffs. Some were at ground level, beyond a scraggly line of bent trees. He and Dain used to come up here in the spring and

summer to hunt or ride. Originally, their father had shown them the way when they were barely ten.

Dynan led Galarin into the largest of the caves. There he found feed supplies and water from a spring that bubbled up near the back. He found a lamp on a shelf near the entrance where it could charge in the light.

After the horse was settled, he headed back out, trudging through waist-deep snow, looking for some sign that would tell him what this was about. There was nothing. Further into the gorge a fall of rock cut across his path. It looked as though someone had taken a handful of the cliff, crumpled it and thrown it down in a fit of anger. It had always been there for as long as he'd been coming to this meadow.

The boulders from the slide were strewn into the meadow and over time had turned into mounds covered in grass in the spring, or shrouded as they were now by the snow. The stones were rounded for the most part, but there were a few with sharp edges and corners. Cut, the thought came.

In a flash of thought Dynan saw a great, carved entrance delving deep into the mountain and when he looked down from the place it would have been, he saw an opening in the jumble of rock.

An entrance was formed against the cliff-face tall enough for him to go in without stooping. He was about to enter when he heard a horse nickering, letting him know he wasn't alone.

Standing behind the massive pile up of boulders kept him from seeing who was coming, but he heard them, knew their voices and realized the instant before she rounded the corner what had happened.

"You are going to be in so much trouble," Shalis said as she tumbled through the snow over the rocks, looking like a little ball of fur she was so wrapped up in cloaks and coats. Liselle Tremault came right behind her, looking exquisite.

Dynan remembered her. He'd woken to find her in his room a couple of times in the middle of the night, watching over him, she said, at the request of his little sister. He found he didn't mind that at all.

"What are you doing here?" Dynan said. Shalis must have seen him in the woods and as usual, persuaded her keeper to come along. Or maybe it was the other way around. Liselle seemed just as worried, though she wasn't ranting at him like a little lunatic.

"What am I doing here?" Shalis said. "What are you doing here? You don't even have a guard. You're going to get yourself killed for certain."

Dynan saw that she was really upset with him, afraid for him, but Liselle answered before he could. "Shalis, no such thing is going to happen. We're still on Palace grounds, even up here in the mountains and it's patrolled. There isn't any danger here, except maybe from the cold."

"I told Poppé where we are," Shalis said, folding her arms. "He's already on his way."

"Dynan, is Shalis with you?" Dain asked him then, getting in without trying hard. Concentrating to keep him out required too much effort and energy Dynan didn't have.

"She is now."

"We're on our way down to a transport, so we'll be there pretty soon. I don't know what you're doing, but you better do it quick."

"Right. Thanks."

“Know what this is about yet?”

“No, but I’m about to find out. Tell him there’s a passage up here and I think it’s going to lead to a Temple.”

“He’s going to yell at me again,” Dain said. “Yep. He says you better not go in it, and if you don’t listen to him, you’re never going to see sunlight again. He’s just going on. They’re all coming with us you know. And the new guards too. These guys are not happy with you at all.”

“It’s all right. I’m going anyway.”

“You’re an idiot.”

Dynan ignored him and Shalis, who was still yelling at him and saw what he intended just before he ducked into the opening. He encountered a series of open pockets of space left by boulders jammed on top of one another. He held up his light and saw cut stone behind the pile up. He hesitated, since the boulders weren’t really supported by anything other than chance. There was a possibility they could fall.

Shalis and Liselle followed him, clambering over the rocks, some of them double height and too much for Shalis to manage without help. Dynan saw she wasn’t going to be deterred, and gave her a hand. She kept up a steady stream of complaints about his lack of intelligence, sounding word for word like Dain.

“Keep your voice down,” Dynan said to her. “It’s been a long time since anyone has come in here, little girl. I need to be able to hear in case one of these rocks decides to come loose.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Shhhh.”

The pile up of stones ended after one last narrow arch they all had to squeeze through. The room they came into was so large the small light Dynan carried hardly cut the darkness. They were tiny specks in a great cavern.

“Who made this?” Liselle asked, standing close enough to him to stay in the light and kept Shalis with her.

“I don’t know.”

“You knew to find it though.”

“I’ve been here before,” he said, and pain started behind his eyes the way it always did when memory tried to come in. He knew it was there somewhere, but he also knew trying to bring it back would land him on the floor.

The wall on the right disappeared into another vast opening and Dynan knew they’d reached the stairs. Again the light did nothing to cut through the inky darkness. Five stairs showed in the weak beam and then another step and another for each they went down.

“What do you suppose is down there?” Shalis asked, hugging his arm. She had a grip on his hand that was almost painful.

“It’s a tomb, Shalis,” he said. It was the first thing that came into his head, but before they could ask, he shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“It’s so cold,” Liselle said, her breath rising above her head until it was lost in the dark.

“Do you have a light?” Dynan asked Liselle, but guessed she would have had it out already. “Here, take this one. I have a laser cutter. Better than nothing. I think you both should stay here. It’s a lot of stairs.”

“No,” Shalis said before he was finished. “No,” she said again when he thought to argue with her. “I’m not staying here without you. I’m not afraid of a tomb. How do you know what it is anyway? You’ve never been here before. I know you haven’t.”

“I think I died, Shalis,” he said, and his voice echoed in the hollow spaces. “I think I came here. I’m certain of it. I’ve seen it before.”

“Why do you want to go back?”

“There’s something I have to find.”

Liselle looked back over her shoulder. “Well the sooner we start down, the sooner we’ll find it.”

“Is that the transport?” Shalis asked, letting Dynan go. She started down the steps one after the other until she was at the edge of the light. “Come on already or Poppé will come and stop you.”

“It hasn’t been long enough. Be careful, Shalis. If you get hurt, Pop will kill me. How do you keep up with her?” he asked, and started down. Liselle replaced Shalis with the handholding. Dynan realized she was shaking a little.

“I just follow her around,” she said.

“You don’t have to come if you don’t want to.”

“I’m not staying here by myself.”

Liselle held up the light and nodded him on. Dynan took out the laser cutter and turned it on, pressing the controls to maximum. The glowing kem-long blade gave them a little more light to see with, but barely. He had to be careful with it too, since it would cut through anything it touched.

Shalis stayed a few steps ahead all the way down. It was less than it seemed, but far enough. Dynan was winded by the time they reached the bottom and found the great doors closed.

As the lights they carried lowered to floor level and filled the broad space, they saw a man sitting in the far corner, wrapped in a heavy cloak with a hood pulled over his head. Liselle gasped when Dynan killed the laser-blade-light, drew his sword, and reached down to snatch Shalis back a step.

“Who is that?” she asked, her voice echoing up the steps.

The man didn’t move. Another step toward him and an instant later, Dynan realized he wouldn’t ever. He was dead.

He put his sword down on the stair, not especially wanting to tell his sister she was looking at a corpse. Explaining it to her wasn’t much fun, since she didn’t believe him.

“He’s dead, Shalis,” Dynan repeated. “He can’t hurt me. Listen, I want you to stay here.”

“Shouldn’t he be a skeleton,” Liselle said, bending sideways to peer under the man’s hood. She was right too, which meant he was only recently dead. His hands, the only part they could see of him, seemed only old; the wrinkled skin of an elder. Dynan didn’t expect any of the bodies to have skin at all. He thought too much time would have gone by.

He had to sit down. The cold was deeper than before. He couldn’t feel his hands anymore and his face was frozen. Shalis was shivering.

“Well, how are we going to get in?”

“*We* aren’t. I’m going to get in and you’re going to stay here,” Dynan said. “Please, Shalis?”

"I don't want to sit out here with him," she said and then wrinkled her nose. "I thought they were supposed to smell."

"What?"

"Dead people. Everyone says they smell bad. He doesn't smell at all. Why is he here anyway?"

"I don't know, but you're waiting out here," Dynan said and glanced at Liselle to let her know she'd be waiting too.

He looked at the old man hunched in the corner and a thought occurred to him. Like his father, Bremen Telaerin had disappeared without a trace. Maybe he'd spent his life trying to find this place again. It made sense he would come here to be with his family at the end of his life. It didn't seem possible a man nearly a thousand years dead could have skin, but then Dynan thought of the preserving effect of perpetual cold. And it was unnaturally cold.

"Don't touch him," Dynan said to his sister.

"Why would I want to do that? You are so gross."

He pushed to his feet, seeing clearly a woman activating the mechanism that would open the doors. He moved to the stone where he thought the trigger was, and pushed on one corner the same way she had. The stone slid back out of the way. Inside was a lever, but he didn't pull it right away, taking a moment to look up from the height of the doors to the stone above.

"Go back up the stairs a little and get under the archway," he said. "Just in case the ceiling decides to come down."

"And what are you going to do?" Shalis said.

"Run."

She made a derogatory sound. "You can barely walk," she muttered, but she climbed the stairs, looking up into the dark as she went. "I think I hear them."

Dynan nodded. He could tell Dain was getting closer. Dynan reached into the slot in the stone and pulled the lever. A distant hum reached them and the big doors started to grind open. The next instant though, the hum faded and the doors stopped moving. They stood open hardly enough for anyone to fit through.

There were light brackets on the wall and Dynan took one of them down. He took a couple extra power cells from Liselle's lamp. They worked in the ancient one, which told him how little the technology had changed in all that time, and gave them extra light.

The door was barely open, but it was enough. Dynan told Shalis to stay one more time, and slipped inside.

The light was just strong enough to show him what he already knew. Dynan saw her, slumped against the wall near the door, holding her children to her, the two boys and the girl, trying to protect them to the last, Fadril Telaerin, the First Queen of Cobalt.

Like her son sitting on the other side of the door, their bodies were preserved in the bitter cold with hardly any sign of the tremendous age they'd remained here. She looked just as she did standing at the foot of a rocky hill, waiting for Dynan to come down, and just as she did kneeling in a green glade, gathering her children into her arms.

Dynan knelt down beside her, careful not to disturb anything, looking at a face completely familiar to him. He saw her talking to him, leading him through a terrible land to a terrible place, but that went away almost as he thought it, melting to a land of peace. He saw his mother with her, closing another gap in his memory.

He saw it and beyond the pounding headache that threatened to bring tears to his eyes, he remembered. The body nearest Fadril was the man Dynan had just finished writing about, the leather sack he carried giving him away, along with the sword in his hand. Polen Forb lay on his back, his arms out to either side. His eyes were closed and his face at peace, looking only as if he were asleep. Dynan knew him.

He knew Faulkin Yeld, who was next, curled on one side, the brown vest he always wore preserved along with him. Grint Heddly still had the yellow scarf wrapped around his neck. Both men held weapons tightly in hand.

Farthest from the door and his wife, the body of Alurn rested in the center of the oblong room, lying on his side. The crown of the First King was at a slant against a small rock on the floor, fallen from his head in battle. He looked the same. He looked like Adiem.

Dynan stood and moved to Alurn, looking around the room for the body of his brother, who had died here too. He heard Fadril telling him that Adiem wouldn't come here. Dynan put a hand to his head, pressing in on his eye and against the pain that exploded behind it. The room spun.

"Dynan?"

Liselle came in, looking first to where Fadril sat near the door, gasping at the sight of her and the children. She made her way carefully across the Temple, avoiding the dead to reach him.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "You've been in here a while. Dynan?"

"I'm fine," he said when he wasn't and she didn't believe him, reaching up to wipe away the moisture on his face.

"I don't think so," she said, and then slipped her arm around him. "You should come out."

"I'm all right," he said, looking down at her while she looked up. He stopped her from wiping away the tears again, and kept her hand in his. "I knew these people, Liselle. I don't know how, but I met them and there was a terrible struggle to get us all back. I promised them I'd find them again. You don't believe me, do you?"

"Of course I do," she said. "I don't have any reason to doubt you, especially since we're here and so are they." She looked down at Alurn and saw the crown. He was wearing the Telaerin crest ring, and her eyes widened. "Is that really Alurn Telaerin?" She looked back at the others. "Polen Forb too? Is he at all like history describes him?"

Dynan wasn't sure she was being serious, but he nodded. "A little. He was gruff around the edges. But amazing with a sword and a decent man. He risked his life for mine."

"And Alurn? From everything I've read about him, it seems he could be completely conceited. Was he?" she asked with a smile.

"No," Dynan said, and then changed his mind. "Yes, a little I guess. Maybe all great leaders have to be and he was that. They all followed him without question. They've been waiting here a long time."

"And now they're not," she said and pulled on him. "I really do think you need to come out of here and sit down. You're shaking."

"I'm freezing," Dynan said, and smiled when her response to that was to put both arms around him.

“You only just got yourself out of bed and here, you’ve pushed yourself to the very edge of endurance. Probably not the best idea.”

“Well if I fall over my father won’t yell so much.”

“I wouldn’t count on that.”

“Before he gets here and gets started on it, I want to thank you for coming with me. He isn’t going to be too happy about it, but I’m glad you did.”

“I didn’t think I was going to make it down those stairs.”

“You could have turned back.”

She smiled, looking up at him again and shook her head. Her eyes lowered before rising back to his. Her fingers tightened around his own. His breath shortened, standing so close to her. He supposed he could be reading everything wrong, but decided caution didn’t fit the occasion. He leaned, hesitating for another fraction of time, and kissed her.





Chapter 25

“Awwwww. I’m telling.”

Liselle didn’t miss even half a beat. “What was the name of that boy you thought was handsome? Gaden Ahreld, wasn’t it? You said you wanted to—”

“Boy?” Dynan said, playing along and completely serious at the same time. “What boy? You’re too young for boys. Gaden Ahreld? Allie Ahreld’s little brother? I’m going to remember that.”

“You better not!” Shalis said, still peering at them through the narrow opening, but then she looked behind her. “We’re right here, Poppé. Ooo, he’s so mad.”

Shalis hesitated and then slipped through the door, the thought of running to Dynan cut short by the fact of all the dead she was unexpectedly faced with.

“Shalis, no,” Dynan said and left Liselle to reach her.

“There are babies. Who would kill little babies?” she said, backing away from the children she saw and into Dynan. She turned around and buried her face. “Who would do this?”

“A very bad man,” Dynan said and held her. “He can’t hurt them anymore.” He knelt down and waited for her to look. “Did I tell you, I saw Mother?”

“You’re crazy.”

“I really did. She asked me about you and she knew how fearless you are before I could tell her. She knew how beautiful you are.” He looked up and saw his father at the door, blazing mad, but listening. “You look just like her. You have her same spirit. Do you know how lucky we all are to have you here and see her in you? It’s amazing. She doesn’t like it so much that you go out to the cliffs though, so maybe you ought to stop.”

“You’re just making that up,” Shalis said and tossed her head, looking back over her shoulder at their father, who knew Dynan was making that part up too. Ambrose came and stood over them in silence. “You’re trying to soften him up.”

“She wants you to be safe, so you’ll grow up and meet boys...later. That Lady over there is your ancestor, and she looks just like mother and just like you. She was fearless and brave, and you don’t need to be afraid for her. She’s safe, and she’s with her children.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive,” Dynan said and looked up at his father again.

“Shalis, go wait with Melgan,” Ambrose said. “You’re lucky he can’t fit through the door. The next time you want to go off on some half-brained expedition, leave her out of it.”

“He didn’t know we were following him,” Shalis said and tugged on his hand. “Don’t be mad, Poppé. Look who he found.”

Ambrose didn’t acknowledge the plea, but stared her down until she obeyed him.

“Who are the rest of them, Dynan?” she asked as she walked by Polen.

“Shalis go in the other room – now.” Ambrose didn’t have to glance at Liselle before she was on her way after Shalis.

The silence was broken only by the muted voices from the other side of the cracked door. Dynan could hear Melgan having a stern conversation with Liselle and he wanted to go out to her rescue, but then she didn’t need it.

“Would you rather I let him come down here by himself, Captain?” she asked. Dynan smiled when Melgan didn’t respond.

He was about to try and stand up, having gotten down on his knees for Shalis, but a heavy weariness came over him, making him want to curl up on the floor and sleep.

“So is this the end of it?” his father asked, but when Dynan glanced up at him, he was looking down at the body of Alurn. When Ambrose nodded like he was getting an answer, Dynan started looking around for someone else in the tomb.

“Is it?” Ambrose asked again and walked over, taking off his cloak that he draped over Dynan’s shoulders.

“I had to...” Dynan said, but couldn’t get the rest of it out.

“See that they are buried,” Ambrose finished for him.

“You know, don’t you? You know what happened.”

“I know,” his father said, crouching down beside him and tucking the cloak around him, “that you were nearly killed by a group of madmen—”

“They meant to, but didn’t get the chance. They would have,” Dynan said, seeing the three men for a moment, but then they went away. “There was someone else. He looked a lot like Alurn. Black hair, but he had grey eyes.”

“Really?” Ambrose said, an edge to his voice, and again he wasn’t looking at Dynan. “Is that true?”

“I had to do something, Pop,” Dynan said, and meant to get up. He put his hands on the floor to push and felt something under his finger. “It’s not his fault, the guy with the grey eyes. He ended up helping me, I think, and he did something to my memory. Maybe it was too horrible to keep. It’s all right. I know enough that it won’t drive me crazy wondering.”

“You know too much,” Ambrose said, and stood over him.

“Then he’ll make it stop,” Dynan said, leaning down to blow the dust and grime away from the thing on the floor.

It was a small crystal ball held in the claws of some large raptor and he thought of a dragon immediately, only there was no such thing.

“I trust him, Pop. I don’t know his name anymore, but he helped me once. It’ll be all right.”

“Dynan—”

“Really, it will be,” he said, and picked up the orb. It was strange that no sign of age touched the piece, as if it had only just been hand wrought. The chain that used to hold it was all but disintegrated. Dynan looked to Alurn and saw his hand outstretched. A piece of the chain wound through his fingers.

“We need to go,” Ambrose said, “and get you out of this cold.”

Dynan realized the chill in his bones had lessened so he wasn't shaking anymore. He looked at the claw-enclosed orb in his hand, wondering at its significance when he saw that there was another one just like it not far from Polen Forb. Its chain was in about the same state, tarnished and weakened to the point it wouldn't hold. Dynan left the chain, but picked up the orb. His father followed him and stood over him again.

"What is that? You shouldn't touch anything."

Dynan handed the pieces up to him and heard him pull in a breath. Dynan turned back to Polen while images of him alive played through his mind.

"I told you, old man," Dynan said to him.

"What?"

"Not you, Pop," Dynan said and laughed.

"We're going to leave now," Ambrose said and meant it.

Dynan agreed this time, but again he saw something poking out of the leather sack that Polen had strapped around him and realized it was a book.

"Dynan, stop. I don't want you to—"

"You know I studied with the archeology group for the last five years, right?" Dynan said, carefully shifting the flap that was already half open because of the way Pol had fallen. The leather was stiff and didn't want to move. "I remember that much, don't you?"

"I remember I had to force you to take the class."

Dynan pulled the book out kel by kel until he had it in hand. It was frozen too, making the leather brittle, so he took extra care when he lifted the cover to look inside.

The first page was covered in handwriting.

"Fadril Telaerin is one of the most fearless women I've ever known," Dynan read and glanced up at his father who was looking at Fadril and her children.

"She had to have been," he said.

Dynan nodded to that and carefully set the book down beside Polen, knowing it wouldn't be possible to take it down the mountain with him. He pushed up to his feet.

"I will see to it that they are properly tended," Ambrose said. "And soon. I'll have a team of Medics—"

"You need the Arc Group. Amerin Pern. He's the expert. He'll know how to manage with this. And the place has to be guarded."

"Why do you say that?" Ambrose asked, smirking over Dynan talking about guards.

For an answer, Dynan pointed up and his father followed the gesture. The capstone of the room was the same stone the Throne Room seal was carved from, a kind of rock incalculable in value.

Ambrose grunted at the discovery, and pulled in a breath. "Yes. All right. Speaking of guards."

"It won't happen again."

"It will not," Ambrose said, and Dynan didn't look at him, but allowed himself to be steered toward the narrow opening. "Not ever, Dynan. You're going to swear to me right now that you'll never leave the Palace again without your guards, once you're allowed to leave that is, *if* you're allowed. The guards, by the way, are going to have a conversation with you about it at a time of their choosing, just so you know. I want the oath, vow, whatever you want to call it, right now."

"I swear I won't," Dynan said without hesitation or even regret that his freedom was going to be curbed to such a degree for probably a long time. In the greater scheme of things, his father needed the assurance, and Dynan was happy to give it to him.

"All right then."

"I really talked to her," Dynan said, having not shared the conversation with him.

"Who? Fadril? What are you—"

"Mother," he said. "She was there at the end, when I thought I might not come back. She said she hears you sometimes when you talk to her."

"Dynan—"

"I was complaining we never get to see you. She said you should cook dinner for us."

Ambrose didn't speak for a moment, shocked at first, and there was always everlasting grief behind his eyes, but after a moment he smiled. "She said that?"

"We used to, didn't we, when we were little?"

"Once a week," Ambrose said and then he looked at him again. "All right. I'll cook dinner. I'm not sure you're going to like it, but I'll do it."

"With no one else around, Pop. Just us."

"Kamien?"

A moment of silence followed that, but Dynan nodded. "If he wants," he said and Ambrose laughed.

"He might surprise you."

"I doubt it."

Ambrose stopped him at the door, and took his hand, putting the two glass orbs into his upturned palm. "It seems you're meant to have these. Give one to your brother. Show them to Amerin, but you can keep them."

"Thanks, Pop," he said and when he glanced through the opening, saw Dain huddled on the stairs. Shalis was there too, with Liselle beside her. "So when's the next Palace Ball?"





Chapter 26

“Your Majesty.”

Ambrose took a sip of corrigan, setting the short glass down, and turned to find his attendant holding a bundle in leather wrappings.

“What is it, Thurmond?”

“This was delivered just now, from the High Bishop,” he said, coming in with the package, moving with the measured steps of an aged man. “One of the Temple monks brought it, a young woman, I believe. I noticed from her hands. But no matter, she had all the proper passes to bring it. Xavier cleared her through and there’s a letter from the High Bishop as well.”

Ambrose tensed at that news, having no desire at all for contact with the Temple. It was too soon. He supposed Gradyn felt that strain from the last time they spoke at the internment of Alurn and Fadril and their family, and wanted to do something to change the situation. Xavier allowing the message to come through meant the same thing.

“And I’m really sick of both of you,” he muttered under his breath. “All right. I’ll take a look at it. Thank you.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Is there anything else you need for the night, sir?”

“Are the boys in?”

“I just checked on them.”

“Shalis asleep?”

“For the moment.”

Ambrose nodded to that. “Then I don’t need anything else.”

“Very good, sir. Good night.”

“Good night, Thurmond.”

He waited for a time after Thurmond left, ignoring the lure of the letter and bundle until after he’d finished reading the daily report.

He slugged back the last sips of his drink, and after a lengthy battle of conscience over accepting this offering, or even looking at it, he took the letter. It was written in the High Bishop’s scrawling hand.

Ambrose,

The distance I feel between us pains me to such a degree that I feel I must try again to explain. This chasm is of my doing, caused by my inability to trust in faith and in you enough to tell you the truth. It’s an old man’s affliction, fear is. I readily admit to it. You

are neither old nor fearful and I shouldn't have lied to you about what concerns you most personally. I saw no other way at the time, ruled by my fear of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. Perhaps you'll find the capacity to forgive an old man's weakness, now that both your sons are back with you and mending.

I dishonored the memory of your father in suggesting his last words to you were false. I didn't know how much he was aware. I don't know still where he came to have such knowledge, which you now know to be the truth.

There are other truths - too many, I fear - that you should be aware of. I thought by not telling you, fate could be delayed. I still pray it can be put off, at the least, but I know you are owed the full truth now. In faith that you will know what to do with it, I give you the Book of the Word.

At the committal for the First King and Queen, I asked that you have faith in your sons and in their future. I would ask that you have faith in your own as well, and in the Gods who guide and guard it.

Your servant,

Grady Vall

Ambrose shook his head at the words and the gesture, finding little capacity for forgiveness or faith. His sons had nearly died for it. Ambrose wasn't about to let go his anger just because the High Bishop wanted it.

He grunted as he pushed himself out of the chair, turning to the wrappings, unsure he believed it was what the old man said it was. "Let's see what we have here."

The seal on the cover and the obvious age of the book sent a chill chasing up his spine. Ambrose turned the pages and read the story of his sons' attack and torture hidden behind stains of blood. Maybe the darkened marks were Alurn's, or came, maybe, from his deranged brother. Ambrose couldn't tell who'd written it, one or the other and didn't care. He read, turning the crumbling pages, looking into the future until he didn't want to look anymore.

"Father?"

Ambrose straightened, and found Kamien watching him from the doorway. He shut the book, trying not to appear as if he was keeping something from his eldest son. He tried his best not to believe the things he read, but the seed was planted.

"Damn him," he said of the High Bishop.

He picked up the book, uncaring of its age and held it a moment. Kamien came over, curious now. "I came to say goodnight. What is that?"

"More ghost stories," Ambrose said, looking to the glowing embers of the fire still burning in the grate. There he wavered a moment. Destroying the book wouldn't destroy the truth in its pages. But maybe, as the High Bishop prayed, it might delay its onset.

"May I see?" Kamien asked, joining him by the fire.

"No."

Ambrose took the book and flipped it into the fire so it landed on its face. The pages caught in an instant and flared. He watched in grim satisfaction while the Book of the Word burned.



If you have enjoyed reading this book, please consider leaving a review.

The next book in the series is:



Where truth and lies mingle among friends and enemies alike.

Behind the veil that separates the living from the dead, awaits the teeming horde. Evil bides its time, probing for weakness. It slithers across the divide, searching for the weak, the insane, the criminal mind, and even the average citizen of Cobalt, commanding them. The order is to kill. The target...

Seventeen-year-old Dynan Telaerin's biggest challenge is keeping the woman he loves and the brother he adores from being in the same room at the same time. Liselle Tremault and Dain Telaerin despise one another, forcing Dynan to choose between them, but a murder plot against him abruptly trumps other concerns. Visions of the destruction of civilization follow, turning shadowy dreams into the possibility of terrible reality. The lines blur between what is evil and what is good as one seeks to destroy him and the other seeks to delay his future. The methods each side employs to attain their goals are remarkably similar, leaving Dynan in a desperate race for his life.

MYTH, the second book of the Guardians of the Word fantasy series considers the complications of truth and intention, where one may not be conducive to the other and where some evil is necessary to negate others.



The Guardians and their Servants

The TELAERINS

Adiem Arturin— Dead at 28 a thousand years ago, telepath, corrupted by the demon, leader of the demon's realm, split into entities called the Six, shape-shifters consigned to the form of a wraith, a reptilian like entity. They are constantly seeking to break the barrier into the world to subjugate all to the demon's will. As long as he remains, the world can't move forward, and time will repeat, beginning with the destruction of civilization every thousand years.

Alurn Ardin – Dead at 28 a thousand years ago, telepath, murdered by his brother, Adiem in a battle to contain the demon's horde behind the veil. The First King of Cobalt, who learns of the demon's great plan to conquer the world. Messenger of the Seven Gods, placed into stasis to assist his heirs in their task to defeat at long last Adiem and forever contain the Demon. Shape-shifter who uses the form of a dragon.

Fadril – wife of Alurn, First Queen of Cobalt, murdered by Adiem at the age of twenty-six. Taken to the Demon's Gate in exchange for the souls of her children. Guardian of the Dead.

Ambrose – son of Dionin, King of Cobalt.

Shalael – wife of Ambrose, died from complications of childbirth, mother to Dynan, Dain and Shalis.

Kamien Argent – son of Trameil Argent, eldest son of Ambrose, lost his rights as Heir to the Throne at the age of four, by order of King Dionin.

Dynan Alurn – second son of Ambrose, telepath. Chosen as protector of the Sacred Seal, sent to the Demon's Gate to rescue Alurn. Given a part of Maralt Adaeryn to help withstand the Demon's influence.

Dain Ardin – third son of Ambrose, telepath. Chosen as protector of the Sacred Seal. Given a part of Maralt Adaeryn to help withstand the Demon's influence.

Shalis – only daughter of Ambrose and Shalael.

The KING'S MEN

Xavier Illothian – The Lord Chancellor of Cobalt, only Lord Chancellor to serve two Kings, and Surrogate father to the King's children.

Melgan Lon – Captain of the King's Guard, childhood friend of Ambrose, Surrogate father to the King's children.

Roth Perquin – First Minister of Cobalt, childhood friend of Ambrose, Surrogate father to the King's children.

Brendin Moch – Secretary to the King, Surrogate father to the King's children
Boral Sloyl – The Palace Master at Arms and Surrogate father to the King's children.

The TEMPLE GUARDIANS

Gradyn Vall – The High Bishop of Cobalt, holder of the spirit of Alurn, orchestrator of the prophesy.

Maralt Adaeryn – telepath with the ability to erase memory. Holder of the Talisman. Sworn protector of Dynan and Dain.

Carryn Adaeryn - sister of Maralt, telepath with the ability to see the future. Sworn protector of Dynan and Dain.

The KING'S HOUSEHOLD

Liselle Tremault – Lady in Waiting to Princess Shalis.

Lady Rene Hendel – Lady in Waiting to Princess Shalis, and former caretaker of Dynan and Dain.

Regan Trinhholm – Dynan's attendant.

Lors Weich – Dain's attendant.

Colin Fryn – one of the Hounds, an elite Special Forces operative.

Ralion Blaise – one of the Hounds, an elite Special Forces operative.

Sheed Lasser – one of the Hounds, an elite Special Forces operative.

Frazier Cordon – Palace Guard

Ames Lithford – friend of Dain

Lyle Dowd – friend of Dain

Allie Ahreld – Communications technician with a talent for developing com system operations.

Gaden Ahreld – brother of Allie, first suitor of Shalis.

The RULERS of BRITTALLIA

Ambrose Telaerin – King of Cobalt. Son of Dionin. Cobalt has three planets within its boundary, Arel, Altair and Muri, the latter ruled by an independent King.

Drake Mardon – King of Trea, married to Queen Marella Mardon. Friend and ally to Cobalt. Ilthain is the capital city of Trea. Trillian is a hidden moon within the System.

Alexia Targon – Queen of Yomir. Historical enemy of Cobalt. Yomir's other planet is Redomon.

Creall Nyant – King of Rynald. Allied with Yomir in the Great War against Trea and Cobalt. Planets are Rynald and Jeminda.

Trayanna Moren – Queen of Suma. Allied with Yomir in the Great War against Trea and Cobalt. Planets are Suma, Crinalda and Orgrel.

Lorton Kyle – King of Thylin. Allied with Yomir in the Great War against Trea and Cobalt. Planets are Thylin, Murunde, and Purdyn.



About the author



Author Jolea M. Harrison has been writing for as long as she can remember, when around the age of eight she dreamed up an epic tale of a young princess in search of the King's approval, who went out and killed the evil monster none of the knights could slay! This short story was even illustrated on 3 x 5 cards! After reading *The Lord of the Rings*, the fantasy bug left a permanent mark, which was then complicated by her immediate love of *Star Wars* and other works of science fiction. She started her writing career in earnest about 10 years ago when she set out to publish the epic series, *The Guardians of the Word*, which is eight books in length. After receiving her fair share of typical agent rejection notices, she decided to independently publish the first book of the series, *Chosen*, in June, 2011. *Myth*, *Telepath*, *Legend* and *Union* followed over the course of the year. The remaining books – *Seer*, *Adept*, and *King* completed the series with the release of *King*, March 22, 2013.

“It’s been more than worth it, and I’ve enjoyed every minute, but especially getting to know the incredibly helpful and wonderful people I’ve met because I took a leap of faith. I’m a writer, a mother and manager of chaos. I try to do too many things at once, like so many of us, but it all usually works out. I love writing. It’s what I’m passionate about and what I want to do above all other things.”

Her other interests are gardening and maintaining her Civil War era home. On a recent fact finding mission about the house, she discovered the name of a young soldier who died there while being cared for by the doctor who owned the house at the time. Sometimes in the evening mists, it's not unusual to see the shapes of soldiers marching across the fields or hear 'something' climbing the stairs. She has two children who firmly believe in ghosts.

For more information about the author, go to

<http://jm-harrison.com>
on Facebook at Jolea M. Harrison
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About the Series

Guardians of the Word

The Guardians of the Word is an epic fantasy, science fiction amalgam that tells the story of Dynan Telaerin and his ancestor's long struggle to rid the world of evil. Beyond the barrier lies the heart of deception, trapping the world in a repeating cycle of devastation, rebirth and then destruction once again, every thousand years. For countless cycles knowledge is destroyed, the words of truth lost to future generations until one young man, the First King of Cobalt sacrifices his eternal soul to remain. He brings previously lost knowledge forward in time to his ancestors, Dynan and Dain, who like him are telepathic twin brothers. It is their destiny to finally break the cycle, or die in the attempt, damning the world to the final darkness, for in their time, the Gods are weakened, evil prevails and unless it is defeated once and for all, will remain to rule in domination and terror.

The Chronicles are Chosen, Myth, Telepath, Legend, Union, Seer, Adept, and King.

Keep reading for a sample chapter from the next book, **MYTH**



THE SECOND CHRONICLE OF THE GUARDIANS OF THE WORD

MYTH

Dynan felt a throbbing tension behind his temples, expanding as he moved. He became aware of a voice, urging him to get up, the sound swirling through a fog, close at hand one moment, distant the next. Light cut across his eyes, instantly intensifying the pain in his head. He didn't know where he was, or who was talking to him, but as awareness returned through the pounding in his head, he recognized that it was Liselle Tremault.

"Dynan, wake up. You have to go. You have to get out of here."

He couldn't get his eyes to open to confirm the voice to the face. It was like climbing straight up out of a long, dark tunnel to the surface where light existed. It was a long way off. He couldn't think why Liselle would be in his bedroom, telling him he had to leave.

"Dynan, wake up."

The urgency of her voice struck him then, and he peeled his eyes open, blinking at the soft colors of pale rose and lavender that told him he wasn't in his room. Memory finally returned, but only in small, disjointed pieces. He remembered bringing her here. He remembered taking her clothes off, stumbling into this bed, kissing her, putting his hands through her long brown hair and everywhere else, wanting her. But past that - nothing. It all went away in a blazing white light and the fog of too much alcohol.

His head pounded with movement as he tried to sit up. "What—"

"They're coming," she said, looking back to the door and abruptly rising from the bed. She wore only a gossamer shift. He saw the gown he'd taken off of her, and all the under garments that went with it, strewn around the room. "Lady Hendel. I should have been downstairs an hour ago. If she sees you..."

He knew then the reason for her growing panic. He had to get out of her room before he was caught here, the repercussions of which were too huge to think about. He untangled himself from the bedclothes and stumbled to his feet, grabbing for articles of clothing that were his, while Liselle was doing the same thing with hers, trying to repair the appearance of her room.

He'd only just managed to get his pants on when he heard voices from the closed door, leading to the sitting room. He recognized Lady Rene Hendel, and guessed there was probably a maid with her. Liselle grabbed a dressing gown, threw it on, and then started to work on her bed, trying to make it up so that it wouldn't be immediately obvious that there'd been two people in it.

Dynan spotted an empty bottle of wine and two glasses sitting on a table near the fireplace. He pulled on his shirt, moving to get rid of more evidence. Lady Hendel knocked softly on the door. Liselle froze where she was. Dynan handed the wine and glasses off to her.

"Is there another way out of here? A service entrance?" he asked in barely a whisper, and she shook her head mutely. He looked to the window, wondering if he'd make it down the trellis without falling off. He still felt half-drunk. Liselle was shaking.

"It'll be all right," he said, whispering in her ear as he pulled her to him. He kissed her, despite the increasing pressure of time, because he didn't want her to be afraid, and he didn't want to leave her without letting her know that he didn't regret being here. She finally smiled, and tension left her face. "I'll see you downstairs."

He pulled his boots on, and then opened the window. A burst of cool morning air blew in. It was edging toward spring at Beren, unlike the Palace in Rianamar where it was still snowing and would for another two months. On this crystal clear day it promised to be warmer than usual.

Lady Hendel knocked again and called for Liselle. Dynan took the wine bottle from her, and dropped it into a big bush two stories down, hoping it wouldn't break. Liselle handed him his jacket, helped him into it and he took the glasses, putting them in an inside pocket. He heard the latch turn on her door, and swung himself out the window and onto the trellis that ran the length of the wall to the right of a line of windows. He crouched down so he wouldn't be seen, while Liselle pretended to be opening the window and curtains to let in the fresh air. Dynan stayed under the window ledge, clinging to the edge of the trellis, waiting.

"Yes, Lady Hendel," Liselle said in response to something Dynan couldn't hear. "I know. I overslept. I'm very sorry I'm late. I'll be ready in just a few minutes."

Liselle moved away from the window. Dynan decided not to wait to hear more, thinking he needed to get down and out of sight, in case someone outside might spot him there. He clambered down as quietly as he could manage, trying to ignore the pain in his head, and the dizziness that swept through him when he looked down.

He made it, half collapsing onto the ground beside the wall and a first floor window under cover of the same bush that caught the wine bottle. He left it there, and ditched the glasses. The gardeners would wonder maybe, where they came from, but Dynan didn't think they'd figure it out. He waited another minute for a bout of dizziness to pass, wishing he didn't feel so horrible. He didn't understand it, having been drunk a time or two, and not having had this kind of debilitating reaction. Maybe it was the added nerves of having had so narrow an escape, he thought, and pulled himself into a half crouch.

He made his way down the back side of the mansion that way, staying out of sight using various large plants to conceal his movements, and crouching down under the windows as he passed them. He made it to the corner, deciding the best way in would be through the kitchen, peered around the corner and saw that no one was there. He slipped inside and eased into a chair beside his twin brother, who was having breakfast, a moment before Regan, his attendant came into the room.

"There you are," Regan said. "I was beginning to wonder. You didn't sleep in your room last night. Where were you?"

"I didn't sleep," he said, hoping he didn't sound like he was lying. He wasn't in the habit of doing so, and felt sure he looked guilty. "I had a few reports I wanted to get done. I stayed up most of the night."

Beside him, Dain remained silent, except to roll his eyes a little. Dynan wondered what he'd have to say about it all, thinking it wouldn't be anything good. Dain didn't like Liselle, to the point where he refused to have anything to do with her unless he had to.

They were at the Beren Mansion, a place Dynan thought of as his real home, for the annual spring festival. The usual number of servants and staff were busy making preparations. Shalis, their sister, was there, helping to get everything organized like she did every year.

"Your father's transfer is pulling in the front drive," Regan said with a raised brow. Dynan looked down at his disheveled clothes. He needed to get to a medic kit too, or he wouldn't survive the next hour with this headache. Dynan nodded, even when he didn't think he could stand up again.

"I'll go get changed."

He pushed himself to his feet, and found his arms shaking as he leaned on the table. He felt sick. He turned away when Regan looked at him, and started for the door to the hall. He met Ralion Blaise and Sheed Lasser coming in. Both guards stopped at the sight of him, eyes widening slightly, but they didn't say anything. They shared a look as he walked by and then they were both looking back at Dain for the explanation Dynan wasn't going to give them. They would know, just as Dain knew, that he hadn't stayed up all night to work on a report. Dynan trusted they weren't going to run to the King about it either.

He made it to the stairs, and thought climbing up them might kill him when he heard Ralion coming up behind him. His guard put a hand under his arm and helped him up the stairs.

"Have a little too much to drink last night?" he asked mildly when they reached the top. Dynan could only nod, barely, groaning from the pain that was now throbbing through his entire body. "Don't remember much of what happened either, do you?"

"No. Look, if you're going to..." He had to stop because he felt like he was going to be sick any minute.

Ralion held up a hand, and steered him into his room, and then into the washroom. "I'm not," he said, though he was trying not to laugh. He moved him over to the sink. "Here. Have at it."

Dynan nodded miserably. His stomach obeyed as though given a command, and he started throwing up. His guard left him to it.



*Chosen is dedicated in loving memory
to my father and mother, Doug and Fran Minnick
and my sister, Lindy.*

and to my sister and brother, Coni and Bob.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
The Guardians
About the Author
About the Series
Myth Excerpt

