

Blood

Book 1: Apprentice

Chapter 1: Cliffdiving

"Ready, and, let's, *go*," said Talyn, and he tipped off the edge of the cliff and plummeted.

The other three followed half a breath later. "First to fly will *never be allowed to forget it!*" shrieked Jenn as she fell.

<Never lost before, so I have no idea what *that's* like,> Talyn sent, letting Mysha and Emryl hear it along with Jenn. He didn't like to shout against the wind.

<You lost last tenday!> protested Mysha, the only other kama present with enough mind training to perform the feat. Emryl could mindspeak, but only at touch range; Jenn hadn't even learned that much.

<Forgot all about it,> returned Talyn, shooting Mysha a wink. The air sang around him, offering in music to buoy him up and carry him any which way he wanted, but what he wanted was *down*: that was the point. He wondered what it was like to jump without the promise of the air in the back of his mind. Jenn heard the tones, though they didn't sound as friendly to her as they did to him. Emryl was the same way. Mysha, not an elementalist except for the sole skill of flight, might not, but she was silent to Talyn's semivoluntary receivers.

Emryl caught herself first; Talyn knew from the hum of her thoughts that she wasn't playing to win. She and Mysha were always the first and second to stop falling and halt their descent with air kamai - Emryl because she was cautious, Mysha because she was really a mind kama and wasn't confident in her air kamai or earth protections. The real contest was between Talyn and Jenn.

Talyn sheered away from the water at the bottom of the cliff so late that he was soaked with spray, but he avoided impact. Jenn didn't.

"*Ow*," Jenn hissed, lifting her waterlogged self out of the river and gingerly propelling herself to where the others were floating. "Ow, I win." *I need to stop doing stupid teenager things. Later, sometime*, Talyn caught her thinking. He stepped up the volume of his mental recitation of "Deep in the Snowdrifts" to hedge her out. Why couldn't she learn to shield? Mysha's thoughts were always silent; Emryl he sometimes heard but only faintly.

"Your stonesskin got it," Talyn scoffed aloud, even though the pain in Jenn's broadcast belied it. He wasn't sure *how* her protection had failed.

"It got my leg, yeah," Jenn said, "but then my leg bent the wrong way, ow, my hip -"

"Here," Talyn said, holding out his hand. "If you didn't break a bone I can put you right."

"What if she did break a bone?" Mysha asked, watching Jenn and Talyn link hands.

"Don't know how to do that yet," Talyn said. "I mean, not safely, I could fix *her* but it'd mess *me* up fifteen times of sixteen from going too fast, I'd pinch a muscle in the sympathetic fracture or something." He made a face as his leg twisted to match Jenn's injury. It didn't hurt, but it felt like it should, and he wasn't accustomed to it. The twist righted itself in his own body and the healing crossed to Jenn. "Mysha, Emryl, you're both okay, right? Or should I heal you too?"

"I might've scraped my calf during the jump," Mysha said.

Talyn broke the magical conduit between him and Jenn and reached out to Mysha, who floated closer. He didn't feel anything, but he *wouldn't* feel a scrape which didn't contain any sensation other than pain. "All better?" he asked her after a few fragments.

"Yeah," she said, and let his hand go. "Thanks."

"I want to jump again," Jenn said. "One more and then we can head back and start fixing breakfast." *Griddle cakes*, Talyn heard her think, and he chewed the inside of his cheek and refocused on the song in his head, listened harder to the crooning air and the burbling river water and the sighing rock of the cliff.

"Are you sure?" Mysha asked.

"Come on," Talyn urged. "One more."

The apprentices raised themselves to the top of the cliff again. Talyn counted down, and they jumped.

Talyn won.

"I said I don't want you to heal me!" Talyn said, backing away from Byron. The room was round, save the thick column in the center that contained the tightly spiraled stairs, and so Byron's attempt to back the boy into a corner was not succeeding.

"Look, Talyn, I said I wouldn't notify Master Revenn that you've been cliffdiving again this once, but if you don't let me heal you, how are you going to keep it from him?" asked the exasperated wild kamai student. "He'll wake any slice now." *Stupid kid*, came the older apprentice's thought. Talyn ignored it; people were allowed to think that about him occasionally. (Also, if he owned up to having heard it, he'd be in even more trouble.)

"I want to see it done," Talyn insisted. "You'll finish the whole thing in a fragment and I won't know any more about healing broken bones than I did yesterday. Grandfather'll scold me about cliffdiving and maybe I won't get any griddle cakes or he'll swat me, but he'll take a good sub or two to fix the bone and then I'll know how to do it."

"But... gods, Talyn, doesn't it hurt?" asked Mysha, looking over her shoulder from where she was mixing batter. Red tendrils of hair brushed across her face and she shoved them aside with a floury hand.

He shrugged the shoulder attached to the unbroken arm. "Some." More than some, but he didn't want to say that in front of the girls.

"Oh, if it's that mild, you can help us, then," said Jenn. "No kamai. *What if you visit someone who's especially sensitive about kamai?*" she simpered, mocking Byron's usual tone. "*Then you'll wish you learned to do simple chores without floating everything... What if you get married and your spouse doesn't like kamai in the house, what then...*"

"Are you mad?" Talyn asked the blonde in mock bewilderment. "Me, make griddle cakes, without kamai? I'll have you know I have a *broken arm*."

"If you would let me *heal you*," Byron began.

"Why," asked Revenn's booming voice, "does Talyn have a broken arm?"

"To get out of breakfast duty," Emryl suggested from where she was pouring fuel pellets into the stove.

"Talyn," said Revenn.

"Cliffdiving," admitted Talyn. "I was cliffdiving." The girls might be able to escape punishment.

"And you haven't let Byron heal your broken arm because?"

"He's punishing himself," proposed Jenn. "He's oh *so* crippled by remorse. He thinks it's only appropriate if it show in a physical infirmity, and he wants you to let his arm knit naturally so he can bear the sign of his irresponsible behavior for the rest of his natural life."

"That's the one," said Talyn sarcastically. "Yeah, nobody heal me. Or if you have to heal me," he added more earnestly, finally meeting Revenn's eyes, "can you do it *slowly* -"

"Talyn, did you break your arm deliberately to learn to set bones?" asked Revenn incredulously.

"No! It was an accident. But as long as it's already broken..."

Revenn dug the heel of his hand into one of his eyes, groaning in exasperation. "My boy, you are a trial," he muttered. "But yes, very well. Come he-"

Mid-word, Revenn disappeared.

"Master?" said Emryl.

"I can't find his mind," said Mysha.

"Or his lifeforce," Byron murmured.

"He's not disturbing the air -" Jenn put in.

"He's not there," said Talyn authoritatively.

"There's not a transfer point in the middle of the *kitchen*," said Emryl.

Jenn flipped griddle cakes on autopilot. "We'd have felt a god if one were near again..."

"Gods could work from a distance, though," Mysha pointed out.

"Speaking of gods," said Talyn casually, "doesn't anybody remember the *weirder* visitor we got a few tendays back? Or where Grandfather went the last time he was away?" He remembered Keo's thoughts, twinned with a softer, male voice echoing each one, screaming greenly in his head until she shielded. The goddess's thoughts hadn't screamed; her charisma had done that.

"He went to a Master working... Wait, I thought you made that up," Jenn said. "Green haired lady from another world, actually a dragon? Honestly."

"I didn't! If you'd asked Grandfather like I told you to, he'd've told you - and Nevyn was there and Pyelle -"

"Convenient that Master's gone now," muttered Jenn. "And Pyelle can't tell between truth and fiction and Nevyn's still at his grandmother's."

"Shush, you could have asked them any time," Mysha said to the older girl.

"What were you saying about the supposedly-a-dragon-from-another-existence visitor, Talyn?" Emryl asked.

"Right, so, people from there can bring people here over to their existence, she said," Talyn reported. "That's what happened to Rhysel Camlenn and she got stuck but that's not normal. Usually I think they'd ask politely, like when they asked Grandfather to go to Rhysel's Master's working, but there must've been some emergency, and they needed Grandfather. They'll give him back when it's over."

"Oh," said Mysha, and that was all Talyn heard before he was pulled from his world.

The summoning itself felt like nothing, but Talyn took a startled step when his surroundings blinked from tan rock, painted with practice fire-writing and illusory paint, into a lavender-walled workings room. Revenn was there, holding a *tiny* dragon - she couldn't have been even a hatchling, if she'd been Barashin; those came out of their eggs ten and fifteen and twenty feet long - and there was a human-looking man with color-flecked red eyes, and Rhysel

was kneeling on the floor, and an elf standing with his hand raised at the border of the circle in which Talyn stood.

The elf smudged the chalk of the circle. "Grandfather," said Talyn. "What's going on?"

"This baby dragon is dying; Rhysel thought I could help her," Revenn said. "Look at her and let me see what you see. I need to know more to heal her."

Talyn looked at the squirming, mewling baby. She had glittery scales, like blade-shaped fire opals - but that wasn't what Revenn wanted. Talyn let the song looping in his head fall silent. He let the coiled, ready magic, begging to paint the world, show him more. Dropped his shields, let Revenn through to watch the magic.

A brilliant, blood-colored chain hooked through the baby's throat and stretched taut through the air towards Rhysel, laid across the back of her hand, ready for her to shrug it off with the least twitch if she couldn't bear it. *Lifelink* - but Rhysel wasn't shouting; someone had moved the pain - *no one* was shouting - there was a twist of white between Rhysel's temple and the glitter-eyed man's, but he looked anxious, not agonized...?

"She's lifelinked," Talyn said. "Uh, but none of you is twitching on the ground right now...?"

"I don't understand it either, my boy, but let's focus on the task," Revenn said. *I gave the child's father Rhysel's lifelink pain; he's inured, somehow* came the thought.

Talyn squinted harder. The baby's life force was a desperate panting rhythm of energy, forced to beat on by the relentless tug of the link. The lifelink was the only thing keeping her alive. But her body was whole - she wasn't wounded - no parasite, no disease, no poison, her own blood wasn't even attacking her -

She wasn't starving, she wasn't so desiccated as to die that way, she *was* suffocating but that wasn't what was killing her.

Her life force *itself* was broken. It didn't recognize the baby's skin as a container; it was draining away, disappearing into humming dust in the air, and all that sustained the little dragon was the chain Rhysel held and the dragon's father suffered.

"Look, Grandfather," murmured Talyn. "Her life force is draining away to nowhere - there -" <see, it's like she's not a living thing at all> - "the lifelink isn't plugging the hole, it's just regenerating more. Can we patch it?" <Not so much a *patch* as a replacement - she's *made* of holes - didn't want to scare her father -> Talyn added to Revenn.

<Yes, I understand, I see. Patching it...> "Perhaps," Revenn said aloud. "Everyone, sit down, I'm going to need a lot of energy. Aar Kithen, I'll try to leave you awake enough to send me home, but perhaps you should keep Talyn overnight. Rhysel can heal his arm as slowly as he likes when both come to, and I'm going to be explaining to some half dozen apprentices where I went and why."

Rhysel wasn't a wild kama. If she healed him, it'd be by her esoteric specialty, vastly more interesting than the plain wild kamai he could watch Revenn perform. Talyn whirled around, smiling. "With proxic elemental kamai?" he asked, sitting on the floor with everyone else and angling himself so he'd fall on his good arm when drained near-dry into sleep.

"Yes," Rhysel said. She touched Talyn's shoulder, and the baby's father took Talyn's uninjured hand, and when the circle was completed, Talyn watched silver-rainbow energy swirl around to Revenn until he fell into unconsciousness.

Talyn woke later; he didn't know how much later. The glitter-eyed man and the baby dragon were gone. Talyn was laid out on Rhysel's sofa, good arm down, broken one still in the

makeshift sling and unhealed. The elf fellow was fixing a plate of sandwiches in Rhysel's kitchen.

"You're awake," remarked the elf. "Aar Camlenn" (*Rhysel*, came a thought, and Talyn steeled himself to attend to the song in his head) "is, to the best of my knowledge, still asleep. I can see to your arm provided you do not object to it taking as much as an angle; I lack her sculptural talents and must substitute extreme care." Talyn quieted the music to listen for information; an *angle* was a good, long time.

"That's fine," Talyn said at once. "I've never seen proxic elemental healings done before." He paused. "What's your name, anyway? Who are you?"

(*Tekaal*) "Aar Kithen. I will take these up to Rhysel's room," he said, indicating one plateful of sandwiches, "and return to mend your arm. I have made excess sandwiches and you may have the others. Feel free to finish them."

"Right, I'm hungry," Talyn noticed. "Thanks."

Aar Kithen nodded and went up the stairs. Talyn, one-handed, ate the rest of the sandwiches that were laid out on the cutting board; Aar Kithen hadn't felt hungry and must have eaten already. They weren't interesting - shaved turkey and lettuce leaves on irregularly thick bread - but drain made everything taste good.

Soon enough Aar Kithen came back down to the kitchen. Talyn offered one of his hairs without needing to be asked; he knew the general idea behind proxic elemental kamai, at least, even if he didn't know how the energies rippled and whined when pushed that way.

The little statuette of Talyn, made laboriously to exactly mimic the boy's pose and features inside and out, took half the allotted angle. The other half was spent with Aar Kithen painstakingly changing the interior of the model's arm, once its connection to Talyn was forged. He nudged stone muscle delicately aside to make way for knitting bone, shrank swollen flesh piece by tiny piece. Talyn couldn't decide whether to watch his own arm or the statue. He flicked his eyes between them, watching tiny knives of blue light manipulate the rock and larger copies of the same painlessly pierce and smooth under his olive skin.

"This is *so* cool," Talyn told Aar Kithen. "Practically nobody does this - proxic workings that don't handle themselves automatically like sympathetic healing are fiddly - but the kamai is amazing -"

"It is gratifying that you find it so entertaining," murmured Aar Kithen.

Rhysel came down the stairs, still chewing a bite of sandwich. "Good night," Aar Kithen greeted her, and Talyn twitched with embarrassment, hearing the elf's thoughts as he spied his girlfriend. *Deep in the snowdrifts*, Talyn sang to himself insistently, *deep under the snow...*

"The child survived," Aar Kithen continued, and he went on summarizing things for Rhysel.

Talyn listened to their conversation, since they were courteously holding it in Martisen (or, they thought it was courteous; he'd have rather listened to the meanings in their minds and learned the local language, as long as he was there). He picked up the context he needed that way. But primarily his attention was fixed on the slow, careful kamai.

"Having fun?" Rhysel eventually asked Talyn.

"Yes, Master Camlenn," Talyn replied, still looking at the kamai as her boyfriend worked it.

"Call me Rhysel."

He did, in his head, but it was generally smart to start with the most formal address. "Okay, Rhysel. Hey, can I stay here for a couple of days and learn more proxic kamai?"

Grandfather doesn't do it at all. He was just going to fix my arm with wild kamai." It wasn't only a healing magic. It could reshape in arbitrary ways.

"I don't mind," Rhysel said. "You're generalizing, aren't you?"

Talyn had no idea what led people to *not* generalize. How could Mysha confine herself to mind kamai, Jenn and Emryl stick to the elements alone, Nevyn refuse anything outside the realm of death and Byron study only life, little Pyelle find only illusions fascinating? "Yep," he said. Aar Kithen completed the healing. He withdrew the plucked hair from the statuette, destroying the sympathy between statue and boy. "Cooooool... Yeah, all five aspects, why?"

"We're going to be teaching kamai at the local school for wizardry - the kind of magic that, er, Aar Kithen used to summon you and Master Revenn. We want to put on a bit of a show for interested students, but I only know a little bit of mind and wild kamai and Aar Kithen only knows a bit of death and image. We could do our assembly much sooner if you wanted to help."

"I'll help," Talyn said. The world was interesting, and he'd have such stories to tell the others when he got back. The thoughts he caught around wizardry were fascinating. He wouldn't have the natural edge there that he did with kamai, but still - more magic - "Can I learn some wizardry, too, while I'm here?"

"No," Aar Kithen said. "Presuming Aaral Camlenn" (*Rhysel*, said his mind) "is representative, people from your world do not have channeling capacities; you could learn spells, but attempting to cast them would accomplish nothing."

"Okay," sighed Talyn.

"I'll write a letter to send to Master Revenn about you," Rhysel said. "The sending circle for letters is still there, right?"

The question was addressed to Aar Kithen. "Undisturbed," replied the wizard.

"Talyn, I should warn you," Rhysel said, standing. "The days are longer here, and now you've been up most of the night. You're going to have some trouble getting your sleep cycle back to normal."

Talyn lost interest in the conversation after that, and instead flooded the tower with his senses. Rhysel had brought it up with ward stones, and it listened for her orders; Aar Kithen or Talyn could shape the stone, as indeed Aar Kithen had to perform the healing, but it would be no more responsive than ordinary rocks from the ground. If Rhysel called on her walls, her furniture, the floor under her feet, it would rise up to meet her demands with little thought and less drain.

Then a word, half-heard and half-read out of Aar Kithen's mind, penetrated Talyn's consciousness - *imprisonment* - for the little dragon's parents.

"Wait," Talyn interrupted. "Term of imprisonment? That's a normal thing here?" He tried not to shudder at the idea of being shut up in one place, for tendays, months, years, like they used to do before the Kyne Reform.

"Yes," said Aar Kithen. "Imprisonment, fines, occasionally community service; certain crimes carry the death penalty."

"You don't do personality revisions?" Talyn asked. Not that that wasn't a haunting enough idea, but it was as little of an intrusion as would be safe - make one change, kill the urge to violence or strengthen the voice representing the rule of law in their minds or set up outright blocks to stop them before they raised a hand to do wrong. Then they could do their jobs, look after their families. See the sky.

"No," said Aar Kithen. Nonplussed. He didn't know what they were, though he could guess from the words. "Is this a kamai working?"

"Yeah," said Talyn. "Especially for violent crimes, but sometimes for stuff like stealing

or whatever, they have a mind kama edit the criminal's personality so they won't do it or anything like it again. I had to work one once," Talyn said. He shivered. It was gentler than jail, but the woman he'd revised had thought, when she saw how young he was, that he might help her escape instead if she pleaded - and she had - and he'd done what he was supposed to do, because he could see her crimes in her mind. "They called in Grandfather but then there was an emergency - demon on the loose - and he was needed and I went to do the revision in his place." Mysha had offered to go. But she'd shaken when she offered. And Talyn had wanted to try the working, until he'd actually done it.

"I see. No. We have nothing of the kind," Aar Kithen said. "Aaral Pyga would be competent to do it, but there is only one of her, and she would be unlikely to have any interest in the profession. What is a 'demon'?"

Rhysel explained those to him, and Talyn lost interest again; he rummaged through the cupboards for more food and made occasional comments about the planned kama demonstration that he had volunteered to help with. Rhysel sent him into a guest bedroom, when he was visibly drooping, and he curled up there and slept.

In the morning, Talyn cleaned himself and his clothes by magic, quietly grinning over the fact that no one was admonishing him for using kama where it wasn't strictly called for, and started hunting for breakfast.

"I forgot to ask Master Revonn about shrens," Rhysel said abruptly from her seat at the kitchen table. "Did he tell you about them?"

"No," said Talyn. Technically. "But I heard him thinking about them a couple of times, when he unshielded for lessons with Mysha and the other mind students. They're kind of sad." He didn't fully understand the problem, but that much was clear. "Why?"

The extent of the issue came clear in Rhysel's thoughts. Poor things... "I don't expect you to be able to cure them," she said, "but do you know how to do the anesthetic working? The younger shrens are in so much pain." Her tone was full of urgency.

"Yeah, I can do that," Talyn said. "Do you want to go right now?"

Rhysel tossed him a bag from a cupboard he hadn't looked into yet. "Here. You should have a snack if you're going to do a lot of kama. But yes, right now."

She was still buzzing with concern about the pain of the small shrens. "If it's that bad - they can't shield, right?" Usually he didn't adopt others' feelings and sensations as his own - but if they were too overwhelming he couldn't hedge them out and they drowned out his own thoughts - Nevyn had been practicing holding a lifelink against intense pain, in case he ever needed it, and Talyn had had to flee the tower -

"They're babies, and not kyma either," said Rhysel. So no. They couldn't shield. Talyn shuddered.

"Is there a way I can do this one at a time? If it's that bad..." Not that doing it one at a time was a perfect solution. Nevyn was only one person himself. But it would be less incapacitating than a crowd of tortured shrens.

"We'll ask Jensal," Rhysel said. "I imagine you could be in a room far away from most of the babies and she could bring them in one at a time. She did that when I met Artha." Artha's name came with an image. Very cute, very small, green-scaled. Looked just like a dragon. Why couldn't she fly...?

The shren house was familiar-looking to Rhysel, and Talyn wasn't being particularly diligent about drowning her leaked thoughts in repetitive songs and nursery rhymes, so by the

time they got there it was familiar-looking to him too. Rhysel knocked; the leader of the shren house answered the door. *Jensal*, Rhysel recognized her. "This isn't a tourist attraction," said Jensal.

"He's better at some kinds of kamaï than I am," Rhysel said. "He probably can't cure the babies, but he can anesthetize them."

"For how long? They just got their dose of sootheweed for the day." (*Not that this helps much, especially not the oldest, don't dare up the dose, don't dare step up the frequency, came the meanings of the turquoise's thoughts, though the words they came in were like nothing Talyn had ever heard.*)

"Indefinitely," Talyn said confidently. Her eyes went wide, and he started explaining. "It's not a good idea to go around doing that to everybody all the time - they start biting their tongues off, and stuff - but I think this is a special case. And sootheweed doesn't even do a very thorough job, sounds like, let alone last for more than a few -"

"Talyn," said Rhysel. "She can't shield, but you can mind your own business. I'm sorry, Jensal - he reads minds - automatically."

Talyn wished people would stop apologizing for him. It primed people to think of him as intruding, and he tried, he tried harder than anyone understood, to not let *them* intrude on *him*. When he let up on the singing in his mind, it was usually to make things easier for other people, save them time explaining.

"Does he," said Jensal. "And you want to put him with baby shrens?" Talyn's estimation of her intelligence went up a notch. "Well, maybe he can knock the esu out of one or two before he collapses screaming. Come in."

"I should probably see them one at a time," Talyn said. "Exactly that reason."

"Right." Jensal ushered them into her office. "Wait here. I'll start you with Artha. She shouldn't be too overwhelming. If you can do it with her, I'll have you through all of ours and get a wizard to teleport you to the other three houses before you can recite my entire name."

Rhysel asked, "What's your entire name?"

"Jensal," said Jensal.

Talyn puzzled over the strange language she thought in. He could understand what she was thinking, but it wasn't just foreign, it was *weird*. "I really hope their minds work about like a halfblood's or a human's or an elf's. I haven't really practiced on anyone else, but Mysha's got this book that says even Barashin dragons are pretty different in some ways. Dragons here might be more different."

"You could hear Jensal, couldn't you?" Rhysel asked anxiously.

"Yeah," Talyn said. "I mean, I'm sure I can do it. I'm good at kamaï." Understatement. With kamaï he'd learned, there were nine other people as good at it as him - that being the number of other innate kyma in the world. As soon as he learned all the workings that there were, like Master Bryn had, he'd be the best kama of all time.

Jensal came back, with Artha on her arm. The baby shren looked drugged or drunk - or high on sootheweed, he supposed. And she was talkative, for a baby, the way the little red opal hadn't been. "Did you know," Artha said, "that sootheweed is not a weed because a weed means a bad plant that people don't want?"

"I didn't know that," said Rhysel.

Talyn accepted Artha out of Jensal's hands. Her scales were soft, and the hum of pain from her mind was faint, ignorable. But it didn't come from any sector he was used to hearing pain from. He didn't think he had any idea what that part of the mind *was* - he could only tell that

it hurt her.

She giggled at him anyway. "You're a scared," announced Artha.

"I'm a what?" She was referring to her empathy, he heard. "No, I'm not," he denied.

"Are so, I can tell, see," she said. Her tail waggled. "I'm greeeeeen. You're not green. Not even a little bit green. Paint won't help."

Talyn thought she was exaggerating his apprehension about working on an unfamiliar mind, but Jensal inserted, "Sootheweed is not renowned for its lack of side effects. Is that going to interfere?"

"Shouldn't," Talyn said. Being drunk or high wouldn't change anything, but sootheweed wasn't a Barashin plant. It *could* be different. "Okay, Artha, I'm going to try to make the hurting stop."

"You're not a weed!" cried Artha, contorting herself amusingly. "Because you don't grow from the ground."

Jensal and Rhysel spoke, but Talyn ignored them, sounding out the twists and turns of the little green's mind, holding her face in his hands. She was limp in his lap except for occasional giggles snuffling through her nostrils.

"It's weird in her head," Talyn murmured. It was a *maze*. "The pain's ignorable, but... everything's connected up strangely."

"Be careful with her," said Jensal. "I don't think her parents would care, based on the note they sent with her egg, but I value her life."

"I will," said Talyn, and he reached toward the pain and turned it off.

Artha made a sound. Talyn didn't know what to call it - something like a wail of pain, but not so coherent or sane. A sound that ought to have had a person behind it and didn't.

Chapter 2: Hearing

"What did you do?" roared Jensal, reaching for Artha, but he didn't know if she'd make things worse and smacked her hand aside. Artha was still moaning.

Talyn was still trying to figure that out. "I don't know! I'll undo it!" he cried. "I'll - here - just undo it - it'll be fine." He took back the magic, threading backwards through what he'd done exactly to prevent other side effects.

Artha silenced with a gurgling sound and jumped off of Talyn's lap, leaving tears in his shirt in her haste. She landed on Jensal and scrambled up to the elder shren's blue hair.

"What. Did. You. Do. To. Her?" Jensal demanded.

"I tried to cut off the pain," Talyn said, cringing against her fury. "But it must have been connected to something else. I don't know what it was but she's all hooked up as normal now! I'm sorry!"

"It was baaaaad! Make him go awaaaaay!" howled Artha. Talyn had to read her thoughts as much as listen to her speech to make out what she meant.

"Artha, sweetie," said Jensal, pulling Artha out of her hair, "what happened? Did it hurt?"

"No," sobbed Artha. Of course it hadn't hurt - he'd turned off the pain - "It didn't do anything," she said, bewilderingly. "I wasn't a thing that could hurt."

That seemed to be the extent of Artha's understanding of what had happened, despite Jensal's further queries. Finally, Jensal stared down both Talyn and Rhysel, thinking loudly that if they moved an inch while she was putting Artha to bed, she'd turn into something that could eat them.

"I'm sorry," Talyn whispered as Jensal stormed out, infant green in tow.

"You didn't mean to," Rhysel reassured him. "I just hope Jensal will let me or Master Revenn try other solutions."

It hadn't occurred to Talyn that he could have ruined the possibility of other kyma trying to make progress on the shren problem. Especially outside of Barashi, where kyma weren't already tarred with the brush left by the old prejudices.

Jensal was back presently, still fuming. "Both of you, out."

"Jensal," started Rhysel. Intending to apologize for Talyn again. He winced.

"Rhysel, I don't know what this kid did to convince you that he was safe to have mucking about with the babies, but I don't want him on the premises again. You can come back, after you mail me a complete description of what you want to try next and get written permission and not before. No more unannounced visits, and I don't care if you have to spend a year giving me a crash course in magic before I can understand what's going on, I will understand it before you do it to anyone under my care. Is that understood?" Talyn felt/saw white-orange anger pouring off the shren, but under that was a kicked, twisted stump of hope, shriveling even smaller than it had been, and it was his fault...

"Yes," muttered Rhysel, gripping Talyn's shoulders and pushing him out of the office and towards the exit. "I understand. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too," tried Talyn. "I didn't mean to hurt her. I didn't think it would -"

"Out," insisted Jensal, before he could beg her not to give up, tell her that kamai could do *anything*. "Just - out."

There was a day of downtime before the kamai demonstration at the school was

scheduled. Rhysel left Talyn to his own devices, apart from a stern warning about going anywhere near the shren house. Then, she went to read up on mind shielding - Talyn offered to help her, but she muttered that it would defeat the purpose and she could work from the book just fine.

Talyn soon grew bored with the confines of the tower. Rhysel gave him a pocketful of spending money, and he went out and flew aimlessly, eventually landing in a random Paraasilan street and listening to the meanings behind strangers' conversations. He'd learned several dozen words by the time he grew hungry and chose a restaurant with pleased-seeming customers to have lunch in.

He was able to order food - he pointed at something innocuous-looking on the illustrated menu and said, "This, please,". He was intrigued to note that the waiter was surprised by his accent. The humans in the country were dark and the elves were light, and Talyn looked well within the range of how locals expected Esmaarlan "half-elves" to look. He'd fit right in if he developed fluency and trained away the accent, not that he was particularly expecting to spend a *lot* of time in Esmaar.

The food was foreignly spiced, but there was plenty of it and it was hot. Talyn paid - with a little exasperated help from the waiter in counting from his coins - and then went and bought a change of clothes so he wouldn't have to carry on wearing the same things. Cleaning them wasn't hard, but he was tired of the outfit.

That expedition left him with one small-denomination disk of copper, and he flew back to Rhysel's tower to collect wood for use in the demonstration, and then turn in early. She was right - the days *were* longer - and he'd be glad of a long sleep at the demo.

On the day of the assembly, Rhysel brought Talyn to the transfer point she'd built at Binaaralav Academy, and then to the assembly room via a contraption called a "lift". Talyn sat at the table facing the chairs intended for the audience, and proceeded to valiantly ignore the conversation between Rhysel and her boyfriend. Rhysel's shield was only about half-done, and Aar Kithen had none at all, and Talyn was *not* comfortable picking up on all the subtext. Going home to visit his parents was bad enough; they'd been married for decades and decades and mellowed out some. At least the apprentices weren't allowed to date each other. He'd hate having to listen to, say, Jenn and Nevyn make goo-thoughts at each other sixteen divs a day.

The first attendee entered. "Hi!" said Talyn automatically. She was intensely striking - paper-pale with hair and eyes so black they could have been inked onto her. Even more black-and-white than a Malterian like Emryl's uncle Corvan; if it weren't for the splash of lavender at the throat of her white dress and around the waist she could have been a charcoal drawing. And... he could not hear her thoughts. Not even if - would Rhysel catch him at it? He risked it anyway - not even if he dropped all of his attempts at avoiding it.

"Aaralan Hhirheek," said Aar Kithen.

"Hi, Aar Kithen," said the girl. What was her *first* name? Aar Kithen wasn't even thinking it; if Rhysel knew it she wasn't leaking enough for Talyn to tell - and the girl herself was - Talyn pushed. She couldn't be shielded. Rhysel hadn't infused any Elcenians besides Aar Kithen, yet. So he couldn't hear her by accident, but if he *tried*... (he couldn't remember ever having to try before for surface thoughts...)

He pushed just hard enough, and then his mind was flooded with a storm of voices caterwauling in pitches he wouldn't have been able to hear with his ears, all howling over each other -

"Why did you jump off a cliff?" the girl asked him. He snapped back out of her mind,

away from the voices.

"What?" Rhysel said.

"How did you know I jumped off a cliff?" Talyn asked - Aar Kithen's thoughts translated the girl's Leraal for him, and he could manage the grammatical transformation well enough to ask the question.

"Your shoes," she said. "The way they moved - they hit the corner of the cliff, then fell, but they stepped, you weren't pushed - I mean, that's if you were wearing them. If someone else had them on when that happened, then I was wrong."

He hadn't replaced his shoes on the prior day's shopping trip; they were the same ones he'd worn cliffdiving. They were old and had stains from saltwater and mud and dropped bits of food, but weren't especially worn, as Talyn tended to fly whenever he could.

"You were right!" Talyn assured her. "What's your name?" He had to know her name. "Why is your head full of voices that aren't yours?" Would she even know? "I can't even tell what you're thinking if I *try*. That's *amazing*."

"You can hear them? I'm Leekath," she said. It was a pretty name. He could even pronounce it without image kamaï - he'd been afraid she'd have some horrid screeching name.

Aar Kithen interrupted Talyn from his attempt at figuring her out. "You *jumped off a cliff?*"

Rhysel's half-formed shield didn't stop Talyn from hearing a certain familiarity with the phenomenon. "It was cliffdiving! Rhysel used to do it, too," he deflected.

Not very effectively. "Is that how you broke your arm?" Rhysel asked. "You shouldn't be cliffdiving at all, but if you do, you should at least gather the energy to fly before you jump to begin with. If you wait you'll mistime and hurt yourself. You could have been killed."

"I wouldn't have been killed," Talyn denied. "My stonemagic is automatic now."

"And your arm broke because?" Rhysel inquired archly.

Talyn flinched, but he did have an answer. "Because it was just my arm. It's not automatic for *little* things - I have to be able to draw blood for some things and I don't know how to make a hole in a total defense yet - but I wouldn't have died." Rhysel wasn't planning to push it any farther, and he re-focused on Leekath. <Can you hear me?> he sent to her.

Leekath nodded, looking at him with round, calm eyes.

<Can you try replying to me? I know you don't have kamaï, but since I do, it *should* be possible to have a two-way conversation unless your voices get in the way of that too...>

<They're hhhiiiiias,> Leekath sent back clearly.

Talyn grinned. <What're hhhiiiiias?>

<The voices of objects,> sent Leekath. <They speak to me. I'm a hearer.>

<What do they say? I don't know the language they're speaking, and they don't have their own minds for me to read.>

<They're speaking vampire,> Leekath sent. <They talk about themselves. True things about themselves. I can ask them questions, if I want, and they skip to the parts I ask for, but otherwise they just talk about everything in a loop.>

<That's amazing. How'd you get to be able to do that?>

Leekath rolled her shoulders a little - not quite a shrug. <It happened when I was four,> she said. <It only ever happens to vampires. Most of us can't do it.>

<I hear things too,> Talyn volunteered. Leekath looked up to meet his eyes instead of gazing vaguely into the middle distance. <People's minds. I'm an innate kama - I don't so much have to learn *to* do kamaï as learn to *not* do it. And I can hear people's minds without trying,

unless I distract myself all the time.>

<But you can't hear me?>

<No. I want to, though. Is it okay with you if I try? I'm sure I can figure it out. Then we can talk without me having to ask you so many questions about basic stuff,> he sent.

<Okay,> Leekath replied.

Talyn followed her voice - a hollower, smoother version of the one she spoke with aloud. Its path through her mind led him between the screeching hhikiiias, although he could hear them growing louder as he peered deeper. And there was the surface of her own mind, with her own thoughts. <So you want to learn kamai?> he asked her. Other students were starting to fill the auditorium, all with typically transparent thoughts, but Talyn's attention was on Leekath.

<Maybe,> she said. <It sounds like it might be interesting. I want to know more about it, at least.>

<It's great!> Talyn encouraged. <Kamai can do anything.>

<I don't think it can do *anything*,> Leekath sent. <But it can do different things from wizardry, or at least do them differently.> She was thinking of wizardry's limitations - gestures and words for every spell, channeling sting, the inability to resurrect the dead or travel back in time.

<Okay, not literally *anything*,> Talyn admitted. <We can't bring back the dead either - though we can talk to them - and we can't do time travel - and there's some workings that are forbidden to do, but kamai can do a lot. And without any gestures or words for most of it, and no channeling sting, just drain.>

<You can talk to dead people?> Talyn checked, anxiously, and sighed with relief on finding that her interest was academic; she hadn't lost anyone close to her.

<Actually that set of workings doesn't work here, or it didn't when Aar Kithen tried it,> Talyn said. <We aren't going to do any death kamai today, because there's nothing else really suited to a demo. I mean, I could read someone's lifespan, but nobody wants that done.>

<You could read mine.>

<You'd want to know your lifespan? That's when you'll die of old age,> Talyn clarified. <If a disease or an accident or something doesn't get you first, you'd know when you were going to die, down to the slice.>

<I already know it. Or, I don't know how much a slice is ->

<A little over four splits,> he said, scanning for her concepts of time to attach words to. <But how do you know your lifespan?>

<Well, it's not going to stay the same,> she said. <But I know what it ought to be now. I've been keeping track of who I bite.>

<Who you...> But he didn't finish the question; he just poked around for the answer. *Interesting...* vampires weren't just prettily monochromatic, they drank blood, and adopted the lifespan of whoever they bit, but when they bit different people, each meal was averaged. Leekath fed mostly on elves, with occasional treats of dragon's blood, spaced out as each dragon she knew was acquainted with several vampires. <*Oh*. So you wouldn't mind?>

<No, I wouldn't mind.>

<If I'm going to show it to everybody I'm going to have to convert the years. It doesn't have to be exact - it'll tell me down to the slice, but there's no good reason to do that much math. How long are your days? How many days in a year?>

They worked out a conversion formula, while Rhysel made a stone golem of an aurum-dove for a girl in the audience. "We have a guest here today," Rhysel announced,

indicating Talyn. Talyn looked away from Leekath, to watch Rhysel for signals about when she wanted him to get started. "While Aar Kithen and I will be competent to teach introductory kamaï in all five disciplines by the time next term starts, Talyn's been generalizing for a few years now and can show off some more interesting, advanced workings outside elemental kamaï, which will make for a better show. Talyn?"

Talyn didn't have enough Leraal to address the audience in their language, so language-free mindspeech it was. <Hello, everybody,> he conveyed, stepping up the "volume" to include the whole room. <This is called mindspeech. It's almost the most basic mind kamaï there is. Really advanced stuff is just about like what Keo can do - maybe not as powerful, but the same sort of thing. Who wants to see a memory I have of flying over the Baltrys Mountains with a flock of wild rocs ->

<What's a roc?> Leekath asked.

<Oh, you don't have rocs here. Really, really big birds - while I was turned invisible so they wouldn't try to eat me? It was great! Raise your hand if you want to opt out though.>

Some people put their hands in the air, but Leekath wasn't one of them. Talyn noted the attendees who wanted to be excluded, and sent along the memory to everyone else. He'd been ten, he'd just mastered invisibility hot on the heels of learning to fly, and when he saw the rocs he hadn't been able to resist chasing them. The heavy disturbances their wings made in the air nearly clobbered him when he flew close, magical mastery of the air notwithstanding; he'd almost tried to ride one, but he'd certainly have been noticed then. Domestic rocs were dangerous enough. Wild ones weren't going to tolerate an invisible burden settling on their backs.

He'd flown with the rocs for almost a div, but the students didn't want to see the whole thing; when some of them became bored he cut off and moved on. <There's no animals in here. So that kind of limits what I can do with wild kamaï - I don't know how to shapeshift yet, and no one here is injured so I can't show a healing. But wild kyma can do with wood what Rhysel just did with rock, except for the conjuration part - the wood does have to grow from a plant. So I brought this.> He pulled out the mottled block of wood, harvested and smushed together from several shrubs on Rhysel's property, from where it had been stashed in her satchel. He started teasing it in his hands, showing off a bit. <Anyone else want a critter?>

A boy three seats down from Leekath wanted a blue chinchilla. Talyn made it, covering for his inexpert shaping of the animal with the dense, fine fur. It would hop around awkwardly, but it would be soft and cuddly (and blue), which was what the boy really wanted. Golem given away, Talyn moved on. <Death kamaï's hard to demonstrate, in a setting like this. Actually, when we planned this I wasn't going to do any death kamaï at all because it all involves things like summoning dead people - and I don't know anyone who died on this world -> (Talyn wasn't about to give up on the working in Elcenia altogether; it might just be Aar Kithen) <or animating corpses - not pretty - or killing things - which, again, there's no animals here. But there's one thing I can do that Leekath just volunteered for!>

"Talyn, what are you doing?" muttered Rhysel.

<It's okay,> Talyn assured her, only her, and he carried on. <Leekath, can you come up here and sit on the desk or something?> he asked the vampire. As she complied, he broadcasted, <Death kyma can tell how long someone's lifespan is, assuming they die of old age, not accident or illness or something else. Most people don't want to know that, but Leekath already has a pretty good idea, because she's a vampire.>

Aar Kithen explained the situation to Rhysel; Talyn took Leekath's hand. Her skin was soft and smooth and cool, and as he read her lifespan, sifting along it year by year and counting

them up in his mind, he tried to think if there was any other excuse to touch her that he could pass off as part of the demo. Probably not. <It's not part of the working to show the number visibly,> he announced. <I'm going to do that separately with image kamai so you can all see. But I'm getting the information with death kamai. And I'm converting it from Barashin years to Elcenian ones with ordinary math, which is not supposed to be part of this demo but what are you going to do.>

Several people in the audience thought he was funny, but mostly he wanted to know if Leekath thought he was funny. She thought he was a little funny. That was... okay. He finished counting up her years. He did the arithmetic. It didn't seem like many - Elcenian elves didn't live as long as Barashin halfbloods, even, let alone Barashin elves. He pulled the symbols out of Leekath's mind and projected them into the air for everyone to see.

<Is that about what you were expecting, Leekath?>

"I was two years off," she said aloud. She was very quiet, pursing her lips at the displayed value. Talyn boosted her volume with an image working, which was next on the program anyway, so everyone would be able to hear. "I had to estimate for the first couple hundred..."

There was a pause, and finally Talyn let Leekath's hand go and she sat back down. <Thanks!> he sent. <And now, image kamai!> He brought up some music, and set off some illusory fireworks - he had enough practice entertaining young relatives with this sort of thing that he could do it in his sleep - and he also conjured everyone cookies. He wondered if Leekath could eat cookies. Illusion ones wouldn't hurt her, but she might not be a cookie-liking person. <Pass them around. They have no nutritional content at all. No content, period, they're imaginary - but they've got texture and taste like the real thing, just like Mom makes,> he said of the imaginary baked goods. Leekath passed on the plate when it got to her without taking any.

Rhysel steered Talyn back into his seat, when the cookies were on their way around the room. "Thank you!" she said, not sounding particularly grateful - he surmised because of his stunt with the death working, but her shield was in the way of telling. "Now, none of you in the audience currently have the ability to perform any kamai at all. However, I've reconstructed a previously lost working that will let me infuse people with the capacity. Aar Kithen was infused in this way, and he's now as capable of kamai as I am." Aar Kithen floated a few feet off the ground, made a globe of handfire, and then descended back to his chair. "The process hasn't done him any harm, but - I'll let him describe it."

"It involves drinking an unpleasant-tasting, effervescent liquid," Aar Kithen said, "and falling unconscious for an extended sleep."

"I'll take questions now," concluded Rhysel.

Leekath asked hers first. "How am I supposed to fall unconscious after drinking a liquid," she asked, "when I can't sleep in this shape or drink in the other one?" She had another shape - he looked - she could turn into a *bat* - Talyn resolved to learn shapechanging kamai as soon as Revenn would let him touch it.

"You'll probably want to shift and fall asleep right away after you drink the infusion," Rhysel guessed. Leekath nodded and closed her eyes.

<You can turn into a bat? That's fantastic,> Talyn told Leekath. <What kind of bat?>

<All vampires can turn into bats,> she said, puzzled over his fascination. <It's not a kind of bat that exists other than in the form of vampires being it.>

<Ooh. What do you look like when you turn into a bat?>

<I don't really know. I guess probably something like my family does.>

Rhysel sent Talyn outside to find a tree branch and make another golem out of it; this ate several subs he could have been spending talking to Leekath, but he didn't kick up a fuss about it, just made the requested pygmy elephant (as cartoonishly as he thought he'd get away with, to avoid the fine detail called for in a realistic sculpture) and animated it. <Why don't you know?>

<Vampires don't show up in mirrors. I've seen photographs of myself from when I was little, but only in this shape, not the bat shape.>

<Do you know what you look like now?> he asked her.

<Probably like a fourteen-year-old version of myself as a kid,> she said. <I'm growing my hair out a little because my sister told me to, so I guess it's longer now except the bangs...>

<You're beautiful,> he said insistently, and showed her herself in a visual sending. <Look.>

There was a long silence. Leekath opened her eyes to look at him. <You think I'm pretty?>

<Yeah! You're really pretty!>

She didn't seem to have a response to that, and Talyn's attention was pulled away again when he heard his name. He caught up on the conversation with Aar Kithen's thoughts.

"Theory," said a dragon boy who'd lingered after nearly everyone else had dispersed. "When you conjured that rock, where did it come from? What features of Leekath did Talyn's spell -"

"Working," Rhysel corrected.

"Working - look at to tell how long her lifespan is now? What was the fire you conjured fueled by? Do you have to actually know anything about the behavior of animals you make golems of, and if so, how much? Is mindspeech language-dependent? Are the -" The boy's mind was enflamed with curiosity; Talyn frowned with vicarious frustration when Rhysel cut him off.

"Whoa, whoa," Rhysel interrupted. "I'm not a teacher yet. Maybe you should enroll."

"Plan to," the dragon boy said. "But I have these questions now and I'll only have more after I see more kamai, so -"

Rhysel interrupted him *again*. Hadn't she ever wanted to learn things? "So," she said, "it'll require a lot more background to answer some of those. I can see why you waited for a thinner crowd before you asked your questions, but I'm not sure I'm even equipped to give the theoretical understanding you seem to want."

"Mindspeech is language-dependent the most basic way but not in more advanced forms," Talyn cut in, hoping to help assuage at least some of the poor dragon's searing need to know. He spoke Martisen; the dragon understood it just fine. Useful property. Could kamai do *that*, without intermediate mindreading...? "I don't know Leraal very well - just what I've been able to pick up listening to people think - so I used a kind that isn't. And we don't need to know much about how the animals work - the forms take care of that. I don't know the answers to the rest of it though."

"What's your name?" Rhysel asked the dragon boy.

"Kaylo," he replied. Talyn committed the name to memory. "Will you be doing any theory in the classes proper?"

"Some. Probably less than you'd like, but I can't please everyone," Rhysel said. "I'll be able to get you books, if you're interested enough to study on your own time."

"Will definitely take you up on that. But I'll leave you be for now," Kaylo said.

"Thanks," he added to Talyn. Talyn smiled, then looked at Leekath again.

<Will you go out with me?> blurted Talyn to the thoughtful vampire.

<How can I do that if you're going back to Barashi?> she asked. But she wanted to. She *wanted* to.

"Rhysel," Talyn said at once, "how long am I welcome to stay?"

"As far as I'm concerned, however long you want," she said. "But won't your grandfather want you back soon?"

<There, I can stay long enough to take you out,> he sent Leekath. "Aar Kithen, can you send him a letter for me?" <Grandfather'll let me stay a bit, Leekath. He'll want to hear all about Elcenia anyway, I know it.>

"I can," said Aar Kithen.

"I want to stay a couple more days," Talyn said. <Tomorrow?> he asked Leekath, as she smoothed the skirt of her dress.

<All right,> she said. <Tomorrow, evening, after classes.> And she got up and left the auditorium, eyes closed but amazingly not bumping into anything.

<I'll see you then!> he sent after her.

All he had to do was think of somewhere to take her.

Chapter 3: Writing

Leekath was enrolled in six classes: Seventh Tier Theory, Intermediate Scrying, Introduction to Wards, World History 3, Survey of Natural Things 3, and Spell Diagrams 2. She had also been in a Teleportation Workshop, the first two weeks of the term, but it had ended almost a week before. Even people who were legally obligated to be very careful about who was and was not allowed to teleport couldn't justify making wizard students spend two months on one spell with only half a dozen practicable variants.

For this reason, and thankfully not often for the other, Leekath's roommate Hihhliir routinely announced that Leekath was insane.

"Do you ever do anything besides schoolwork?" Hihhliir asked.

She'd asked before. The answer was always the same. "I write letters to my family," Leekath repeated. Her pen echoed the lines she wrote on the history summation - Linnipese rebellion against Ertydo, 10986 - and she didn't have to look at the paper. It would tell her if the writing veered away from the lines. "I listen to music -"

"You *buy* music. You never put any on," Hihhliir said. "At least not when I'm in the room."

Leekath could hear the music perfectly well without actually activating the crystals. All the songs, all the time. "Oh," she said. It wasn't any use telling Hihhliir that. "Sometimes you *are* out."

"Usually you are too, though," Hihhliir said. "Anyway, tonight you're going to actually listen to some music! Aren't you excited?"

"Wait," said Leekath, "what?" Hihhliir wasn't a *thing*, and had to be *coaxed* to tell. The objects in the room gave no clues, this time.

"That boy," Hihhliir came. "A half-elf boy -"

"How do you know about him?" Leekath asked.

"He came here, while you were at Wards," Hihhliir said. "He wanted advice on where to take you out tonight, and I said, if I had a boyfriend, I'd make him take me to Rheeekaaan's concert -"

"She's in *town*?" Leekath asked. Four of the singer's crystals warbled in the desk drawer dedicated to music.

"Mm-hm, and that boy said he'd take you there. He's very cute, Leekath. But what'll your dads think?"

Leekath put her pen down and sat on her hands. The chair spoke up when her skin touched it, but it was familiar; she could ignore it. "I didn't ask."

"My parents'd never let me date somebody who wasn't a vampire or at least a dragon," Hihhliir said. "Never ever. I would be in *so* much trouble..."

"I'm due in Theory," Leekath said, standing up quickly and scooping up the relevant stack of books and papers. "Later."

Leekath arrived four degrees early for her theory class, which was taught entirely from the textbook and had therefore lost all of its interest by the second week, when the book had read itself to her in full for the eighth time. She closed her eyes. Being a vampire had its privileges: she could not possibly be falling asleep in class, and in the unlikely event that the teacher was gesturing meaningfully, she could be echolocating and no one in the room would know any better. So there was no way to prove that she wasn't paying attention, even though she wasn't.

Shoes counted aloud the steps they'd taken. Sweaters described their knitting patterns.

Every copy of the textbook chorused together in unison. A chair up front had a loose joint. One of the boys had brought a stuffed toy, hidden away in his bookbag; Leekath couldn't guess at his motivations. A girl off to the left had pierced herself in places Leekath didn't want to contemplate, and the jewelry murmured its carat value and design. The chalk on the shelf under the slate behind the teacher's desk whistled out all the words it had traced in the past.

"Leekath," said the teacher, "please read aloud page 204, paragraph six."

The book would skip ahead in its monologue, if she asked it to, and then she could speak a beat behind - but she couldn't translate in her head that fast, and the book's hikiia spoke vampire like every other hikiia even though the book was in Leraal. Leekath flipped the text open and read it with her eyes instead. "Spell invention is a laborious process," she said. "In general, the simpler the desired spell, the more work must be invested initially to create it and add it to the canon: there is a tradeoff between invention complexity and spell complexity (e.g. it is easy to invent a circle spell, as much intentional work is offloaded onto the diagram). The essence of invention is akin to the intentional component, writ large. Apart from inventor's intention, there is no intrinsic reason why the sound *tyo* ought to correspond to the color-changing effect in particular..."

Theory ended, eventually, and Leekath hied her way to the Survey of Natural Things, a generalist academic course on plants and animals and rocks and stars and the like for people who didn't care to spend half their wizarding education in specialized botany and zoology and geology and astronomy courses to be able to pass general education tests. Leekath wasn't especially interested in live plants and animals, which didn't talk to her, or in stars, which might if only they weren't so far away, but she did like the rocks. The teacher often brought in fossils and taxidermy, which were all right.

Natural Things was short. There was a ten-degree break afterwards, which Leekath spent flying around outside rather than returning to her and Hihhliir's room, and then Scrying.

Leekath learned the scry of the day - a past-watch defined by person and event. The rest of the class was spent testing the limits of the spell. She could not, it turned out, view events in the lives of people she'd only heard of and never met (so she couldn't witness God speaking to the Most Holy Founder, or the Linnipese rebels ousting the Ertydoan occupation); she couldn't watch her aaihhhi and fheeil meet (because they'd met at temple under anti-scrying protections); and she couldn't confirm her sister's story about seeing *the* Ruth Samihaan at the boutique last month, because that event apparently hadn't happened (but at least she knew Iilha had been lying).

When Leekath went back to her room, Talyn was waiting for her.

The tickets would have eagerly told her everything printed on them anyway, from where they were tucked in his pocket, so Leekath hoped he hadn't wanted the concert to be a surprise. "Hi," she said.

"Hi, Leekath," he said, grinning brightly. His clothes were brand new, though the shoes were the same ones he'd walked off the cliff with. "Did you have a good day?"

"It was fine. Hihhliir said we're going to a Rheeekaaan concert?" she said, instead of remarking on the tickets' report of the same.

Talyn pulled the tickets out. "I know you can hear them," he said. "It's okay."

She shuffled her feet. "People don't like it."

He shrugged, still smiling, and pressed a ticket into her hand. "I'm not them. I won't pretend I can't hear thoughts, you don't pretend you can't hear things, okay?"

"Okay," Leekath said. He was still holding her hand. He was quite hot; she wondered if he felt it, or if it was only normal for him. "How do you want to go into town? I could teleport us most of the way - I'm allowed now - or we could fly, or we might be able to get there in time if we walk, too..."

"I'd love to fly with you," he said warmly.

"You don't turn into anything - I guess a window isn't the best way out -"

"Depends on the window, but yeah, we should probably go out by a door," Talyn said.

"I don't think you'll *like* vampire music," confessed Leekath, heading for the lift. "Most people who aren't vampires don't. You won't even be able to hear some of the notes."

"Will *you* enjoy it?" Talyn asked her.

She nodded. "Hihhliir knows what I like. How did you find our room to ask her, though? Front entrance," she added, for the lift's benefit.

"I wandered around until I heard where the vampire dorm is," he said. "They put all of you in this one wing, apparently?"

"The rooms are laid out differently. We need perches, not beds, and don't want mirrors, and need enchanted glass to keep out the burning parts of sunlight, and different plumbing. And we don't care if we're a three-degree lift ride away from the cafeteria. So it makes sense to put us together. Halflings get their own wing too because they want smaller furniture. But they put leonines in with the humans and the elves."

"And dragons?" asked Talyn.

"There's only a couple enrolled. I'm not sure where they live," she said. "They don't have sign-up sheets to bite them like Keo does."

There was a silence. The lift opened to the front hall and the pair stepped out. "Speaking of which," Talyn asked with deliberate casualness, "are you hungry?"

"Just a little. I ate six days ago," Leekath said. "Why?"

"Well," said Talyn, "I was thinking, after the concert, if you wanted dinner, I could give you dinner." They stepped outside, and Leekath tried to think of a graceful way to explain that she was used to elves at the least, and a half-elf wouldn't taste very good by comparison. Talyn saved her the trouble. "Halfbloods live for more than eight hundred Elcenian years," he said. "I did the conversion. I'm not going to be as tasty as a dragon, but I should beat an Elcenian elf, right?" He blinked suddenly and looked at the setting sun. "Are you okay outside before sunset...?"

"I have a sunscreening spell on," she said. "It's mostly the lower tier students who need the special windows. And there are legal regulations about it, that Binaaralav has to follow even though it's a wizard school and suncreening is easy. And you're right. You will be tastier than an Elcenian elf."

Talyn grinned at her. "Great. Let's fly!"

He flew without any discernible change in demeanor, let alone shape. Leekath blinked into her bat form at the height of where her head had been, hearing abrupt silence in place of the voices of her clothes, and beat her wings to propel herself towards town. Her eyes as a bat were even worse than otherwise, and she gave her navigation over to echolocation, letting the bounced echoes of high squeaks paint a picture of the landscape and her date.

"Can you talk in this shape? Aloud, I mean?" Talyn asked her.

<No,> she thought at him, like she had at the demo. He nodded; he'd heard. <Not in Leraal. I can speak vampire like this, but not while I'm trying to find my way around by sound too.>

<Thank goodness for mindspeech, right?>

<It seems pretty handy,> she agreed. She hadn't felt the inconvenience of quietude in bat form, but she'd generally had few people to talk to.

<Don't you have lots of friends? Your roommate seems to like you,> Talyn said.

<She's all right. She's a lot younger than me, though. And she's the only roommate I've had who didn't request a swap.> At his incredulous look - she could observe his face freely without losing track of where she was going - she went on. <I've never met another vampire who could hear things the way I can, but there are more of us. And most people think it's a disease. I think the things I hear are true - I know things I couldn't know any other way - but I don't try to convince people, anymore. It makes them uncomfortable.>

<They're *wrong*.>

<Thank you,> Leekath sent.

The concert venue had both chairs and perches, the latter at various heights throughout the broad space of the hall. Leekath chose a seat; she didn't expect Talyn would want to hover near the ceiling for the duration of the show. Vampires - only vampires - were quickly filling every space in both forms; Talyn stood out clearly, with curls and colors that couldn't belong to an actual Rheeekaaan fan, and they got looks.

<Hopefully no one will actually bother you,> Leekath sent. She didn't have overmuch experience with the treatment of non-vampires by monospecific groups of vampires. No one in her household had ever brought a "bleeder" home, and of course they were never at temple, and everywhere else vampires were a minority. <They *shouldn't*, this is just a concert, but...>

<I pretended I didn't understand what the ticket seller was saying, when he wanted to know if I had a clue what I was buying tickets for,> Talyn sent.

Odd looks were still all the couple had received by the time the hall went black. Leekath, along with everyone else save Talyn, sent a peeling *eep* to confirm the shape of the room in the sudden darkness, and she heard the shape of the singer who'd appeared onstage. A spotlight came up, illuminating a willow-narrow vampire woman in a long red dress with a red crystal held to her lips.

"Hello, Paraasilan," she murmured into the crystal, which filled the hall with her voice, and before the audience's shrieking cheers died down, she launched into her first song. It was a note-perfect copy of the same number on Leekath's crystal, but it had more fire and verve in person, and more depth of dynamic transition. She almost completely forgot she was with someone, until the last high reprise of the theme died away.

<You don't like it, do you?> Leekath asked Talyn, when the song concluded and her cheeks hurt from grinning and her feet from stamping on the floor.

<It's not *bad*, it just doesn't sound very... musical, to me,> he apologized. <I can enjoy it vicariously, though! I'm glad you're having fun.>

Rheeekaaan waited for the stomping (from the seated audience) and the squeaking (from the bat-shaped listeners) to die down, and sang again.

"That was *wonderful*," sighed Leekath, twirling out of the concert hall. Hhikiiias popped into existence as vampires transformed into clothed humanoid shapes en masse to depart. "Thank you for taking me."

"The day's not over yet," Talyn said, grinning at her and taking her hand to lead her away from the throng exiting the building after them. "I think I promised you a meal."

Leekath peered at his neck. "I do have to say," she said, "since you're not from here and might not know, that it's against vampire religion to bite anyone without their permission, it's a really *bad* sin, and permission doesn't count if you feel obligated, or like you *should* be feeding me, or anything like that. We're not even allowed to pay people - I mean, I know I didn't pay you, but - I just mean that you don't have to let me, if you don't really want to."

"I really want to," he murmured, tilting his head.

"I just have to make really, really sure, because -"

"Please," he said.

Leekath studied his face, which was open and hopeful. "It won't hurt," she promised. "You might be a little dizzy, and you should eat soon, and drink plenty of water or juice or something, but I won't take enough to hurt you and my fangs are anaesthetic -"

Talyn held his arms out, wrapped them around her, and pulled her in.

He smelled like blood. She could hear his pulse beating, *thud-thud-thud-thud-thud*, and wondered, not for the first time, how people with heartbeats didn't go mad listening to that day and night.

She opened her mouth and closed her teeth in his throat.

The sensation of drinking was called "flavor", because that was the only word available for sensations accompanying food, but Leekath didn't think non-vampires could be having the same experience when they ate their... sandwiches, or soup, or casseroles, or whatever else they ate. They were too casual about it. And tastes varied too much. And after finishing meals they were up and about as normal.

Feeding was a sacrament, and everyone would agree on how to rank all possible gifts of blood, and it always left Leekath tired and content and full of well-being.

"Are you okay?" Talyn prompted when she lifted her head from his shoulder and wobbled back.

"Mm-hm," she said with a sigh.

"Am I tasty?" he asked, half-grinning.

She nodded. He wasn't as staggeringly delectable as dragons were. But those were occasional treats, and his blood was a far sight better than the elf blood she was accustomed to. "You're really tasty."

"You were right, it didn't hurt," he said, prodding at the puncture wounds in his neck. They weren't dripping any more blood - the fangs took care of that too - but they wouldn't heal on their own for a couple of weeks. "I actually can't feel those spots on my neck at all anymore."

"If you go to a light, the numbness will go away along with the bite mark," Leekath said. "I don't know what will happen if you get Rhysel to heal you, though. Can kyma heal themselves? Lights can't, but they also can't heal other lights, so I don't think kyma can work quite the same..."

"Kyma can heal each other," he said. "But not ourselves. I think I'll leave the mark, anyway," he added, smiling perkily at her. "To remember you by when I have to go home."

Leekath ground the toe of her sandal into a gap between cobbles in the street, glancing away shyly. "I guess you're probably not going to come back, are you."

"I... don't know," he admitted. "My grandfather won't let me stay here indefinitely. I have to go back and study more. Once I'm a Journeyman I'll be assigned a town to look after, and I'll have to talk to the town's council for leave if I want to go anywhere. Once I'm a Master I can take apprentices and they can look after the town, but somebody has to look after *them*, and you

don't take older apprentices right away so I'd have to wait for my first ones to get old enough, and becoming a Master might take me a couple of years by itself. But I might get another break soon and I don't *have* to spend *all* of them home with my parents," he added hopefully. "And if somebody would be willing to summon me here..."

"I can do it, I can get a teacher's supervision and do it," Leekath said. "My Diagrams teacher would probably even count it for credit."

"...Uh, I'm sure you're the best wizard ever and would never trap me in -"

"That won't happen," Leekath said with certainty. "I can cast a summon by myself just fine. It's actually really hard to do what happened to Rhysel."

"We should write letters," Talyn said suddenly. "Then I can tell you when I have time -"

"I don't have a place to keep the circles drawn long term, but maybe Aar Kithen would be willing to -"

"Rhysel'd ask him for me if I asked her -"

"Letters," said Leekath. It was only half-satisfying. People's writing didn't read itself to her in their own voice; she'd hear his words in some other, a translated keen, not necessarily even a *male* voice. "And tell me when you can come back."

"You could come to Barashi," Talyn said.

"And stay where?" Leekath asked. "I'd have to be in a building. My suncreening spell would break in another world. Rhysel will put you up when you're here, but if I go there..."

"I'll ask Grandfather," Talyn said. "I'm sure he'll let you, but - yeah, I do have to ask."

"Letters," Leekath said again.

"Letters," Talyn echoed.

"Do you want to fly back to school with me?" Leekath asked.

"Yes."

Dear Leekath,

I'm back at Barashi now, and thank goodness now everybody believes me about Elcenia. (Keo came here a while ago. I met her, and told Jenn and Mysha and Emryl about her, but none of them believed me.)

Jenn's looking over my shoulder. She thinks I should tell you that I hang out with girls because those are the apprentices closer to my age and not for any other reason and she thinks I should tell you that I'm not allowed to date them anyway, and she doesn't seem to have bad intentions telling me so, so I am. There's three boys and four girls (the other girl is Pyelle, and the boys are Nevyn and Byron, but both of the other boys are years older than me.) I started kamaï younger than most people because I'm an innate kama, so I actually was here before Jenn and Mysha were (but after Emryl). Pyelle showed up really recently.

Jenn is still reading over my shoulder and she should really stop that but she says I should explain innate kyma. We're even rarer than spontaneous kyma (like Rhysel). I'm the youngest one and there's only nine more in the world. We manifest early (usually people with kamaï ability can't use it until they're twelve or thirteen - older for fairies, I don't know about dragons or trolls) (I mean Barashin dragons) and we accidentally do kamaï, but not dangerous stuff like spontaneous kyma do, more like my mindreading. (I'm really glad that didn't bother you.)

Have to go help Pyelle with a working she's stuck on. I'll seal this up but I'll write another letter soon. I don't know when Aar Kithen's going to summon them.

Sincerely, Talyn

Talyn,

I had to look up an old old spell to let me write this letter in Martisen (I know you can speak some Leraal now but I don't think you can read it, am I wrong?). Putting a translation spell on the letter wouldn't work since it'd break as soon as the letter got to you, and the spell is old since for most purposes it's better to just put a spell that will let you understand everything in your native language and sound like everybody else's native language to them. But anyway, this one works, and I cast it with Rhysel as a focus so now I can write in Martisen. If any of the grammar is weird please blame the spell.

(I can understand your letters whatever you write them in, since the hikiia will translate.)

Hihliir was so jealous that I got to go to the concert, even though it was her idea that you take me! She's not really old enough to be dating, but I told her there was no reason she shouldn't buy a ticket for herself. She said it was too expensive, but she buys a lot of clothes. I told her to skip the next shopping trip and she can borrow some of mine; she'll fit a couple of my old things. I'm the youngest girl in my family (I have younger cousins, but they're boys) so I don't have anyone else to hand things down to. Do you have brothers and sisters?

I'm going to take this to Rhysel's tower to send now. I'll write more tomorrow.

- Leekath

Dear Leekath,

The grammar looks fine. (But I didn't actually do all that well in Language and Literature in primary school so maybe I'm just not noticing mistakes.) Is that handwriting anything like your actual handwriting? It's so neat. I can write a tiny little bit of Leraal that I memorized from signs around town but definitely not enough for a letter, so it's good you're a hearer! Kamai can do some translation but nothing that would stick to the letter. It's all mind kamai.

I wonder if I could stick a working to a crystal. But that's not even a little related to what I'm doing now so Master would probably be annoyed with me if I started working on it too much. (I'm not supposed to do kamai all the time; when I'm not studying I'm apparently going to stunt my growth if I don't "have fun" outside of kamai, which doesn't mean flying and doesn't mean messing with image magic and definitely doesn't mean cliffdiving. It usually winds up meaning card games, which I don't think are all that fun. Whatever.)

I have a lot of brothers and sisters! Three of them are younger than me. The other fifteen are older. My parents had kids in batches - I'm second in my batch. I don't see older siblings that often except for Coryl who's just a little older than me. You didn't say if you have brothers or sisters?

Grandfather's been concentrating on Byron more than the rest of us lately. Byron's almost ready to be a Journeyman; he's a really accomplished wild kama. (I don't know why people specialize, but most people do.) I think he'll probably be out of here by the end of the year, and then Grandfather will start looking for another apprentice or two. But he might wait until he's tracked down the rumors about a demon in our province. Usually there aren't any demons and people just start rumors for attention or to cover up crimes or something.

Sincerely, Talyn

Talyn,

I'm glad me being a hearer doesn't bother you. One of my dads sometimes says I'm going to have a hard time finding friends and people to go out with my whole life because of it.

I don't understand how playing with kamai doesn't count as having fun. Especially flying! Are card games really the most interesting thing you can do that your grandfather thinks counts? Couldn't you read books or listen to music?

I have an older sister and my brother is the middle child. He studies dance and she's taking classes to be a hairdresser. We live in a house with just twelve people in it (us three, my dads, fheel's parents and sister, my aunt's husband, and their three kids). Most people in Esmaar have more people than that living with them. I don't know how many is usual where you live.

How is it decided when you're done with an apprenticeship? For wizards we pass a test to graduate each tier, and when we pass the tenth, we're wizards.

The other letter in this sending is for your grandfather. Did you ask him if I could stay over? (It's okay if you didn't. The letter asks the same thing.) Because Rhysel and Aar Kithen want someone to pass messages in person, and I said I'd do it. If your grandfather says yes I'm going to come over every weekend. That's two Elcenian days from when Aar Kithen is sending this letter. He says I'll show up really early in the morning (before your suns are up) so I'll have time to get inside. I'd ask you what a demon is but you can tell me then in person!

- Leekath

Chapter 4: Visiting

Talyn didn't usually get up for night watch. Nevyn was the one who loved the dark and would happily awaken at one to take over for Emryl or Byron, and be ready to address the needs of any townsfolk who came beating on the door at night.

Talyn was up because Leekath was coming, early, and he didn't want the first person she saw to be a stranger who couldn't even speak to her.

Jenn had teased him. "You've barely met this girl," she said. "She went on one date with you, *if* that's even true -"

"It's true!"

"And now you're getting up while the gods sleep to meet her, even though any of us could supposedly write her notes and she'd understand them with that power she has, and Mysha could mindspeak to her and she'd take a nightwatch turn if you asked her to..."

"I just want to, okay?" And Jenn had shrugged, thinking *denial!*, and gone to bed, and he'd gone to bed too. Byron had dutifully woken him up when it was time for the shift to change, and Talyn was pacing on the first floor of the tower.

The big sand glass apparatus that was turned at dawn each day said it was two-fourteen when there was finally a soft knock on the door. Talyn threw it aside to reveal Leekath, weakly illuminated by the fire-writing he'd been tracing around the walls from edginess. She had a bag over her shoulder, and she was smiling tentatively. "Hi," she said.

"Hi, Leekath!" he said, and he wove his way past the *hhikiiias* to figure out if she'd let him hug her. That wasn't even passive listening - he had to *look* - but he wanted to know, and finding out by just hugging her was too risky.

Finding her subconsciously amenable, he plucked her bag out of the way, set it on the floor, and pulled her past the threshold into a hug. "It's good to see you again," he murmured.

"Well, I can stay until Chenen afternoon," she said, hugging him back and leaning her head on his shoulder. "I'm not sure exactly what time that will be here, but it's about two Elcenian days, total - Fenen night, all Lunen, most of the daylight angles of Chenen." She leaned a little more. "I'm actually pretty tired. It's almost when I go to sleep."

"Why aren't you nocturnal?" Talyn asked, steering her towards a low couch that curved with the tower wall. She sat next to him agreeably enough. "I'd think any species that doesn't like the sun would be inside while it's shining."

"I'm not nocturnal 'cause Binaaralav doesn't have night classes," Leekath said. "Vampires who don't have to do things on a schedule with non-vampires do sleep days, but there's more of them than there are of us. There have to be or we'd have some trouble eating regularly," she added.

"Speaking of which," Talyn said. "It was a, um, 'week' ago that I gave you dinner. That's a normal amount of time between feedings for you, right?"

"Yes," she said, "give or take a couple of days."

"Do you want to bite me again?"

"It's not safe for you, so soon. I can go without while I'm here and eat when I go back to school, or maybe one of the others here will want to let me?" she said. She still had her arms wrapped around his middle and her head on his shoulder. The way they'd sat down had one of her knees over one of his.

"Oh," said Talyn, disgruntled. "Uh, sure. We're all halfbloods here except Pyelle, who's an elf." He ground his teeth once before continuing, out of a sense of obligatory honesty, "And

Barashin elves live longer than halfbloods."

"Ooh," Leekath said.

"Will you kiss me?" he blurted, without even checking for the answer first.

She went a little stiff. "I - I don't know *how*. Um, and if I accidentally fang you, your face will go numb just like your neck did. And there aren't lights here, right?"

Finding, to his relief, that these were her only actual objections, he said rapidly, "We can figure it out. And I'm sure Grandfather, and probably also Byron and maybe Nevyn depending on how your fangs work, can fix the numbness if I ask them, when they wake up."

"Oh. Um, okay, if you're sure."

Talyn cupped her face in his hand and tipped it up. Her skin was as cool as ever, even though the night outside was warm for early spring. When he kissed her, her mouth was the same.

His entire lower lip went numb a fragment later, but he was still very pleased with himself when he'd pulled away. "Sankoo," he attempted, and then he prodded at the numb spot with his knuckle in amusement. <Thank you,> he sent.

"I'm sorry!" she exclaimed. "They don't have to be biting down with any force, they're just really sharp..."

<Don't be sorry! I'm not,> he sent firmly.

"Okay," she sighed, and she covered a yawn.

<I should show you where you're sleeping. Grandfather assigned you a guest bedroom that will be yours whenever you're here. I put a perch in it that's about the size and height of the one in your room,> he said, ushering her to her feet. She followed him up the stairs; he floated her bag after them. <It has an opaque window shade. It's got a bed that you won't need, but that's not a problem, it just isn't a plus either, right?>

<Right.>

The room was on the fourth floor, with Pyelle's and Emryl's. The stone perch Talyn had pulled out of the wall stretched its span, and Leekath reached up to touch it and transformed into a bat with her feet clinging to the part of the perch her hand had rested on. <Good night,> she sent.

<I actually signed up to stay awake all night,> Talyn sent ruefully. <But I'll see you in the morning, whenever you're up.>

Leekath nodded her pointed, large-eared head, and closed her eyes. Talyn let himself out, smiling as well as he could with a drooping lower lip, and closed the door behind him.

Nevyn was up first, unsurprisingly. He was able to wake the deadened nerves in Talyn's lip when asked, though he did want to know how the mishap had occurred and chuckled a little too long when told, thinking that Talyn would soon move on to someone who didn't trail insensations wherever she put her mouth. Talyn quickly distracted himself from the older boy's thoughts after getting the gist, and reassured himself that he and Leekath would figure it out.

After turning the sand glass, Talyn woke up the girls and Byron too so everyone could get started on breakfast. "Where's Leekath?" Emryl asked him, curious to meet a person from another existence.

"Still asleep," Talyn said. "She's from a different time zone. But I expect we'll wake her up soon clattering around."

"Won't she want to be woken for breakfast?" Pyelle asked, wondering whether to scoop out nine people's worth of berries instead of eight from the giant preserves jar.

You're breakfast, Talyn didn't say. "Vampires don't eat the same things we do," he said instead, stirring the offered berries into the bubbling oatmeal. "So no, don't wake her, just wake Grandfather as usual when we're done fixing the food."

"What do they eat?" Jenn asked, grating cheese to sprinkle on the eggs that Mysha was scrambling. Her mental image was along the lines of a person - who looked nothing like Leekath - chowing down on woodchips and shards of china.

Talyn hadn't told anyone about the meal he'd provided Leekath; he knew she bit a variety of people, all the time, and that it wasn't *supposed* to be an intimate matter, but it felt like it to him. His hair covered the bite marks; no one had asked. "Blood," he said tersely.

"Ew!" exclaimed Pyelle, and Talyn winced inwardly at the distinctly triumphant feeling that Leekath might have to rule out the elf. It wasn't that much of a triumph anyway; there were plenty of halfbloods, none of whom were reacting with the same disgust.

"Blood? And that's it?" Nevyn asked.

"Yeah," Talyn said. "They bite people for it. With permission," he added hastily, because he didn't want Leekath to wake up to a towerful of misconceptions.

"I don't see how that could sustain a person," Jenn said, although at least she didn't think Talyn was *lying* - she thought he'd misunderstood something.

"It makes sense to me," Nevyn said seriously. "Blood is a powerful substance - all of the food you eat gets processed and put into your blood anyway. You're not sustained by anything that's *not* in your blood at some point."

Mysha poured the beaten eggs into the pan that Byron had buttered and spiced. Byron started slicing bread. "Pyelle, even if you think it's gross, Leekath is our guest and you'll treat her with respect," he said to the image apprentice.

"I understand," Pyelle said meekly. "I won't be mean to her."

"You're quiet this morning, Mysha," Emryl commented.

"I just don't have anything to say," Mysha demurred. She was shielded as ever, so Talyn didn't know if that was true or if something was bothering her.

"Is that oatmeal done?" Jenn asked Talyn, dumping her cheese into the egg pan. "I'm starving."

The apprentices served out food onto plates and into bowls, and Pyelle ran up the stairs to fetch Revenn. When she and the Master descended the stairs, Leekath - wearing a black cloak with attached gloves and a hood, to protect herself from the suns' light streaming in through the windows - was with them.

"Morning, Master!" said Jenn. "And you must be Leekath!"

Talyn abruptly realized that he'd have to do the translating until and unless Revenn or Mysha took over, and projected a language-independent sending at the vampire. <Just reply in whatever language. I'll see that everyone understands.>

She blinked and then said, "Yes, I am." Talyn broadcast more of the same to everyone else in the room.

"Oh, wow," Emryl said, peering at what of Leekath's face was visible under her hood; she wasn't facing the east side of the tower, so the hem of the fabric was just above her eyebrows. "You look *just* like my older sister did when she was thirteen or fourteen, except she's not *quite* that pale - but close!"

"I do?" Leekath said. "Uh, thank you. You don't look very much like anyone in my family," she said apologetically.

"Talyn says you drink blood," Nevyn said.

"That's true," Leekath said.

"Just out of a glass," Nevyn asked, "or what?"

Leekath opened her mouth a bit and touched one of her fangs. "These are like straws," she said. "I actually can't swallow."

"Oh, interesting," said Byron, peering at her. "...You have an *odd* biorhythm..." Talyn almost snickered.

"What's that?" Leekath asked. She sat next to Talyn, at the empty place setting he'd left.

"A combination of your life force, heartbeat, and breath, at its most basic," Byron said.

"Well, I don't have a heart *to* beat," Leekath said.

Byron's incredulous question about that was cut off by Revenn's, "Let's not interrogate our guest all at once, please. Leekath, I understand you have letters for me?"

Leekath nodded, and pulled the envelopes out of the pocket of her cloak. "I heard them," she apologized. "But Rhysel knew to write around anything she didn't want me to hear, and I didn't try to listen."

"That's all right," Revenn assured her, taking the letters. He pocketed them, and took a spoonful of oatmeal. "As long as you're here, I would like to learn more about Elcenia than Rhysel's been able to put in her letters; would you be willing to set aside some of your time in Barashi to talk to me about your home?"

"Okay," Leekath said. Talyn suppressed a flare of resentment - he'd expected to have her to himself. But of course Revenn wanted to talk to her. He probably wouldn't keep her that long.

"Excellent." Revenn spooned some eggs onto his bread and reviewed the lesson schedule for the day, and who was supposed to be practicing what workings during their downtime. Talyn was getting a lesson in wild kama'i from Byron after lunch and teaching Pyelle image kama'i after that. Revenn suggested that he and Leekath discuss Elcenia during that time, so Talyn wouldn't lose divs he could have spent with her. She probably wouldn't have been interested in watching him make shrews move game pawns.

"So I don't have any commitments until eight-zero?" Talyn confirmed.

"Yeah, you can scamper off with your girlfriend till then," Jenn put in.

Talyn froze. He hadn't even thought about trying to apply *labels* to him and Leekath. If Jenn scared Leekath away he was going to have to think of some very fitting revenge - possibly something involving that boy from the village she saw on occasion, though he knew she wasn't really serious about him -

<I did not go around telling people that you're my girlfriend. I wouldn't do that without asking you,> he sent to Leekath as damage control. It occurred to him belatedly that he could have just refrained from translating Jenn's remark for her, but that didn't seem right. <Um, but since it's been brought up now... do you want to be my girlfriend?>

<Okay,> Leekath sent back shyly.

Talyn grinned at her. "What's got you so happy all of a sudden?" Emryl asked him.

"I have a girlfriend," he chirped.

The breakfasting kyma eventually finished eating and dispersed. Mysha borrowed the uncommitted Jenn to practice memory-retrieval on; Nevyn and Revenn went by transfer point to some far-flung locale where they would be allowed to work with a corpse; Emryl practiced the elements of fireform so she'd be able to attempt turning completely into flame when Revenn returned to supervise her; Pyelle made herself a big bowl of illusion vanilla pudding as her practice on multisensory illusions and stayed right where she was to "test" it with a spoon; and Byron went to keep an appointment with a medic in town.

<I don't think I can safely bite Pyelle,> Leekath sent to him as he got up and offered her his hand. <She's too little.> Pyelle was almost thirteen, but she was short, and slim, and indeed might not have enough blood in her to offer up to a vampire even if she were amenable to the idea. <Who do you think I should ask instead?>

<Uh. Emryl seems to like you,> he said reluctantly. Leekath got up, her hand in his, and followed him up the stairs to her blacked-out room; he suspected she'd be more comfortable if she didn't have to be wrapped up in her cloak. <And Grandfather might want to see for himself how it works, so you could try him, too.>

<I'll wait until this afternoon when Master Revenn talks to me about Elcenia, then, and ask him, and if he says no I'll try Emryl,> Leekath sent.

In the guest room, Leekath peeled off the sun cloak; she had on an ordinary skirt and blouse under it. "I'm not used to wearing that around," she said. "I think it's too small for me now - I haven't put it on since I learned the sunscreening spell."

"Why wouldn't everyone learn that spell?" Talyn asked, sitting on the bed.

"It's kind of a complicated spell... Will this perch hold me in both forms?"

"Yeah, it'll support you like this just fine," he said, although he didn't see how that could be comfortable.

Leekath pulled a spare sash out of her luggage, tied her skirt in place around her knees, and hoisted herself up to hang upside-down from the perch without turning into a bat at any point during the process. Her hair wasn't quite long enough to sweep the ground. "The spell requires a pretty high channeling capacity - I mean, not huge, but more than some people have, and if you botch it you'll hurt yourself. It's complicated to keep out the parts of light that can hurt us without blocking all of it so we look like white blots wandering around and can't see, or making it bounce off and give people who stand near us extra sunburn, or anything like that, so it takes a lot of power. Some people who don't learn the spell for themselves get a wizard who isn't a vampire to cast it on them. My aaihhhi does that, since he knows a lot of wizards from his work. But other people just stay out of the sun or wear cloaks."

"Aaihhhi," said Talyn, supplementing with image kamai. "That's..." He looked. "One of your dads, but how *do* you have two, exactly? What about your mom?"

"I don't have a mom," she said. "I have an aunt who carried me and my brother and sister, but she's only my aunt, even biologically."

"So..."

"I was conceived by spell," Leekath explained. "I guess kamai can't do that?"

"I don't know if it's ever occurred to anyone to try," Talyn said, leaning against the wall thoughtfully. "I bet it could, though."

"Why wouldn't anyone try it?" Leekath asked, swinging back and forth idly and letting her arms dangle to brush the floor with her fingertips.

Talyn shrugged. "There aren't that many men who want to marry other men," he said. "At least here. Are there lots in Elcenia?"

"I don't remember the percentage exactly. They're not unusual, though," Leekath said. "Same with women, but then the spell lets one of them carry the baby instead of getting help from someone else. And they can only have girls."

"Oh. It's not like it never happens here, just not much. And people don't go to kamai to solve their problems as much as they do with wizardry, it seems like."

"Huh. Well, that's how I am," Leekath said. "Hey, you were going to tell me what demons are, and how you get to stop being an apprentice when you're ready, and stuff."

"Oh! Right. Let me go get your last letter, and I can make sure I cover everything you wanted to know," Talyn laughed, hopping to his feet. "I have it in my room."

"Can I see your room?" Leekath asked, grabbing the perch with one hand to flip off of it and let herself down onto the ground. She undid the spare sash keeping her skirt in place and looped it over the bar, and picked up her sun cloak.

"Sure," Talyn said. "It's not that interesting, though. It just has my bed and books and clothes."

Talyn wound up taking Leekath on a haphazard tour of the entire tower after picking up the letter, while explaining that Revenn saw all of the students on a daily basis and it was up to him when to declare any of them Journeymen. When Talyn learned that Leekath's fur protected her from the sun when she was in bat form, he took her outside as well, with her balanced furrily on his shoulder and her wing-claws hooked through his shirt. He explained demons as malevolent possessing marokel ("they're rare, you don't have to worry about them") while he showed her the cliff. (She declined to cliffdive, on the grounds that the wind associated with the fall would blow her sun cloak away from her face, and falling the entire way in bat form would have her descending uninterestingly slowly). He brought her on a stroll through the woods that encroached on the west side of the tower, and she chatted about her aaihhhi's work in Parliament.

Eventually the greater sun peaked in the sky, and Talyn had to help with lunch and then study with Byron and then tutor Pyelle, while Revenn monopolized Leekath. But Talyn had her mostly to himself for the rest of the day (minus his occasional runs to Byron for de-numbing), and the next day too until she was abruptly unsent, and most of each visit each seven days after that.

Leekath's sixth visit was shorter than the others, because she wasn't sent until the day after she was infused with all of the other future Elcenian kamai students. Talyn couldn't decide if he was more annoyed about the reduced time with her or more thrilled that they would finally be able to share kamai; in any event, when she finally appeared, the first thing he said was, "Have you learned any workings yet?"

"Not exactly," Leekath said. "Lessons don't start for almost a month. And I practically just woke up, so I wouldn't have had much chance to figure things out myself, except..."

"Except?" prompted Talyn when she trailed off.

"A lot of things are louder, now, because they have more to say," she said. "They're telling me what I can do with them, and more about themselves, now that I could be doing kamai to them. When I went to Rhysel's tower to be sent here today I listened to her ward stones a bit... they were just rocks before, but now they tell me all about what they could do."

"What kinds of things?" Talyn asked.

"Not everything," she said. "Like, there's no kamai that would work directly with the fabric in my outfit - I mean, I could set it on fire, presumably, but that's not really *about* the dress. But, like..." She squeaked into the night, and reached down and picked up a fist-sized rock off the ground. "This will tell me all about how I can change it."

"Does vampire even have *words* for kamai stuff?" Talyn asked.

"No," she said. "So I'm kind of confused. It talks to me, and I understand what it says, and I could do it -" She pushed lifeforce through the rock; it softened and she squeezed it in her hand. She added more - Talyn watched the magic turn the rock to a crystal. "But I don't know how the words it said told me how to do that. I wonder if maybe I've been understanding things by more than just words all along, and now it's just obvious."

"Maybe," he murmured. "That - was - amazing. You've been a kama for less than a day..."

"I don't think it'll help me with everything," she hastened to add. "Just stuff that uses tools like Rhysel's ward stones, and with rocks. I can't hear illusions, remember, or substances, or live things including people's minds."

"It's still *amazing*. The tools know what they can do? Not just what's been done with them?"

"I heard Rhysel's ward stones explicitly say they *hadn't* done one of the things they could do," Leekath said.

"But - Leekath, we're still discovering new things that can be done with ward stones. You could just hear them all at once," marveled Talyn. "That'll get you your Mastery, whenever you want it, just like that, if you come up with even one more."

Leekath turned her rock into a crystal chain, looped it around her wrist, and linked it to itself. "I don't think we're doing the same system of credentials," she pointed out.

"You could get your Mastery anyway," he said. "I still don't know what I'm going to do for mine. I mean, I could probably do something worth the qualification now, but I want it to be really spectacular, not just the first thing I think of."

"Wouldn't it be cheating, a little, to use hearing to get a kama Mastery?" asked Leekath.

Talyn shook his head. "No more than if I do something earlier or better or different because I'm an innate kama. Hearing's part of who you are, and you're the one who'll be a Master one day. They aren't awarding the Mastery to kama itself."

"Well, anyway, it will only help me with a few things," Leekath said, clinking the crystal chain on her wrist. "Want to teach me something else?"

"Yeah!" Talyn exclaimed, perhaps too loud - someone's quiescent thoughts upstairs stirred in annoyance - and he pulled her into the tower to run through all the introductory kama he could think of.

Chapter 5: Possessing

"I'm not supposed to do this," Talyn said. "Normally. But." He laid the flat of his palm on Leekath's head. "Grandfather'll lecture me for an afternoon once everything's calmed down but you need to be safe -"

"What are you doing?" Leekath asked, though she wasn't truly alarmed. "All I said was 'hi' -"

"Invisibility," Talyn said. "Flight, in case you can't take off as a bat for some reason - some stuff with fire - transfer point signatures - sensing animals -"

"Are you teaching me that stuff? Directly?" Leekath asked. "Is that what you're not supposed to do?" *Why?* he heard her wonder, but he refocused on sending her what she had to know.

Talyn nodded once, lips pursed. "There's some long, complicated justification - I wasn't really paying attention - but this is more important than whatever it is. You need to be safe."

"From what?"

Talyn dropped his hand from her forehead and pulled her into a hug. "Leekath, there's a demon loose."

"You said they were rare..."

"They are. We've got one anyway. Here." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of ward stones. "Take these. They'll tell you what to do; they're not yours but you can still use them. A demon can't get through a stones ward. And -" He let her go long enough to rummage around the cluttered shelves to the far side of the room, and seized a clear octahedron. "This crystal has Keo's dragonsong in it. If it comes to the worst and you need to be unsent early, sing it, I'm sure she'll scry you or something and get Aar Kithen -"

"I can't," Leekath said.

"Can't hear the stones, or the crystal?" He couldn't sort through the voices in her head fast enough to tell which streams of chatter belonged to which objects. "I can teach you the stones ward if the stones can't and you can play the crystal aloud -"

"Can't sing. My voice won't do that at the pitches of this song," Leekath said. "It's the flipside of why vampire music is how it is..."

"Okay," said Talyn, frowning at the crystal and trying to think faster. "Okay, I'll hang onto it, then, I can sing it. Maybe I should just do that now and get you home where you're safe, actually. Except then Keo might decide to summon *me* to find out what was going on, and what if the demon came here while you were alone..."

"Alone? Where is everyone? It's the middle of the day," Leekath said.

"They're looking for it so they can kill it," Talyn said. "Except Pyelle - Grandfather sent her to another image kama's tower for the day. When we woke up this morning, Nevyn had left a note saying a villager came with a deformed dog corpse -"

"What's a dog?"

Talyn pushed the knowledge at her impatiently and continued. "Which means the dog was possessed by a demon, and now it's somewhere else. Nevyn went with the villager to try to track it and kill it, but he didn't come back, and the note didn't even say which villager it was, just someone with a dog, and *lots* of people have dogs."

"Why didn't Nevyn wake anyone up?" Leekath asked.

"No time. A demon is an *emergency*. Anyone it possesses is going to die, and the demon will switch bodies as often as it can so it won't be easy to spot by the deformities. Nevyn..."

should have been able to handle it. But I think he's dead, and I can only hope he didn't get possessed first," Talyn shivered. "I'm supposed to stay in here, look after you, and not leave the tower, because if the demon manages to jump into *me*, we are in even *worse* trouble."

"Why?" Leekath asked. "I mean - that would be bad, but why *especially* bad, for people who aren't you and me?"

"Marokel - including demons - don't have language," Talyn said, pulling Leekath up the stairs to put her luggage in her room and curl up with her on the bed under her perch. "If they possess someone, they can get at their non-linguistic memories, but not anything that they understand through words. So if it possessed -" He considered the kyma out on the demon-hunt. "...Byron," he decided was the most tolerable thought, "then it could calm animals, since that's really basic and Byron can do it without thinking about it now, but at least it couldn't use shapeshifting kamai, because that's really hard and Byron barely even knows how to do it, let alone by instinct. Does that make sense?"

"I think so."

"And I'm an innate kama," Talyn said. "And I just don't learn kamai through language in the first place. I can't do as many things as Grandfather, but I do them much more instinctively. A demon that got into me wouldn't be actually unstoppable, but it would be so, so hard to fight."

"Will staying in the tower help?" Leekath asked.

"Demons aren't like regular marokel. They need hosts. They can't float around for long distances looking for new ones, they have to jump at close range. So unless the demon gets into the tower, we're safe here," Talyn promised. "It has to be a good-sized host, like the size of a cat, so it's not going to be a gnat or anything else we'd miss or that could get in through a crack in the window."

"Why don't we just go where Pyelle went?" Leekath asked. "I understand why you wouldn't have wanted me to just land without anyone to meet me, but -"

"The transfer point is outside. Pyelle had everyone escorting her out to it - we'd be on our own," Talyn said. "I could make one in here, but I'd need a lot more lifeforce. I'd be saving it up in a power box but you make those with ward stones, that's the only set in the tower, and I want you to have them in case you need to make a ward."

"We could just make a ward now," Leekath said. Her hands were clenched in his shirt and her voice was tending towards the strident as she appreciated the gravity of the threat.

Talyn chewed his lip. "If we make a ward, and I sing for Keo, then we can sit under it until she summons me or sends us a letter or whatever... if you make it, it'll stay up even if I'm summoned away... I can tell her to get you unsummoned, and we can stay in Elcenia till the demon is taken care of. That's probably best."

"We should write Keo a note, in case she tries looking for that before summoning you," Leekath said. She sat up, slid to the ground, and arranging the stones on the floor. "Do you have paper?"

"We should do this on the ground floor," Talyn said, standing up. "Not up here. I don't *think* the demon will knock down the tower, but if it does and we're under it, the ward will protect us - if we're in the part that gets knocked down the stones could dislodge and the ward would break and we'd be in trouble."

They went down the stairs, ward stones and image crystal in hand, and Leekath started setting up the ward while Talyn activated the crystal to brush up on the tune to the dragonsong, which he'd altogether forgotten. Keo's voice sang from the octahedron while he hunted for paper. "Under the box," Leekath told him softly as she placed the last stone.

Talyn pulled out a sheet of paper, humming along with the second rendition of the dragonsong, when he heard a mental shout. <Help! Help!>

"You heard that too," Talyn said softly. And it wasn't language-dependent, either, she'd understood it, he didn't have to pause and translate...

"Mysha," murmured Leekath.

<Help! It got him, I can't fight it ->

"Talyn, you *can't* go outside," Leekath exclaimed.

"Put your ward up," Talyn said.

"You can't go out! If it gets you -" She was imagining vague disaster scenarios. They were probably about right, *if* it got him. But.

"If it's in someone and Mysha's coming *here* for help, you and me and her are the last kyma for miles around." He deliberately didn't process the implications of that. "Non-kyma don't have much of a chance - and if it gets to the transfer point it could go anywhere, hurt anyone - I can fight it -" There were dozens of ways to kill demons. Anything at a distance that hit it hard enough would work. This demon was clever, but Mysha'd given him warning, and she could help.

"Talyn!" shrieked Leekath.

"Put up your ward," he barked. "If it's in a person - in a kama - it can get into the tower! Staying inside won't *help* anymore!"

"Get under here *with* me!" Leekath cried. "Song Keo -"

"I can fight it," he repeated, and he activated the ward stones himself, encasing Leekath in protections that blocked even her thoughts from him, and opened the door.

He couldn't see Mysha immediately; she had to have been straining her range. <Mysha, where are you?> he sent back. Behind him, he felt the ward drop away from him; Leekath had convinced the stones to give her control of it. Good. He'd ask her how she'd done that later. There was going to be a later. <Mysha! Who did the demon get?>

She replied with a picture of Revenn.

Talyn drew breath through his teeth. <Did you try a mind-blast...?> He spun around and sank the transfer point into a deep pit and filled the pit with illusion sand - not impossible to get at, but it'd stall the demon, give him a better chance if the monster made a break for the point.

<I can't bear it, I just can't,> came Mysha's wail. <Not him.>

<He's my grandfather! How do you think I'm going to bear it?> Talyn shouted back at her. <Are you out of its jumping range? Mind-blast him - he's - he's gone already - he'd want you to ->

<I can't, I can't remember the steps ->

<When you're closer I can remind you. Can you do it if I send you the knowledge? Don't make me, Mysha, please don't ->

<Maybe,> came her mental sob.

<I know you brought your gold wand. You'll need that to channel the blast if you're at all drained. Do you have it?> Talyn forced himself to focus on Mysha, on Mysha's distress, on Mysha's need to learn something over again and Mysha's task at hand. <It's not catching up to you, is it? How far away are you?>

<I have it. It's chasing me, but not catching up. I'm on my way to you.>

<I can send you how to mindblast as soon as I can see you, and then you can do it, and then it'll be over,> Talyn promised. <All over.>

<I'm almost there.>

Mysha flew over the horizon a moment later, red hair streaming behind her. <Teach me,> she begged.

Talyn didn't have a gold wand on him to boost mind kamai - his was upstairs - but he had a lot of lifeforce, and he *could* arc the knowledge over to her at range. <Here. Please.>

Mysha spun in mid-air, flying backwards to the tower to face her opponent, and aimed her wand at the figure chasing after her.

Revenn's body fell from the sky like a stone.

"He was already gone," Talyn murmured as Mysha skidded in for an awkward landing and started walking towards the tower. Her face was covered in tears. "Who else was killed?" he called.

<I can't hear you,> she sent.

<Who else did it get? Is there anyone else left?>

<No... no, they're all gone...> Mysha was hugging herself. Talyn wanted to go to her and comfort her, but he was drained enough from dipping the transfer point and arcing the mind-blast knowledge that walking to anywhere but a chair didn't appeal.

<Come inside and - and we should eat something, and then call on other Masters about what to do.> Talyn was numb. Eating felt like a preposterous thing to do in the situation, but that was what one did when drained - one had food - one recovered one's strength -

<Talyn,> came Leekath's mindspeech from inside.

<What? Oh, I should have told you, you can drop your ward now, the demon is ->

<Talyn, the things don't like her.>

<What?>

<The rocks and the sticks and her clothes - those are Mysha's clothes, but they don't like who they're on - usually nothing cares about her ->

Talyn froze mid-turn towards the tower. "Hey," he said to Mysha, who was still trudging forward. "Uh, can you hear me yet?"

Mysha cupped her hand around her ear and looked puzzled.

Deliberately dropping to elementary, language-based mindspeech, he sent, <So what Masters do you think we should call?>

<Sorry, I'm - I'm so frazzled ->

Language-independent.

Just meanings. No words.

She hadn't called him by name once.

Talyn seized the golden wand in her hand with air magic and pulled it towards him; he caught it and aimed it at her.

"Say something," he said. "Anything. A *word*."

Mysha blinked at him, and looked at the wand, and then surged forward, lunging for him.

The mind-blast caught her when she was three feet away, and Talyn threw himself backwards with his last energy, collapsing on the doorstep of the tower.

Talyn came to in his own bed, with a splitting headache, numb spots on the back of his neck and parts of his arms, and the stolen minds of Mysha, Revenn, and the demon murmuring in his mind.

He was too drained to do even the passive kamai of mindreading that he'd been fighting

to control since he manifested. He didn't notice Leekath was beside him until she squeezed his hand and asked him a question.

Lacking enough Leraal to understand her without the help of mind kamai, he mumbled, "Food?" He knew Leekath knew that word in Martisen. He hoped she remembered it. She asked something else - "can you" something - maybe could he tap her? He couldn't do that, not until he recovered more. "Food," he said again.

Leekath frowned at him, but got up and came back with a bowl of cherries. He wished she'd picked something a little easier to eat, but couldn't fault a vampire for not having learned much about fruit and how it was eaten. Hoping she'd pick up on the fact that he didn't have the motor control to feed himself, he opened his mouth.

She popped a cherry, stem and all, into his mouth. He bit the stem off and let it fall onto his chest, but swallowed the pit after weakly chewing the cherry into a pulp, then opened his mouth for another. She took the stem off of the second and subsequent cherries.

When he'd finished them all, he reached out for her hand; she laced their fingers, and he gently pulled to tap her for the rest of what he needed. "Can I take more?" he croaked when he was able to translate for her.

"Take what you need," she murmured.

He tapped more, sighing with relief as his senses returned to him and some life came back to his extremities. "Parts of me seem to be numb," he said quizzically. Voices of the dead roiled under the anxious hum of Leekath's mind, but he viciously forced them down. He had lots of practice ignoring thoughts. He was going to get a lot more.

"You hurt yourself when you fell," she murmured. "You had bruises. I can't heal you but I can anesthetize you. I didn't take any blood. That wouldn't be good for you right now."

"Oh." He inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly. "How'd I get up here?"

"I carried you," she said. "Was that a bad idea? I knew you weren't possessed because the things all calmed down..."

"I'll be fine," he said.

"The gold wand told me what you did," Leekath said. "Are you *really* fine?"

He winced. "Okay. Not *very* fine. That's the only fatal mind kamai working that functions at a distance, though, and I only had a metal wand and not enough lifeforce to do without a tool - I didn't have a choice -"

"It's okay," she said, plucking the cherry stem off his chest and smoothing his shirt. "I didn't think you picked it for no reason. But it has *side effects*."

"I can ignore them. Mostly." He flinched as he failed at it. "Oh, gods, Mysha was in *love* with me - she loved me and I killed her - and I helped the demon kill my grandfather - he'd have been able to get it otherwise - he was *never* possessed - *gods*."

Leekath ran her fingers through Talyn's hair carefully. "We should get help."

"Yeah," he breathed. "That would be good. Help. Can you go down to the transfer point -"

"No," she shuddered, and he caught a memory of her creeping out to pick up his unconscious form and hearing Mysha's voice, keening in vampire, emanating from the blasted girl's body. "No, I don't want to go down there while she's..."

"Okay," he said at once. "I'll tap you a little more and you can stay up here." He took another deep breath, pulled Leekath down to a third of her normal lifeforce, and sat up. She turned into a bat; he heard her thoughts slowing with sleepiness. "I'll hang you up. You can go ahead and nap," he said, scooping her up and bringing her to her guest room. Her little feet clung

to the perch and she closed her eyes.

Talyn was loath to be alone, but he needed *help*, and the embedded shards of stolen minds weren't much. Some calmer moment, he could pick at them, and see what, if anything, he could salvage - his grandfather's kama knowledge might be intact, if nothing else. Some other time.

He avoided looking at Mysha's body, and edged his way around the outside tower wall to the transfer point. There were a few options for who to go to for help. Eventually, he settled on Emryl's uncle Master Corvan. He didn't know any relatives for any of the others, and Corvan was a mind kama and would understand the mind blast.

It occurred to Talyn that he wasn't really sure if the others were dead. The demon could have been lying. Emryl and Jenn and Byron - maybe even Nevyn - could be alive somewhere, having gotten split up or injured. He debated whether to go looking for them first, then finally decided to get Corvan and enlist his help in hunting for the others.

Talyn stepped onto the transfer point and jumped to Corvan's tower. It was raining, there, but the transfer point was only a few steps from the door. <Master Corvan!>

<A moment,> sent Corvan, and the door soon opened. Talyn was used to thinking of Corvan as pale, but he wasn't compared to Leekath; stern eyes glowered down at him, annoyed as ever to be disturbed. Well, that would last until he knew his niece was involved. <Talyn. What brings you here?>

Talyn didn't have the words. He bowed his head in silent offer. The Master touched his scalp and pulled the knowledge.

<We must not waste time. Come,> Corvan sent firmly, and he strode towards the transfer point. Talyn followed meekly.

<I helped it...> he sent guiltily, when they'd arrived back at Revenn's tower. What had been Revenn's tower.

<You were deceived. Was it uncharacteristic for her to use language-independent mindspeech?> Corvan asked.

<No, it was usual...>

<You acted rashly but should not hold yourself responsible for Master Revenn's death,> Corvan said. <There is someone else here - or something. A mind full of shrieking.>

<That's Leekath. She hears things even asleep,> Talyn sent.

<Are you in a condition sufficient to carry me aloft as well as yourself?> Corvan asked. <For what may be an extended search?>

<I can do that,> returned Talyn dully.

Talyn picked up the two of them and flew them as Corvan directed in search of the others. It was almost half a div before Corvan, casting out for the feel of their minds, located any of them.

Byron was alive, barely, unconscious and bleeding from the base of his skull, half in and half out of the river. Talyn didn't want to consult the demon's memories, but they came unbidden; Byron had trusted the demon wearing Mysha's face, too, and she'd simply bashed his head with a rock when Revenn was distracted, then claimed to see a demonic bear, which they'd "chased" into the woods. Revenn hadn't noticed that they'd lost Byron until later. The demon hadn't wanted Byron for a host; it had wanted Talyn. Talyn stabilized the wild kama, but didn't have the energy to heal him completely before flying back.

Nevyn was dead by the riverside, a strange twisting to his face and hands where he'd begun to deform from possession. He was otherwise unmarked. Mysha had killed him when he'd

been found, but she hadn't been far enough away to escape possession herself. No one had seen the demon leap out of him and into her.

Jenn and Emryl were both alive and still searching. They'd considered it likely that the demon had gotten into a swimming form of some kind and taken the river to make better time away from the place where it had been discovered; Revenn and Mysha and Byron had gone the other way.

"It was in Mysha the whole time?" Emryl mouthed, letting her uncle hug her. "I thought she was too far away."

"She didn't mind-blast it when it was in Nevyn," Talyn murmured. "She shut down his autonemics. That wouldn't have worked from far enough away, not even with her wand. And everyone was in too much of a hurry to check, to suspect, when she seemed to be acting normal."

"What happened then?" Jenn asked in a small voice. Talyn turned away. He wanted to go back to Leekath, wake her up selfishly just so he could have someone to hold. She wouldn't laugh at him if he cried.

Corvan explained what he'd pulled from Talyn, and then they collected Nevyn's body and Byron's inert form and floated back to the tower. <I will contact the relevant parties and make funerary arrangements,> Corvan said, as Talyn tapped Emryl for the spare lifeforce he needed to restore Byron.

He did the healing carefully, with sympathetic wild magic instead of laborious proxic elemental, and didn't end with an unhealing hole in his head or any other ill effect. Byron sat up slowly, rubbing the intact skin where he'd been struck; he too received the rundown of the day's tragedies.

Talyn went up the stairs to Leekath's room. She was asleep, but the whir of hhikiiias in her mind was comforting anyway. He opened up his senses to them, until he could think about the overlapping sounds and not guilt or grief or demon-thoughts hissing under his own.

He lay down on the bed under her perch and let himself sleep.

Chapter 6: Grieving

When Leekath woke up, the sun was down, but low voices audible through the door suggested that there were people up and about. Talyn, asleep beneath her, wasn't one of them; she shifted out of bat form to a position with one hand clutching the perch and let herself down to the floor gently rather than waking him.

She heard Byron talking, and Jenn crying, and Nevyn explaining what had happened while Revenn and Mysha gave different parts of the story -

Leekath shook her head, hard, trying to chase out the last three voices. Dead. All three dead. They hadn't even spoken vampire; they couldn't have reached those pitches while they lived; *those* sounds were only the hhikiiias of bodies.

She forced herself down the stairs, step by step, but every one brought her closer to the bodies and made their voices louder - *I am a corpse*, keened Mysha; *I have the following demonic malformations*: began Nevyn, *I fell from a height of 87 feet*, screamed Revenn. Before anyone had noticed she was awake she'd turned and fled back up to the guest room, intending to grab her bag and move up to the now-vacated room at the very top of the tower.

She opened the door, and Talyn was sitting up in bed, knees drawn up to his chest. "You're awake?" she asked softly.

Talyn nodded slowly. "Yeah. I heard you open the door."

"I'm sorry. I was trying to be quiet," she murmured, sitting beside him.

"I don't mind," he said, sighing the words into her shoulder as he wrapped himself around her. She hugged him back; terrible as the voices of the dead sounded in her mind, she hadn't known any of them longer than a few weeks, and Revenn hadn't been *her* grandfather. She could stay put with him instead of running farther from the bodies.

"We can go upstairs if you want," Talyn said in response to unspoken thoughts. "I - Grandfather won't need his room."

"Will you be okay there?" Leekath asked, though she did ache to climb higher, away from the voices. She'd gotten so used to them. She'd stopped trying to push them away when she was five or six; but she started again, shoving uselessly at the familiar timbres twisted into unnaturally pitched, unnaturally emotionless descriptions of their own deaths. *Go away, go away, shut up, shut up* -

As they never had when she was small, they obeyed.

All of them.

The sudden silence of everything - *everything* - felt deadly cold.

Talyn breathed in her ear. His heart beat. People - live ones - spoke downstairs.

The wind shushed across the surface of the tower.

And that was *all*, and Leekath's eyes rolled back in her head and she slumped over.

"Leekath. *Leekath!*" <Leekath, Leekath ->

<Talyn?> she thought groggily. If it was him he'd hear her.

<You're awake,> he sent her in relief. <Gods above, what's wrong? Your mind went quiet and you collapsed - are you hungry or ->

<Say something,> she begged. <It's so quiet.>

"Uh - are you hungry?" he asked again. "I think it should be safe for you to bite me again or if you don't think it is Jenn and Emryl weren't injured, you could ask one of them, or I guess there's Master Corvan but he's a human. What happened to your hhikiiias?" he babbled.

His hands were trying to find somewhere to touch her that would soothe, but he was too frantic, patting her shoulder and then her knee and then her forehead and then her cheek. Leekath opened her eyes slowly. They were up in Revenn's old bedroom, away from the bodies, but that hardly mattered, because she couldn't hear them. She couldn't even hear her clothes, right up against her skin, which should have been looping through familiar choruses about their stitching and wear and dye. "You were trying to make the - the bodies be quiet and then they all -"

"I don't know," Leekath croaked. "I couldn't do it when I was a little girl. I don't know why I was able to do it now. I don't know if I can bring them back."

Talyn gave up on trying to pat comfort into her and instead lay down next to her, wrapped his arms around her, and pressed his ear into her shoulder. "It's worth a try, isn't it? If you want them back?"

"I do want them back," she said, threading her fingers through his curls. "I don't know how to *pull* on them the way I *pushed* them, though, now they're gone."

"Are you otherwise okay? I didn't even know you *could* pass out in this shape," Talyn said.

"I can pass out. Just not fall asleep," she murmured. "I didn't know losing my powers would do it."

"I'm sure you didn't lose your powers," Talyn said. "They're just - turned off for a little bit until you find out how to turn them back on."

"Maybe," Leekath sighed. She hugged him tighter. "I *am* hungry. Do you think it's safe to bite you? You did get some cuts when you fell..."

"I might have lost a couple of drops of blood, but not much," he said. "Go ahead." He scooted up so she didn't have to move.

Leekath sighed and closed her eyes and pressed her teeth into Talyn, deeper than she'd bitten to anesthetize his wounds, and pulled warm blood from his throat. The silence didn't become less silent, but it wasn't as *cold*, at least.

When she was full, she kissed the bite mark, even though he wouldn't be able to feel it, and he re-settled himself beside her.

"I don't know how to ask the hhikiiias to come back," Leekath murmured after a silence.

"How did they show up in the first place?" Talyn asked.

"I was reading a book, and I pretended it was reading itself to me," she murmured. "In my aaihhhi's voice. And it did, and then when it was done, it started talking about itself instead of just reading its story. And then everything else started talking too."

"You can ask things questions, right? Maybe if you ask something to tell you something...?"

"Maybe." She glanced around Revenn's room, and eventually decided to start with a book again. She sat up, dislodging Talyn in the process, and ran her fingertips along his arm as she got to her feet and went with steady steps towards the bookshelf. The titles were illegible, in Eashiri and Martisen and a handful in Trollspeak. Leekath pulled one from the shelf at random. "What do you say?" she asked it.

The book was unresponsive.

"Please?" she whispered against the leather cover. "What do you say? I can't read you if you won't tell me."

Talyn got up and padded across the room to loop his arms around her waist and press his face into her hair.

"What do you say?" Leekath asked the book again desperately, switching from Leraal to

vampire even though usually they'd respond to questions in any language.

For a moment there was no sound, and then the book shrilled, *Shapeshifting Kamai and Supporting Workings, third edition, by generalist Master Bryn Rhylenn, 24702, editor Lauryl Aylell* -

Leekath exhaled deeply and ran her hand over every book still on the shelves until her mind was abuzz with all of their recitations, too. Her clothes chimed in, and Talyn's did, and the sheets on the bed and the shoes under it and everything else.

She leaned back into Talyn, sagging with relief.

After Talyn explained the situation to Master Corvan, the mind Master moved the bodies in their makeshift shrouds out and away from the tower; the weather was fine, and they wouldn't become waterlogged or decay quickly. Leekath came down accordingly to watch everyone deal with the aftermath and take notes to bring back to Rhysel.

Corvan had gotten ahold of Pyelle and the Image master she'd been visiting; the master was newly promoted and didn't yet have any apprentices but agreed to start with Pyelle, under the circumstances. Byron, who had been nearly at his Journeyman promotion anyway, was summarily awarded it and assigned the tower to give the townsfolk - who had lost four of their own number to the demon, and several more animals - some continuity of kyma. Jenn and Emryl wanted to apprentice together, to some elemental, they didn't have any notion who - Corvan recommended a man Leekath had never heard of and they accepted his suggestion without further inquiry.

"What about me?" Talyn asked quietly.

<You may have a challenge finding a generalist Master,> Corvan said. <Master Bryn no longer takes apprentices; there are precious few other generalists capable of the level of instruction an innate such as yourself requires. You could complete your apprenticeship in several steps - perhaps you would like to follow Emryl and Jenn, learn elementalism with them, and then move on to another aspect?>

He swallowed. "I think I should be with my family for a while before I start anywhere else," he said.

<Of course. And I believe there are other kyma in your family you could consider apprenticing with. Although normally Master Ranel does not take apprentices she might make an exception...>

<No, I don't want to go to my sister's,> Talyn sent. <Or to Grandmother's. I - let me think.>

Corvan nodded and turned towards the image Master who'd brought Pyelle back, discussing what he knew about Revenn's educational style and how to help the little apprentice through the transition.

<How am I going to have an excuse to visit you now?> Leekath asked. She imagined she could get sent to Barashi *occasionally* by asking favors from teachers and advanced classmates, but not on a weekly basis, and some strange Master might not take her in.

<I'm thinking. Who has research interests in common with Rhysel so she might want to correspond with them some - even if not weekly? Bryn doesn't take apprentices anymore or I'd try her...>

Jenn and Emryl took their suggested Master's transfer point signature from Corvan, and left to petition for apprenticeship. Pyelle's new Master took the girl to her new home, to return only for the funeral.

<Rhysel's a Master,> Leekath pointed out on impulse. She felt selfish, suggesting that he move to another world just so she could see more of him, but she was already dreading the unsending that would leave him alone save for the newly promoted Byron and businesslike Corvan.

Talyn was silent, blinking, and Leekath began to regret the proposal - he'd know perfectly well why she'd suggested it - but then he sent, <That's a good idea.>

<Really?>

<I can mostly teach myself, with books, and I think Rhysel would mostly let me,> Talyn said. <To whatever extent I can't she and Aar Kithen are going to know all the aspects between them. And I could help with her teaching stuff at the school.>

<Does Corvan actually have to approve of you going to her? What if he doesn't like the idea?> Leekath asked.

<He doesn't actually have to. It's between me and Rhysel - and my parents, a little, but I'm going to spend some time home with them anyway. He's taking charge of the others because they need him to. But I can take your idea instead. Will you ask her for me?>

<Of course,> Leekath sent back, squeezing his hand.

Leekath didn't like being unable to properly tell time. She could tell *Barashin* time - Talyn had taught her how to read the sand glass apparatus and see how many "divs" and "subs" it had been since midnight - but she couldn't wave her hand through the air and mutter the magic word and get a readout of the Elcenian time. She'd tried it once - just in case all the theoreticians in the world were wrong about wizardry working on other worlds - and nothing had happened.

So after *approximately* the amount of time she normally spent in Barashi, she had to hold all of her possessions on her person so they would come with her, and couldn't become involved in any conversations that she wouldn't want interrupted, waiting for Aar Kithen to undo the spell that kept her pushed out of her world. She could wear her bag slung over her shoulder, but it was problematic that Talyn was taking such a long time to perfect his letter about what had happened.

"Rhysel might not even want to read the letter," Leekath said. "Since I'm going to tell her what happened in person." She bit her lip carefully. "The way I hear her talking about him I think they were *really* close. I don't think I'd want to hear much detail if someone that close to me died."

"I'll hurry," Talyn said, scrubbing a tear out of his eye with his wrist. "It's okay if she doesn't read it. But I should write it."

Leekath sat next to him, put her arm around his shoulders, closed her eyes, and listened to the letter.

"I really think he's going to unsend me any tick, now," Leekath said. "And - and he'll probably have more on his mind than summoning the letter separately once I tell Rhysel about Master Revenn."

Talyn finally set down his pen. He pushed the letter into Leekath's hands and kissed her in the same motion. <Leekath,> he began. <I ->

The room around her was replaced, and Leekath was sitting on nothing in the summoning circle, the letter crushed in her hands.

She'd been planning to break the news to Rhysel gently - starting with "I have bad news" and going from there - but with Rhysel's eager face staring at her and the warmth of

Talyn's lips still on hers, she lost track of that plan.

Leekath stood up from her precarious "sitting" position and looked sadly at Rhysel.

"Leekath? What is it?" Rhysel asked, drawing her eyebrows together.

"M-M-Master Revenn... died," whispered Leekath. "It was -"

Rhysel burst into a moan of misery so loud that Leekath flinched and covered her ears.

Aar Kithen looked between Leekath and Rhysel, and let the vampire out of the circle.

"Do you have further information? She may want it later."

"A demon did it," Leekath said. "And it killed a couple of other apprentices too, but it's dead now, Talyn killed it -" It was hard to listen to Rhysel's shouting; Leekath let the letter flutter forgotten to the floor so she could clap her hands over her ears. "I'm so sorry, but -"

"You may go," Aar Kithen said, and Leekath dove for the open window, changing shape midair.

Leekath turned back into her humanoid form at the base of the tower. It was past sunset, but she re-cast her suncreening spell anyway, rather than be surprised in the morning; then she teleported to her room. Hihhliir was there, napping; she didn't stir when Leekath popped into place. Leekath sighed and started catching up on the assignments that she'd neglected over her visit.

A few degrees later, there was a soft knock at the door; trying not to wake her sleeping roommate, Leekath opened it a crack and peered through to see Aar Kithen. She stepped into the hall. "What is it?"

"Do I remember correctly that you have a parent who is a member of Parliament?" he asked her.

"Aaihhhi is," she said. "He has been for ten years. Why?"

"Can he grant a dispensation to allow Aaralan Inular to obtain a familiar prior to graduation?" he inquired.

"I think he *could*. I don't think he will, though," she said. "He doesn't like to give dispensations for things..."

"It would mean a great deal to me and to Aaral Camlenn," said Aar Kithen, "if you would ask regardless."

"I can call him," Leekath said. "He's probably still up. But he might be too busy to answer..."

"I understand," said Aar Kithen.

Leekath slipped back into her room, fetched the communication crystal that linked to a twin in her aaihhhi's possession, and went back out into the hall to strike it while Aar Kithen looked on.

The crystal rang and rang, and Leekath worried that he wasn't going to pick up - he might have left it in his office while he attended a meeting, he might have it tucked while he flew somewhere - but at great length, the ringing stopped. "Aaeihhyleekatheeei!" he said cheerfully. "We haven't talked in weeks! What's going on?"

"I called you last week," she reminded him. "Your secretary said she'd make a note -"

"Must have been lost in the paperwork shuffle. But what's on your mind?" asked her aaihhhi.

Leekath took a breath. "I called to ask a favor," she said. "You might have heard about the offworlder who got stuck here."

"Terrible business, my condolences, of course," aaihhhi said.

"One of the girls who summoned her could reverse the summon just fine, if she had a

familiar, but she won't graduate for years," Leekath said. "A teacher asked me to ask you if she could have a dispensation to get her familiar early. I've had a couple of classes with her - I don't think she'd mess up the familiar tying spell," she added.

"Now, Leekath," said her aaihhhi, and she winced apologetically at Aar Kithen; Korulen wasn't going to get to bend the law. "The rules about when wizards-in-training are permitted to attempt various spells are there for their own safety. Even graduated wizards sometimes make errors with that spell. Can I be certain that the trapped offworlder isn't pressuring your friend? After all, whether the girl gets a familiar successfully or dies, the offworlder gets what she wants. And we certainly can't incentivize inappropriate spellcasting. If all you have to do to get a familiar as early as you like is co-cast a summoning spell that no one can undo at the expense of some poor offworlder's freedom, who knows how many unbreakable summonings will *accidentally* happen with that ulterior motive?"

"Oh. I see," Leekath murmured. "I'll tell the teacher no, then." She glanced up at Aar Kithen, who dipped his head in silent acknowledgment, mouthed his thanks, and teleported away. "Um - the thing I wanted to talk to you about *last* week is -"

"Is it important, Leekath?" he asked. "I've only got another degree before the subcommittee on weather-control spell regulation meets."

"It won't take long," she said quickly. "I have - a boyfriend."

"Oh, that's nice," Aaihhhi said. "What's his name?"

"Talyn," she said.

"Not a vampire name. Is he a dragon?"

She winced. "No."

There was a silence. "Well, Leekath," Aaihhhi said at length, "God knows you can do what you like, but I don't think your fheel will like it."

"I was wondering if you could tell him when you go home -"

"Oh, Leekath, dear, that would hardly be fair to him - he'll have questions and you're the one who knows the answers, not me - and now I must be going. I love you!"

"I love you," she managed before he deactivated his crystal.

She leaned against the hallway wall and slid down to the floor, taking deep breaths.

There was a communication crystal in her room that connected to one in her family's home. If she rang that one, Fheel would pick it up and she could tell him.

Leekath let herself back into her room, put away the crystal that matched Aaihhhi's, and went back to work on her assignments.

On Inen, Leekath decided to check if Rhysel had read Talyn's letter and considered his request. She rang the bell, and went in when Rhysel let her through; the letter was in the trash, never having been smoothed. Someone had mistaken it for scrap. "I'm sorry," Leekath said.

"Thank you," Rhysel said, not making eye contact.

"If - if you want - I could tell you more about what happened," Leekath offered. She twisted her hands together behind her back and decided not to bring up the discarded letter. "I wasn't there for - that part. By the time I got there he was already gone and the demon was in one of the apprentices - that's where it was when Talyn killed it - it was awful - but - I do know what happened." She hesitated, and said, "Corpses... turn out to count as objects. I can hear them talking about themselves."

Rhysel winced, and Leekath wished she'd written a script for herself ahead of time instead of adlibbing. "Do I *want* more details than 'killed by a demon'?" Rhysel asked.

"I don't know," Leekath said apologetically. "But if you do, I can tell you."

"No," said Rhysel with a grimace, "I don't think so. Er - before it happened - did you give him my letter?"

"He didn't have time to read it," Leekath euphemized.

"Right," said Rhysel. "Well. Thank you, Leekath."

It was a clear dismissal, but at least Rhysel was capable of holding a conversation without screaming, so Leekath thought she'd try her question. "Er," she said, tracing her foot in a semicircle.

"What?"

"Most of the apprentices are going to other Masters, now, except the one that the other Masters declared Journeyman instead because he was almost done." She took a breath. "Um, Talyn, wanted me to ask for him, if - not right away, but later, when you're ready - if you'd let him apprentice with you. He says he can mostly self-teach, and he could help you and Aar Kithen with your extra disciplines. Um, I think he mostly just wants to... live... here."

Rhysel was silent, and Leekath worried she'd misstepped in asking, but eventually Rhysel said, "Check again in a week, but - tell him 'probably'."

"Okay," Leekath whispered, and she left to attend classes.

Leekath stayed after Spell Diagrams 2 to talk to the teacher and ask about sending a note to Barashi; the teacher let her work in his office and checked her diagram over for her, and she cast the spell to send the missive to the tower that had belonged to Revenn. She wasn't sure if Talyn was still there or if he'd already gone home with his family, but she assumed Byron would get it to him if need be.

A week later, Rhysel agreed to take Talyn as her apprentice. Aar Kithen confirmed that it was daytime in his part of Barashi, Leekath wrote him a letter which Aar Kithen sent to give him a few angles' warning, and loitered around Rhysel's tower while she made him a bedroom and Aar Kithen prepared a summoning circle.

At the time specified, Aar Kithen cast the spell, and Talyn appeared in the circle laden with bags of possessions. Leekath smudged the chalk on the circle to let him free and hugged him.

Talyn shook some bags off of his shoulders so he could return the embrace and plant a kiss on her mouth. <I missed you,> he sent.

<I missed you too,> she replied. <Right before Aar Kithen unsent me you were saying something - it seemed like it might be important - what was it?>

<I love you,> Talyn sent.

Chapter 7: Meeting

Talyn felt like if he stopped kissing Leekath, something really awful might happen, like him no longer kissing Leekath. Mindspeech it was. <I love you,> he repeated, and then, quickly, before she could answer, before the startled thoughts in her head could resolve themselves into a shape, <It's okay if you don't feel the same way - I just didn't want it to be a secret.>

At least Leekath didn't stop kissing him. <I - I don't know what to - is this because of Mysha?>

<No, it's because I love you - well - it's mostly because I love you. A little about Mysha. She was in love with me but she didn't say anything because she wouldn't have been allowed to do anything about it. And I think that's awful that it was a secret, and so I don't want this to be.>

<Oh.>

"Aaran Casten," said Aar Kithen dryly, "perhaps you would like to show Aaralan Hhirheek your room."

It was diplomatically done, though Talyn felt a coil of embarrassment in Leekath's mind. Rather than solve the problem of how to walk to the room without disengaging his mouth from hers, he picked the both of them up with air kamai and floated to the place Aar Kithen was thinking of. <Sorry about that. I didn't think it ought to wait,> he sent.

<It's okay,> she said sheepishly. Without breaking the kiss, she sent a high-pitched ping into the room. Talyn peered into her mind with fascination as she effortlessly interpreted the echoes. <So this is where you live now?>

<Well, I'll still be going to visit my parents pretty often,> Talyn sent. <And I might go visit my grandmother for a tenday sometime, because I won't be able to learn a lot of death kamai here and she can fill in the gaps. But yeah. I live here.>

<I'm glad you'll be nearby now,> Leekath replied. She was shy about the mildness of this sentiment next to his declaration.

He pulled her closer and stroked her hair. <It's okay,> he assured her. Her hair was soft; he ran his hand down it again. Her thoughts quieted, almost as though she was falling asleep.

<Leekath?>

<Mm?>

<You can't sleep in this form, right?>

<Mmm.>

He was concerned enough to actually pull his face away from hers and search her eyes, which were half-open. "Are you okay?"

Leekath's eyelashes fluttered. "Oh. I'm fine. I think you found my trance trigger," she said. Her thoughts were waking up somewhat. "Trancing isn't sleep. I was conscious, just not very energetic."

"That's going to happen every time I pet your hair?" he asked, frowning his eyebrows.

Leekath nodded. "Unless I'm not comfortable, or want to be particularly alert. Then it won't."

"...Nobody ever petted your hair before?" Talyn asked.

"My sister has styled it sometimes since she wants to be a hairdresser, but not really *petted* it." Leekath leaned towards him again for another kiss. <It's okay. It's nice.>

Talyn kissed her back and ran his hand through her hair again, and Leekath sighed contently.

Some time later - Talyn supposed he'd better start thinking of it as degrees - he asked,

<Do you see a lot of your family?>

Leekath snapped out of her trance instantly. <Not during school. I live with them on breaks between terms.> There was an edginess to her thoughts. Talyn poked at it.

<They don't know about me?>

<I told Aaihhhi,> she sent. <And I mentioned you in a letter to my brother which he might have read already. But - Fheel and my sister and the others don't. They're the ones who I think will have a problem with you not being a vampire or even a dragon.>

<Why's that a problem? On Barashi people don't usually date people of species they can't have kids with but I didn't think that was a problem here - I haven't heard anyone even *thinking* a complaint about Rhysel and Aar Kithen.>

<They can probably have kids just fine if they want, by magic if nothing else - vampires are more complicated,> Leekath said. <I don't have a circulatory system. Or a digestive system. If I couldn't turn into a bat, I'd die of sleep deprivation. People *have* half-vampires, but they miscarry a lot, and die as children a lot, and when they grow up they have a lot of health problems as adults too.> Her mind was full of bleak memories of the half-dozen attempts before her surviving half-human cousin was born - three dead before birth. One dead in infancy, unable to shift and needing it to sleep. One dead in infancy of malnutrition, fed the wrong guesswork mix of blood and milk. One with half a heart that worked for a week and stopped. <That uncle lives in a different house - they're not as conservative about this sort of thing - and it's worse when a vampire is carrying the baby instead of a human like my aunt, or something.>

<Is that it? Because I bet there's a way around it, if that's it. I want your family to like me,> Talyn sent.

<No, that's not all of it.> She squirmed. <Don't read my mind too much about my religion, please. It's mostly a secret from people who aren't vampires.>

<Okay,> he agreed, and then he instantly regretted it as he realized this might mean he would *never know*.

<Dragons can't be in the religion either, but they're really tasty, and they can speak the language, and they can turn into bats or even humanoid vampire shapes if they want, so they're... tolerated, if vampires want to date them or marry them. And vampire thudias count as vampires for religious purposes and they're perfectly healthy. But other than dragons, people don't like it. My aaihhhi's okay,> she sent earnestly. <I think he'll like you. And my brother Khi. But my fheel and my sister probably won't be very nice to you.>

<Does it have to be a big deal?> Talyn asked tentatively. <I mean, do they expect to meet me?>

<Not yet,> Leekath said.

Talyn started petting her hair again. The fretting in her thoughts calmed.

The ability to saturate themselves with each other didn't pall; by the time Leekath's semester wound down, Hihliir was teasing Leekath about Talyn more than about anything else. Since this didn't seem to bother Leekath - she thought of her roommate with a sort of indulgent amusement, taunts and all - Talyn didn't step in to defend his girlfriend. He did hear unkind thoughts from her hall neighbors and classmates (mostly bizarre speculations about her behavior that wouldn't have made sense even if the voices she heard *were* hallucinations). These he was tempted to confront, but they never escalated into outright bullying and he didn't want to risk getting in trouble with the school authorities and having them forbid him from meeting her on campus.

The last day of the semester was the last day of Komehel (well, technically "Komehel-for" wasn't in Komehel, though Talyn couldn't figure out why that was). <I'm not allowed to stay at school over the break,> Leekath told him. <My parents want me home and this time I don't even have to wait for a shuttle that goes to Mifaar, since I can teleport.>

<We can see each other over break sometimes, though, can't we?>

<I don't know about that,> she admitted. <Fheel doesn't like me to go places, uh, "unsupervised". He figures being at school is like being supervised, but when I'm home I mostly stay home except when I visit neighbors to ask for lunch.>

<I could come by and give you lunch. Would they be okay with that?>

She hesitated. <Probably. But I... I still haven't told Fheel about you - and he'd want to know who you were and why you were, um, delivering.>

<We can tell him, right? It's better than not seeing each other for a month. A long month.>

<...Maybe,> Leekath sent back. <You have the communication crystal I gave you, right? We can at least talk. I'm allowed to do that.>

<Yeah, I have it.> He sighed - through his nose, so he could keep kissing her. <Is he going to punish you for dating me, or something?>

<I don't know. I never dated anyone before,> Leekath admitted. <If I'm not there by -> She disengaged, to cast the time-telling spell. "Four degrees from now -" She fastened her mouth back to his, expertly avoiding fanging him. <Then he'll be mad at me for dawdling...>

<Then we have four degrees,> Talyn said.

Leekath left him behind with just a tick to spare.

Talyn didn't know what to do with himself while Leekath was gone. They talked by crystal, but she couldn't usually spare more than an angle a day - "I'm supposed to tutor my little cousin" was the usual reason; sometimes it was "Aaihhhi's home, I want to catch him before he starts working up in his study". If they talked late at night it was occasionally "time to leave for temple", about which she could say no more.

He studied kamaï from Rhysel's books and the ones he'd brought with him, but sometimes he also loitered around Binaaralav. Some of the students did stay over break: the people with the enormous wolves who thought in decorated sync were getting extra language tutoring, and some students who wanted to get studying or projects accomplished with the use of the library were around for other reasons, and Talyn heard some people thinking that they were there to avoid various flavors of irksome home life.

Kaylo, the dragon Talyn had encountered at the kamaï demo, was on campus for what appeared to be the library-related reason. Talyn ran into him sitting on the floor in the stacks, chewing his way through a stack of dense theory books that made the dragon's head buzz with jargon and abstract reasoning far above Talyn's level of comprehension.

Talyn hadn't meant to disturb Kaylo, but the dragon looked up anyway in a gap between thoughts. "Oh, hey, I remember you," he said in Martisen. "You answered some of my questions at the demo. I didn't know you were in Elcenia again."

"I started apprenticing with Rhysel," Talyn said, upon ascertaining his welcome to start a conversation. "Can we talk in Leraal? I'm still practicing it."

"No problem," said Kaylo easily, in the requested language. He shelved the book he'd been flipping through - "this monstrosity is useless, author did *not* check the literature" - and picked up the rest of his stack of books. "Is Rhysel a better teacher than she let on at the demo? I

know Aar Kithen's all right, but he has less kamaï background than she does, right?"

"I guess that depends on how thorough Keo was giving him Rhysel's knowledge. And how you compare the extra reading they've been doing. I guess she's okay, but I'm mostly self-teaching," Talyn said.

The boys strolled towards one of the study tables and Kaylo plunked his volumes down and started sorting them into three piles. Talyn slid into a chair. "Well, I'll live, I suppose," Kaylo said. "I mean, with wizardry, they *ostensibly* teach theory, but I'm having to research everything on my own time *anyway* because half of it is *manifestly nonsense*. Maybe having a teacher who doesn't care about theory will save time in the long run."

"What're you working on now?" Talyn asked, peering at the books. They were titled things like *The Complete Tah Roie Rhythm Data [volume 6, 11000-11100]* and *Wizardry: A Statistical Analysis and Collected Papers on Familiar Theory*.

"Channeling capacity," said Kaylo. He finished his sorting into piles and began arranging each pile into his desired reading order, then pulled a notebook out of the bookbag he wore on his back. "It doesn't make *sense* - there's not even a *pretense* of an understanding of why or *what* the stuff is unless you go by Sand Dusk Chanter apologia and say it's *the trust of our Lord God* - er - do you mind?"

Talyn's welcome had worn out with the books laid out on the table before Kaylo, who was near-twitching with the urge to seize them all at once and extract their contents into condensed cross-referenced nuggets. "Sure," Talyn said, getting up again. "Good luck with your project."

"Thanks," said Kaylo absently, already hunting through the index of *Minutiae on Channeling (A Crosstraditional Approach)*.

Talyn went outside and loitered by the pond that had once contained Rhysel's housekeeper, gardener, and their three children, waiting for Leekath to call. She'd said the previous day that her brother was coming home for a brief visit - his school operated on a different schedule than Binaaralav did, and was still in session for the month of Sutaahel; he was mostly coming to see Leekath while she was there. She'd told Talyn that she'd ring as soon as Khi was gone.

The sun had almost set when the crystal in his pocket chimed. "Leekath, hi!" he exclaimed into it, scrambling to hold it to his ear. "Did you have a good visit with your brother?"

"It was really good to see him!" she said. "Um, but."

"What?"

"...I still hadn't told Fheel about you."

"Uh-huh..."

"Khi didn't know that. He thought everybody knew. And he mentioned you."

"Oh. Uh, did that not... go well?"

"Uh. Fheel wants to meet you. So, I guess tomorrow, you should come over... and meet my family."

Talyn had considerable information about how to make a good first impression, even if Leekath hadn't been able to tell him much - she didn't seem to have any examples ready to hand of any person or thing that her fheel found pleasing. Given twenty-five angles in which to render himself suited for meeting his vampire girlfriend's vampire dad, his first order of business was to buy new clothes. He got money from Rhysel, followed passersby's thoughts to an upscale store, and told the first clerk he saw, "I need to look *nice*."

Impressing-my-girlfriend's-family-when-they're-predisposed-to-hate-me *nice*. Help me?"

The clerk wisely gave no consideration to Talyn's stylistic preferences in the face of such a task. She picked out a long-sleeved red shirt with a row of square buttons trailing down the front alongside his right arm, a pair of brown ticked-patterned slacks with no pockets, and a pair of heeled boots that divided into four sections above the ankle and had to be bound closed with a series of cords. Once the clerk had finally impressed upon Talyn how to tie the shoes, she took the money and Talyn went back to Rhysel's tower.

Theedy, the housekeeper, and Eret, the gardener, were respectively willing to tutor him in languages but untalkative, and unwilling to tutor him in languages but capable of producing plenty of words at a time. Given the volume of vampire language Talyn wanted to pick up and how much time he had to do it in, he antagonized Eret rather than wheedling Theedy. The red opal man would snap at Talyn in any language, which on this occasion worked against his stated preference to be rid of the pest. Talyn tottered around in the boots, eventually managing not to fall over in them, and practiced syncing up his mouth with illusion kamai of vampire words. He had to lean on Eret's ability to hear the high pitches, as he couldn't himself, and that impeded the fluency with which he could imagine them and press them into being. But he would be around plenty of readable vampires when he visited Leekath's family.

By the time Talyn felt it prudent to go to bed, he expected to be able to hold a very simple conversation in vampire, and as a side benefit he'd be able to understand it if any of Leekath's relatives decided to curse him out.

In the morning, Talyn studied shapeshifting.

Revenn had wanted him to hold off, Revenn had wanted to save shapeshifting for later, but Talyn didn't just want to be able to make himself a phoenix or a dolphin for kicks. He needed to turn into one thing, and it was *important*.

Talyn had spied on Byron practicing shapeshifting once, but Byron had never become a *bat*, so Talyn couldn't just directly lift the shape of the magic; he had to figure out which parts of it were generally applicable and which parts he needed to mess with, and how, to make himself a small furry flying creature.

His book was annoyingly vague - it *was* a textbook, and contained a high ratio of suggestions like "ask your Master to demonstrate the following exercise" - but by lunchtime, Talyn had managed to blur his arms into wings and back. He bolted down three bowls of the soup Rhysel fixed and moved on to attempting to shrink and finish the change.

Leekath called him while he was eating dinner; he'd successfully managed to bat-ify himself exactly once and only just changed into his sharp outfit. "I can come pick you up now," she murmured into the crystal. "Are you ready?"

He put his fork down. "Yeah, I don't want to keep your folks waiting."

She teleported onto Rhysel's front step; he could hear her mind pop into audibility there and opened the door before she knocked. Leekath spotted the plate of dinner on the table. "Oh," she said. "You could finish eating."

"I can do without," he said.

Leekath hesitated, trying to piece together whether her fheeil actually knew that non-vampires could safely skip meals, and finally held out her hand. "Call Fheeil 'Aar Hhirheek'," she said. "If Aaihghi comes home while you're there, call him Representative Hhirheek first, but he'll probably tell you to go ahead and call him by his first name and then you can. Don't talk back to Fheeil or - or anything. Ignore my sister as much as you can because she'll probably try to goad you but don't be *outright* rude to her - if she asks you a direct question

answer her and stuff. Um, my other relatives probably won't try to interact with you, but they might be around. Nod at them when you first go in but you don't have to talk to them if they don't talk to you. And - uh - Fheel might want to talk to you alone. He might send me to work with my little cousin on something, maybe, and then I'll have to go, but he doesn't know about mindspeech, so if you need to ask me something you can do it that way."

"Oh. Uh, okay," Talyn said, taking her hand. "I think I can do that."

"You look really nice," Leekath added softly. She kissed him, just once, and then teleported them both.

Leekath's family home was smaller than its neighboring ones, but comparatively better-maintained with fewer obvious additions, and it had a rigidly trimmed flower garden climbing the walls and sitting on the roof. Leekath landed them on the gray-brick street encircling its ring of homes, inhaled deeply, and pulled the door open.

Her fheel was waiting behind the door, tall and grim and unsmiling. "Welcome home, Aaeihhyleekatheei," he said, though there was no welcome in his voice or his thoughts. "Hello... 'Talyn'." His pronunciation of the foreign name had the exacting perfection of someone who insisted that his surface behavior be beyond reproach, whatever lapses he might have beneath that. Such as not being the least bit glad to see his daughter when she came home.

"Hello, Fheel," murmured Leekath, dipping her head respectfully.

Talyn leaned on his image kamai to answer in vampire. "It's nice to meet you, Aar Hhirheek," he lied.

"Enter," said Aar Hhirheek, standing aside. Leekath trotted in at once and Talyn followed her, propping himself up with air kamai when the heel of his boot caught on the threshold. Aar Hhirheek didn't notice the trip, but he noticed the shape of Talyn's ears and the color of his eyes and concluded that he could not reasonably be lying about his lack of dragonhood. (Black dragons would have had eyes like Talyn's but only blue-groups could turn into half-elves.) This disappointed Aar Hhirheek; he'd have rather Leekath been dating a dragon who was for some reason pretending to be otherwise than a half-elf.

Talyn hadn't been sure what to expect about the interior of a vampire home. Except for perches attached to the ceiling over the chairs and couches, it was normal on the open-plan ground floor apart from the lack of a kitchen. Vampires in both forms occupied the miscellaneous seating and hanging. One bat-shaped individual - Talyn gathered from her thoughts that she was Leekath's sister Iilha - released her grip on her perch and transformed into humanoid shape such that her feet were planted exactly on the ground. Her hair was in an overcomplicated updo that didn't do enough to distract from the sneer on her face. "Well, God on the moon, Leekath actually has a bleeder boyfriend. I thought that was just a detail to make the "boyfriend" story more plausible but she actually went and did it," remarked Iilha.

Talyn steeled himself to ignore her as Leekath had said. <Am I allowed to sit down?> he asked his girlfriend.

<Wait until Fheel does.>

Aar Hhirheek didn't seem to be inclined to sit soon. Possibly ever. He paid no mind to Iilha's comment. "Are you aware," he said to Talyn, "that Aaeihhyleekatheei is mentally unwell?"

"I know about the voices she hears," hedged Talyn. "Aar Hhirheek. It doesn't bother me."

"I did not ask you if it *bothered* you. Are you equipped to look after my daughter? At

her current level of stability, or should it drop to a more customary level for sufferers of her disease? Or perhaps you are not interested in looking after her, which would be perhaps more understandable, and intend to discard her after her delusions cease to amuse you?"

"I love her -" began Talyn.

"I did not *ask* you," Aar Hhirheek said, "if you loved her. You may or may not believe that you do; you are very young, certainly not much in excess of thirty -"

"I'm not an Elcenian half-elf, I'm from Barashi and we age -" Talyn started.

<I told you not to talk back to him!> Leekath shrieked in his head, as Aar Hhirheek's expression darkened further and Iilha snickered while hoisting herself back up onto the perch.

"Aaeihhyleekatheeei," said Aar Hhirheek slowly, "I believe Kaeesiishiialaei would benefit from your assistance with mathematics."

"Yes, Fheeil," murmured Leekath, and she trudged up the stairs.

When she had gone - and the room had otherwise cleared out, Iilha and other relations taking the hint from Aar Hhirheek's glowering silence - Aar Hhirheek advanced two steps to stare Talyn down from closer quarters. Talyn didn't back up, *or* set the man on fire, both of which victories ceased to bolster him when Aar Hhirheek said, "Considering that you are a rude and excessively idealistic cultural outsider; considering that you are too young *whatever* your aging rate might be to take on the commitment of an unwell and necessarily dependent lover, let alone spouse; considering that you cannot so much as propose to present me with healthy grandchildren I can present in the temple; considering that you have the effrontery to correct me while you are a guest in my home... Considering all of this, *Talyn*, do you have any considerations to present which suggest I should *not* forbid Aaeihhyleekatheeei from seeing you?"

Talyn's blood ran cold. Would Leekath dump him, if Aar Hhirheek told her to? What would happen if she didn't, and he found out? What would he do to her? The man's thoughts didn't hold answers to any of that; in his mind he was simply *to be obeyed*. The question of consequences for disobedience didn't come up until after that unthinkable thing happened.

"Perhaps," Aar Hhirheek said, after Talyn had gone too long without answering for his liking, "you believe that *she* loves *you*, and that this will cause such obstacles as her welfare, her duty to her family, or her status as a dependent in this household to evaporate. That is incorrect."

Talyn considered and rejected saying *You can't stop her! We can run away to Barashi!*. He considered and rejected *I can probably fix the grandchildren thing with kamai when it's time!* because he didn't think he wanted Aar Hhirheek's mind actually going anywhere nearer that topic than it already had. He considered and rejected *You're the rude one!*, which wouldn't improve Aar Hhirheek's estimate of his maturity. He considered and rejected turning into a bat for no reason, which would probably not *actually* shock his host into acceptance of the relationship.

"What would her aaihhhi say if Leekath told him you did that?" Talyn asked instead.

Aar Hhirheek drew himself up even taller, but Talyn could tell he'd made a dent - albeit a very small dent - in the vampire's frosty composure. "My husband," said Aar Hhirheek, "prefers not to handle the minutiae of our children's upbringing, given that he has a great deal of work to do and I am available for the task. Aaeihhyleekatheeei will not trouble him with the matter. And," he continued, "he would respect my decision, most particularly as he has not met you and I have. Do you have an answer to my question?"

Talyn didn't.

But he drew breath as though to answer it anyway, because he heard someone else whose politics-saturated thoughts could only belong to Leekath's aaihhhi approaching the front

door.

"I'm home!" Leekath's aaihhhi called. He flung the door open and strode in with a smile and a bulging caseful of paperwork. He pecked his husband on the lips, having to stand on tiptoe to do it, and then peered at Talyn. "Goodness. You must be Talyn! It's good to meet you." He proffered his free hand to shake; Talyn pumped it twice. "Where's Leekath?"

"Upstairs," said Talyn. "Tutoring her cousin, Representative Hhirheek."

Her aaihhhi beamed brightly. "Call me Thiies... She's so helpful. It's such a blessing that she can manage academic work, let alone assist others. Leekath!" he called up the stairwell. "Come down here!"

Leekath was down the stairs in a flash; Talyn hadn't actually been aware she could move that fast. She threw her arms around her aaihhhi and he patted her on the head. "So this is your boyfriend?" Thiies asked her.

"Yes, Aaihhhi," she said. "This is Talyn."

Thiies patted Talyn on the head too. "Leekath, has Kae got a handle on whatever you were teaching him?" At her nod, he continued, "I think you might be about old enough to start looking at some of my work, and see if you might want to help me out in my office when you're a bit farther along. Strictly unofficial for now," he added with a wink. "But I recall you can teleport as of last term - maybe you'll have something to say about this amendment to the restrictions on licensing -"

He drew Leekath away to his office up the stairs, leaving Talyn and Aar Hhirheek standing where they'd been when he came in. Talyn was puzzled over Leekath's ecstatic reaction to the invitation to what sounded like extremely boring work. She hadn't seemed to object to tutoring Kae in itself, so it wasn't a reprieve from distasteful work -

Aar Hhirheek called Talyn's attention back before he could read deeper. "I will not forbid Leekath from seeing you," he said in a low, growling voice. "Provided you are on your best behavior - No, that will be unlikely to suffice. Provided you are on *adequate* behavior on any further occasion you should be a guest in my home. I will not suffer to be disrespected under this roof. The five degrees it would take to convince my husband that you were better gotten rid of will not stop me from ordering you out of my daughter's life if it comes to that."

"I understand," said Talyn, not breaking eye contact. "Aar Hhirheek."

Chapter 8: Dancing

Talyn eventually got out of the Hhirheek house, although only after relating his entire life story to Aar Hhirheek while trying not to flinch away from the man's disapproving glare and menacing thoughts too often. Leekath spent the entire remainder of the visit in her aaihhhi's office, taking bewildering pleasure in tedious regulations on teleportation. She was good enough at multitasking to mindspeak intermittently to Talyn - coaching him on how to phrase answers to questions, mostly, and saying goodbye when Aar Hhirheek couldn't think of anything else to interrogate him about in that high, sharp voice.

"I believe I have satisfied my curiosity about you," said Aar Hhirheek.

"Aaeihhyleekatheeei will most likely be occupied with my husband for the rest of this evening. You should be on your way."

Talyn didn't need to be told twice. <Call me when you can,> he sent to Leekath on his way out.

<I will,> she promised.

Leekath called him the next day. "I'm sorry I didn't come out to say goodbye," she said.

"I didn't want Aaihhhi to think I was getting bored or wanted an excuse to stop helping him..."

"That's okay, I understand," Talyn said. "Does all that legal stuff really interest you?"

"Kind of," she said. "I mean, the reason I wanted to go to wizard school in particular is because you have to be some kind of magic user to get into Parliament. Aaihhhi's a sorcerer, not a wizard, but hearing's not recognized as a form of magic so I have to learn wizardry to qualify. And then maybe someday if I work my way up we can work together all the time."

"Uh-huh," Talyn said slowly. "Um..." He couldn't think of a good way to bring up Aar Hhirheek's less than fatherly behavior directly. "Does Rhysel count as 'supervision' such that you could come over here? She'll be a teacher at Binaaralav next term," he said instead. "...I don't like that you're all cooped up in that house. And your aaihhhi's at work most of the time, isn't he?"

"Yeah, he is," acknowledged Leekath. "I can ask if Rhysel counts. If Fheel wants her to talk to him - by crystal - will she say she's responsible for me while I'm there, and stuff, even though it's a school break?"

"I'm sure I can get her to do that," Talyn said. "And then, if Rhysel said it was okay, would you want to come with me to visit *my* family?"

"Do they want to meet me?" Leekath asked.

"I haven't asked them," Talyn admitted. "They know about you but won't start pestering me to bring you home for a visit for another few months at least. But they won't mind. Coryl - she's in my batch, a little older than me - brings home boyfriends without warning all the time when she has them, and my parents are always happy about it."

"If you think they'd like to meet me, I can go," Leekath said, though she didn't sound gleeful over the prospect.

"...It's really different at my house compared to yours," Talyn said. "It's... more like when your aaihhhi is home than when he isn't. Only, uh, more so, and all the time. And none of my sisters are like Iilha. Does that make sense?"

"Aaihhhi can only be so easygoing because Fheel takes care of the day-to-day stuff for him, since Aaihhhi is very busy," Leekath said. "I'm not sure how it would work to have both parents be more like my aaihhhi only *more* so..."

Your fheel told you that, didn't he, and you never wanted to waste your aaihhhi's valuable time checking up on it, Talyn thought but didn't say. "Well, you can see how it works

for yourself!" he told her instead. "I think my family gets along just fine. I have fifteen older brothers and sisters who've all turned out okay, and two little brothers and a little sister who seem pretty great to me."

"I'll ask about whether Rhysel counts as supervision, if you'll ask her if she's willing to supervise," Leekath said.

The conversation drifted away from there, and eventually Leekath had to go ("Fheeil wants me to look up how to renew the spell on the laundry hamper so he doesn't need to pay someone to fix it; bye.") Talyn managed to tell her he loved her before she deactivated the crystal, and then went to write a letter to his family and ask Rhysel a few questions.

<Welcome to Kalelifar, Restron,> said Talyn. <Or, well, the transfer point nearest to it. But it's not that far away from my house because my sister made it.>

<How many kyma are there in your family?> Leekath asked. She rearranged her sun cloak under her arm to confirm it was still there. Aar Kithen had promised that the sun wasn't due up in this time zone for a few divs.

<Me, my sister Ranel, and my Grandma Casten - Grandfather Revenn's daughter-in-law,> Talyn sent. <He's - he was - actually my great-grandfather. One of my great-uncles is a kama too. More people in the family have the ability - about a third of my siblings and my dad and so on - but it's not the most popular career choice.>

<What does your dad do?> Leekath asked, turning into a bat and starting to fly in the direction he'd indicated.

Talyn rose into the air after her. <He's an archaeologist - he goes out and digs up old things and figures out what they were,> he clarified, when the concept didn't meet with recognition in Leekath's mind. Then something occurred to him. <Uh, you might not want to tell him you're a hearer, because he *will* believe you. And then he'll want you to go out to his workshop and listen to every unidentified little object he has.>

<I wouldn't mind doing some of that if he wants,> Leekath sent.

<That's up to you. Just warning you,> Talyn sent. <I can't think of any other instructions you need. I explained about you and how you're a vampire and won't need a bed and stuff in my letter, so you don't have to do that. The only siblings you're going to see at the house are Erryl and Cyranna. We can go visit Abel and Coryl where they're apprenticing, though, if you want. Other siblings I'd need to make plans with.>

They reached the Casten house, which was quiet, and landed on the porch. <Will going inside wake them up?> Leekath asked.

<Probably not, but before my dad monopolizes you, I wanted to ask you if you'd teach me to fly. With bat wings,> he clarified.

<Did you learn to turn into a bat?> she asked, incredulous.

<Mm-hm,> he said, and proved it, blurring into the shape before her eyes. <I was hoping to impress your family but it, uh, didn't come up. But I'm still glad I learned it.>

Leekath scooted forward along the porch toward him and touched their noses together. <Thank you,> she sent.

Talyn squirmed, unable to put together a smile that wouldn't look ridiculous in bat form, then tapped their noses together again. <You're welcome.>

<Of course I'll teach you to fly. But, can you echolocate?>

<Uh... sort of. I can make the squeak and I can hear the echoes, but I'm not very good yet at figuring out what they mean...>

<Then we either need to wait for daylight, or start with that,> Leekath sent matter-of-factly. <Watch what I'm doing...>

Talyn spent the rest of the early morning spying on Leekath's mind putting together a sound-picture of the world, and was halfway competent - such that he might bump into Leekath, but not a wall - by the time the sun came up. He shifted back to his halfblood shape; Leekath stayed bat-formed to protect herself from the sun, and he scooped her up to carry her inside. The front door let into the kitchen, which had west-facing windows and allowed Leekath to safely shift and pull on her sun cloak.

Erryl, Talyn's eight-year-old brother, was an early riser, and woke up a moment after Talyn shut the door behind him only to hurtle out of his room and into the kitchen. "Talyn!" he exclaimed. "You're home! You're prob'ly *Lee-kath!*" Erryl added to the vampire visitor.

"Yes," Leekath said, sending the subtle translation of her words that Talyn had taught her to use so she could talk to people without him present. "You must be Erryl."

"Mm-huh. Talyn, I'm supposed to go to the Herrysses' house for tomatoes for breakfast today but I wanna meet Leekath, can you go instead?" wheedled Erryl.

"Uh," Talyn began.

"*You* already *know* her," Erryl pointed out.

"I guess..." Talyn said. <Unless you mind, and then I'll make him go,> he sent to Leekath.

<It's okay,> she sent. <Go ahead.>

Talyn picked up how many tomatoes Erryl had been told to get from his brother's thoughts, and left Leekath and Erryl alone in the kitchen and went down the street to the Herrysses' farm. He had to remind Mr. Herryss who he was, but was accepted as a Casten when he did, and the cost of the tomatoes would be billed to the house later.

When he got back, Leekath had Erryl trying to convince him that it was probably safe to bite him even though he was little ("because I'm really strong! And because it sounds *cooooooooo!*") and she had Cyranna, the six-year-old, sitting on her lap. Cyranna was holding her ever-present stuffed bunny, patched and restuffed and refurbished so many times throughout its long history of belovedness by small children that Talyn wasn't sure if Leekath would even hear it as the same object it had started out as.

"She's pretty, Talyn," Cyranna whispered loudly when he came in bearing tomatoes.

Talyn grinned. "I know," he said. "How're you, 'Anna?"

"I'm goood," Cyranna said. "Leekath Leekath Leekath, can Murry really talk to you?"

"Yes," Leekath said. "He says he likes you."

"He should, he's my friend," Cyranna said, squeezing the rabbit tighter.

"My goodness, you're here already," said Talyn's mother's voice. She came into the kitchen with a hairbrush stuck in her long waves of hair and a sleepily pleased expression on her face. When she spotted the tomatoes on the counter, she nodded, smiled, and went on brushing out her hair. "Good morning, everyone. Hello, Leekath, I'm so glad we get to meet you at last."

"Hello, Mrs. Casten," said Leekath politely.

"Oh, you can call me Astyrell - or Asy, even. Most people call me Asy. Now," she said, busying herself chopping up the tomatoes and fetching a packet of sausage from the icebox, "tell me about yourself, Leekath - what do you do?"

"I study wizardry, which is a form of magic, at Binaaralav Academy, and I'm going to start learning kamai formally in - four tendays," Leekath said, correcting herself from reflexive reference to "weeks".

"Hobbies? Everyone should have hobbies," said Asy.

"I like music," Leekath said. "Vampire music. And, um, politics. My aaihhhi - my dad - is in Parliament."

"Maybe you'd like to share a song or a story with us tonight at the gather," Asy said.

"The what?" Leekath asked, blinking rapidly.

"Oh, didn't Talyn tell you?" Asy asked. "Every evening when Garrytt, my husband, is home and not on some expedition, we all join together as a family - sometimes even our apprenticing children, Abel and Coryl, come home - and share music, or a story, or something else."

"Oh," Leekath said softly, eyes very wide. She was frantically trying to come up with a vampire song that took place at least mostly in a halfblood-audible register, or a story that they might find interesting that she could deliver without tripping over her own narrative.

"But you don't have to do anything if you don't want to," Talyn inserted. "It's optional for everyone anyway, and I forgot to tell you to expect it, and you're a guest."

This didn't seem to calm Leekath down. He peered deeper; she couldn't think of a more surefire way to infuriate his parents (however calm Asy seemed, whatever was claimed about the gather's optionality) than to refuse such a reasonable sort of request. <They won't be mad if you don't want to do anything!> Talyn assured her. <Really!>

Cyranna had picked up on Leekath's nervousness. "Here," she said, pressing Murry into Leekath's shoulder until the vampire lifted her hand to hold the rabbit. "Murry's best at making me feel better when I feel bad. You can have him for a little bit."

"Thank you," murmured Leekath.

"Goodness," Asy said. "I'm so sorry - do you have a fear of performing in front of people?"

"I - I don't know," Leekath said. "No one ever asked me to before." She'd stopped trembling, though she was now considering the possibility that Asy would only accept an abstention from the gather if Leekath had a certificate diagnosing her with a phobia.

"It's *okay*, Leekath," Talyn said, shooing Erryl from the chair next to her so he could sit down and put his arm around her. "You don't have to do anything. We could even skip it and go somewhere else together."

"Oh," Leekath said.

"Maybe we should go to Cayter Springs," Talyn suggested. "Mom, do they still do open dance lessons? Leekath, do you want to learn some Barashin dances? And even if you don't it's worth going at least once to look at all the weird buildings. It's an artists' commune," he explained.

"That could be fun," Leekath allowed, when Asy nodded about the dance lessons.

"I wanna go to the Springs," said Cyranna. "I wanna dance and I wanna go in the hot springs and I want Talyn to fly me around."

Talyn blinked, trying to think of a way to exclude his little sister from the date without making her cry, but Leekath actually seemed to like the idea of Cyranna tagging along when he peeked. "Okay," Talyn said.

"Hot springs?" Leekath asked, petting Cyranna's wavy hair while the little girl squirmed with excitement.

"...Huh," he said. "I guess a flat planet wouldn't have them. The inside of the planet is really hot," he explained. "Some places, the heat comes up to the surface and it can make warm pools. People go swimming in them."

"I probably shouldn't go in those," Leekath said. "Vampires and warm temperatures don't mix very well."

"We can skip them, then," Talyn said, watching Cyranna for signs of mutiny, but she seemed like she might be content without. "And just go to the dance studio and go on a flying architectural tour."

Asy finished breakfast, and Talyn's father finally lurched out of bed in time to get a plate. "Morning. You're Leekath?" yawned the archaeologist. "Good to meet you. I'm Garrytt."

"Hello, Garrytt," said Leekath. She was grateful to have Cyranna on her lap, as this meant she didn't awkwardly sit in front of an empty place setting; Cyranna seemed glad that she had someone to hang on to Murry for her while she messily consumed tomatoes and sausage. "Talyn thought you might want me to help you with your work some because I can hear objects talking about themselves."

Talyn hadn't been expecting her to volunteer the information first thing, but he could spend his visit catching up with family members while Leekath was occupied and then pull her away come evening on a claim of prior plans. The offer woke up Garrytt more than the food had. "This is an offworld magic you do?"

"Yes," Leekath said, lifting her chin a fraction that no one but Talyn noticed. "I'm a hearer."

"If you're willing to help, I'd be thrilled to have you," Garrytt said. "I have all sorts of odds and ends I haven't been able to figure out."

After Garrytt finished his food, he picked up Cyranna, spun her around twice, set her dizzy on the floor and gave her Murry out of Leekath's hand, and led the vampire out to his workshop. Talyn got started on the dishes.

"- and I put together a mosaic he hadn't been able to puzzle together. He thought he was missing a piece, but he'd mistaken it for the left eye of this statuette that didn't *have* separate eyes. The other eye was actually a piece of a wine bottle."

"But I liked how that statue looked with eyes!" Cyranna complained, swooping through the air under Talyn's power. He wondered if she'd study kamae when she was old enough. "It looked like a bug! With big bug eyes!"

Leekath laughed. "It's a goblin representation of a god, silly." She was speaking vampire, of necessity due to her bat form, and projecting the translation.

"Goblins look like cats," Cyranna asserted. "They got big cat ears."

"Which god?" Talyn asked.

"I don't know," Leekath said. "That's not the kind of thing it could tell me. I didn't even hear it saying it was supposed to be a god; your dad told me that."

"Dancing soon," whooped Cyranna. "Dancing dancing."

"I like dancing," murmured Leekath. "Sometimes my brother used to dance with me before he went off to school for it."

"He doesn't anymore?" Talyn asked.

"We're not home at the same time very often," Leekath said. "And he does a lot of his practicing alone now. He's *very* good at dancing and I'm not - the best he could do is use me as a placeholder, and Ilha works better for that because she's closer to his height."

"Ilha cooperates with that?" Talyn asked skeptically.

"She does if he pretends to listen to her talking about different kinds of braids and shampoo and stuff while he dances around her," Leekath said, shrugging.

"Well, the open dance lessons are usually a line dance," Talyn said, descending towards the ground in front of the dance studio. "They'll give the instructions pretty much continuously through the whole thing, and it doesn't matter if you're good or not."

"Leekath!" exclaimed Cyranna when her shoes touched the flagstones. "Before you don't be a bat, can I pet you?"

Leekath landed on the ground and looked up at Cyranna, nonplussed. "I suppose," she said.

Cyranna petted Leekath's fur, very gently, attracting some puzzled glances from other people arriving for the open dance lesson. "You're soft," cooed Cyranna.

Leekath shifted after Cyranna had had her fill of soft bat fur. That attracted attention, too, but the fact that they'd flown in led most of the minds Talyn could hear to dismiss it as some kamai thing. No one questioned them as they went in, each holding one of Cyranna's hands.

They danced until Cyranna was too tired to go on, though Leekath seemed to find the exercise energizing and was much more graceful than she'd claimed. Talyn watched with some interest as she didn't appear in the long mirrors along the walls of the dance hall; he remembered her making the claim about vampires and mirrors but hadn't seen her in front of one before.

"Do you think," Leekath asked as Talyn picked up his sister to carry her out, "that Khi could take lessons here - not these introductory open ones, something more formal - on his break? I think he'd rather do that than go home." She peered at the last, indirect rays of sunlight, and left her sun cloak tied around her waist.

"You'd have to ask the Master," Talyn said. "I don't think he does these things most of the time - the dance caller was a journeyman and the people on the floor helping out were apprentices. He's probably in the other half of the building. Do you want to go around and see if he'll talk to you?"

Leekath nodded. "Unless we need to get Cyranna home sooner than that."

"She's okay. Right, 'Anna?" Talyn asked.

"Iwannadancemore," yawned Cyranna.

"Well, that didn't sound like a vote for going home," Talyn said. He showed Leekath around to the other entrance, where a receptionist handled the dance studio's business, and sat with Cyranna in one of the handful of chairs.

"Excuse me," Leekath said to the receptionist. "I have what's probably a weird request. My brother goes to a dance school most of the year, but he gets five tendays off at a time occasionally, and I was wondering if he could spend those in a part-time apprenticeship here if he wanted?"

The receptionist blinked many times. He was trying to figure out what Leekath was, but instead of asking, eventually settled on "she's clearly just a mostly-Malterian halfblood and the light is bad in here". After coming to that erroneous conclusion, he asked, "What kind of apprenticeship gives him five tendays off at a time?"

"It's not really an apprenticeship," Leekath said. "It's just a school."

The receptionist pursed his lips. "Well. Your brother would probably need to talk to Master Coranton himself, and audition, but Master Coranton might be open to some kind of arrangement."

Leekath nodded. "Thank you," she told the receptionist, and went to fly home with Talyn and Cyranna.

Back at the Casten house, there was a brief fuss over sleeping arrangements. "You can put me anywhere," Leekath said. "I could go in the coat closet if we moved the coats over. I just

need something to hang from, that's all."

"Nonsense. You belong in a proper room. Now, we have Coryl's room, which no one is using tonight..."

"I wan' Leekath with meeeeeee," mumbled Cyranna.

Asy considered this. "Do you want to go in Cyranna's room? She has a closet, if that sort of bar is really best, or there's a clothes-hanger that fits over her door and could be cleared off."

"That sounds fine," Leekath said. "Either one."

"I was a little alarmed when the letter said you wouldn't need a guest bed," Asy chuckled, "until I got to the part where Talyn explained. Very well. Cyranna's clothes-hanger it is. I'll go get the clothes out of the way for you."

Ostensibly, everyone in the house went to sleep at the same time. But his room was close enough to Cyranna's to mindspeak easily. <Did you have a good day?> he asked Leekath.

<Yes,> Leekath answered. <Your family is really nice.>

<I'm glad you could come here,> Talyn sent. <Do you get what I meant about it being like when your aaihhhi is home?>

<Maybe,> Leekath hedged sleepily. <I think your family is probably nicer than most families.>

Talyn tried to think of a way to take that as a compliment without allowing the conclusion that *her* family was *about as* nice as most families. <Maybe you should visit more people at home,> he sent. <Emryl might want to have you over. You could get back in touch with her and drop by when she's at home sometime.>

<It'd be nice to see Emryl again.>

<Or some people you know from school, if any of them would let you hang out at their house for a while,> Talyn pressed.

<G'night, Talyn,> Leekath sent.

<Good night,> he replied. <I love you.>

<Love you too,> came her answer, and she fell silent in sleep.

Book 2: Extinguisher

Chapter 9: Adventuring

Talyn was getting very, very tired of Leekath being in school.

There was only a tiny break between the winter and spring terms, and that break had been a flurry of activity in Rhysel's tower because she got married. Talyn didn't have to do anything for the wedding itself besides show up in a decent set of clothes and transfer-point some guests around. What he did have to do was any chores his Master set him, and those piled up when she was busier than usual. Then by the time Rhysel and Aar Camlenn were wed, and Aar Camlenn was settled in, and the lyrics to every song Talyn had ever heard of were etched so deeply into his brain that he was sure they'd left scratches on the inside of his skull, and Rhysel was capable of leaving her new husband's side to take back some of the work she'd fobbed off on Talyn... school started again. And Leekath had her massive courseload to contend with.

She made time for him, an angle or two nearly every day, but that left him with twenty-three or twenty-four angles to fill with other things. And he was beginning to... not exhaust his boundless enthusiasm for kamai. That wouldn't ever happen. But he was running out of things to do with it in the confines of Rhysel's tower, her garden, the Binaaralav campus that he *wasn't technically* supposed to be on so very much, and the environs of Paraasilan.

And when he was bored, the torn minds under his own spoke to fill the quiet.

So he tried to avoid that.

Kaylo took fewer classes than Leekath did. In fact, he took the minimum number he needed to stay enrolled in the wizardry program, though he kept up with his cohort in kamai. "Why?" Talyn asked him once. "Aren't you super-into learning?"

"Right in one," said Kaylo, flipping through a book called "Tolerances in Wizarding Gestures, w/ a Special Appendix on Voyan Numbers".

"No, I mean..."

"I know what you meant," laughed Kaylo. "There's three related reasons. One, I want time I don't need to spend in class or doing assignments for class so I can work on my own projects. Two, I'm a dragon, I can take my time - I don't need to hurry through like a human or something so I can get started on a career while I'm still young. And three, my aunt is obligated by my parents' will to continue support me *only* so long as I'm enrolled in some sort of school. If she keeps that up 'till I'm out of school she gets their money. If she quits before then, I get it." He paused. "I don't get along with my aunt."

"Ah-huh," said Talyn. He'd known that Kaylo's parents had died - hard to miss, since Kaylo thought about them pretty frequently - but he'd never caught a thought about an aunt. "Do you live with her?"

"I avoid that when I can. I stay here on breaks. Before I started here I found other relatives who'd let me live with them. My mom had eighteen Ranndean elf thudia kids before she married my dad, and as long as I put in some legwork doing the genealogy, I could convince them I was related. A few let me stay with them 'cause they liked me or if I did chores or whatever. Rannde's okay. Human relatives - that's practically everyone on Dad's side, he used to live in Corenta where I grew up - were a little trickier to find. More generations. And there was one dwarf family I tried but they turned out to have moved to Ertido so, no on that."

"Oh," said Talyn. "That's not a *usual* sort of will, is it?"

"Nope. My parents were pretty eccentric." Kaylo put a bookmark in his book about

gesture tolerances, pushed it aside, and picked up a reference tome about magic words in use (volume eight). "They figured if Aunt Mijja put me all the way through school, I'd be fine without the money since I'd be so very educated, and then she'd be rewarded with the inheritance. I don't think they counted on the antagonism."

"How'd your folks die?"

"You're really inquisitive today," Kaylo remarked without heat. "They got hit by a scoot - this was like seventy years ago, scoots were a new thing, they weren't yet so riddled with advanced safety spells that you can't hit a tall dandelion with one. That would've cost them forms is all, but they were walking under a bridge."

"And..." Kaylo's mental image saved Talyn asking the question. They'd been forced by the impact into giant, natural garnet dragon shapes, and struck their heads on the stone above them with their sudden height. "Oh."

"I don't really mind the company," Kaylo said. "Since you do shut up when I get deep into something... I'd mind-shield around you but I don't think you'd be able to tell when I need quiet, anymore, if I did that. But why are you hanging around me so much lately? I know you don't understand eighty percent of what's running through my head."

"Bored," Talyn said. "Don't want to be bored. Need something to *do*, somewhere to *go*... I'm going to sound like a little kid, but I want an *adventure*." Something relentlessly occupying enough to make those extra people in his head *shut up shut up shut up*.

"Are you looking for the 'people trying to kill you' kind of adventure or the 'discovering ancient civilizations' kind of adventure or the 'intense work on an interesting problem' kind of adventure?"

"If I wanted the last kind I'd get you to explain more of what you're working on," said Talyn, gesturing at the books. "If I wanted the middle kind I'd ask Rhysel for a few weeks off and go on an archaeological expedition with my dad, but I've done that and it's not actually very exciting. Are those the only kinds? Where can I go where people'll try to kill me?"

"Ryganaav," said Kaylo. "Cut your hair so your ears show, fly south for a while, do a little lightshow for 'em, you'll have guys with swords on you in two ticks flat."

"I did not actually expect you to answer that question," Talyn said.

"I don't think you should actually go. It'd be dumb," Kaylo said.

"Guys with swords couldn't actually kill me," Talyn pointed out thoughtfully. "I could just stonesskin and jerk them around a bit."

"Does that count as an adventure, then?" Kaylo asked. "You might as well wait for Rhysel to have her kids and when they've got motor skills give them wet noodles and tell them to thwack you with them. Wooooo."

"I dunno. It'd be better than sitting around, trying to figure out if there's a plant in Rhysel's garden I haven't fiddled with to the limits of its tolerance, or an illusion I haven't made six times already, or another language I have any chance of ever using that I can get - dragons to speak at me until I'm fluent."

Kaylo didn't catch the little pause in which Talyn remembered that he needed to lie about Rhysel's housekeeper and gardener, Theedy and Eret. Kaylo practiced with Talyn on occasion too. "D'you want to learn Ryganaavan Leraal? It's just barely still mutually intelligible with the kind around here, but they've got a couple extra sounds, lots of different vocabulary, some weird sentence patterns, and one hell of a different accent."

"Sure," Talyn said. "Why not?"

"Well," said Kaylo, and his accent did radically shift, all of the vowels rounding like he

was going to give a speech or call across a distance. "Why not would be if you want to have any conversations about devil-powers. That being the only word in this dialect for the sort of thing us devils do to mess with stuff." This was accompanied by vaguely flailing gestures.

"Devil-powers, huh?"

"And - hang on." Something in one of Kaylo's books of devil-powers caught his eye. "Oh, that's just *not true* - when was this thing written - okay, this publishing company needs to hire a fact-checker - now I have to go verify everything I took out of this thing -"

Talyn knew when he wasn't wanted. He slipped out of the library, leaving Kaylo to devilishly mess with stuff.

<Where would I go if I wanted to meet a Ryganaavlan person?> he asked Leekath later that evening.

<Why would you want to do that?> she asked him, adjusting the tilt of her mouth on his.

<It sounds like an interesting place. I mean, in a horrible sort of way.>

<I guess,> she said dubiously. <Well. Don't actually go to Ryganaav. But sometimes Esmaar gets refugees from there. You might be able to meet one who's in public housing.>

<In town?>

<Maybe, but probably not. We're nowhere near the border. You could try in town and ask whoever runs the housing in Paraasilan if they know which town you should try. What are you going to talk to a Ryganaavlan refugee about? They won't like you. You're not a human.>

<Even if they came here?>

<I read a study Aaihhhi sent me on the kinds of refugees we get most so we can see about updating the protocols for them... They - the human refugees; we get leonines from Ryganaav too but I don't think that's what you meant - usually come because they have light or sorcerer children and don't want to turn them in to get murdered. Sometimes women come if their husbands are abusing them more than usual. They don't usually come in because they have sympathetic feelings for non-humans. There's classes for them to take where they have to meet vampires and halflings and elves and leonines and not try to kill them.>

<Uh-huh.>

<You could volunteer for a class like that,> she said. <If you want to meet some. You'd maybe be a good introductory exposure since you're almost a familiar color and your ears are only a bit pointed, not all long like an elf's. They'd give you a ward, though, I don't think they'd let you rely on stonesskin.>

<Maybe,> he said dubiously. Hadn't he decided he wanted some people to try to kill him...? <Er, why hasn't someone conquered this place already? Would it even be hard? Doesn't anyone care about the people in it?>

<Of course we care. That's why we take all the refugees who come in,> Leekath said. <But Esmaar doesn't have an army. We can't go around conquering places. And the countries with armies don't want to go after Ryganaav, I guess. It's a desert. You could conjure water and turn it into a nicer place to live but it'd be a big commitment of resources and it'd be really hard to absorb the natives. And some other country with an army could stab them in the back while they're distracted, I guess? I mostly know domestic politics, not international politics.>

<Think anybody'd object if I tried to get a Barashin country to try?> he sent darkly.

<Yes,> Leekath sent, her tone frank. <They'd have to send an army through a circle. That would look suspicious. Also do Barashin armies even use magic? Without it they'd have some serious casualties.>

<A little magic. Mostly healing magic,> Talyn admitted. <Kyma aren't supposed to ally with national militaries and they're weird about accepting kymic help anyway. But...>

<I know, it's pretty bad,> she said. <I think sometimes charities like the World Relief Union put together expeditions to go in and find people who need help and get them out in case they can't cross the desert themselves. You could volunteer as magical support for one of those.>

<Maybe. I think I'll try meeting one who's already in Esmaar first,> he said. <I promise not to let them strangle me.>

<Good.> She shifted, nuzzled his throat. <I like your neck not-strangled.>

"Yes, actually," said the elf woman, called Lorin, in the Paraasilan public housing's administrative office. "Normally we wouldn't have any Ryganaavlanik all the way up here, but we took overflow from Lotaasten last week, and there's a woman and her son. She's already been through all the required desensitization, though, or they'd have found someplace else to send her besides to *me*. The kid is just four; I think he'd be afraid of me if I were a leonine but he hadn't yet learned to fear my ears."

The Esmaarlan idea of public housing wasn't much different from its idea of private housing, though the scale differed. Eight massive buildings lettered *Mel* through *Shath* circled a courtyard, and each could hold five or six average Esmaarlan households entire. It surprised Talyn that the entire city could be served by only enough space to harbor the contents of fifty homes at most. Either Paraasilan sent more overflow than it received, or the dynamics of poverty were very different than they were in countries he was familiar with. He supposed closer extended families under single roofs would make it easier to absorb one or two lost jobs without resorting to life on welfare.

"Can I meet them?" Talyn asked. "Since they're desensitized already."

Lorin scrutinized him. He met her eyes, trying not to be distracted by her complex earrings. "How would you feel if somebody heard there was a half-elf living wherever you live, and said, 'ooh, a half-elf', and showed up and wanted to ask you all kinds of questions about that?"

"Uh." It hadn't occurred to him that wanting to meet Ryganaavlanik just because they were Ryganaavlan might be *rude*, as Lorin thought. "I didn't mean to offend, I just... I'm from another world. I don't know much about Ryganaav and I want to learn more. Books aren't as good," he added, before Lorin had a chance to suggest the nearest library out loud.

"Is there some reason she should want to meet you?" Lorin asked. "Are you going to give her an apartment in exchange for a certain number of angles interviewing with you? A sum of aaberik? Does your family run a niche clothing store that will offer her a job hand-sewing exorbitantly expensive traditional Ryganaavlan garments, for theaters and collectors and playactors who care about authenticity?"

"Er... what happens to her if she *can't* find a job or someone who'll give her stuff?" Talyn asked.

"She can stay here indefinitely," said Lorin, "if she has to. Although eventually she might work up to being able to use magic *objects*, even if she never learns to so much as tell time on her own. Then she could work retail, or something like that. As it is there's really nothing - Esmaar isn't set up to accommodate people who hate and fear and won't perform any magic." Lorin was remembering this bleak set of prospects for her tenant out of training materials, not long experience - she'd never had a Ryganaavlan in her housing before - but she couldn't think of any counterexamples, though she'd tried. It distressed her, under the businesslike calm she wore

on her face.

"What if I pay her for her time?" Talyn asked. It was the sort of cause Rhysel would gladly throw money at if he asked her. He wouldn't have to balance curiosity - and flight from boredom - against the ability to take Leekath to concerts and dances and plays.

"Then I could ask her if she'd be willing to talk to you," Lorin said.

Talyn went back to the circle of public houses the next day while Leekath was in one of her unbroken marathons of classes. At his side hung a bag heavy with coins, enough to pay the Ryganaavlan woman for three angles at the rate Rhysel paid her housekeeper and gardener. (Both Theedy and Eret, in their thoughts, reckoned themselves drastically overpaid; the former thought Rhysel knew and was just generous, the latter dreaded a pay cut. Talyn didn't think either the Ryganaavlan woman or watchful Lorin would call him a cheat if he wanted five or six angles for the money he carried. But he also didn't think Rhysel would complain if he went back for more.)

"I brought money," he said without preamble when he went into Lorin's office. "Will she meet me?"

"She will. Her first name is Sarid," Lorin said. "I'm not sure if she'd rather you call her that or call her Tetal tis Nam - that being the nearest equivalent of calling her by Aaral and a surname, but I think it means something more along the lines of 'she who belongs to Nam by purchase'. And she ran from him."

"You call her Sarid?" Talyn asked, though he knew the answer.

"I'm another woman, devilish ears or not. You, she might react to any which way." Lorin shrugged. "Her little boy will be with her through your interview. His name is Sinhar Dehel. And he's a sorcerer." *That's why she ran*, Lorin was thinking.

"Okay," Talyn said.

Lorin led him to Aan house. Inside, it was divided into "apartments", each big enough for more than a dozen people, but thoughts and voices were scarcer than the architecture suggested. Much of it stood empty. Sarid and her son had one of the sections to themselves. "I'd have to make them share it, if we were fuller," Lorin said. "But I don't, and there's no point in scaring her with roommates who insist on knowing what time it is and using the stove and so on."

Talyn wondered what Sarid and her boy *ate*, if they couldn't use enchanted kitchen tools. The question was answered when Lorin pushed open the door to her apartment, two flights of stairs up from the entrance. They stepped into the kitchen, which was full of fruits and breads and vegetables and nuts and cheeses and dried meats that could be eaten raw and stored outside of the cold cabinet. Talyn doubted that the public housing department also went to the trouble and expense of procuring food that had been *produced* without magic, but apparently it accommodated Sarid's terror of the appliances.

Sarid herself, dark-colored and wearing pale yellow, looked to be either a well-preserved thirty-five or a weary nineteen. She was standing in the kitchen, stiffly knifing cheese onto a heel of a loaf of dark bread, and she did radiate terror. The color-coded blue-white cabinet scared her. The stove and all its dials frightened her. She shivered when she looked at the sink, but appeared to have (mostly) managed to think of it as a bizarre-looking mechanical contraption attached to a well.

"Hello," she said in a low voice, dipping her head politely to Talyn. His ears didn't show past his hair. He didn't alarm her, at least not visually - there was an undercurrent of dread that he

practiced some dreadful magic or hid some devilish "deformity".

"Hello." Talyn replied as best he could in the same dialect; he wouldn't be fluent in the idioms without more practice, but the transformations of the sounds were simple enough. "How are you?"

Sarid finished putting the cheese on the bread. "My health is good," she said.

Lorin didn't show any inclination to leave them alone. "Do you plan to stay the whole time?" Talyn asked her.

"For the first few degrees. Then I'll let you be," Lorin said. She was thinking about some protocol regarding her responsibility for tenants; she didn't think he was going to do anything to hurt Sarid, but wasn't yet willing to act on that expectation.

"If you'll excuse me," Sarid said, "for just a short while, I would bring my son this," she gestured at the food, "and then I can talk with you as Lorin said you wished."

"Of course," Talyn said.

Sarid ducked her head again and scurried to the sofa around the counter from which Sinhar's simple thoughts drifted. "No," Talyn heard her say. "No, eat with your hands. Your hands, Sinhar."

Sinhar didn't like this rule, and resumed bringing bread to his mouth with sorcerous telekinesis when Sarid stopped looking, but she didn't know that. "What do you wish to talk about?" she asked Talyn with another one of those head-dips. He knew she was doing it to be polite, but they would make him dizzy if she did it much more.

"Er, Rygnaav," he said. "Where you came from, what it's like there."

Sarid sat at one of the kitchen chairs, and Talyn took one opposite her. Lorin, who expected to leave soon, continued standing. Sarid didn't seem to understand the topic. "What about it?"

"Well..." It was usually easier to get people to talk about themselves. "What was your childhood like? Did you wear more or less this sort of thing? Why did you come here? What do you miss about it, if anything?"

"This is a normal dress," she said, looking down at the yellow cloth. "I made it. I grew up in Astol with my brothers and sisters until my husband bought me. I came here because I couldn't let Sinhar die." She paused, closing her eyes, thinking about the faces of two little girls, toddler and infant - "I miss my daughters," she said.

"You have daughters? They're not here?" Talyn asked, blinking.

"I do. I couldn't take them," Sarid said, looking away. "Not all that way. Not carrying them and enough water for all of us too."

"Are... they safe?" Talyn asked slowly.

"I think so," Sarid said quietly. "My sister-in-law is there to watch them." She expected her husband to keep the girls until they were salable, and his sister to look after them for that time. She was reasonably sure he'd find a way to make sure their daughters were taken care of even if a buyer turned up for his sister, the youngest of three he'd inherited on his father's death and the only one he hadn't managed to marry off yet. Talyn winced. As chattel, the girls were, at least, a valuable investment - it would be foolish to let them die just because their mother had run off, their brother in tow - but it left a bad taste in his mouth.

"But you're not sure," he said.

"They could be like Sinhar," she said. "Whatever's wrong with him, whatever let the devil powers into him, they could have it too and just be too young to show it."

"Nothing's wrong with Sinhar," said Talyn.

Sarid didn't argue with him, but she was thinking about a sinister figure whispering in her boy's ear, tempting him to float bread to his mouth and dooming him to hellish torment for it by stern gods. Whatever let him hear that voice was what was "wrong" with him, in her mind.

Talyn decided that her religious concerns about Sinhar's virtue could wait. "Lorin," he said, addressing the elf, "what if I go and *get* her daughters? Is that legal?"

"Uh," she said. "I'm not a cop or a legal scholar. It's not legal in *Ryganaav*, I'm sure, but what Sarid did wasn't either. I don't think you'd actually get into trouble for it, if that's what you're asking. People take a dim view of Ryganaavlan ideas of parenting and they'd be more likely to pat you on the back than arrest you if there was even any involvement from the law."

"Do you want me to go get them for you?" Talyn asked, addressing Sarid.

"I - I - they don't belong to me," Sarid said. "They belong to Nam." Her husband, their father - the girls were named Path and Naarin us Nam. Path and Naarin, belonging to Nam by birth. Sarid might not have been able to bring herself to "kidnap" Sinhar if he'd been a girl: he didn't technically *belong* to anyone.

"They're your daughters," said Talyn. "I think they'd be better off here with you than there with him, waiting to be sold off when they're, what, sixteen?"

"Younger, if they're pretty," Sarid murmured. "But that's what's supposed to happen."

"Waiting," Talyn said, "to hit their fourth or fifth birthdays, and start moving things without touching them or producing light from nowhere?"

Sarid shuddered. "They're not mine," she whispered.

"They shouldn't be his, either," Talyn said.

"Talyn," Lorin said uncertainly.

"They will be worth so much money when they are older, if they're pretty," Sarid breathed. "And without me he has to replace me, if he wants a wife, and -"

"If I leave money behind for them?" Talyn asked, feeling sick to his stomach. Rhysel would reach into her sack of troll gems again for this, he was sure.

"Why would you want to buy them?" Sarid asked despairingly. "Path is only two. Naarin is a baby."

"I don't want to buy them," Talyn said, grinding his fist into his eye in frustration. "I want you to have them. If the only way you feel comfortable with that is if I compensate your husband for taking them, I can do that. Do you want me to go get them for you?"

Sarid got to her feet suddenly and strode towards her son. "Sinhar," she said, and he caught his bread out of the air before she noticed it floating. "Do you want your sisters here with you?"

"My sisters," he said. "They're *my* sisters."

"That's right," she said. "Do you miss Path and Naarin?"

"Uh-huh."

"Do you want them here?"

"They're mine," Sinhar said. "After Daddy," he added.

"Never mind about Daddy," Sarid murmured, and Talyn shuddered at the guilt she felt over running, even to save Sinhar's life. "Do you want Path and Naarin?"

"Yeah."

Sarid stood up, face set, and looked at Talyn over the counter. "If you can do it," she said, "if you can bring them here - *without* hurting them or tainting them with your powers - then - yes."

Chapter 10: Fetching

"What does it mean to 'taint' them with my powers?" Talyn asked tentatively.

Sarid bit her lip. "I would *rather* you didn't use any. But if you need them, then, don't... Try not to let the girls see, and don't use the powers *on* them. Can you do that? I don't *want* them to have Sinhar's flaw."

Talyn nodded. "I don't think I'll need to use magic on them directly. And I can make most of it invisible. Although I'm not clear on how that would make them able to do any magic they can't already do..." Sarid flinched and he fell silent.

"How are you planning on accomplishing this?" Lorin asked him, frowning. "I hope you're not going to get yourself killed..."

"Step one, ask my Master for money," said Talyn. "Step two, ask a spell from my wizard girlfriend. I'll be fine."

Rhysel was easy.

Leekath wasn't.

"You want me to push you to *Ryganaav*," she said incredulously.

"Is that what it's called when you send within Elcenia?"

"The other direction is calling. You want to just go there all by yourself?" Leekath exclaimed. "What happened to going with a charity?"

"Nothing happened to it, exactly, but I don't think a charity would help me do this particular thing. I could fly there instead, but I'm going to have to *walk* back and should probably show up with all my lifeforce."

"Are you serious?"

"It's not that far or Sarid couldn't have made it with a four-year-old. It's not going to be the most fun hike ever, but I can do it. I'll take a hover platform if that would make you feel better."

"I thought you were also going to do it without showing them any magic."

"They'll sleep some, right? Kids wake up, platform folds up. I'll take a knapsack."

Leekath cocked her head, brow furrowed. "Is this the kind of thing you do a lot and I just haven't known you long enough? Because I knew you were the sort of person who went flying with wild rocs and that's fine, but going to *Ryganaav* like this is... Will you let me ward you?"

"If you want. But they can't hurt me," he said.

"I'm not that worried about the humans, but there are leonines in *Ryganaav* too, and they *don't* hate magic. Their lights and sorcerers can't hurt you, I guess, and they don't have wizards, just a handful of random spells, but their mages can give you trouble." She was thinking about the ways mages could get around and through otherwise impenetrable wards, trying to remember if there was a mageproof protection that would keep Talyn's breath from being stolen or his skin burnt to a crisp or his blood frozen in his veins or his stonesskin cracked open.

"Are there a lot of mages?"

"At least some leonines do have the spell to tell if someone's a potential mage," Leekath said. "So yes."

"Why would they attack me?" Talyn asked. "I'm not going to go around attacking leonines."

"They'll figure that that's because you haven't spotted them yet. You'll look like a

Ryganaavlan human from a distance. And a Ryganaavlan human would be hostile to leonines. Even if you convince them you're peaceful that doesn't mean they are. Ryganaavlan humans are pretty awful but the leonines aren't that great either. They might eat you, or try to keep you as a slave - same for the girls you're trying to bring here."

Talyn chewed on his lip. "A two year old is probably not talkative enough to tell her mommy if she sees magic, is she. Let alone the baby."

"Probably," said Leekath. "I'll call *them*, if you want, and push the gems you picked out of Rhysel's bag to pay for the girls."

"No, I mean, *if* my plan goes south and we get attacked by leonines I can turn us invisible or something. I still want to keep my word to Sarid if that doesn't mean getting... eaten? Really?"

"Really," said Leekath.

"You're the only person allowed to feed on me," Talyn said loyally, and he got a small laugh.

"Hover platform?" Leekath asked, graphite stick in one hand and checklist in the other.

"Yep. Rhysel says it's not mine, though, it's going to be a household thing so her kids can play on it when they're born and stuff."

"Gems? Water? Food? Milkpotion for the baby? Warm clothes for nightfall?"

"Yes, but - is the milkpotion you got made by witches?"

"Well, you could take some kind of animal milk instead," said Leekath, sighing. "But that's not really *good* for babies."

"It's only until I get them across the border," Talyn said. "How do you know what's good for non-vampire babies to eat, anyway?"

"I stood near a parenting magazine that wasn't especially for vampires one time," she said. "And I was bored. Communication crystal?"

"I have it, but don't call it, okay? I'll call you in an emergency, if there is one."

Leekath nodded. "But I'm at least going to scry you if you aren't back in two days."

"Of course." He looked into his backpack. "Kiss goodbye?" he asked rhetorically, pretending to hunt for it.

"Oh, you." She touched his cheek, turned his head, and kissed him. <Be safe. Okay?>

<Thanks for putting up with me,> he sent. <I'll do my best to come home in one piece.>

Just like teleporting, being pushed felt like nothing on its own. However, landing in Nam's limestone house was noticeable - the structure was built to admit cooling drafts, but it was still dramatically warmer than any part of Paraasilan.

Talyn had appeared invisibly in a circular room with a fireplace in the middle and sleeping pallets arranged around it. The fire wasn't burning, but would presumably be called for during the colder night. Three of the four pallets were empty. In the third slept Naarin, the baby girl, wearing what looked like a sack with sleeves; it had some kind of strap sewn to it which Talyn imagined would let someone sling her over their shoulder.

He *was* invisible, though, and if he picked up the baby before finding Path, Path would see her sister floating. He noted where Naarin was and stalked quietly through the house in search of the toddler.

Path was strapped to her aunt's back, chewing on a wooden toy shoved too far into her mouth for Talyn to identify its shape. Nam's sister looked like she might be sixteen or seventeen,

and she was pounding lentils into flour in a big stone bowl. Talyn wasn't sure how to get Path away from her, nor when she'd put the girl down. He chewed on his lip and wondered if using mind kamai on Sarid's sister-in-law would bother her, then decided she didn't need to know. He let the looping music in his mind fall silent.

- finish the flour, then bring Naarin to Tetal tis Usanek for wetnursing, but is there enough in the petty cash to pay her husband? Then I need to go out to the well and bring in enough for supper. I think we're out of pepper. What is Nam going to do without me? I don't think he knew I could hear them talking, but I know Senakaal Kegar is thinking of buying me, and then Nam will be here with two little girls to look after and no woman. Will I fetch enough to let him buy Tetal us Kazyl, or will he have to wait and save more for her, or settle for Tetal us Etaan? What force took Sarid, to leave Nam like that? And Sinhar! Bad enough for her to go, to abandon her responsibilities, but his firstborn son! What is she going to do with him, sacrifice him to the Corrupter...?

Talyn was unpleasantly struck by how normal all these thoughts felt to the woman - he searched for her name - Asdaar. She didn't have any particular emotional reaction to the idea of being sold to Senakaal Kegar except for concern about her brother's ability to keep up with his work and remaining children. And Asdaar was *livid* at Sarid, rather than harboring a hope that her sister-in-law had escaped to a more hospitable destination. She didn't know Sinhar had manifested sorcerer powers, but Talyn had the unpleasant idea that she wouldn't be more sympathetic if she did.

This place, Talyn thought, is messed up.

Although he did wonder if Nam's head was full of normal-sounding thoughts, too.

At any rate, Asdaar planned to wear Path - and Naarin too, when she was awake or when Asdaar was out of the house - all day. Talyn wouldn't get a chance to unobtrusively steal the girls away until the family bedded down for the night. He had some waiting around to do.

Maybe Sarid didn't go voluntarily, but if lion-devils came to steal her and Sinhar out of our home wouldn't they have done me and Nam harm? Or taken the babies or the neighbors? Asdaar was thinking.

Rapidly losing interest in Asdaar's speculations, Talyn decided to spend his wait exploring.

The town was built around an oasis. Virtually every man Talyn passed was involved in some kind of farming; a handful lent money or practiced crafts or worked at the temple or were passing through on caravans to sell things. All the women did domestic work, except that the wives of men who had more than one sometimes helped their husbands with whatever his job was and let her co-wife manage the household. And the place was overrun with children.

The adults walked sedately, moving from shadow to shadow to avoid the sun and often weighed down with heavy burdens. The children were harder to avoid. One little boy did bump into Talyn, and looked confused, but eventually decided he'd just tripped strangely and continued. After that, Talyn flew above the crowds instead.

It was a homogenous place. Talyn had grown up in Restron, almost entirely populated by halfbloods, but at least they came in different colors. All the Ryganavlanik were within a narrow band of shades of brown. Their hair was all black, all straight. They all wore pale colors to ward off the sun, and they could have been wearing gender-segregated uniforms, there was so little variance in styles.

Talyn started to get hungry after he'd been flying around eavesdropping on people for

two angles. He'd witnessed a drunkard haggling with a caravanser about the price of liquor, a man accept a sum of goats in exchange for his fifteen-year-old daughter, and a little girl teaching her cousin how to play some dizzyingly complicated game with bits of glass and string. He'd watched a priest's acolyte assure a man that, one day, the faithful would overtake the world, eradicate the devils and the wielders of their powers, and be reassumed into the blessings of the gods. The same acolyte then met with a different parishoner and counseled him away from suicide in the wake of financial ruin with bewildering gentleness and a gift of coins. Then he'd spoken with a different man and suggested that if the fellow's wife wasn't obeying him when he issued verbal orders, he could try hitting her.

Talyn didn't know if he wanted to throw up or set the town on fire. Or fly home and leave them be.

He flew into the desert, found and killed a hare, and cooked it with fire magic and ate it, rather than stealing from any of the food sellers.

And then he went back, because the desert was quiet, and he could hear his grandfather and Mysha and the demon. They weren't alive, their minds weren't learning things or reacting to what Talyn saw and heard, but their memories bubbled up according to what he thought about, and he roared songs in his thoughts to shout down the demon's remembrance of possessing desert animals, Mysha's yearning to travel through troll lands and learn more about their misunderstood culture, his grandfather's anxiety about what purpose Talyn would turn his innate power towards.

Shut up, shut up, I'm busy, Talyn insisted, and he busied himself. Night was falling. He went back to Nam's house and caught the tail end of the family dinner. He forced himself to be fascinated when Nam told Asdaar about the status of the vineyard (good) and the fate of "that cheat, Oligar" (bad) and the asking price for Tetal us Kazyl (high).

They went to bed by the fire over which Asdaar had cooked dinner. A chill stole through the air. Naarin fussed, and Nam sat up and scooped his daughter into his arms and soothed her and put her back down.

Finally, they all slept.

Talyn picked up Naarin by the strap on her sack-garment and managed to get her secured to his chest without waking her up.

She's Sarid's little girl, he thought fiercely. *She should be with her mother and brother. Not here. Nam would sell her eventually anyway for goats or something. I'll leave gems and it won't make a difference to him.*

He didn't really believe that, but he didn't believe Sarid ought to have to do without her girls either, so he picked up Path, too, got her onto his back behind his knapsack, dropped one of the jewels Rhysel had given him on each of the girls' pallets, and stole out of the house.

The town wasn't well-lit at night, but it wasn't impossible that someone would see him, if they looked; there was moonlight and a few slow-burning torches. He got out of the city on foot, wishing the Barashin gods would be able to hear him from Elcenia so he could pray that Path and Naarin would stay asleep.

They slept without divine assistance. Path was having a dream about a pretty bug she'd seen becoming giant and letting her ride it.

Beyond the light of any of the torches, and too far to be easily observed in the moon's glow by a townspeople, Talyn pulled out the hover platform, unfolded it, and climbed on to direct it north.

The girls slept soundly, and he dared step up the speed to make better time. Talyn was

nearly at the border when dawn broke, they opened their eyes (he hastily became visible), and he was obliged to go on foot.

"Papa? Auntie?" asked Path, who, on his back facing outward, couldn't see who was holding her. Naarin yawned and didn't seem to care.

"Shhh," Talyn said to Path.

She didn't recognize his voice. "Who? Who is?"

"It's okay, Path, I'm... a friend of your mama's," Talyn tried.

"No," Path said. Evidently she'd been chided for discussing her mama; Talyn caught a distorted memory of Nam frowning at her for bringing Sarid up, then looking away with a hurt expression.

"It's okay," he repeated. "I'm nice."

The border was attended, if not exactly guarded. Esmaarlan government workers staffed outposts every couple of miles. A fence that would probably have been mildly challenging for a magically unequipped human to get past stretched between them. Talyn headed for one of the little buildings.

Someone came out to meet him and Talyn tucked his hair behind one of his ears to show off the point; he didn't want to listen to the spiel they gave to ordinary refugees. "Er," said the human man who'd been about to launch exactly such a spiel. "...Okay, what's the story?"

Talyn told him.

"All right," the attendant said when the explanation was through - as simply factual as Talyn could make it and filtered through a sleepless night. The attendant didn't want to hear about the acolyte giving a week's worth of his own pay to a ruined man. The attendant didn't want to know that Nam had woken up to put Naarin back to sleep when she woke. "What're the girls' names? I guess they can do the processing at the house you're taking them to, but I could use something to do."

"Path and Naarin. Us Nam," Talyn said wearily.

"Okay." The attendant wrote this down on a pad of paper. "And Nam's not going to be joining them?"

"Don't think so. I'm just taking them to their mother and brother."

"You affiliated with an institution?" asked the attendant. "World Relief Union, United Aleists of Espaal, the Sand -"

"No. Just me," Talyn.

"You're a brave young man," the attendant said.

Talyn didn't feel brave. He felt exhausted. "Thank you."

"How are you getting to Paraasilan? I assume if you could teleport you'd have done that from farther in, not walked here..."

"Was thinking a public scoot," Talyn said. "The girls' mother doesn't want them to have to look at any magic but the inside of a scoot doesn't look very magic, right?"

"Looks like seats and windows," said the attendant. "Do you need help getting to a scoot station?"

"Directions, maybe," Talyn said.

"Just follow that street," the attendant said, pointing through the windows in his building at a little dirt track. "It's about a mile away. Will you be all right? You look really run down. I could come with you, carry one of the kids. Someone else'll pop into this depot if the detector shows anyone coming."

"If you aren't going to use any magic that she can see, sure," Talyn said gratefully,

handing over a squirming Path.

"She looks like one of mine," the man said. Talyn was having a harder time blocking out thoughts with the sleep deprivation; the attendant was picturing his family, including a three-year-old who vaguely resembled the toddler in his arms.

"Great," Talyn said. "Tell me about your family."

As he'd hoped, this kept the attendant rambling until they got to the scoot station and Talyn didn't have to contribute further to the conversation. He was left sitting in the station, holding three tickets to a Paraasilan scoot that left in twenty degrees.

"Eat?" said Path.

Talyn dug out some crackers for her, which she munched, and gave Naarin a bottle of goat milk. It had been kept preserved by magic, but nothing she could see. Naarin took a while to figure out the bottle, but sucked down the milk contently enough once she'd managed.

Sarid was going to be so happy to see them.

He focused on that, and on songs, and on passing Path more food when she repeated "Eat?", and on the thoughts of the other people in the station, and on anything but the seething minds folded into his.

"Mama?" asked Path skeptically, when Talyn finally staggered into Sarid's apartment with the children in tow. Sarid was cutting up an apple for Sinhar.

She dropped the knife. "Path," she breathed. "Naarin. You *got* them."

Talyn nodded and handed over first one, then the other, and wobbled.

"Were you up all night?" Sarid asked. "Can you get home?"

"Yeah," he yawned. "I think so. Maybe I should call my girlfriend. What day is it? Chenen, right? I made good time. They sleep through the night really well."

"Chenen, yes," Sarid said. She pressed a kiss to each daughter's forehead.

"Then she's not in class, I can call her," Talyn said. He shrugged off the knapsack and rummaged around for the communication crystal. Sarid had been thinking of pointing out that there were empty rooms in the apartment, but nodded when he said he was going to call Leekath.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"You're welcome," Talyn said. He found the crystal, and wandered out of the apartment to shield Sarid's children from the sight of its use.

He thwacked it against a banister. It rang. Leekath picked up.

"I'm back," he said. "I am so tired. Can you get me?"

"Where are you?"

"The public housing... thing."

"I can't teleport there. I'll be a few degrees walking. Is that okay?"

"Yeah," he said. "I'll sit here." He plopped down onto the stairs and leaned against the wall.

"I'll see you soon," she said. The crystal went silent. He put it down.

When he woke up, he was in his bed in Rhysel's tower, tucked in.

He rolled over and went back to sleep.

The next day was an Inen, and Talyn sorely regretted having conducted his mission during Leekath's break in classes. The girls would have been fine for another two days. Not that he knew that when he set out. He'd been envisioning something like the mental picture Lorin or Leekath composed when they thought about Ryganaav.

It wasn't like the stereotypes were *untrue*. He'd personally watched a man sell his daughter, seen a woman limping because her husband had hit her, listened to a priest-in-training speak fondly of eventual genocide. He didn't doubt that Sinhar would have been brutally murdered if he'd floated a piece of bread to his mouth in front of anyone but Sarid. And maybe there wasn't supposed to be a "but" after any of that; maybe it was inexcusable; but it was eating at him.

"I don't think I'm going to try to organize an army to take over Ryganaav," he told Rhysel over breakfast.

"Good to hear," she said, raising an eyebrow.

"But something has to change there," he said. "It's just - it shouldn't - is there a way to make it change without anybody having to die?"

"I don't know, Talyn," Rhysel sighed. "From what I've heard, it's a very deeply embedded culture. Maybe Keo could do it, but... well, she would have done it already, if she were going to."

"I'm going to ask her," Talyn said, and a sad look crossed her face, but she was always shielded nowadays unless actually practicing mind kamai, and he couldn't tell what that was about.

"Good luck," Rhysel said.

Talyn could have pinged Keo from the breakfast table, but he was going to be on campus later anyway, to meet Leekath for the one-angle gap in her classes and give her lunch. So he took the transfer point to the pond, went into the building, and told the lift to take him to the headmaster's office.

Kanaat, not Keo, was sitting at Kanaat's desk. His mind was as opaque as hers, behind shields Talyn couldn't even see like he'd be able to inspect a kamai shield. "Can I talk to Keo?" Talyn asked.

"Keo is substitute teaching," Kanaat said. "If you'd like to wait a half angle, you can talk to her then."

Talyn knew perfectly well that talking to Kanaat was an awful lot like talking to Keo, but he decided to wait instead of bringing up the topic with the elf. This was mostly because he'd have to ask things in terms of "why doesn't she just" rather than "why don't you just", and the former felt like he was talking behind Keo's back even under the circumstances.

Waiting patiently wasn't good for the calm of the minds in his head. He seized a book at random from Kanaat's shelf and read about the history of analysis spells until Keo teleported into the room.

"Hi, Talyn," she said. "What's on your mind?"

"Ryganaav," he said shortly. "Ryganaav is on my mind."

"You're not the first person to come to me wanting to talk about it," Keo said. "Will the usual answer help, or do you think you have something unusual to say?"

"It's probably the same thing," he admitted, looking away.

"I am very powerful. My powers work instantly, when I deploy them," Keo said. "But I don't *think* instantly, and I'm not a special kind of wizard who can do mental spells without gestures and words - I can't just apply a standard adjustment to one brain and the next brain and the one after that, over and over. Major intervention requires *detail work*."

"So it'd take too long," Talyn said.

Keo shook her head. "It'd take a long time, but that's not the problem - I could do a few towns a year until I was done, timewise. The problem is it takes too long *and the people I hadn't*

touched yet would still be the way they are. I mess with the first person, and his brothers and sisters and wives and sons and daughters, his priest and the people he works with and the people he buys food from, his neighbors and his friends and the guy he's considering selling his eldest to - they notice he's gone a bit off, he's saying weird things, he goes quiet at weird times, he doesn't sound sincere when repeating after the sermon in temple anymore. And since I haven't messed with anyone else in town, guess what happens to that guy?"

"Sword through the chest?" Talyn asked dejectedly.

"Or rock to the head or he's driven out into the desert and eaten by leonines or he dies of thirst - one way or another, it is not actually doable to survive in Ryganaav without being a very good actor, backed by plenty of friends or magic, or an honest believer," Keo said. "They *are* aware that something like me could exist. That's usually what they assume happened when someone doesn't fit in quite right, so they're quick to break out the armaments rather than having long reasonable arguments."

"But you could do some things," Talyn said. "You could - nudge them a little bit."

"Nudge them a bit to do what? It can't be anything extreme like letting magical children live or trying to free their women," Keo said. "I could get a few guys to hit their wives less, but not all of them actually do that, and there are wife-beaters in *plenty* of countries. I could get them to be a little less hostile to the leonines, but the leonines won't return the favor unless I go after them too."

"Get them to..." Talyn made a vague gesture. "Ugh. I don't know."

"If you think of something, let me know," Keo said gently.

"Right," said Talyn. "Thank you. I'm sorry to make you, um, repeat yourself."

"It's all right," Keo said.

Talyn got up and went into the lift. "Library," he said. He could probably keep his passengers down for an angle or two by finding Kaylo and talking magic.

Chapter 11: Sifting

Kaylo was shielding when Talyn found him. "Thinking secret thoughts?" Talyn asked in Ryganaavlan dialect, sitting down at the other side of the table and making way for his elbow in an array of books.

"Yup," Kaylo said in the same accent. "How are you?"

"I went to Ryganaav," Talyn said.

"The hell is wrong with you?"

"Nothing," Talyn lied. He hadn't told anybody about the aftereffects of the mind-blast. Leekath had heard the wand describe it. Master Corvan knew, because he'd pulled the information about the entire disaster directly from Talyn's mind. But people almost never *did* mind-blasts. They were taught, as a ranged defense for mind kyma, but virtually never used, only not forbidden outright because of an accident of history. No one knew what to do for him. Corvan might have tried something experimental on anyone but an innate; Talyn, though, was likely to involuntarily lash out with magic if someone poked around in his mind. Which now included three others.

He didn't want to talk about it, because that, like boredom and like thinking of the minds' prior owners, made them *chatty*.

"Something," Kaylo said, "is wrong with you if you went to Ryganaav."

"No - I started with talking to a refugee woman. She got her sorcerer kid out but had to leave two girls behind," Talyn said. "I went invisible and got them for her. I wasn't in any danger or anything."

"Okay..." Kaylo raised an eyebrow, but changed the subject. "So we've learned the lifespan reading working thing now. I said it was fine if people read mine, since, you know, I'm good for a couple thousand years yet and I'm sure I'll forget the exact number by the time it comes up, but anyway that wasn't what I wanted to ask you about. I was reading Leekath's lifespan, since she was the only other person who volunteered for it, and you know how you sort of sift along it a little at a time?"

"Like you're a funnel or something, yeah," Talyn said.

"Right. And I asked Rhysel whether it was *strictly* essential to the working to put it *back* after we were done with each bit."

Talyn smirked. "I bet she wasn't happy."

"Not even a little bit happy. I shut up about it. But *is* it? Strictly necessary? I'm not gonna go around stealing people's lifespans, but *could* I?"

"It's a forbidden working..." Talyn said slowly.

"Which means it's a working," Kaylo said.

"It was. People *really don't* do forbidden kama. They learn it, sometimes, but don't do it."

Kaylo flung up one hand in exasperation. "Why are *entire classes of workings* banned? Of all the stupid ways to do things. Elcenians don't make *spells* illegal, just certain things you can do with them. Then if someone thinks of a good application for one they can use it without any fuss. We'd still be getting meat by slitting animals' throats if no one had figured out that you can use instant death spells on livestock just as well as you can use it on enemy troops, as a for instance."

"There's a process to unforbid stuff," Talyn said. "But I don't think stealing lifespan would be a good candidate. I don't think it even works on animals."

"It wouldn't have to be animals. Like, you were in Ryganaav, do you think they die of *old age*? Not likely - they're killing each other and getting into fights with leonines and getting diseases and dying of exposure or dehydration or malnutrition or childbirth. If you took ten years off of every person in Ryganaav you walked by maybe one in a hundred of them would miss it. I'm not going to do it, because as I mentioned going to Ryganaav means something is *wrong* with you and I'm awesome, but how would it be hurting anything?" Kaylo asked.

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted Talyn. "I still don't think it'd get past the unforbiddance process."

"Probably not. Enh. How did they pick things to put off-limits, anyway? It's not just everything you could use to kill somebody or that'd rule out a lot of, say, fire magic."

"The first forbidden kamaï was stuff that people were using to make themselves immortal," Talyn said, leaning back in his chair far enough to look at the ceiling. There was a painting on it, of children opening books and thereby releasing stylised representations of knowledge. "You could do that by stealing enough lifespan from people, but not by setting them on fire. A few things have been forbidden since but not that many."

"How," Kaylo asked, "is the no-forbidden-kamaï rule even enforced? Again, I do not ask because I plan to actually do any. I'm just morbidly fascinated by how the stupid system works."

"Well, it's mostly self-regulated. We get it pounded into our heads really thoroughly during apprenticeships. Isn't Rhysel making a big deal about it in class?"

"Some, yeah," Kaylo said. "She isn't actually teaching us any forbidden kamaï unless you count the obvious leap I made from lifespan-reading. But she's making very sure that we are all informed it is Not To Be Tampered With."

"Yeah," Talyn said. "She had the same Master I did, he -"

Revenn's mind *twitched*.

"He what?" Kaylo asked.

"Never mind," said Talyn, forcing himself to smile. *Gods, I can't even think about how he didn't want me to do forbidden kamaï without waking him up?* he thought before he ruthlessly shoved away all grandfather-related ideation and blinked expectantly at Kaylo. Kaylo would say something, certainly. Kaylo was smart and curious and would have something to say that Talyn could think about instead.

"Right, so what happens when people don't self-regulate so well?" asked Kaylo. "How do the Good And Virtuous Kyma chase down and stop the Bad And Vicious Kyma?"

"Well, most people don't delve into forbidden kamaï just because they find it intellectually fascinating," Talyn said. "They would be actually using it to extend their lives - or, you know, whatever. So you'd notice that people were dying unexpectedly early, or that they were going missing, or some other sign - or that someone was living too *long* - and you'd track down the kama that way."

"And then they tell the kama that forbidden kamaï is very naughty and they don't get any iced planets for dessert?"

Talyn chuckled softly. "No - personality revision - and they'd try to reverse the damage as much as possible."

"Wouldn't that require more forbidden kamaï?" Kaylo asked.

"Yeah - a committee of the people who forbid or unforbid stuff can let you do things if it's to undo something that someone who did it without permission caused."

"They don't grant dispensations for research?" Kaylo asked. He didn't sound very

hopeful.

"Nope."

"Suppose Bad And Vicious Kama puts up a fight," Kaylo said.

"Then the Good And Virtuous Kyma - why are we calling them that?"

"Because it's funny."

"The Good And Virtuous Kyma fight to subdue, but they won't let someone go rather than kill them, if it comes to that. It hasn't happened in my lifetime, though. I think the last one was like a hundred years ago. I don't remember the guy's name." Revenn did, but Talyn wasn't going looking for it there.

"Okay. But if you were subtle about it? I reiterate, I'm not actually interested in this stuff on more than a theoretical level, in which respect it is like almost everything else," said Kaylo.

"I'll unshield and say it if you want."

"No, that's fine," Talyn said, "I'm pretty sure you aren't going to do anything wrong. I guess kyma could be going around doing unobtrusive forbidden kama without anyone noticing, and then nothing would happen to them, I suppose."

Kaylo nodded. "What sorts of things get forbidden these days?"

Talyn thought about it. "Things that get badly abused. Things that develop a sinister reputation - we really don't want another kyma purge - that was when non-kyma all decided that kyma all needed to die because some of them were doing, er, Bad And Vicious things. Things that nobody can think of a benign application for."

"Because of course no one cleverer than them will ever be born," said Kaylo dryly. "Or, you know. Hatch."

"Of course," echoed Talyn with a faint smile. "But... why is this all worth the mind of the great theoretician Kaylobesayn? Didn't you have a project already underway?"

"Project is entitled Channeling Capacity: What The Hell Is It," said Kaylo. "I'm trying to figure out if I could sift along someone's CC the same way I can sift along their lifespan."

Talyn boggled. "Er," he said. "If you could do that, then you could maybe move it around the same way you can with lifespan, is that right?"

"I know what you're thinking," said Kaylo smugly. "No, I won't sell you any of mine, but find some random person who will and you could learn to be a wizard, too."

That, Talyn decided at once, would be *excellent*. That would be *very occupying*. That would give him more in common with Leekath, and Kaylo too for that matter. That would give him lots of things to learn and practice and think about which would be very unlike anything his parasites had memories of. "How can I help?" Talyn wanted to know.

"Tell me more about why the working works that way. I know which textures - sorry, you prefer aural tones, right?"

"Yeah, but I know all three representations," Talyn said eagerly. "Whichever you want."

"Okay, so I know which textures go with lifespan. But why those? How were they discovered to go with lifespan and not hair color or something? Is there anything else you can sift along the same or a similar way so I could check out commonalities between the workings? Stuff like that. Tell me everything," Kaylo said, a fascinated glint in his garnet eyes.

Talyn smiled, and started talking.

Talyn had been seeing a lot of Kaylo anyway, but the CC-transferring project had both of them worked up to the point where Talyn was once almost late for a date with Leekath. Kaylo was late for dates with Korulen more often than that, and was sometimes hauled away scrabbling

for his books when she came to see what the holdup was. After a few days Kaylo decided it was best all told to let her in on the project, although its connection to forbidden lifespan-stealing was not mentioned to her. ("She'd think that whole mess was depressing," Kaylo explained to Talyn. "She thinks a lot of things are depressing.")

Korulen was not Kaylo's theoretical equal, but she had him beat on literature review - which he did only grudgingly to begin with, spending half of his trawls through the stacks cursing ignorant authors and their "relentless adherence to wizarding orthodoxy". She promptly took over that part of the project and presented Kaylo with more palatable packets of collected data.

Her specialization in mind kamai and history of friendship with Rhysel had also netted her tutoring in things Kaylo hadn't covered yet, and while she didn't know any workings Talyn lacked, she did know her stuff from a non-innate's perspective and was better at getting some concepts across to her dragon boyfriend. For one thing, Talyn had never considered hunting through another person's memories as a variant on sifting, since he could pull on what he wanted more intuitively than the painstaking bit-by-bit search Korulen had learned.

Kaylo researched "Channeling Capacity: What The Hell Is It" in parallel with the progress on sifting workings. His descriptions of what the hell it was didn't make a lot of sense to Talyn. "It's a *hole*," Kaylo kept explaining excitedly, scribbling notes on new analysis spells he was developing to get a better look at it. "But it's not a hole *in anything*. The hole is the only thing there. Like - like - okay, the summoning circle isn't actually the least bit like it, but imagine if it was, it's a place you can go and go *through* from one world to another, but there's not a *barrier* between them, so that would be a hole in nothing if that were how it worked and it isn't and that's a terrible analogy, don't actually think of it like that. But it's a hole!"

"Okay, so it's a hole," Talyn said. "And?"

"And so if you were to move it, you'd be closing it up in one place - and opening or expanding it in another - but there isn't anything around it to close in. You're just shrinking the hole, is what you're doing," Kaylo said.

"Maybe," said Korulen, "we should figure out how to count CC with kamai before we start thinking about moving it?"

"Right," said Kaylo, and he re-focused on that. Talyn wistfully thought that Leekath might be useful to have on board the project, too, but she had too many classes, and they used up all of the energy she had for seriously thinking about magic. Occasionally she'd sit with them while they worked, but only in a trance induced by Talyn petting her hair, not in a state where she might be tempted to participate and lose her ability to concentrate on assignments.

Kaylo was able to accurately count Korulen's CC with kamai alone after a solid week of research. She immediately hauled him away for some manner of celebration that both of them conspicuously shielded their minds about. They were back half an angle later - half an angle that Talyn spent trying to read Korulen's stack of books, rather than sitting through alone with nothing to do and no one to talk to. They looked smug. Talyn demanded an immediate resumption of research so he wouldn't have to think about how much he wished Leekath had put off the next installment in Survey of Natural Things to spend more time with him.

Talyn learned to sift along CC. He had the oddest feeling that it didn't like him - Kaylo and Korulen reported nothing similar. It didn't feel slippery or sound afraid or taste prickly when they interacted with it. Still, none of that interfered with his ability to go bit by bit until he'd counted all the discrete bits it came in. (How a hole came in bits, he didn't know. He still didn't see what caused Kaylo to identify channeling capacity that way.)

"Try to keep one," Kaylo said, staring through an analysis while Talyn counted Korulen's channeling capacity for the umpteenth time.

"Wait, what? You give him one," Korulen said indignantly. She snatched her hand out of Talyn's and he lost count. "You didn't, did you, Talyn?" Talyn shook his head. He hadn't been trying, and interrupting a mere count wasn't dangerous; he only "held" each chunk of CC for an infinitesimal fragment of time.

"Uh," said Kaylo. "I'm observing under analysis. Come on, just one. If it works, he can give it right back."

"Teach me the analyses," Korulen huffed. "I'll send you the memory of what it looks like."

"Maybe Leekath will give him a unit of CC," Kaylo suggested.

"She gets out of class in ten degrees," Talyn said. "But maybe we should try to find someone who isn't a wizard to experiment on, here?"

"Got an idea?" Kaylo asked.

"Not off the top of my head," Talyn lied. There were Eret and Theedy, who probably didn't need their whole CCs, but it would be better if Kaylo didn't know about them. Talyn had more than once caught the shrens fretting about the certitude that their children would be confiscated if any dragon (or anyone in general, but especially a dragon) found that they were shrens raising dragon hatchlings. Since as far as Talyn could tell, their fears were well-founded and they were fit parents, he didn't plan to lead Kaylo to them.

He'd have considered Sarid, who likely didn't *want* her CC, but taking it would be performing magic on her and she'd probably like that less.

That, or she'd ask him to take the children's CCs too, and he couldn't countenance taking the ability to cast spells away from children - even Ryganaavlan children - who were going to grow up in Esmaar.

"Maybe some of my dad's family," Korulen said. "They live in town. I bet Gran wouldn't mind letting me try. She might not like you or Talyn doing it though."

"Long as I get to see it happen," Kaylo said.

Korulen's grandmother let Korulen try to take one point of CC. Kaylo stared in fascination through his analyses, and Talyn watched the raw kamai at work.

Kaylo confirmed with the usual capacity testing spell. Korulen was up a point. Her grandmother was down one.

Korulen returned the capacity. Kaylo checked again. Both were back to normal.

"We did it," Korulen said, grinning.

"Awesome," said Talyn.

Talyn and Kaylo hung out in the library again the following day, without Korulen, who was doing lunch with her friends Lutan and Kaarilel. "You could use it as a Master working," Talyn said. "It was mostly your work - me and Korulen were both basically research assistants, even if she performed the working first."

"Maybe," Kaylo said. "I'll think about it."

"I could qualify for Mastery now, probably," Talyn said, "with something simple, but I want to wait for something that really represents what I can do. Is that what you're thinking?"

"I've just barely started to learn kamai," Kaylo said. "I'm sure I can do cooler things with it eventually. I bet there's a lot of good, obvious stuff in wizardry/kamai interaction just because that's a completely new field and the easy work hasn't been done yet, but I'd find it more

aesthetically interesting to actually *surprise* someone - dig up a way to do some kamai everyone thought was impossible, instead of some kamai that no one thought of before because its subject was a world away - does that make sense?"

"Yeah, of course," replied Talyn.

"I have a list of projects a mile long and a list of questions that could turn into projects ten times longer," Kaylo yawned. "The odds that this one was the best of the lot aren't great."

It was then that Leekath got out of class. She teleported into the library, having come to expect to find them there. Talyn looked up at her and smiled, but she didn't sit down with him right away.

"Hi, Talyn," she said. "Kaylo, remember in kamai class earlier I asked -"

"Right, sure," Kaylo said, tilting his head to one side and tipping his book over so he wouldn't have to stop scanning it for the statistics he was looking for.

And without further ado, Leekath sank her teeth into Kaylo's neck and pulled blood.

Talyn knew perfectly well that Leekath bit people who weren't him. He only had so much blood. She needed more than he could make. He also knew that some of the not-him people she bit were dragons. Keo and Narax had little sign-up sheets so that all the vampire students got a fair crack at them. Kaylo had no sign-up sheet, but people he knew could ask. Like Leekath, his classmate.

Talyn had never *watched* Leekath bite a dragon before.

He had never watched her smile like *that*, standing wobbly from her bent posture. He'd never heard her thoughts *sigh* like that or seen her eyelashes flutter like *that*.

It occurred to him that he could punch Kaylo in the face.

But Kaylo wasn't even paying attention to Leekath; he registered that she was all done and un-tilted his head and found his statistic. "It's up four points in Linnip from the turn of the century," he said. "I think that corresponds pretty closely with the consolidated modernization they've experienced in the region..."

Talyn had completely lost track of why that would be a useful thing to say, and he was still thinking about punching Kaylo in the face, but Leekath had made her drifty way around the table and to the chair on Talyn's right. He put out his arm to settle around her shoulders automatically. This made it unavailable for punching Kaylo in the face.

"Want to go back to my room?" Talyn asked Leekath abruptly.

"Okay," she said, blinking. "Thanks, Kaylo."

"No problem," Kaylo replied distractedly.

He was still shielded. Talyn couldn't even tell what he was thinking.

Leekath teleported him to his room in Rhysel's tower.

<You know what I bet exists,> Talyn sent, fastening his mouth onto Leekath's. He couldn't taste any blood. It was all sucked up through her fangs; if any got into the rest of her mouth she wouldn't be able to swallow it.

<What?> She was perfectly happy to kiss him. She liked curling up close to him. She liked that he was warm.

The fact that he knew all of that didn't help much.

<I bet there's a working somewhere that replenishes blood and doesn't do anything else. I've seen it as part of healing workings, but those don't work if you're not hurt - and I like your bitemarks - but if I could *just* refresh my blood supply, you could bite me whenever.>

<Instead of elves?> Leekath asked pleasedly. <So whenever there wasn't a dragon ->

<I was thinking all the time,> Talyn interrupted.

There was a pause. She didn't stop kissing him, but took her time to reply: <But dragons are the tastiest. And if I bite them whenever I can, I'll live longer. Actually if you find a blood-replenishment working, everybody could bite dragons all the time.>

<Right.> There was that. He didn't want Leekath to actually *die* just so he wouldn't have to think about her smiling that loopy, tired smile after getting blood from *Kaylo* and *Kaylo* *didn't even care* -

<But it'd be a great working to have, definitely,> she assured him. She'd been practicing a maneuver where she could just barely scrape the inside of his lower lip with a fang, not enough to prick and numb, just enough to remind him that he was kissing something sharp. She had it down. Talyn shivered and held her tighter.

<I love you,> he told her.

<I love you too,> she replied cheerily.

<I'm thinking of going back to Ryganaav. Maybe for a while,> he sent.

<Did you meet somebody else who needs some kids rescued or something?> she asked, puzzled.

<No. I'm... I'm curious about the culture. Under all the awful stuff. They have other characteristics. And I'm getting the impression that everybody except them only pays attention to the awful stuff.>

This was all technically true.

<And they don't *want* their channeling capacities,> Talyn continued. <I could go surreptitiously take them away. I'd be doing them a favor in their own estimation and I'd get something useful for it.>

This was also the case.

He'd wait to see what Leekath thought of forbidden kamai until after she'd tasted the results.

Chapter 12: Shining

After his third day of wandering through the desert with little water and less food, Talyn was less convinced that his plan on how to manage a long-term stay in Ryganaav had been a clever one.

He was also beginning to doubt the timetable which suggested that he ought to be reaching his town of choice any angle now, and wondering whether going on any farther would lose him his ability to call for a bailout from Leekath via Keo. If he passed out, how was he supposed to remember what to think to get help?

Why was the sun so blindingly *bright*?

Talyn was tanned almost as dark as a native from the times when he was too abominably hot to keep all his wraps on. His ears were shaped to match; it turned out that Leekath could hear everything she needed to do proxic workings on him by listening to the proxy. (She'd then kept it active for the next four angles, listening to it monologue about every feature of Talyn in utter fascination until he'd warned her that drain would hit to correspond with how long she'd left the connection.)

All he needed was to actually find a native to pretend at, sell his story, and go from there, keeping his devilish powers to a minimum apart from liberal reading of minds to supplement his acting skills.

He was so thirsty.

He looked like a human, he wasn't going to flash powers at anyone, maybe they would give him water? When he got there? Was that a town or an optical illusion?

Was it strictly necessary for there to be all of this *sand*?

It looked like a town. Talyn tried to ask it to please be a town, but the power of speech had abandoned him. His body was using its limited reserves of liquid for sweat, not spit. He swallowed his very last mouthful of water.

"Be a town," he rasped.

It was a town.

He got into the shade of a building and fell over.

"Papa, look," said a little girl's voice. "Papa, it's a man over there."

"Is he passed out drunk?" asked a boy. "Who is that? I don't recognize him."

"He has silly hair," said a different girl.

"The Setaarik have a boy that age," said a different boy.

"That's not him, though," the first boy said.

"Does he need help? Is he okay?" asked a third girl. "Too much sunshine?"

"I *like* sunshine," opined the first girl.

"I see him, I see him," said a man's voice. "Boy? Boy, are you awake?"

Talyn opened one eye and looked up into a bearded face with black eyes. "*Water*," he groaned.

"I like water, too," the first girl said.

"What happened to you?" the man asked.

"L-lion-devils," Talyn said. "Caravan. All dead. *Water*."

"Jisaal, your water," said the man, snapping his fingers. "We're almost home; you can spare it. Share Asfaan's if you need to."

"Here, Papa." It was the third girl's voice.

The mouth of a waterskin was held to Talyn's lips and he swallowed as much as he

could, until it was gone. "Thank you," he gasped when he'd gotten the last drop down. He felt miles better. Still half-starved and he could definitely get down another gallon of water if someone offered, but better.

The man with the beard helped him sit up. Talyn leaned against the cool stone of the shady building. "I'm Azef Milner," he said. "Have you got a name?"

"Taalén," Talyn approximated; a direct transliteration would make his name sound like a girl's. "Kasten. Where - where am I?"

"Egalon," Azef said.

"Safe?"

"Quite safe," Azef assured him. "Lion-devils don't touch this town. There are too many of us."

"Oh," said Talyn. "Good." He closed his eyes. "They're all dead. I was fetching water and when I came back they were all dead."

"Look, Taalen," said Azef. "Why don't you come home with us. Got a soft spot for you - lion-devils killed my brother - we'll get you patched up and maybe you can find work here, or at least we can keep you going until another caravan comes through for you to sign on with."

That was... actually significantly better than Talyn had hoped for. That was extremely nice.

"Yes," said Talyn, "thank you," and when Azef extended a hand to help him up, Talyn gave back the ten years he'd lopped off the end of the man's life.

Azef kept camels. Caravans in a hurry could trade him their tired camels for fresh ones, for a fee, and pass through without having to stop; he employed a vet who could patch up damaged animals; he bred them and sold them and stabled them on behalf of others. His house held him, two wives, and eleven children. The oldest two were boys, half-brothers close to Talyn's age, named Akar and Roles. They worked with the camels, and they were the ones to show Talyn the ropes of his new job.

"It's pretty simple, really," Akar said. "Camel dung goes in the cart. Shovels are kept over there. When someone's carting it away and the cart's not here - that's Roles's job -"

"Between fetching water and checking sums," Roles put in.

"Then you don't shovel, you comb," Akar went on. "People want to buy clean-looking camels. They don't have to be pretty enough to raise our taxes, mind, just get the snarls out. If you see a sore or a cut or anything on a camel, you tell the vet."

"Don't let them kick you or bite you," Roles added.

"And just comb our camels, not the boarding camels," said Akar. "Unless you're off shift and they pay you to and you want to make the extra money. That's allowed."

"If you find a sore on one of those, you don't have to tell the vet, either," said Roles. "But you can tell the customer and tell 'em we have good rates on patching up that kind of thing."

Talyn knew a few things about working with animals, from wild kamai studies and from his next-oldest sister being in training to become a vet herself. That, and mind kamai, let him follow the instructions about as well as everyone expected a former caravanser to.

He shoveled.

It was boring, but the minds around him weren't.

Roles carted away the dung (to be sold, as fertilizer or fuel), carted in water, and was learning to take over for the accountant. He thought about saving money, because when Azef died, Akar, slightly older, would inherit everything except for Roles's mother. Roles thought that

this would threaten his closeness with his brother, if their finances differed that sharply that suddenly, and sought independent wealth more because he wanted to be Akar's equal than because he wanted to buy things with it, although he did like the look of a neighbor girl. (Talyn took two days to stop wanting to shudder when someone thought about buying or selling a woman. He took three days after that to stop wanting to shudder when he thought about how it no longer sounded weird to him.)

Akar kept track of all the camels and maintained the camel-related gear; he handled customers, when the place was busy and his father was occupied; he shadowed the vet and knew a handful of the relevant herbs and surgeries and ways to keep an angry camel from biting a chunk out of one's arm. He thought about his sisters and half-sisters, because when Azef died, he would inherit all five of them. He could give his two half-sisters to their full brother Roles, perhaps, without causing insult, and then those two could be taken care of and out of his hands, but he didn't know how to run a household, even if he felt like he could probably step into place in the business without causing a disaster. He didn't even want to think about getting married.

Talyn boarded in a tent by the camel ranch with some of the other employees. It was near enough Azef's house that he could listen to the family's thoughts at night. These were more worth eavesdropping on than the concerns of his other co-workers, most of whom were resentfully poor single men, often drunk, concocting elaborate fantasies about the girls they'd buy if they could or getting into fights with each other about nothing.

Azef's family was happy. His wives loved him and got along with each other and doted on their children. His sons looked up to him as a paragon. His daughters practically worshipped him, even his eldest Jisaal, who was already the subject of a small bidding war.

Talyn left the Milner family's lifespans alone, although he did find opportunities to take all of their CCs.

He was less restrained about the people he encountered in town, when he swapped his pay for meals twice daily, or attended temple services every three days.

All it took was patting a child on the head, shaking a man's hand, tapping someone on the arm to ask them if they'd dropped a coin he'd been holding all along, and he could have one more decade and a couple hundred more units of channeling capacity.

Temple services were the worst part of his little adventure. Morbidly fascinating, yes, but they revolved around overwhelming amounts of hatred and self-righteous venom to convey even the pleasantest parts of the message. Talyn had to fake trauma flashbacks as aftermath from his cover story to hide his disgust. Everything revolved around building a strong and cooperative society to rise up and overwhelm the devils, eradicate devil-powers, and regain the favor of the gods. There were five gods - Makas, Sinhar, Isir, Lal, and Edantas - and all of them were apparently agreed that the best reason for their worshippers to do anything was to be more effective at killing devils.

Don't cheat your neighbor; he's a human, and your ally in the great fight! Work hard and long; we'll need the products of your labor to feed the army of the faithful! Don't hoard your daughters rather than sell them; they are needed to bear and raise righteous children! Come to temple every time it meets; chase out doubts and corrupting influences that could hurt the cause! Don't hide a child who manifests devil-powers; they're agents of Koraalin the Corrupter and will spread their poison to their family and neighbors - better to kill them right away! But don't kill humans you just happen to dislike; what if devils attack next week and you need one more man at your side? Pay your taxes honestly to support the temple; keep the messages of truth alive! Don't waste water or food; these are important wartime resources!

Outside of temple, Talyn didn't pick up much prevailing sensation of being at war, but in the midst of a shouted litany of hate, everyone viewed themselves as a combatant or a supply line. Jisaal entertained lengthy fantasies of producing an entire platoon of sons who would drive leonines extinct once and for all and carpet her husband's house in their pelts. (She'd seen one leonine, once, from a great distance, and had been able to entertain neighbor girls for months with embellished stories.)

Akar watched the priests preach with fire in his eyes and thoughts of practicing with his knives more. Roles didn't hope to live to see the last devil executed, but he thought maybe his grandchildren would, and let himself imagine an idealized grandson put a long-eared monster that looked like no actual species to the sword.

Azef himself seemed to take only the better parts of the content home - he was moved to support his family as well as he did in part because he expected that one day they'd be under attack, like in the assault that had claimed his brother, but he didn't particularly want to start the war or occupy the front lines. In the moments when he thought in more detail, he wanted the devils to die out quietly, convicted of their wretchedness and the futility of standing against the gods. He wanted them to go to their assigned hells without bloodshed. He didn't expect them to do it, but he wished.

The littler children didn't have much sophisticated understanding of the content of the sermons. But they were caught in the frenzy. Azef's five-year-old girl, Oris, swung her legs where they dangled from the high seats in the temple and tried to imagine what devils looked like. In her head they were terribly ugly shapes skulking around in deep darkness and eating little children for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. If she contemplated magic, it looked like black slime that emanated from the monsters and moved things around or changed them, leaving everything it touched warped and misshapen.

Sometimes after temple, Talyn was invited to supper with the family. He always went. Jisaal thought he wanted to buy her (he couldn't have afforded her even if he'd wanted to, and she knew it, scoffing at him privately), but mostly, he was there to talk to Akar and Roles.

They were becoming his friends.

That hadn't been part of the plan, but he had a hard time regretting it when Akar taught him a dice game ("don't they play this in your part of the country?") or Roles relayed a joke he'd overheard ("so a farmer and his wife travel to Pridetaal with six pots of ostrich meat...") or either one expressed genuine sympathy at Talyn's invented losses.

"Did you see the devils?" Roles asked once.

"I saw a dead one," Talyn said, setting the facts he made up to music so he could remember them. "Someone killed it in the fighting, I guess. I didn't see any live ones."

"Was your family in the caravan or were you signed on alone?" Akar asked.

"My whole family was there," Talyn said. He would be able to recall the story more easily if it borrowed more of his real life; he couldn't plausibly include *all* of his brothers and sisters, but he could include versions of the ones in his batch. "My father brought all of us everywhere."

"Do you think any of them are alive?" Akar asked. "Sometimes the lion-devils keep slaves instead of eating everyone. I heard in Lokyvan - that's the town east of here - there's a woman who was kept by them for six years, and then she escaped and found her brother who she belonged to. And then her brother got a bunch of men together to go where she said they were, and they killed them all and freed a bunch more people."

"No," said Talyn firmly. He couldn't have anyone encouraging him on a rescue mission.

"They are definitely all dead. I didn't see any human footprints leaving the camp except for mine, but there were plenty of lion-devil tracks."

"I'm sorry," Akar said, frowning and patting Talyn's shoulder. "It's grotesque - humans aren't meant to be food or slaves."

Talyn didn't even have to suppress a retort about Akar's mother and her co-wife and all of his sisters.

He didn't think of it until he was going to sleep for the night, angles later.

One of Jisaal's suitors - the new owner-by-inheritance of a lemon orchard - finally, definitively won the bidding war. Azef used some of the money to send her to her new husband's home in style - there was a feast, and everyone who could conceivably share in the festivities was invited, including Talyn. Jisaal was pleased at the outcome herself - she liked the lemon farmer's turns of phrase and the way he laughed, and the fact that he was tall. Talyn wondered if Azef had actually consulted with her at any point or if it was just happy coincidence; he'd never caught either one thinking about such a conversation.

Talyn wondered if Jisaal would be *happier* free.

He thought she might not - he wasn't sure, but she *might* not - but decided that it didn't make it right, and anyway, he was reasonably sure she had it better than a lot of her peers. It was unfashionable to bruise one's wife *visibly*. That advertised to everyone who saw her that one had been unable to control her otherwise. But Talyn could tell when they were in pain even if they didn't limp or sport black eyes.

There had been a few purposes to his trip to Ryganaav. He'd managed to brush the hand of everyone in town. He didn't know what his lifespan had gotten up to, but he was probably at least competitively tasty relative to a dragon. He was certain he had the highest channeling capacity of anyone in the world unless Kaylo or Korulen or Leekath had been up to a lot of transactions. (He missed Leekath like a burn on his skin. He wanted to hold her all cool and contented against him. He realized with not a little dissonance that if she showed up to visit him she'd be murdered by the nearest force of people large enough to kill her.)

With that all done, he ought to have been seeing about getting home.

Talyn lingered.

He didn't know what he was waiting for. He didn't exactly *like* shoveling camel dung, and the thoughts around him had gotten samey to the point where his passengers were starting to act up in quiet moments. He was pretty sure he wasn't going to think of a miraculously simple change that Keo could make at her leisure to transform the half-sane, half-abhorrent culture into something acceptable to better sensibilities.

But he waited, because he'd told Leekath "a month, tops" and he'd been there only four weeks, so he could afford to see what was holding him back, even if he did desperately want to see her again. Because she'd still only have a couple of angles in a day, and he would have to think of something to fill the others, and he didn't know what to fill them with.

He wasn't sure whether it was a cause of his dawdling or not, but he found something worth having waited for when he'd been in Ryganaav for four and a half weeks.

It was evening, and Oris, the five-year-old, was loitering around the camel yards trying to convince one to eat a weed while she waited for Akar to finish his work and come play with her. The camels disdained the weed, and so she carefully placed it in a feed bin and started following Talyn around instead as he wheeled the cart around.

"You smell like camels," she said.

"You would too, if you were around camels all day," Talyn said.

Oris giggled. "It's dark," she observed.

"That's what happens when the sun goes down."

"I like the sun to be up," she said. "It's pretty."

"You know you shouldn't look right at the sun. It'll hurt your eyes."

"Nuh-uh, the sun is nice." Oris watched the fading rays in the west. "It's pretty."

"It's useful. Helps us see," Talyn said.

"You have to see to do camel stuff," Oris realized aloud.

"Yep."

"I'll make a pretty and you can see," Oris announced as he pushed the cart into the camel stable. It was deserted; one of the camels was giving birth and a lot of labor was going into helping her with that.

"Are you going to get me a torch or som-" Talyn stopped short.

Oris was cupping her hands and holding up a little, sparkling ball of green light.

"*Stop that*," he snapped as quietly as he could. "Stop that *right now*."

She dropped her hands, startled, but frowned at him. "It's a pretty," she said. "And I don't belong to you even a little. I don't have to do what you say."

"Don't do that," he said, switching from sharpness to pleading. "Don't ever. Do you understand? It's - it will get you in very deep trouble."

"It's so pretty," objected Oris. "It's green. And sunshiney."

"You mustn't," Talyn said. "Don't. I'll - I'll buy you a bag of date candies if you don't do it any more, understand?"

"Oh. Okay," said Oris. But Talyn knew that wouldn't hold her long, not when the light was so *pretty*.

He had to get her out.

But Oris was older than Path and Naarin. She'd wake up if someone lifted her out of bed at night; she'd understand what was going on; she'd kick and scream; she'd draw attention to herself and then Talyn would have to do something drastic to get her out. In Esmaar, she had no family waiting for her. This was not something he could do by turning invisible and waiting for night.

Talyn evaluated his options as quickly as he could, shoveling mechanically and making sure Oris didn't wander away. He could do magic to her, to keep her power under wraps. Personality revision like she was a criminal. He ruled that out, not just because it was repulsive. Lights didn't just make lights, they *liked* light, they could go without eating solid food at all if they got enough sun - Oris was already paler than her siblings, she didn't tan, only soaked up the sun and smiled and remarked on how she liked sunshine. It would be enough to make them suspicious of her eventually even if she'd escaped detection so far. And he didn't know how to take that power from her. He couldn't implant an aversion to sunlight to cover it, either. For all he knew that would actually kill a light, and anyway she'd be obliged to go out of doors *sometimes*.

He had to get her out.

He had to kidnap her from her loving family to make sure that they wouldn't rally their neighbors and pelt her with stones until she died.

Talyn cast out his mental ears as far as they'd go. Maybe her parents and the other wife and her siblings would all be like Sarid. Maybe they would all listen to him, maybe he could get

the entire family to move.

He listened harder than he had been, seeking not just what the family was thinking at the moment, but what they *would* think if Oris earnestly cupped her hands and showed them a globe of healing green.

"Will I get my candy *soon*?" Oris asked plaintively. "I like dates."

"As soon as I'm done," Talyn said. "Wait patiently, okay?"

"Okay."

He finished mucking out the stalls, having read enough minds to know that his optimism about the family was misplaced.

Azef wouldn't *personally* stone his daughter. But he'd let others do it, if he saw.

Oris's mother - Talyn took a moment to remember which wife she belonged to - Cheris. Cheris would want her daughter to live, if that were possible, but had other children to think about. She'd sacrifice Oris rather than leave Akar and Laalem and Miraan and Lishen and Miris all motherless trying to intervene and revealing her own "unrighteousness" in the process.

Talyn thought, though, that it might be possible to get Oris out without her kicking and screaming.

"Hey, Oris, let's go see your mama," he said. "And make sure there aren't already date candies in the house. If there are already date candies you might want me to get you a different kind, right?"

"Ooh. You're smart," said Oris.

He walked her back to the limestone structure.

"I like sugar limes too," Oris said. "Sugar limes are green. I like green."

"Green is nice," Talyn agreed hollowly.

"It's pretty," clarified Oris.

They entered the house. Cheris was cradling her baby girl Miris, trying to calm the infant down so she'd stop wailing. Talyn was quietly glad that the baby was screaming so much. No one else would be able to hear them talking.

"Tetal tis Azef," he said quietly. Her co-wife wasn't present to make the address ambiguous. "I have bad news."

Cheris's eyes went wide even as she kept rocking Miris in her arms. "What? What is it? Is someone hurt?"

"No," Talyn said. "Er, but - it's Oris."

"You said you'd get me candy," said Oris. "Mama, do we have date candy?"

"No," murmured Cheris, still looking at Talyn. "Oris looks fine, Taalen."

"Show your mama, Oris," Talyn said.

"You said I got candy for not," Oris said mulishly.

"I will buy you all the candy you can eat if you will just do what I say," said Talyn desperately. "Every kind of candy there is. Just show her."

Oris regarded him skeptically, then turned to Cheris, cupped her hands, and made the green light.

Cheris almost dropped Miris, which only made the baby cry harder. "Gods above," she whispered. "Oris, no, my baby, Oris, *no* -" Oris dropped her hands and looked puzzled.

"I've seen too many dead people," Talyn said. True, even if he was letting Cheris take the wrong idea from it. "I don't want to see any more. I'll run away with her if you let me and get her somewhere - else. You can pretend I took her without asking and scream and send everyone after me and no one will think you were involved. Will you let me save her?"

Cheris clutched at her infant, who was still screaming at the top of her lungs. "Where will you *go*?"

"A border," Talyn said.

"I don't understand," Oris said, her voice starting to tremble.

"You *know* what's beyond borders?" Cheris asked.

"Devils, who'll let her live," Talyn said. "She can grow up there. I promise you."

Cheris bit her hand and squinted her eyes shut, but finally said, "Go. I'll give you a head start and then I'm pretending you just picked her up and ran and I noticed her gone. If they catch you I can't protect you, do you understand? Run *fast*."

Talyn didn't have to be told twice.

He picked up Oris and ran.

Chapter 13: Stealing

Oris was not as calmed as Talyn had hoped by her mother's acquiescence.

"What are you doing?" she whined. "Where are we going?"

"Shh," Talyn said. "We have to go, uh, north."

"But I'm s'posed to be home for bed - I -"

"Shh," Talyn pleaded. No one was batting an eye at him carrying Oris, even at a run - the streets were dim, and even if he was recognized, Cheris hadn't screamed yet. He could be interpreted as Oris's brother, or a friend of the family, taking her somewhere in a terrible hurry.

"Where are you taking me?" Oris asked frantically.

"Esmaar," he said. "Please, please be quiet."

"But I don't belong to you, I belong to Papa, he didn't say -"

She was growing more strident with each word. One person in reading range considered the possibility of kidnapping - well, "theft". Talyn gritted his teeth and sent her to sleep, in the first deliberate exercise of kamai he'd deployed since arriving. She slumped in his arms, dropping her head onto his shoulder.

Behind him, Cheris cried out in very real distress. There went his head start.

Talyn sped up. He called a wind behind him to kick up sand and shield him from view, and he flew.

He didn't get far by air. He hadn't taken any food or - more importantly - water, and he'd been planning on going to bed in less than an angle before Oris had lit up. Tapping the girl would have gotten him more distance, but not all the way to the border. He landed, far enough from Egalon that no one would find him any time soon, and thought, <Keo!>

<Mm?>

<I need to get out. Please ask Leekath to call me and the little girl I have with me - she's a light ->

<Will do. Just a tick.>

Oris was drooling on his shoulder. Talyn shuffled his feet in the sand, wondering what to do with her. She could stay in public housing, sure, they'd take anyone who needed a place, but who was going to take *care* of her? Sarid? He had no idea if Sarid wanted a third daughter, let alone a light. He didn't know what the relevant laws were. Probably, minor children never got all the way across the desert to Esmaar without a parent or an older sibling or *something*.

He decided that Lorin would know about the rules there and he could ask her.

Then Oris's weight was gone from his arms and he was standing on the stone in his room, not in sand. "Leekath," he breathed, smiling.

"You need to be the focus for the light," said Leekath tightly. "I don't know her. There."

Talyn got out of the circle and placed his hand where she pointed, and concentrated on Oris. Leekath cast, and Oris appeared, sleeping still and her hair full of sand, in the calling circle.

"This is her?" Leekath asked.

"Yeah. Her name is Oris," Talyn confirmed. "I was working for her father. And then she decided to show me a pretty thing she could make. I kind of panicked - but I had to get her out - lights aren't like sorcerers, I couldn't have just made her hide the power because sooner or later someone'd notice she didn't react normally to sun."

"What are you going to do with her?" Leekath asked.

"I was going to ask Lorin, the public housing lady, about that," Talyn said. "I have no

idea how legal what I just did was. But I couldn't let her die."

"Of course not," said Leekath, looking away.

"Aren't you happy to see me?" he asked softly. Leekath was shielding - he couldn't remember her ever doing that before. But he could read her face and her posture and her voice.

"You were gone a long time," she said. "I missed you. And now you look all Ryganaavlan and you're still talking in their dialect and you didn't leave because you wanted to come back to me, you left because you found a little light."

"I did want to come back to you," he insisted. "Um -" He repeated himself in carefully Esmaarlan sounds, then continued. "I just -"

"And you smell awful," she said.

"Uh," Talyn said. Well, of course; he'd had a repulsive job and not so much access to water that he could pour it on his skin every morning. "I'll go put Oris in a guest bed since by this time the housing place has a night attendant on duty instead of Lorin, and I'll tell Rhysel what's up, and get cleaned up, and then can we talk? Okay?"

"Okay," said Leekath, sitting on his bed and tucking her feet under herself.

Talyn leaned to kiss her, but decided that was better saved. He scooped up the light on the floor and went to put her to bed.

Rhysel, when he went to find her, was in the middle of eating dinner, which smelled amazing. "Talyn! Welcome back," she said. "Did you have -"

"I saved a five-year-old light," Talyn interrupted. "She's asleep. I put her in a guest bed. In the morning I'll take her to Lorin's housing place and figure out what to do long-term. I can take her now, if you don't want her in the tower, but there's only a night attendant there now and the night attendant isn't as highly trained as Lorin. He won't know anything about the details of whether I did anything illegal, or how Oris is supposed to assimilate, or anything."

"Of course she can stay here overnight," Rhysel said, blinking rapidly. Aar Camlenn seemed significantly more concerned about the matter, but didn't contradict his wife. "Does she," Rhysel asked, "have a name?"

"Oris us Azef," Talyn said. "Uh, you and Aar Camlenn might want to hide your ears or change them before interacting with her if you do at all. I'm not sure if she'd be less scared of you if you were also darker colored, or not. That's not technically part of the Yaanor doctrine, that being a certain color matters, but she's just five, and it'd make you less unfamiliar-looking."

Rhysel nodded. "But you know what you're planning to do in the morning?"

"You probably won't need to talk to Oris at all," Talyn assured her. "Thanks for letting her stay the night. I need to go take a shower."

"Yes, a bit," Rhysel admitted, smiling weakly. Talyn took that as a dismissal and ran up the stairs.

He took his time under the shower. For one, it felt preposterously luxurious to stand under infinite conjured water, its temperature shifting between frigid and scalding according to his whim. He was intensely relieved to lather up and rinse away accumulated sweat and grime until his fingers had gone wrinkly and the entire bathroom smelled like the almond milk in his soap.

For another thing, though, he didn't know what to say to Leekath. He *had* missed her. He got her a present there, practically. (Was she too mad to even accept dinner out of his veins?)

He wouldn't have stayed in Ryganaav longer than he'd said he might, lingering unsettlement or not. (Talyn thought, on reflection, that he might have been picking up on Oris's

reaction to sunshine and suspected subconsciously she was about to more visibly manifest. He wasn't always fully aware of the things he "heard", and in his early manifestation of power, he'd spent a solid month sharing dreams with his siblings and parents until he'd been packed off to his apprenticeship and taught enough control to sleep in his own head.)

And she hadn't complained - well, she'd complained a little, when she'd pushed him into Ryganaav to begin with. He could apologize for not listening; maybe that would help. (He'd listened, just not agreed with her, but apologizing for disagreeing with her would probably sound passive-aggressive.)

He turned up the heat on the water until it was barely tolerable. He knew Leekath liked that he was warm. If he could just get her into his arms and pet her hair a bit he was pretty sure she'd forgive him for whatever had her upset. And then she'd let him listen to her thinking again, and then she'd bite him and never want to sink her teeth into anyone else again.

Leekath was Elcenian and probably didn't think much about the forbidden kamaï distinction. If it did bother her at all he could just explain Kaylo's logic about Ryganaavlan mortality rates and she'd probably understand that.

Talyn finally let the water stop and wrapped a towel around himself, having forgotten to bring a change of clean clothes in with him. He went back to his room.

Leekath was still sitting on his bed. She looked at him frostily.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You are?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, sitting next to her. She didn't unshield or touch him, but she didn't move away either. He put his hand on her shoulder. She let him.

"For what?"

"I, uh, I guess I didn't listen to you as much as I should have when I was talking about going in the first place," he said. "And I said a maximum amount of time I'd spend there but I didn't need to use that much of it. I really did miss you. I thought about you a lot. I really wish I'd come up with some way to talk to you from there. I probably should've set up a long line of mind coins to relay long range mindspeech, or something, I just... felt like I was in a hurry. And that was dumb."

"I missed you," she mumbled.

He held out his arms. "I missed you too."

Leekath leaned into the offered hug. He didn't escalate to petting her hair, not right away, but she did snuggle up to the warmth. "Are you going to go away again?" she asked.

"Not anytime soon," he said. "Not until after your school break has come and gone and not for so long unless you come with me."

She made a face. "I don't think I'd like it there."

"Well, no, probably not," he admitted.

"And I would have to change a lot more to pass for human than you did," she said. "Do you want me to put your ears back?"

"Not yet," he said. "I don't know how Oris'd react. Right now I'm a familiar person to her. Putting points on my ears would probably screw that up."

"Right." She sighed.

"Hungry?" he asked tentatively.

"A little," she mumbled.

"You can bite me," he said. "I missed that."

Leekath hesitated, and he was tempted to advertise how improved the flavor would be,

but she didn't need the encouragement. She squirmed into position and bit.

Her shields fell away.

<!>

<I got you a present,> he sent, unable to keep a possessive edge out of the thought.

<!!!>

<You like it?>

<Yes!>

Talyn smiled a smug smile that his girlfriend couldn't see. <I'm glad.>

<What did you do?!> she asked. She was pressed very close to him, like she could get more blood if as much of her surface was touching his as possible. She was making little sounds in the back of her throat. Talyn touched her hair but didn't pet it; he didn't want her falling into a trance and missing a moment of the feeding.

<Promise you won't tell anybody?>

<Oh my God. You taste so good. I promise. What did you do?>

<When I was in Ryganaav I took the CC of everybody I met. And just a little lifespan from almost each one too.>

<How many people was that? You taste better than a dragon, I've never even imagined anything so good, this is amazing ->

<A few thousand of them. I didn't count. It added up. I've probably got a really ridiculous CC now, too. I'm glad you like the taste. I'm going to figure out a blood replenishing working and then you can bite me whenever you want.>

<I'm going to have to stop soon if I'm not going to make you pass out,> Leekath realized unhappily.

<Tomorrow. I'll figure out the working for you tomorrow,> he said. She was still making those noises. Talyn's smile widened. <How much *can* you eat?>

<A lot,> she sent shyly. <More than we usually ever would.> She pulled her fangs out of his neck slowly, reluctantly, and he held her and kissed her temple.

<Well,> he sent. <I'm going to make sure you are very well-fed. Sound good?>

<Yeah.> She curled up against him in utter comfort and languor; he was sleepy just listening to her think.

<Are you still mad at me?>

<Hm? Oh - oh, I wasn't *mad*. I just missed you a lot,> she sent. <You're warm.>

Talyn stroked her hair. Her mind quieted; she tranced. Talyn smiled.

In the morning, Talyn was up before Oris, and parked in her room so she wouldn't wake up alone and confused. Leekath had eventually gone back to her dorm, late the prior night, and Talyn hadn't gotten much sleep, but he woke up wired and antsy and eager to get Oris situated.

The little girl woke up as soon as a ray of sun struck her face through the window, and then she sat bolt upright and flung the covers off of herself. "Taaln?" she asked, frowning at Talyn.

"Good morning, Oris," Talyn said in what he hoped would be an encouraging voice.

"Where'm I?"

"Do you remember your mama asked me to take you here?" Talyn asked.

"But that's not her say," said Oris.

"Well, it was an emergency, and I couldn't ask your papa because he wasn't home," Talyn half-lied. "It was very important to get you here as soon as possible so I just asked your

mama."

"She's not next, Akar's next," said Oris. "Where am I?"

"You're in my house," Talyn said.

"You don't have a house. You live by camels," Oris said, narrowing her eyes. "In a tent. You're a worker person."

"Well, it's not my house, but I live here. I was only visiting Egalon for a little bit," Talyn said. "Now I need to take you to see a friend who's going to let you stay with her for a while. We can get some candy and some water on the way." Oris wasn't hungry; she'd gotten plenty of sun and wouldn't have had a meal until midmorning anyway at home. But sweets were always welcome.

"But Papa's not gonna send me away until I'm older. Like Jisaal. You didn't even ask him," cried Oris. "I'm still little. I want to go home."

"Let's go see my friend and see what she has to say," Talyn coaxed. "She's very nice."

"Who's she belong to?" Oris asked.

"I don't know her family," Talyn dodged. "Just her. Her name is Lorin. Let's go see her."

"Then can I go home?" Oris asked.

"That's not up to me, really," Talyn said.

"It's up to my papa."

Talyn didn't answer her again, just picked her up and headed for the stairs. She smelled better than he had the previous night, since she didn't have camel-related chores, but a little ripe. He decided it probably wasn't worth exposing her to conjured water this early on; Lorin would know more about how to gently immerse her in Esmaarlan conveniences.

"This is a tall house, like a temple is tall," observed Oris as he descended with her in his arms.

"Yep. It's a tower," he replied.

Rhysel (ears covered in her hair) and Aar Camlenn (looking awkward in a hat) were having breakfast, which didn't interest Oris, and a large pitcher of juice, which did. "Juice," she observed, carefully not asking for any; at home she was supposed to wait and take what she was given.

"Want some of it?" Rhysel asked.

Oris nodded once, slowly, distracted by the couple's pale coloring and especially Rhysel's vibrant hair. Rhysel poured some juice into a cup - one that already existed, thankfully - and offered it to the girl. Oris sipped. "Thank you," she said, directing the statement at Aar Camlenn even though he'd neither offered nor poured.

"You're welcome," said Rhysel, ignoring the misdirection of the thanks.

Oris looked between Rhysel and Aar Camlenn in puzzlement, but finished her juice in little sips.

<Any suggestions for how to get her there without her seeing any really obvious magic?> Talyn asked his Master and her husband.

<Walk there and keep her distracted?> Rhysel offered, though she was thinking, as Talyn was, about the many elves and vampires and halflings who walked through every street, everyone feeling perfectly free to tell time or call friends or, if licensed to do so, teleport. <Put her back to sleep?>

"You talk funny," Oris told Rhysel, returning the cup.

"We're not near Egalon," Talyn told Oris. "People talk differently here."

"It's hard to understand," she said.

"You're very smart. You'll figure out," he encouraged. "Are you still tired at all? You can nap on the way to Lorin's."

"No, sun's up," Oris said. "I like sunshine."

Talyn chewed his lip. "You look tired to me," he said. "I think you should take a nap -"

"I don't have to sleep if you say. I don't belong to you," Oris said. "I want to go home."

Talyn took a deep breath and pushed at her mind again to make her nod off. It was more easily shrugged off than seeing even half the things he was going to walk past on his way.

"With her out, I can take a transfer point, at least," he muttered, going back up the stairs to the relevant floor.

"You kidnapped a five-year-old light from Ryganaav?" Lorin asked, staring at the sleeping girl in Talyn's arms.

"They would've killed her!"

"I'm not disputing that, but what makes you think I have a way to handle her? Lone children don't ever *get* this far. I can't treat her like Sarid's family, or like an Esmaarlan orphan. There's no procedure. There's no classes for her, even in the southeast of the country where they handle lots of refugees, that don't rely on her having a familiar guardian."

"She knows who I am," Talyn said.

"But she doesn't acknowledge you as having authority over her, does she?"

"No," he admitted. "If she were an Esmaarlan orphan, what would you do? Or - what would you do if her mother had brought her here, and then died right away?"

"If her mother had brought her and then died, we'd have a little girl who'd been reassured the whole way by her mother, and we could put her through slightly modified acclimation classes," Lorin said. "If she were an Esmaarlan orphan, we could place her with an adoptive family who sometimes clean their house and cook food and she wouldn't expire of terror."

"What about Sarid?" Talyn asked.

Lorin shook her head. "We aren't going to take Sarid's children away from her unless she starts hitting them or something. But we're not going to give her another one, either. She still believes in Yaanor. It's not the healthiest environment for anyone, let alone a magic-user. I don't like the outlook for Sinhar. Ideally we'd find a native, human family without any wizards or anything in it who could gently nudge her along, but... well. I'm not sure. She's asleep. How has she been since you got her here?"

"She wants to go home. She likes juice," said Talyn, looking away. "She keeps reminding me that she doesn't belong to me."

Lorin inhaled deeply and ran a hand through her hair. "Look. I care about her. I wish I knew what to do. I'd adopt her myself, if I didn't have pointed ears, a mage aunt, and enough of an impulse to adopt nearby children that I've already got two leonine daughters and a halfling son at home. But I'm not going to come up with anything obviously brilliant in the next five degrees. Let me think."

Talyn shifted in his seat and Oris mumbled something sleepily. "I can't keep her asleep *forever*. Not without hurting her."

"Not asking you to. As a stopgap, I can put her in with the Retaasik, maybe, they're humans, Aaral Retaas might look after Oris during the day and I can divert some of the budget to compensate her... it's going to be a shock to the poor girl, though, however we handle it. If only she were a year or two younger."

"She doesn't even understand that what she can do is a 'devil-power'," Talyn said.

"Oh, marvelous," said Lorin, thinking of clonking her head on her desk. "So she doesn't even understand that she can't go home. What does she think it is?"

"A pretty thing," Talyn said helplessly. "She thinks of devil-powers as being like... dark slime. I think she'd make the leap if she saw sorcery or certain wizardry or kamaï, but she definitely hasn't connected black goop emanating from monsters with green light emanating from her."

"Of course not," said Lorin. "Grand. Well. I'll send for a curriculum from the southeastern acclimation offices and do what I can to suit it to her situation. I'll ask Aaral Retaas if she wants to very very carefully mind an extra little girl. And I'll keep reminding myself that however much of a headache you just caused me, you did save Oris's life."

"I didn't do anything actually against the law," Talyn said, "did I?"

"Against the law in Esmaar? You'd need to talk to a police officer to be sure, but I don't think so," Lorin said. "You said you had Oris's mother's permission, which, if you can confirm under lie detection, counts for a lot. Sarid didn't do anything illegal relative to Esmaar law. This case just doesn't have Sarid's counterpart along for the trip."

Talyn nodded, relieved. "Good."

"Can you wake her up? I need to know whether she can talk to me at all without trying to run away," Lorin said. "If she can't, I might have to hand her off to a southeastern office."

Talyn nodded and carefully woke Oris. She stirred, lifted her head, and looked around. "But I wasn't tired!" she complained. She blinked at Lorin, and at the long bejeweled elf ears, and shrank. "There's things on your head," she told Lorin.

"Those are my ears," Lorin said in a softer, gentler tone than she'd used to talk to Talyn. "They're shaped a little different. I can put lots of earrings on them, though, so I don't mind. What do you think?"

"They don't look right," said Oris.

"I've gotten used to them this shape," Lorin said. "I'm sorry you don't like them."

Oris squirmed, suspecting belatedly that she'd been rude. She was remembering some occasion where she'd commented on a man's overlarge nose and been punished for the remark. "It's not that bad I guess."

"Thank you," Lorin said, smiling.

"This is my friend Lorin I was telling you about," Talyn said.

"Oh," said Oris. "Now we met her. Can I go home?"

"No, you need to stay here," Lorin. "You won't stay forever, but for a while. There's some lessons it's important that you get. I'm going to ask a family if they'll let you stay with them. They have some children your age you can play with."

"I want to play with my brothers and sisters," Oris said.

"They can't come here," Lorin said. "I'm sorry, Oris. Do you know how to read at all?"

Oris shook her head. Off the top of Talyn's head he thought about a quarter of the women in Egalon knew how to read, and a slim majority of the men; it hadn't been a ridiculous question.

"We're going to teach you," Lorin said, "and there will be some things you'll need to read, and you'll talk about those things with me or some of my friends. And then we'll talk about what happens next."

"But I want to go home."

"I know, Oris, but you'll behave here, won't you? It's very important," said Lorin. "I bet

your papa raised a very well behaved little girl."

Oris squirmed. "Papa didn't say I was going here."

"I understand it's confusing," said Lorin weakly. "It'll make more sense later. Do you want to come see where you're staying and have some water and find a room with a window so you can sit in the sun?"

"I like sunshine," said Oris tentatively. She slid off Talyn's lap and followed Lorin out. Talyn trailed after.

Lorin spoke to Aaral Retaas, introduced her to Oris, and assigned the small light a spare room in the apartment they were using. It had a window, which Oris promptly opened and leaned half out of to soak up the rays. Talyn listened in on the feeling. It was warm and filling and very pleasant, but not so overwhelming that Oris couldn't have imagined everyone felt the same.

"I'll write if I need your help with her," Lorin told him. "Thank you. For saving her."

"You're welcome," said Talyn.

He felt very pleased with himself during the walk to the transfer point.

This lasted until he got bored and his occupants squirmed under his own thoughts.

Now I need to think of something else to do, he thought.

Chapter 14: Dimming

Talyn told Rhysel all about the channeling capacity thing. It wasn't forbidden - couldn't be, it was too new - and he did think she'd appreciate the logic of taking it from Ryganaavlanik. The lifespan part (which he didn't plan on sharing) was arguable. But they didn't *want* their CCs, or at least, they wouldn't if they knew what they were.

He decided he'd probably better give Oris hers back, since she was going to grow up in Esmaar and might eventually blend in well enough to use a few spells. He could go visit her after a day or two, and see how she was doing.

"I see your point," Rhysel said when he'd explained and Aar Camlenn had checked his CC (currently six hundred and twelve thousand, four hundred and ninety-six units). "I'm not going to reprimand you about that. But I hope you aren't just justifying taking the CC after the fact. And you need to understand that you can't just steal arbitrary things from people just because you have the power to do it. I don't need to go over that, do I?"

"What, just because I stole a five-year-old and a few hundred thousand units of CC?" Talyn asked jokingly, smiling at her. Rhysel laughed softly and rolled her eyes. Talyn winked. "No, I don't think I can just take *whatever I want*, I picked things to take really carefully."

"All right. I never planned to have apprentices, you know. I appreciate that you're pretty much self-teaching. But as long as we're on the subject, is there anything I should be doing for you?" Rhysel asked. "I think I may have been neglecting you."

"I know you have lots to do," Talyn said. "Like you said, I can educate myself just fine - it's great that you're here if I do want something and let me stay at your place. That's all I need."

"All right," Rhysel said, smiling.

"Want some CC?" Talyn asked. "Or you, Aar Camlenn, want some extra? I don't think there even *exists* a use for all the units I picked up on my trip."

Rhysel's eyes lit. She didn't compulsively, desperately have to have something to do at all times lest a destroyed demon and two dead halfbloods nibble on her sanity, but she did keep busy, and he could tell even with her shields up that she was going to accept and get wizards to tutor her. She turned to her husband. "How much do you think, love?"

"To avoid sting on even the highest pull spells extant," Aar Camlenn said, "eleven hundred would do it handily, but perhaps Aaran Casten would not prefer to dispense it in such quantity?"

"Oh, I don't want to avoid it, I don't think," Rhysel said. "Then I'd have to learn it differently than everyone else does. Don't you have to spend a fair amount of time training away 'spell-flinch'...?"

"Yes, but that doesn't mean you ought," Aar Camlenn replied. "And not everyone who has ever learned wizardry has needed to endure that particular habituation - your silver friend would never have suffered spell-flinch, for instance."

"Let me know when you two are done arguing," said Talyn, amused. "I don't mind handing it out in big chunks. I don't know that many people I'll want to give it to. And I can always go back and get more. I only went through one Ryganaavlan town. There's lots."

"That reminds me, Talyn, do you want me to put your ears back?" Rhysel asked.

"Yes, please," he said. "I'm going to teach myself cosmetic shapeshifting, I think, so later I'll be able to do it myself. But it's probably a better idea to start from how I normally look."

Rhysel fixed his ears, and then she and Aar Camlenn went in to teach their first classes of the day.

Talyn reflected on Leekath's schedule and observed that it ate a lot of her time. Perhaps he ought to enroll at Binaaralav too.

<Keo?>

"You're a little older, equivalently, than we'd usually take someone of your aging rate," Keo said, rummaging in Kanaat's desk. "You're even a little equivalently older than we take most Elcenian elves. But you're too young for a university. You want to start next term?"

"Yeah. It starts in Rohel, right?" That left him a little more than a month to kill. He could get Rhysel to "supervise" Leekath again and get a head start on the material, maybe, the way he'd been helping her on kamai. Not that she needed the help, with hearing and innate cleverness working for her. He could teach himself to turn into things. He could make (briefer) hops into Ryganaav and spend arbitrary numbers of angles puzzling out what ought to be done there. And then when school started up again he could take a courseload as dense or denser than Leekath's and fill his time with wizardliness.

"Right," said Keo. "Well, I'd give you an application form, but I think I can classify you as 'affiliated with the school' since you're a faculty member's apprentice and bypass that. We do have room in the entering class for the coming term. Want a class catalog?"

"Yes, please," Talyn said with his most winning smile.

Keo pulled one off of Kanaat's shelf and handed it over. "Minimum of two classes a term to remain an active student in good standing - and you have to pass them, too, if you want them to count. Maximum of ten, but we don't actually advise going over eight. The extra two would be things you're re-taking or have strong background in, or part-term classes like the teleportation workshop. And most people stick with four or five regardless."

"Maximum of ten," said Talyn, nodding and scanning the catalog. "Can I write in this?"

"Yours to keep," said Keo. "There'll be a new one for the winter term, though, so don't expect it to still be valid then."

"Okay." He started circling likely-looking classes that included first tier as one of the groups of students welcome to take them. "Thanks, Keo."

"You're welcome," she said, shaking green hair out of her face and smiling.

That evening, Talyn gave Rhysel a round 500 units of CC ("I might like more later, when I've gotten past spell-flinch the normal way") and added 650 to Aar Camlenn's total so he'd never have to suffer sting again casting a normal spell. ("I do expect," the elf commented, "that spells requiring previously unheard-of capacities will appear soon enough.")

He took Leekath to a play, and brought her home with him, and kissed her goodbye when she was ready to leave, and went to bed.

The time when he was trying to sleep was the worst, because he had to balance between keeping his mind calm enough to let him drift off and active enough that he wouldn't drown in dead thoughts. He usually passed the time by waking up his kamai-senses and listening to tones, but he was becoming dangerously accustomed to the sounds that walls and wind murmured to him when they weren't *doing* anything. He already *knew* Rhysel's tower. Spending weeks in Ryganaav had postponed the issue but not made the place more interesting.

He resolved to ask Leekath to stay over the next night. The hhikiiias, he decided, would be interesting enough background noise for at least a little while.

Then what? he wondered. *What do I do after I've heard them all ten times, run out of stuff to keep in my room for her to listen to...? What do I do if her ftheil makes her go home for*

break...?

Talyn fell asleep before he thought of an answer.

The next day, Talyn taught himself enough cosmetic shapeshifting to turn his ears round and pointed again without help, although not before accidentally removing all the stiffness in the cartilage and causing them to flop down embarrassingly. No one saw him, and he fixed it in half an angle, but he was glad that mistake had occurred when he was only fussing with his ears and not when he'd learned to turn into a bat. He made a mental note to read his book on shapeshifting the entire way through before learning any other transitions, but he was able to make the one alteration without further mishap. Human-guised, he went to Lorin's.

He went into the elf's office, only to find Oris there, sitting in a chair and huddled under a blanket. "Uh," he said, "hi."

"Hello, Talyn," said Lorin tiredly.

"I thought Oris was going to stay with that family," he said.

"That family has an indelicate twelve-year-old who gave Oris too much information, too fast, and that family apparently cannot watch her closely enough to keep her out of the knife drawer," said Lorin tightly. "So she's here until the department officials get me some kind of support here."

Talyn blinked and listened harder. Lorin was exhausted - she had been up with Oris all night, unwilling to trust the night attendant with keeping the girl safe. Oris herself was a little ball of pain. She was hiding from the sun, having been told that it would fuel her magic, and her wrists hurt from where she'd scraped at the yellow circles that signified to bystanders that she was a light. Talyn wondered how she'd been convinced to get them put on in the first place. If he recalled correctly the marks were usually placed magically. Maybe the magic was easily concealed, or hers were painted on as a temporary measure.

"I can heal her, even though she's a light," he volunteered.

"No," Oris said in a high, strident voice before Lorin could speak. "*No don't that's not how it's s'posed to be if I get better it'll be natural but I shouldn't because I should be dead because I'm bad but she won't let me -*"

Talyn flinched. "You're - you're not -"

"I've been *trying* to talk to her," Lorin said miserably. "She doesn't listen. I'm not a *psychologist*... Go ahead and heal her. I don't think it will make things any *worse*. Although what do I know? Go ahead, a complete unknown with her wrists bleeding is worse than a complete unknown without..."

Talyn touched Oris's forehead where she was cringing under the blanket. She didn't even flinch. She seemed to be simultaneously supposing herself both already too far gone under the influence of devil-powers to be hurt, and deserving of any such hurt by virtue of having the powers. Either way, she didn't stop him from transferring mirrors of her cuts and abrasions to his own wrists and repairing them on hers. She didn't move at all.

"What did the kid tell her?" Talyn asked.

"I don't know exactly. He freaked out and got very closemouthed when Oris reacted to it, and *she* won't say. I assume it included the fact that her green light falls into the same category as other magic and that sunshine was feeding her by magic. If she doesn't take off her blanket or eat some normal food soon I might have to put her in a *hospital*. I'm not qualified to force-feed her. I am not qualified for this at all. I don't even know if sun is optional for her. Do I have to tie her up her outside if she won't sun herself willingly? The supervisory office is supposedly working on

figuring out something but they don't seem to appreciate that this is in fact an *emergency*."

"I can sit with her for a few angles if you need, like, a nap," Talyn said. "I don't know how to safely forcefeed her either but I can make sure she doesn't get injured."

"I'm supposed to be dead," wailed Oris. "I'm in the way of the blessings and the gods all hate me and I'm bad and I shouldn't get any sunshine because it makes me worse and it only feels good because I'm bad and I should just be in the dark and die and then good people like my papa can take over the whole world and then there won't be any more bad girls like me."

"Are you sure?" Lorin asked Talyn wearily, vividly imagining one of the empty beds in the building and how nice it would be to crash into it for part of the afternoon.

"Yeah," Talyn said. "Should I just keep her here, or...?"

"No... better to put her in an empty apartment... people expect me to be here or for it to be empty. I'll make a sign..." Lorin rummaged for paper, wrote *back at twelfth-and-naught*, and tacked it to her door. "I'll show you to a spare place."

Talyn picked up Oris, who only fidgeted enough to keep herself shadowed under the blanket, and followed Lorin. "Here," she said at the first landing. "Come upstairs and wake me up if anyone from the supervisory office comes in looking for me, will you?"

"Right, of course."

"Thank you," said Lorin fervently, and she stole away to take her nap.

Talyn put Oris down in a chair. The public housing units had very simple furniture, but they weren't cheerless places, and Oris had to do some maneuvering to make sure that her blanket kept the sun from the wide window off of her skin. That finished, she sat and marinated in her own misery.

"It's not bad to have powers," Talyn attempted.

"Nobody should have them," said Oris, "they're not supposed to exist and they only do because people were bad and I'm bad so they got into me and I should be dead because I'm bad."

"Well, maybe you could sit in the sun anyway," Talyn said.

"No, sunshine is for good girls."

"Do you understand why I brought you here?" Talyn asked.

"You took me from my family because I'm bad and don't deserve to have a family," Oris said. "Mama let you because she knew Papa would be sad to have such a bad daughter. Does he think I'm dead? I should be dead."

"Your mama wanted you to live, and she knew that the other people in Egalon would hurt you if they knew that you could make a pretty green light," Talyn said. "But your mama didn't want you hurt. Shouldn't you do what she wants?"

"I should die," Oris said. "I'm supposed to die because I'm bad and I let devil powers get into me but I tried really hard not to, I didn't know there were *sunshine powers*, but I'm bad and so they got in anyway."

"Look," Talyn said, cupping his hands and making bright, white handfire. "Does it *look* bad?"

"It's bad." She was only looking out of the corner of her eye, but Talyn felt an awful lurch in her heart. She wanted to be out of the dark so badly and was fighting the temptation to fling the blanket away and make her own green sparkling light with everything she had. "Don't make it. It's bad."

"Why not? I can already do it," Talyn said.

"It's bad it's bad it's bad it's bad it's bad it's bad it's bad -" She had to stop to catch her breath and then wouldn't speak again.

"Magic isn't evil," Talyn said coaxingly. "It's just something some people can do. You can heal with your light. You can use less food if you sit in the sun. Aren't those good things?"

"I shouldn't have any food. It's not for bad girls. I should die."

He sighed. "What about the healing? I fixed your scrapes and now you're not hurt anymore. You could do that."

"I did the scrapes. I wanted them. The circles tell people I have devil powers and then they can tell me to use them but I won't because they're bad so I shouldn't have circles."

"They're also there so that people know not to bring you to anyone with the same powers as you," Talyn said. "Since you're immune to them."

Oris had no reply to that. She scrunched up smaller under the blanket.

"I can't believe I came back here thinking that you would need *more* magic and that I should give it *back*," Talyn muttered. "Now I wish I could take this away too and put you back where I found you."

Oris looked up. This let a little sunlight hit her on the nose, but she ignored it, and stared at him, eyes wide. "Can you do that?"

"I have a weird challenge for you," Talyn said to Kaylo.

"Hit me," said the dragon.

"De-powering a light."

"Yep, that's weird. Why would I want to do that?" Kaylo asked.

"I just came from the public housing place. I was sitting with a suicidal Ryganaavlan five-year-old so the lady who runs the place could have a nap. If she weren't a light, she could go home."

"*Or*, she could go to a hospital and the nice people in green smocks could look after until she adjusted and then the lady could have all the naps she wants," said Kaylo.

"Maybe I can't convince you, but she came from a nice family. Her parents loved her. Her brothers and sisters loved her. She misses them terribly and all she wants is to get the 'devil-powers' out of herself so she can go home."

"And then she can live there for about ten years and get sold to some guy," said Kaylo. "If she doesn't get sick and die first. Although I grant that if she's a light she's not *overwhelmingly* less likely to get sick and die here. Just *lots* less."

"I'm working on the general Ryganaav problem," Talyn said. "I haven't figured it out yet but I bet I have something in ten years."

"It weirds me out when you say things like that. I'm supposed to be the most arrogant person in the building. Hmm. De-powering lights... I'm consumed by the theory, you understand, I officially have no opinion on the practical use you're thinking of here."

"Right, that's what I was hoping you'd say," said Talyn.

"You know, if you don't like how impersonal the people in green smocks are, you could try a person in green hair. I doubt she can fix the country but I bet she can fix up one person just fine," Kaylo said.

"If I wanted to mess with Oris's head by magic I could do it myself," Talyn said. "That just seems - ugh. I know this little girl, I met her before she manifested any powers at all. I don't want to revise her personality. I had to do that once and I could only go through with it because the person I had to revise was a serial killer. Oris didn't do anything wrong, she was just raised in an awful religion."

"So your solution is to give her back to the people who raised her that way," Kaylo

observed, raising an eyebrow.

"They're good people."

"You say this because...?"

"Because I met them! I made friends with her brothers and I worked for her dad and I listened to all of them thinking, for weeks, and they're not *evil!*"

"If you'd shown up on their doorstep with pointy ears they would have tried to kill you. If you'd brought a couple of friends with funny colored eyes or with fangs, they'd be serial killers," Kaylo said lazily.

Talyn folded his arms on the table and dropped his head down onto them. "Oris wants to go home. She wants to not be a light."

"She's *five*. Do you even *remember* being five?"

"Yes! I do! I remember going to school and learning to read and stealing Coryl's cageful of pet hamsters and I remember when Erryl was born and I was allowed to hold him and I remember Ranel checking me for a tellyn conduit and telling me that I could learn kamaï when I got older and I -"

"Okay, so you remember being five," said Kaylo, putting his hands up. "But she's a kid. She's only been here for a little while, right? Maybe she'd like the next ten years better if she were back where you got her, but what about when she's thirty? Or, you know, not thirty because people die of childbirth all the time in Ryganaav even if nothing else gets her?"

"I'm working on it," said Talyn stubbornly. "She's not the only Ryganaavlan who needs help. I'm *working* on it."

Kaylo tilted his head. "Does this little light you want to obey so badly even know your ears aren't supposed to look like that?"

"No," Talyn said, raising a hand to touch a rounded ear. He pointed it and its twin. "She doesn't have a problem with the elf housing lady, though - hasn't made the connection."

"Yet."

"What are you arguing for, exactly?" asked Talyn. "The fact that eventually Oris will figure out that elves are devils the same way she figured out that lightcraft is a devil-power argues for sending her home."

"I'm not arguing for anything. I am full of theoretical interest in how to de-power a light," Kaylo said. "I bet I could do it."

"Great," Talyn said. "Will you tell me when you figure it out?"

Kaylo shrugged. "I guess. But don't feel obliged to actually do it on my account or anything. I do not live solely to see my creations realized in the material world. It is gratification enough to know that I am the most brilliant devil alive, at least until I am slain for having hatched out of an egg and manipulating reality by wiggling my fingers. By the armies of the righteous. Who will regain the blessings of the gods after winning the great war against the corrupted."

Talyn snickered helplessly. "If I think of something better, your de-powering-a-light spell or working can be framed unused as a monument to your genius."

"Right then. I can always use more of those," Kaylo said. "Now go away, I need to read like fifteen books on lights."

Talyn made an exaggerated bow and left his friend to his research.

Leekath got out of her last class after Talyn had his early dinner (timed so he wouldn't have to give up time with her or awkwardly eat while she didn't). He caught her up on the

situation.

"I wonder if you could get her family to convince her that she should live here and be a light," Leekath said. "Her mom, at least. Wouldn't that be better than either sending her back or keeping her here and unhappy?"

"How would I get them in touch with each other?" Talyn asked. "Does the postal system actually go there?"

"I don't think so. I could call anybody you could serve as focus for, though, and there could be an inverse ward in the circle if you think they'll be violent."

"I think Cheris would like the idea of making Oris not be a light, though," Talyn said.

"So don't tell her. I know you don't want to mind-control Oris, but do you have to tell everybody the absolute truth, too? Tell Cheris the choices are sending Oris back or Oris staying here and that's it, and Cheris can tell Oris that her dad said so, or whatever Oris has to hear."

"You think that's a good idea?"

Leekath was quiet, but Talyn could hear her thinking:

If I'd been stolen away from home to someplace full of hearers when I was four, and my aaihhhi visited me and lied and said Fheel thought it was very important for me to stay where I was and be happy there...

"Then things would be different," Talyn said. "Would they be better?"

"Maybe," said Leekath.

Chapter 15: Healing

Leekath stayed the night when Talyn asked, hanging from a perch pulled out of the stone wall by his bed. The hhikiiias did help. He filled gaps in his vocabulary by context, as her sleeping mind attended to none of the voices and couldn't translate for him. Eventually the shrieks blurred and he fell asleep.

He went back to Lorin's the next morning after kissing his girlfriend goodbye and seeing her off to school. It had occurred to him that it might not be *legal* to put Oris back in Ryganaav after getting her out, no matter how much she wanted it, even if Kaylo could teach him to de-light her, even if she could go back to her family and be happy there. Lorin would have a better idea.

Lorin didn't. "It doesn't come *up!*" she exclaimed in exasperation, standing in the courtyard with the back door to her office open and trying to haul Oris out of doors. "People don't *go back!* And she's currently a ward of the Esmaarlan government until we can get her stable enough to be adoptable. It's not like if Sarid wanted to go back with her kids."

"What would happen if Sarid did want to?" Talyn asked.

"We'd keep Sinhar and test the girls for magic potential of their own first, but we'd have to let her take them if they're not magical," Lorin said. "There's a proposal in Parliament now to tighten that - to consider Ryganaav unlivable by anyone female, not just anyone magical or non-human, so minor girls couldn't go there - but it hasn't gone through yet."

That introduced time pressure if Oris's favored solution was to have any hope of going through. "Er, how fast is that likely to pass? How likely is it *to* pass?"

"I don't know. I only found out about it because I've been reading up on rules relevant to this situation." Lorin got Oris two steps past the door, exposing part of the light's hand to the sun and inspiring a helpless thin whine. "I don't know the usual lifespan or approval rate of proposals-in-progress. I don't even know when this one was drafted."

"What if Oris wasn't a light anymore," Talyn said, "and I got her mother into the country and her mother wanted to take her home? Before the law passes?"

Lorin looked at him quizzically and let Oris's hand go in surprise. Oris scurried back into the office and hid under Lorin's desk, clutching her blanket around herself. "I suppose that'd make it equivalent to Sarid trying to take nonmagical girls home," Lorin said, bustling in and resuming her attempts to get Oris into the sun. "Legally speaking." Internally, she didn't like the idea much, but she was at her limit in dealing with Oris herself.

"Well, what happens if I *don't* do that?" asked Talyn.

"I've been in communication with the nearest hospital about Oris but they don't take kids. They're trying to refer me to a place out in the middle of nowhere. Aabalan Pediatric Facility if I'm remembering the name right. But *they're* full right now and haven't gotten back to me about whether there's any other comparable institution... The next option is hiring a freelance therapist *and* full-time childcare for her and having her looked after and treated *here*, which is expensive, so I'm supposed to work harder on exhausting other options first to look after the Esmaarlan taxpayer's money, never mind that I'm abusing wakeflower essence *already* to keep up with her and letting all of my other work slide."

"But what will the hospital do for her?" Talyn asked.

"I flipped through the brochure... They're equipped to make sure she doesn't hurt herself," said Lorin tiredly. "They haven't dealt with a case exactly like her before so they'd be making some of the therapy up, but they have the staff and the equipment to make sure she

doesn't hurt herself and make sure she gets sun or food whether she likes it or not. That's more than I have. Except they're full."

"That's all they can do? Keep her alive?" Talyn knew from Lorin's thoughts what she thought Oris's life in Ryganaav would be like, but life in a hospital in some remote part of Esmaar, kept alive but likely miserable and cooped up and far from everyone who loved her, didn't sound like an improvement. Not compared to being freed from her hated powers and sent home to her family, which would only even be awful until Talyn figured out how to reform the entire country.

"All they can guarantee, anyway. They mostly deal with patients who have serious light-resistant mental illnesses and some young trauma victims. They'd be classing Oris like one of the latter, but she's not an Esmaarlan kid whose parents hit her or a distressed young mage who had a difficult activation or even an unstable *orphan*. They have a green-group dragon on staff but don't use him without a patient's own consent because of a municipal ordinance." She sighed heavily, finally managed to scoop up a kicking Oris, and walked outside again.

Talyn wondered if Leekath had narrowly avoided landing in a facility like that.

Leekath wasn't crazy. Oris wasn't crazy, either.

He listened to Oris thinking, and then looked deeper. If he convinced Cheris to tell her daughter that she had to behave herself, be a light, grow up in Esmaar, try to be happy - would Oris listen to her?

Probably not, he concluded. Cheris was authorized to give her children instructions about minor things - "stop kicking your sister", "eat your mutton", "get ready for bed", "patch the hole in your sleeve". She wasn't authorized to make directives about how Oris conducted her life in such broad terms. Only Azef could do that, or Akar after Azef died. Oris wouldn't listen to her mother unless she said things Oris wanted to hear. Leekath's idea was a bust.

But if Kaylo did what he thought he could, sending Oris home was still possible.

"If taking her powers is possible," Talyn said, "and getting her mother here to claim her is possible, what would you think of that idea?"

"Could you return them? No, I don't even - Talyn, I'm operating on way too little sleep to have opinions," Lorin said. Her thoughts *were* sluggish and blurry, come to think of it.

"Do you want me to babysit again?" he asked.

"No, at this point I think you might make off with Oris and smuggle her over the border. But thank you."

"Oh." He wouldn't have done that - her town would kill her if she were brought back while still a light, advertising to anyone who'd listen that she was bad and needed to die. He needed to get ahold of Cheris first.

And see if Kaylo was making any progress.

"This was *annoyingly* easy," Kaylo said, rolling his eyes, when Talyn asked. "The fact that no one has ever wanted to de-power a light before is the only explanation for why someone hadn't already figured it out. My personal attention was *not* required."

"So it's doable," Talyn said.

"Yeah. The *interesting* part is whether you can make lights out of non-lights, and whether you can de-light a light thoroughly enough to let another light heal them," Kaylo said. "Which is why there was so much research to draw on about lights in the first place, people have been trying to figure out those actually practically valuable problems. If you do this - here - notes - look - if you do that to a light they'll still be immune to lightcraft. But you can get them to quit

soaking up sun and making sparks. The actually useful light-related projects look a lot harder and I'm de-prioritizing them; I have other wizarding orthodoxy to overthrow."

"Have you tested this spell?" Talyn asked.

"No. It's been years since I invented a spell that didn't work on the first try, Talyn, don't start doubting me *now*. Also, I don't want to extinguish any lights," said Kaylo. "They're useful. Do I have to start inventing a counterspell, so you can fix whoever you're going to go enchant, later, after you regret it?"

"Uh." Well, that would make it a lot less complicated, if he could re-light Oris in the future if she ever wanted it. "That would be good."

"Come back tomorrow and I'll give you a counterspell in exchange for two angles discussing why in the name of all that is sane these kamai textbook authors think that *logical paradox* is *okay*."

"Deal."

Leekath surprised him by teleporting into his room while he was reading through his shapeshifting book. "One of my teachers canceled class to go to his grandson's wedding," she said, hugging him and resting her head on his shoulder. "I have two angles free."

"Great!" Talyn said, wrapping his arms around her and turning away from his book. "Hey, take a look at this spell -" He pulled out Kaylo's notes with the final spell written neatly under incomprehensible formulae and scribbled arithmetic. "Could you cast that?"

"Yeah," she said. "It's within my CC -"

"Oh, that reminds me," he said. "I should give you some extra. How much do you want?"

Leekath blinked. "How much do you have?"

"Lots. How about a thousand to start? And you can have more if you want it, later."

"There aren't even *gestures* to cast at six hundred or above," Leekath asked, as Talyn sent along the CC. "I mean, we can extrapolate up to five hundred and ninety-nine, unless there turns out to be a Voyan number in there, but we don't know the gesture tag for six hundred."

"I'm sure someone'll figure it out," Talyn said brightly. "I should give Kaylo some more CC too..."

Leekath kissed him. <What's the spell do?> she asked.

<It'll de-power Oris so she can go home. Kaylo invented it. He's going to make a counterspell too,> he added, to forestall the question forming in Leekath's mind. <If I fix Ryganaav and in ten years I look up Oris and she wants to be a light again, I'll be able to do that - I'll be a wizard too by then - I'm going to start next term.>

<There's a sort of hissing sound in your mindspeech.>

<Huh?>

She broke off from the kiss. "I've noticed it before but it's been getting louder. What is it?"

"It's nothing," he said, and he pulled her in again.

She leaned away; he was always mildly surprised by how strong she was when she exhibited it, as she looked so delicate. "I listened to the gold wand," she said. "But it doesn't know about things like side effects. *Are you okay?* Really, Talyn."

"There's nothing to do about it," he mumbled. "Or Corvan would've tried."

"You could ask Keo," she said.

"The problem isn't that Corvan couldn't have done anything, it's that innate kyma don't

react well to people messing with our minds," Talyn mumbled. He didn't like the topic. It was waking up the parasites. "I'd hurt someone. Maybe even Keo - I wouldn't necessarily react with *mind* magic. She couldn't stop me, it's not a mental reaction."

"She could work from a distance, any distance -"

"I could cause an earthquake even from the bottom of the world and kill a hundred people."

"We could put you on the moon."

"I could run out of lifeforce spraying kamai around everywhere and die myself."

"Oh." She frowned and brushed his hair out of his face. "What if I try?"

"I don't want to hurt *you!*"

"I mean -" She reached out and pulled a hair from his head. "If there's a way to do it without you hurting *anyone*, even you, won't your hhikiiiia tell me? It didn't say anything about this last time I listened, it was talking about other stuff, but it's got to know, if I ask it. Hhikiiias know *everything*."

He looked at the black hair curling from between her fingers. "I - I - *oh*."

Leekath kissed him gently on the forehead. "Will you let me try that?" she asked. "Just to see? I won't do anything if it says it'll be dangerous."

"Now?" he asked.

"This evening," she said. "When I have more time, since it might be complicated. I have another class soon. You'll be okay that long, right?"

Talyn nodded mutely, staring at her.

"I love you," she said, leaning forward again to snuggle up to him.

"I love you too," he murmured.

Talyn did not have a very good afternoon, waiting for Leekath to get out of class. The imminent hope stirred up the dead; imagining them gone counted as thinking about them. He tried to read his shapeshifting book, but his eyes slid over the words and he thought about Mysha and Revenn and the demon, the demon and Mysha and Revenn, Revenn and the demon and Mysha, their memories of possession and suffering and childhood and study and taking hosts and subterfuge and Mysha writing, endlessly, in her diary, about Talyn and how she loved him and how it would be only a few years before they were done with their apprenticeships and she could finally ask him to be with her -

He started towards town, intending to buy a sleeping potion and wait out the angles until Leekath could help him in unconsciousness. He flew, but remembered Revenn teaching dozens of apprentices to fly - he walked, but remembered Mysha walking with her father to school when she'd been small - he wiped away a humiliated tear and crawled towards town, but the demon had taken a hundred four-legged hosts -

He dragged himself back to the tower and huddled on the couch on the first floor, rather than try the stairs.

<Keo. I need to sleep. Please. Just that, nothing else, just sleep.>

<What for?>

<I'll tell you later. I need to sleep. Please.> He didn't *think* he was transmitting any of the dredged-up memories there, from the demon's envy of long sleep (it couldn't keep a host alive long enough to get more than a quick nap safely) to Revenn's memories of lying down beside his wife before she'd died (before Talyn had been born) to Mysha's appreciation of sleep-inducing magic when she'd first learned it and put Emryl into a long snooze by way of

practice -

<Okay,> sent Keo, and he fell asleep.

"Talyn," said Leekath.

He opened his eyes and willed himself to focus on Leekath. "Leekath."

"I brought you up to your room. Are you ready?"

"Can you do it with me asleep?" he asked desperately. He didn't like the way his voice sounded. He'd been *managing*, keeping busy and accomplishing things, and then she dangled a solution in front of his nose and he'd gotten worse and he was dependent and unhappy and could barely stand to be awake.

"Yes," she said. "I don't know how to do that, though."

"Like this." He pushed the kamai working at her. So what if it wasn't how she was supposed to learn things; that was an outdated notion anyway, that it mattered to learn them the hard way, and this way she could keep him under.

"Okay. I'll wake you up when I've listened to everything that might help." She touched his forehead and pushed him back under.

"Talyn," said Leekath, nudging his arm.

"They're still there," he observed miserably. "You couldn't do anything."

"I can't get *rid* of them," she said. "Safely. But I can *move* them - I can put them nearer your normal memories, *under* your normal memories. I think that will be better but I wanted to ask before I do it."

"Do it."

"Okay," she said, and she sent him back to sleep with another kiss.

"Are they gone?" he asked when he woke again, groggy from excess sleep. "I mean - moved."

"I moved them," she said. "How do you feel?"

"Loopy," he murmured. "I wasn't actually tired, just - needed to be unconscious."

"But Mysha and Revenn and the demon?" she asked. "I put the demon on the bottom and Revenn on the top. I don't think you'll want its memories but you might want your grandfather's. He knew lots of kamai."

He had. And Talyn, able to think about his grandfather without activating an extra voice in his mind, knew it too.

"I remember it," Talyn murmured. "Like it happened to - well - not like it happened to me, but like I just copied all of his memories by some... other kind of kamai."

Leekath nodded solemnly. "It's the best I could do. It's the middle of the night, now, I asked and asked the proxy for better ideas, but this was the best thing."

"It's enough," he said, sitting up and squeezing her; she squeaked and hugged him back.

"I just wish I'd thought of it sooner," she murmured against his neck. She was thinking about biting him, already, though the last time had been just three days ago. The lack of a blood replenishment working was the only thing stopping her from asking. He resolved to work on that next, before finishing the shapeshifting book. His girlfriend was amazing and deserved all the blood he could manufacture for her if she wanted it.

"Thank you," he said.

They held each other, silent, and then Talyn noticed another side effect of being able to

think of the dead.

"He's dead, Leekath," he murmured. "He died because of me. And she did too. I killed her."

She hugged him closer, and he cried into her hair.

"Are you sure you want me to call Cheris?" Leekath asked, the evening of the next Lunen.

He nodded. "I was doing everything *weirdly* before you helped me - too fast, too impulsive, trying to make things interesting instead of sensible - but I thought about it for a few days, and I checked on Oris yesterday afternoon and she's no better and they haven't found a place to put her yet, and I think I should at least try to put her back with her family. Cheris is the only one who ever knew she had magic. If she'll keep quiet about it, and you de-light Oris, they can go home."

"Okay, but this is going to really freak Cheris out, you realize. You didn't even round your ears," Leekath pointed out, starting to sketch a calling circle with an embedded ward. "I definitely don't look human."

"I could illusion you," he said.

"I'd rather just turn invisible. When I'm done with the circle," she said. "I think I'd look strange brown."

"You could still be pale. Like Corvan - he's a human but he's pale and has black hair."

Leekath shook her head. "I'd look strange pink, too. And calling her will freak her out whatever we look like."

"I think she'll live if it means she can have her daughter back. She was willing to overlook a little harmless magic once."

"Okay," said Leekath. "You met her and I didn't."

She finished the circle, waited for Talyn to place his hand in the focus lobe, and cast the scrying spell. "This is a really well-designed spell," she remarked. "Scry and call and ward all in one diagram with two spells. It's neat."

Cheris was asleep, and so was the rest of her family.

"Go?" Leekath asked.

Talyn nodded.

Leekath cast.

Cheris woke up when her surroundings changed; her first thought was that one of the babies was fussing, as that was usually what woke her, but she quickly realized something else had changed. Leekath was invisible before the human woman's eyes landed on her, but she did see Talyn.

"You," she whispered. "What are - what have you done?"

"If Oris didn't have her devil-powers anymore," Talyn said, slowly, making sure Cheris understood, "could she go home?"

"But that's impossible - devil-powers are permanent," Cheris said. "Where am I - what -"

"Not anymore," Talyn said. "A way has been discovered to remove some kinds of powers. Including hers. You can bring your daughter home - all you have to do is claim her at the place she's staying now, and I -" <Sorry for not giving you the credit here, Leekath> "- can remove the powers from her. But I will *only* do that if she can safely go home without them."

"But she won't have any powers?" Cheris asked slowly.

"None at all. Better than that, she will be protected from the same kind of power I will take from her," Talyn intoned. "Anyone trying to use them on her will be thwarted."

"How can I believe you?" Cheris asked. She wanted to believe him - missed her little girl like Oris had been carved out of her body, out of her soul - but he'd demonstrated some abilities that put him in an untrustworthy category.

"You can believe me when you bring her home and she is just like every other little girl," Talyn said. "I trust she won't be harmed unless she *does* demonstrate power."

Cheris nodded slowly. "No one even asked me *why* she was taken. But if you're lying," she said, "then she'll die. She's alive now."

"She's unhappy," Talyn said. "She was happy at home. She could be happy there again, without her powers and with her family."

"Oris is unhappy?" Cheris asked.

Talyn nodded.

"She wants to come home - she's sorry for letting the powers in?" Cheris said. "They won't get into her again, if they're taken out...?"

"She's sorrier than you can know," Talyn said. He was going to puke after this was over with, he knew. "Her powers will not return through her own doing. They can't unless they're forced back on her by others with powers."

Cheris sat up and hugged her knees. "My little girl," she murmured.

<Leekath, would you run and get Lorin to bring Oris here? She'll still be at the housing place and awake. And can you illusion Lorin's ears?>

<Yes.> He heard the faint swishing of wings. Cheris wasn't paying attention.

"She was such a good girl," Cheris said to her knees. "I never would have thought it of her. I don't know what she did."

Talyn coughed. "These things are, uh, mysterious."

Leekath was back in just a couple of degrees, which Cheris spent silently dwelling on the absence of her child and Talyn spent standing there awkwardly.

Lorin's long ears were clumsily hidden by image kamai, and she led a sullen Oris by the hand up the stairs. Leekath had cleverly thought not to teleport away, where she could be heard, or back, where her passengers could be seen to appear, in Cheris's presence. The invisible vampire came up the stairs after the elf and girl.

"Talyn," said Lorin, looking at the human woman where she sat on the floor. "What did you do?"

"Mama!" Oris exclaimed, trying to fling herself forward. "Mama!" Lorin kept hold of her hand, if only barely. "Mama, I'm *sorry*, I don't *like* it here, everything is *horrible*, I'm *sorry*, can I be sorry enough to make it go away?"

Tears sprang to Cheris's eyes and she scrubbed at them. "I - I - what do I have to -"

"Talyn," said Lorin sharply.

"Lorin, this is Oris's mother," Talyn said. "She wants her daughter back."

"I can't bring her back if you can't take her powers," Cheris moaned.

<Leekath?>

<I did it right after teleporting them here. I saw there was a finished counterspell on your desk.>

"They're already gone," Talyn said.

Lorin cast about for some way to object. But she was weary of taking care of Oris and neglecting her own children, too sleep-deprived to sort through what she knew about the law,

and not immune to the heartbroken look on Cheri's face. She rubbed at one of her eyes. "If Cheri wants to take her I can't stop her," she mumbled.

"My devil-powers are gone?" Oris asked, staring up at Talyn.

"You'll see for yourself when the sun comes up. It won't feel like anything special," he said. "You can see now, if you want to try to make your light - it won't come."

Oris swallowed deeply, shot a guilty look at her mother, and brought her hands together in a cup.

Nothing happened.

"I can go home?" she asked in a whisper. "I don't have to be in this place any more?"

Lorin let go of her hand and sagged against the wall.

Oris ran into the circle - the ward didn't impede entry, just exit - and fell into her mother's arms. "Mama. *Mama.*"

Cheri clutched at her daughter tightly.

"Do you have some way to explain to Azef and everyone?" Talyn asked.

"You took her into the desert and kept her there. She got loose and came back on her own after a few days," Cheri murmured. "Can you remember that, Oris?"

"Yes. I can. I'm going to be very very good, Mama, I promise," keened Oris.

<Leekath?>

Leekath cast the push spell, and mother and daughter disappeared.

Talyn inhaled. He was queasy, but could postpone actually throwing up until Lorin had gone home. "I need to fix that entire country," he said. "Before she gets much older."

Book 3: Prophet

Chapter 16: Infiltrating

The spring term ended. Talyn was enrolled to start wizarding classes in Rohel - a slimmed-down schedule from his initial crazed excess. But that left him Pehahel to kill, and he couldn't while it away with his girlfriend, because Leekath had obtained a vacation job assisting her aaihhhi in his office and was only available in the late evenings after the work day finally ended.

He was surprised that the government of Esmaar even wanted to employ someone her age for the sometimes fifteen-angle days - without even weekly breaks - that Thiies Hhirheek usually logged, and when she'd first told him about her job, he'd initially assumed that she'd be leaving considerably earlier. He waited three angles for her to get out of the Parliament building on her first day on the job, expecting her to appear at any moment, before she finally emerged well past sunset carrying a stack of documents.

"Couldn't you have left earlier?" he asked her, looking at the paperwork she held. It was tucked into pockets on a long strip of fabric, which was folded between each pocket.

"Yes," she told Talyn, "I *could* leave before Aaihhhi does, but then I'd have to go home. Fheel says it's fine if I go out with you after working a full day, but if I'm not going to work as long as Aaihhhi does I should be home making myself useful tutoring or something. I'd rather stay at Parliament."

"Oh," Talyn sighed. "This is going to be a long month."

"You can practice kamai," she soothed. "And hang out with Kaylo, and learn a hundred languages. And I'll have at least a couple angles most days where I'm not working or sleeping. Aaihhhi doesn't *literally* work all the time."

He didn't waste any more of their truncated evening complaining about her work hours, not when he heard her thoughts buzzing gleefully around the day she'd spent being helpful to her favorite parent.

Talyn was no longer *endangered* by boredom, thanks to Leekath's intervention in his mindblast-scrambled head. But boredom was also easier to come by with integrated memories. He remembered everything his grandfather had remembered at the time of his death - which included Mastery-level knowledge and centuries of experience in all five aspects of kamai. Talyn could practice the workings, sure, but he *knew* it all already. He'd been reading a shapeshifting book; a skim of what he'd had left to read revealed nothing he still didn't know. He'd been curious about "clockwork" illusions; he pulled a classic off on his first try without mishap, albeit he then managed to kill four more angles trying to design an original one. The workings he still didn't know were esoteric specialties, and the only esoteric specialty around for him to learn was Rhysel's elemental proxying - which he'd already picked up.

He could pull together a Master working of some kind, he had loads of ideas and now the expertise to back them up, he could graduate from apprentice to Journeyman to Master in one fell swoop the way Kaylo had gotten his Mastery for his CC-transfer working (not that Kaylo could use the title, while he was studying, a fact which the garnet dragon had complained about at some length.)

Talyn *could* just skip ahead to the end.

And then what? He was still young, and even if the Researchers or the Wanderers or whoever it was coordinating tower assignments thought he could handle a town by himself, it

would be in Barashi. Leekath didn't like to be there for very long, unable to cast spells and trapped under twin suns. Talyn was the same age as most of the kamaï students at Binaaralav; he could tutor them, but wouldn't purport to stand in front of a class and teach unless he was serving as an emergency substitute, and he didn't like the idea of being a teacher full-time anyway.

Besides, Rhysel wasn't charging him rent for his room, or board for his meals, and she and Aar Camlenn had both gotten adequate at shielding their thoughts.

And he was sure he'd be less bored when wizarding classes started, but that left him with a month of very little Leekath, and no interesting new kamaï at his fingertips.

"Think I'll go to Ryganaav again," he said, after Leekath came out of the Parliament building into the dark street to meet him on her second day of work.

"For how long?" she asked. "Not as long as last time, I hope, you promised."

"I'll come back every day to see you - and shower - and sleep in a nice bed and stuff," he assured her. "I'm not going to live ten feet from a camel manure heap again anytime soon. I just want to learn more about the place, and think of something to do with it. Oris is in there, and I feel kind of responsible for her."

"As long as I get to see you when I get out of work," Leekath said, kissing his cheek. She hesitated over her next sentence. "Will you come back tastier again?"

"Yes, I most certainly will," he said gallantly. "How *is* work?" he asked. He set off in a random direction, just to walk. Daasen was a dense city, full of tall buildings with bridges over the streets and alleys connecting many to their neighbors.

"I'm not doing anything *really* important," Leekath said, following after him and catching his hand in hers. "Aaihhhi's office pays me, but not much, since I'm not even a graduated wizard yet and that means I'm classified as a 'non-volunteer' - as opposed to a volunteer or a caster. One of the secretaries seems not to like me - maybe because I only have the job since I'm the representative's daughter? - but she hasn't actually done anything."

"What is it you do all day?" Talyn asked. He didn't understand most of the thoughts she harbored about work. They were dense with jargon that was half-opaque even to her, but she knew how each term related to each other and so she could think about things without letting him understand the ideas.

"Mostly I just read law revision proposals and write summaries of them. Committees of representatives write proposed changes - they want to update them in the face of new spell advances, and make everything shorter so police can learn the law, and stuff like that. There's a law in the works to count kamaï as a kind of magic for Parliament purposes, so people who are kyma and not wizards or anything can be in the government," she said. "Other people in the office work on foreign policy resolutions and stuff."

That sounded mind-numbingly dull to him, but she liked it - or maybe she just liked being around the only adult relative in her house who treated her at all decently, whether she'd admit that the way the rest of them behaved was awful or not. He changed the subject. "Is there a better way to get to and from Ryganaav repeatedly besides storing up lifeforce in a power box, making a transfer point somewhere in the desert, and then flying wherever I want to go next?" Talyn asked her.

"I could push and call you every time, or you could get a teleportation license," Leekath said. "The second one's probably a better idea. You wouldn't have to wait for me."

"How long does that take?" Talyn asked.

"Since you aren't in wizard school yet it's a six-week course. It doesn't really need to be that long, but people demand that it get longer every time someone has a teleporting accident,"

Leekath said. "It would still be faster to start a course now than to wait until school starts again and take the class then, but not by very much."

"Ugh," said Talyn. "I think I'll go with the transfer point."

"Okay. I can push you there to begin with, so you don't have to fly all the way there. And you can fly around invisibly to get from place to place, if you aren't trying to actually live there and don't need to be accounted for all the time by the Ryganaavlanik," Leekath said, nodding.

"But I think," Talyn said, pulling her into an embrace, "that I'll put it off until later." He fastened his mouth to hers, expertly avoiding her fangs. <I don't want to miss any time with you I don't have to. I missed you too much last time.>

<I love you,> she sent, a sigh in her mental voice.

<I love you too.>

Leekath drew the circle she needed to push him that evening in his room in Rhysel's tower. The next morning, before teleporting herself and her aaihhhi to work, she stopped in to quickly kiss him goodbye and cast the spell that would fling him into the desert outside of Ryganaav's capital with a backpack full of food and ward stones.

Talyn turned himself invisible, assembled a power box, and flew up and over the walled city of Pridetaal. It sat on a river, and drank greedily from it; the water roared in blue past the north wall and trickled darkly out the other, spidering out on either side into irrigation channels that turned the ring around the city into a stain of green.

He descended over a knot of people and skimmed over them, pulling a little lifeforce, a little lifespan, and all the CC from each one - barely touching them enough for them to notice, though some did detect his brushing past to their scalps and suspect a bird. There were a lot of pale-feathered doves and swift wrens and other birds in the city, nesting on the flat roofs and swiping scraps of food from the omnipresent shouting street vendors.

When the power box was full enough to make a transfer point, Talyn sailed over the outer wall again. It was a hot day, but the river sucked some warmth out of the air, and flying quickly left Talyn reasonably comfortable.

He picked a spot that wasn't too close to the well-trafficked water or the worker-populated farms, and landed in the sand, where he sat and set down the power box. It wasn't generally a good idea to make transfer points via power box, but it could be done, and it was a better idea than trying to bring a bunch of Esmaarlanik to Ryganaav or kidnapping some locals to tap. The former would lecture him about how insane he was, the latter would probably be murdered by their friends.

Besides, Revenn had known how to make a transfer point from a box.

Talyn outlined the spot he wanted in a his-eyes-only illusion, for focus. No one was nearby, but if he knocked himself out and someone showed up while he was sleeping off the drain, he didn't want to be near suspicious-looking fire-writing or anything else that would appear as devil-powers. With the circle demarcated, he set about creating the point.

Sand was harder to work with than he'd anticipated - neither he nor Revenn had ever made a transfer point in unsolid ground before - and he did slip asleep after the point was made. When he woke up, he had the beginnings of a mild sunburn and he was terribly thirsty, but he was still unobserved in his little valley of dunes, and his magic had vitrified a column of sand rather than work with the loose grains.

He didn't think a glass cylinder would go unmolested for long, even in a relatively

secluded spot on the dunes, so he buried the transfer point - it would work through a few inches of sand just fine, and *he* could see it from miles away if he opened his kamai senses. Then he swigged most of the water he'd brought, and devoured all of the food.

Talyn tested the transfer point, hopping back to Rhysel's tower and then out into the desert again.

That was that.

He had several angles to spend in Pridetaal before it was time to jump to Daasen and meet his girlfriend.

Talyn dismissed the illusion around the border of the new point. He sucked the last power out of the box, which he'd been unable to draw on any further after committing to the working. That perked him up enough that he could reassume his invisibility and fly back to the city.

The walls wrapped around Pridetaal completely - the river was allowed through a barred section, not an outright gap. Talyn made a circuit and found six gates, all heavily guarded by men who ranged from lazy shadow-watchers to fervently paranoid warriors expecting leonine attacks at any moment.

Talyn flew over the walls again, and started looking for the high priest.

That was why he'd picked Pridetaal: it housed the center of the religion that locked the entire nation into its murderous, misogynistic culture. The best way to change the whole country had to involve starting with the man who ran the faith.

The high priest, Talyn learned by listening to the thoughts of Pridetaalanik, lived in the vast Temple of Makas and His Sons. The Temple was near the center of the city, overlooking a yard swarming with gardeners keeping it watered and trimmed. Its terraced walls were carved with images of historical priests and martyrs of note, and passages from the holy text the Yaanorel in half-legible script, and the symbols of each of the five gods. Makas's was a spiral, more snugly spaced on the left than the right. The gods of the four elements had corresponding signs - a square for the earth god, a droplet for the water god, a three-pointed flame for the fire god, and a stylized tornado for the air god.

Talyn landed, still cloaked in illusion, and waited until no one was looking before swiping a honeyed pastry off an offering table. He wasn't clear on what happened to the offerings that weren't taken by invisible kyma; nothing on the table looked stale, though it sat under the hot sun. Another moment of collective inattention netted him a leg of squab, and then he moved on into the temple.

The temple had five wings, with one for each elemental god arranged squarishly; the courtyard cut into the forward pair and the largest wing, for Makas himself, carved out part of the rear two.

Talyn started with a tour of the ground floor, although listening to the thoughts of gathered clerics and worshipers suggested that he'd only find more offering tables and prayer rooms and libraries of theology, not the priestly living quarters. Those were upstairs.

Eventually Talyn located the stairs. They were guarded, but not by anyone who could see him. He ran between them and up the wide, shallow steps.

The high priest's family was huge. He had sixteen wives, who were milling about the living space of the temple idly - the temple's work was looked after by servants and lesser priests, and they were forbidden from religious work of their own, so apart from talking to each other and minding the younger of the high priest's eighty-odd children, they had little to do.

The children were stairstepped in ages from thirty-nine to infancy. Most were between

the ages of ten and twenty - Talyn's inquisitive mindreading revealed that the high priest had ascended to that position at age fifty, and prior to said promotion had only had three wives, two of those early ones since deceased. He was now pushing seventy years of age, but had enjoyed a decade's window of both excess spouses and sufficient vigor to enjoy them.

All of the sons above the age of fifteen were priests, scattered throughout Pridetaal's lesser dioceses and neighboring towns and vying for approval to be next in line when their father died; all of the daughters sixteen and older (so old only to allow prolonged bidding wars) were married to unrelated priests, similarly distributed. The younger children still lived in the temple, with the wives, studying the Yaanorel as soon as they were old enough to read.

Talyn didn't find the high priest himself on the floor of living quarters. So he went up to the steepled top, bypassing the spiral stairs that climbed its walls in favor of flying directly through the center towards the pointed roof.

And there was grey-bearded vi'Yan Rylaatin the Third, standing on the balcony of the spire with closed eyes and folded hands, stooped with age and bowed with prayer.

Talyn sat on the low wall that surrounded the open floor of the tower, and listened to the man who ruled Ryganaav think.

Unlike the priests Talyn had listened to in Egalon, the high priest literally heard the voices of the gods in his head.

Revenn had known what spots to check in a mind for mental illness. Just for kicks, Talyn checked. The high priest was as scrambled as eggs, and he ruled a nation, had every trapping of status heaped on him, was considered holy for the delusions he attended to. Meanwhile Leekath heard voices that spoke the truth - that gave her real information and real power - and she was widely considered sick, she escaped institutionalization only via harmlessness.

Talyn took a moment to convince himself that it would not be the best way to change Ryganaav if he just set the illustrious vi'Yan on fire.

He went back to listening to the old man's prayers. Outbreak of disease in a northern province; suddenly aggressive "fish-devils" finding ways to attack coastal settlements; the ever-present threats of leonines and drought; his eternal fear of "moral decay" among his people - these were the things he sought guidance for. The five voices that sounded in his head said what he expected them to say. They spoke mostly in scriptures, reciting general principles that Rylaatin could apply on his own.

At sunset, the vi'Yan went down the spiraling stairs, still unaware of Talyn, and mulled over the results of his prayers so that he would be able to condense them and deliver them to his subordinates. His words would spread quickly through Pridetaal, subsequently downriver, slower up it, and at a caravan pace everywhere else. He usually didn't have anything *new* to say - the text of the Yaanorel hadn't changed in hundreds of years - but regular reaffirmations of the articles of faith were traded to and from Pridetaal anyway as a means of keeping cohesion.

If his messengers brought back news that anyone wasn't reacting appropriately to his dictates, he could assemble a small military party and take care of that.

Talyn watched Rylaatin have dinner with his wives and those of his children who still lived in the temple, and he paced, and he thought.

A standard personality modification wouldn't *work* with a mentally ill person - not one this thoroughly wedded to the voices he heard, anyway. Talyn could probably cure the illness, if he spent a while in the Repository reading books on it - treatment hadn't been a specialty of

Revenn's, only enough diagnosis that he could refer people to specialists, but it was learnable. That was the standard procedure on the criminally insane in Restron.

But if the voices went away the vi'Yan would assume he was meant to step down and leave power to his oldest son or whoever else he considered suitable. A cure and then a personality change would do the trick if Ryganaavlanik weren't so damnably suspicious, such that half a dozen of Rylaatin's sons would be ready to suggest that their father was senile and that they should send him to retire and install one of their generation in the Temple -

And Talyn hated personality revisions anyway.

He was due back in Daasen to meet Leekath. If he hadn't had a better idea by the time he returned to Pridetaal the next day...

He was going to start writing a book.

<Your plan is to write a sequel to the Yaanorel?> Leekath asked skeptically.

<The first one doesn't have enough okay material in it, or I'd just lean on that. I mean, it tells them to cooperate with each other and look after their kids and stuff, but the justifications are all awful. So I'm going to write a new book that has some resemblance to the old one so people will buy it - same nice instructions, no nasty justifications - and then tones down the awful parts. I can probably get them to just send kids with magic out into the desert, and then there could be some charity from Esmaar or wherever that picks them up...>

<That didn't work very well with Oris.>

<Okay, granted, but that's because no one knew how to handle her and because she didn't realize she had devil-powers. If there were a bunch of kids like that, and their towns turned them out so they couldn't be in denial, and a charity that was devoted to helping them that could figure out what they needed, I bet it'd work better. And anyway, it's better than the poor kids dying.>

<I guess. Can I bite you?>

It had been only three days since the last time she'd fed, and he heard a frisson of guilt about what she thought of as her greed, even given the fact that he could now replenish his blood. But she wanted the taste. And he *liked* that she wanted the taste. And it was going to be better than ever, after he'd lopped off the likely-unusable decade from the end of the lives of much of Pridetaal.

<Go for it,> he said magnanimously.

Leekath didn't need any more encouragement; she broke off the kiss and brushed her lips across his face and down his throat to where he bore healing bitemarks. She renewed them.

<Mmmm,> she sighed at him.

Talyn stroked Leekath's hair. It looked lustrous under the faint ceiling-glow Aar Camlenn had added to all of the rooms in Rhysel's tower. "And once I've gotten them to tone it down that much," he said, "in a few years I can do another book that takes it a step further, and so on, until they're decently-behaved."

"Mm," she hummed aloud.

"I probably need to add bits to the story parts of the Yaanorel. It's got long parts about how Makas made the other four gods, and made humans, and how the gods rained blessings on their people but the people hoarded the blessings. How do you hoard a blessing? In a *jar*, it said. And then apparently they coalesced into an adversary figure, Koraalin. Do you think it's too soon to write in that the Koraalin is dead now and they can relax?"

"Dunno," breathed Leekath. He was still petting her hair; she was half-awake. Until he

put his hand down he might as well be talking to himself. But she was tired anyway, after drinking.

"I'll need to re-read the original," Talyn murmured, undoing the ponytail she had part of her hair in so he could run his fingers down her scalp unimpeded. "So I can match the style. I really only skimmed it when I was in Egalon..."

"Mmhm."

Talyn closed his eyes and held her quietly.

In his head, he started outlining the book.

Chapter 17: Blaspheming

Writing a book was harder than Talyn expected. He discarded four first chapters that respectively meandered, failed to match the prior book's dialect, gave away too much about its real origins, and sounded like something written by Talyn's authoritarian primary school teacher.

Talyn had no experience with writing. He'd listened to plenty of people thinking about the original Yaanorel, but they were all *familiar* with it - exposed to it as children, taught it by their parents. His book was going to be *new*. The audience might have different filters up for novel concepts; they might hedge out ideas in the "revelation" he provided even if those ideas weren't any weirder than what they already believed.

He decided this would go much more smoothly with a test audience.

He visited Sarid.

She was still living in Paraasilan housing, although when he arrived at her apartment, she appeared to have found a little work - she got up to answer the door in the middle of sewing a typical Ryganaavlan outfit for a customer who wanted it for a play and cared about authenticity. All three of her children were playing on the floor at her feet, with toys that looked used and of possibly magicked origin but didn't, in themselves, exhibit magical properties.

"You," Sarid said, when she'd opened the door to see Talyn. He'd arranged his hair to hide his ears again. No point in alarming her.

"Yep," Talyn said. She didn't remember his name; he helped her out. "It's me, Talyn. Do you have a couple of angles? I can pay you for your time again."

"Yes," she said. So she didn't have enough work that it filled up all her time. Most people who wanted Ryganaavlan-looking clothes were probably just as happy to have them stitched together by spell.

"I want your help with something. It's about kids like Sinhar. I know a lot of parents in Ryganaav want to save their kids like you did but can't - maybe they never get a chance because the kid shows magic in front of witnesses, or maybe they can't bear to leave their other kids behind like you had to. I have an idea to help those kids. Do you want to help them? Or is it just Sinhar you cared about?"

Sarid looked at her son. "Your hands, Sinhar, use your hands," she said softly, when he floated his toy, and he caught it out of the air and pouted. She looked back at Talyn. "I... Well, of course they're going to the hells, but they don't have to do it when they're children."

"Right," Talyn said coaxingly. "It doesn't actually *say* in the Yaanorel that you have to kill people with magic immediately on sight - just that they have to die. But you know Sinhar will grow old like anyone else." Except Talyn himself, if he kept up his forbidden activities, but that wasn't topical.

"Yes."

"I've been spying on the high priest -"

"*Spying* on vi'Yan?" exclaimed Sarid. "You set foot in the Temple of Makas and His Sons - to use subterfuge to watch the private meditations of -"

"Yes, yes, but I was already going to hell, right?" Talyn said. "I didn't hurt anyone. My point is, I've been spying on him, and I know he's had a *big* revelation from the gods. He hasn't told anybody about it yet, but he's going to write an entire new holy book. But the gods don't just give him every word. They communicate in high sacred ideals, not in mortal language. Vi'Yan has to decide how to *put* things." The voices often came in very clear language, but Sarid didn't know that.

Sarid turned this over in her head. "You plan to present yourself in a disguise to vi'Yan as - as some kind of scribe, to take dictation and alter his choice of words. Is that it?"

"No," Talyn said, "of course not. He has to write it all down himself so it will be true holy writ, since he has divine authority and obviously I don't." This placated her. "But I'm going to talk to him about it." *Inside his head in the voices of his hallucinations.* "And I want to know what to *suggest* to him, that will most help people like Sinhar, and you." And devils and magic-users in general, but Talyn figured he could make the first chapters about topics Sarid would be sympathetic to, and finish the sections on other things alone with that practice under his belt.

"Oh." Sarid backed into the apartment, and left the door open for Talyn to follow her; he shut it behind him, patted Path on the head as he passed the place on the floor where she was playing with her stuffed snake, and sat across from Sarid in the living room.

"Will you help me?" he asked Sarid coaxingly.

"Why do you care if vi'Yan's choice of words is honored?" Sarid asked, after another silence. "You're not one of us - wouldn't you like to take his finished book and replace it with one you made up entirely?"

"But then wouldn't all the priests who prayed for confirmation of the new book know it was a fake?" Talyn asked innocently. "And then I wouldn't be able to accomplish anything."

Sarid didn't question the supposition that he believed the Yaanor gods were *real*, only his willingness to obey them; she accepted that explanation. "So you need to be subtle enough that the gods will tell all of the priests to abide by the new book."

"Yes, exactly," Talyn lied.

Sarid bowed her head. "You think you can be of more help to children like Sinhar than the gods would already have been?"

"Well, I spied on the high priest long enough to know that the new book is already going to be gentler on them," Talyn invented. "But I'm worried that - apart from the priests who'll obviously be able to check by praying - people won't accept it immediately, and some of them might keep to the old ways even though the gods don't want that anymore. Vi'Yan isn't that good a writer - he does sermons, not books, and he's never had to push an idea this complicated and important before. He might not be able to convince everyone."

"That sounds likely," Sarid acknowledged. "Even if you... help... there will be resistance."

"Yes. I want to minimize that. For my own reasons, but of course I can't do anything to prevent the gods' true message from getting through." He resisted a temptation to say this in a sickly-sweet pious voice.

Sarid nodded once. "I'll help you," she said.

Over the next couple of weeks, Talyn funneled his notions of what the book needed to say through Sarid's understanding of how it needed to be said. What he was writing was still dreadful, morally bankrupt stuff. Little caterpillar-inches towards decency.

It couldn't be very long. Ryganaav didn't even have printing presses, and paper was scarce; every copy of the Yaanorel was handwritten on thick handmade sheaves. *It* was long and still had full penetration, but the new book, to get anywhere fast, would need to be able to propagate pretty quickly. Besides, he was trying to pass it off as an update, not a replacement. Maybe he could outright replace everything in fifteen years.

The "Yaanor-daan", as he'd titled it, commanded its readers to treat the money one gave

to one's bride's father as a gift, not a payment for an item. This was justified with handwaving about goodwill between families and hints of indecency about lying with one's property, rather than any respect for wifely autonomy, but it might give him an in to adjust it later. He reified the minor social stigma he'd seen about giving one's wife visible bruises, which he'd seen serve to limit domestic abuse, although the original book was enthusiastic enough about physical discipline for an unruly female possession that he doubted he could excise it entirely so soon. He'd considered also raising the minimum age for marriage to sixteen, but decided to hold off until the next book there too.

He mandated sending magical children out into the desert, not killing them directly. From Sarid, he learned that sorcerers and lights weren't the only ones sentenced to die for devilish taint - infants born deformed in such a way as to suggest devil heritage, along with their mothers, were also put to death. He added them to the provision. With their mothers, the babies might survive the exposure long enough to be picked up by a charity. (He was planning to find a way to anonymously tip off the organizations that already worked in Ryganaav about the changes, after the first copy of the book was set down. He'd bribe Kaylo to invent a spell to detect shunned Orisik and Sinharik and mothers-with-babies if he had to.)

The book extended preemptive forgiveness to anyone caught at minor neglect of the faith such as missing several temple services, although for realism he had to couch this in admonitions that the absentees be hustled back into temple as soon as possible. Actual religious pluralism would be a long time coming, and would probably devastate even the parts of the culture that were worthwhile.

And one chapter promised its readers that magic couldn't taint a person by mere association. Woven into this was the hope that humans from other backgrounds could be redeemed, so Ryganaav alone would not be expected to reproduce its way to ascendancy without help. Talyn didn't think Yaanor would win many converts from the neighboring countries, but if he could get the Ryganaavlanik willing to interact nonviolently with such people, ideas might transmit the other way.

Talyn wasn't confident enough to put anything about leonines (let alone other devils) in the Yaanor-daan, because he hadn't met any Ryganaavlan ones and neither had Sarid. In spite of the cover story he'd used in Egalon, he didn't know much about the way Ryganaav's humans interacted with its leonine population, and so he didn't know which way to tweak it. He settled for a very general admonition that to kill in error was a grave sin but to spare a life by mistake was not.

He peppered everything with reinforcements of the commonsense morality the original Yaanorel espoused - don't steal, don't cheat, don't lie, be responsible with community property - but left out the genocidal justifications.

And then, because it wouldn't properly sound like a Yaanor book without sending anyone to eternal torment, he added that anyone who rejected the gods' legitimate update to the canon of holy commands was going to hell.

He tried a few different chapter orderings, went through making minor edits to the entire thing, paid Sarid for her help, and, on the morning of the twenty-fifth of Pehahel, returned to his glassy transfer point near Pridetaal.

<- into the desert, where the gods may claim them,> Talyn whispered into vi'Yan Rylaatin's mind, slowly so the arthritic old man's hands could copy down the words, adopting the voice of the air god for this segment. <There is no longer cause for our sons to bloody their

hands...>

The high priest scribbled as fast as he could. His handwriting was poor, but legible, and the book would be copiable. The man's mind was a froth of excitement. He was the first high priest since *the* first high priest with the privilege of dispensing a book's worth of godly wisdom to his people. He would be remembered forever.

Talyn began the next paragraph, pacing invisibly and inaudibly behind the vi'Yan.

It took vi'Yan four days to write down the entire book, as his hands were really not up to the task, and then he announced the book to his family and subordinates in a grand meeting he called.

He read the book aloud for them, each literate person at the meeting who had adequate handwriting in the room transcribing a copy as he spoke.

Three days later, there were twenty copies of the Yaanor-daan to be had, and more in progress.

The next week, the first ones were leaving Pridetaal on camelback and raft.

The high priest gave a public sermon, hollering at the top of his lungs from the steps of the Temple of Makas and His Sons, reaffirming his faith in the new book and endorsing its contents.

Talyn spied on the crowd's minds. They weren't without misgivings, but vi'Yan *was* charismatic, showed no signs of dementia other than the Yaanor-approved hallucinations, and emphasized the parts of the new book that most accorded with what they already believed.

They were buying it.

Talyn went home, and bought his wizarding textbooks early to read ahead because he didn't want to spend several years in low tiers with little kids, and, every evening, celebrated with Leekath.

School started on the first of Rohel. Talyn was enrolled in First Tier Theory, Introductory Intentionality Practicum, Handy First-Tier Spells, and a course on Esmaarlan history. He was also still signed up to tutor kamai students, and expected more of them to take advantage of his availability when he was actually enrolled than when he was an inconveniently-located resource.

Leekath's job went on hiatus when she returned to classes, though she was assured that it would be waiting for her in Sutaahel when Binaaralav went on another break. She was taking more classes than Talyn - there were more available, at her tier level, *and* she was enrolled in kamai - but all of them put together, plus her assignments outside of classtime, still left them with a lot more angles to spend together.

Rhysel didn't receive a newspaper. Aar Camlenn read one, but didn't tend to leave it lying around. And Leekath only took the politics section out of her roommate's copy, and learned things from letters her aaihhhi's office sent.

So it was halfway through term when Talyn learned that Ryganaav was at war with itself.

"They bought it!" he exclaimed, clutching the newspaper in his fist and storming back and forth across his room. "I was *there*, I watched the high priest *pitch* it, they *bought* it!"

"In Pridetaal," murmured Leekath.

Talyn stopped and rested his head on a wall. "Yeah. When vi'Yan was handing down the book directly. Right."

"So as far as the scriers researching the war for Parliament's factbase have been able to figure out," Leekath said gently, "Pridetaal is behind the new book, at least for the most part, but the towns are divided, and then the high priest died -"

"He's dead? What of?" Talyn said, snapping his head up to look at her.

"Either old age or poison - if it was poison they haven't been able to scry the event yet," Leekath said. "And some people thought the gods killed him -"

"Oh, for the gods' sake - the actual walking-around gods - that's *insane* -"

"And it started a war," Leekath finished softly. "The World Relief Union would probably have told you about it but you contacted them anonymously."

"I wonder how many kids they got out before everything got ripped to shreds," Talyn said, sinking to the ground and dropping his face to his knees.

"I don't know." Leekath sat next to him and put her arm around his shoulders. "I'm sorry, Talyn."

"What do I do?" he asked the floor.

"Um..." Leekath was wondering if he ought to do *anything*, not having a very good track record, but she didn't say it.

"You think I should let them kill each other."

"What else would you do?" she asked. "How would you stop them?"

"I don't know, Leekath."

"We're in school," she said. "I want to do things too, but I can't until I'm graduated and I can work in Aaihhhi's office properly, and maybe be in Parliament myself one day. Maybe you should wait."

"How many people did I get killed?" Talyn wondered aloud.

"I don't know."

Talyn sometimes ate in the school cafeteria; Rhysel's housekeeper would feed him whatever she was fixing for her dragonets, even if Rhysel and Aar Camlenn didn't go home for the meal, but he liked the atmosphere of the school's eatery and sometimes they had interesting food.

He was trying, for the sixth time, to convince himself to eat a beetle, when he heard the people at the next table talking about Ryganaav's civil war.

"Is it even a bad thing?" said a human girl. "I mean, this is Ryganaav we're talking about, they'd kill *us* soon as look at us, isn't it better that they're expending their energy on each other -"

"And maybe leaving *my* people alone," said a leonine boy. His mane was starting to come in. He didn't look like the usual local leonine; he was leaner and yellower. Maybe he or his family was from Ryganaav.

"I wish someone else would conquer them. Maybe Esmaar should put together an army just to make it finally go away," said an elf girl with them.

"Who'd join it?" the human girl asked. "*You*?"

"Well, no, but, maybe somebody," said the elf.

"People join armies in other countries," acknowledged the leonine.

"I'm just glad the Ryganaavlanik are at each other's throats instead of, like, Saraan's. We've got wards everywhere but if they went into Saraan they might actually hurt someone," the human said.

Talyn crushed the beetle he was holding.

He left his uneaten lunch where it was and stalked out of the cafeteria, to the lift, to the

transfer point, to eat at home in the company of Theedy and her children instead.

Talyn studied.

At the end of the term, he took his first tier test, passed it, and signed up for second-tier classes to start in Marahel.

Leekath went back to work.

Talyn followed the best news coverage he could find on the war in Ryganaav, which wasn't very detailed. The conflict couldn't progress too fast, at least. Even uninterested war correspondents, observing with telescopic spectacles and long-distance audiophones from scoots high above the action, could get down much of what there was to get.

The same challenges associated with moving around under normal circumstances applied to the impromptu armies, too, and the autumn was making it harder than it would have otherwise been to feed troops sweeping through settlements. Or the noncombatants, women and children and the infirm elderly and those wounded beyond repair, who lived where a war front had swept through.

When he could get his mind off of the war long enough to do anything, he studied wizardry, practicing simple spells to change the colors of his toenails or freeze cups of water or draw glowing lines in the air. He wasn't doing anything spectacularly interesting yet; he hadn't learned to do anything he couldn't already manage with kamai. Leekath assured him that he'd get to do things kamai couldn't manage in third tier, and that the best spells began in sixth or seventh.

Leekath also assured him that it would not do her any harm if she ate every day, so she did, curling up with him and biting and drinking and then trancing under the rhythmic passes of his hand over her hair. He knew she didn't think of it as a particularly romantic thing, but he did, and he was glad he'd managed to obviate her interest in feeding off anyone else.

But she went home to sleep every night, and he was left lying awake in bed, wondering how many had died because of what he'd done.

A couple of weeks into the break, he said, "I think I'm going back again - *just* to watch what's going on -"

"I doubt you'll stick to that," Leekath said, kissing his cheek.

"Okay, if I see something *extremely straightforward* I can do, I'll do that, but I'm not touching anything with moral ambiguities," Talyn said. "Except bringing you some extra tastiness."

"I love you," she sighed in his ear.

"But seriously, I only plan to watch -" She kissed him; he continued by mindspeech. <I'm not even going to interfere if I see a fight because I only know how to do it with magic and that would just freak everyone out. But it's killing me reading the news articles - and ugh, everybody writing them hates the people they're talking about so much, like they must deserve *every* bad thing that could happen to them ->

<Okay. Just don't tangle with any leonine mages. Mages are *strong*,> she replied.

<Okay,> he answered.

Pridetaal was the center of the war, and it looked it.

The holy sites were mostly unscathed, probably since everyone still agreed on which places those were, but Talyn saw no sign of the high priest's wives and children in the Temple of Makas and His Sons. Everyone he did see ran when they had to go out at all. Large patches of

the city seemed to have been burned; some of it was actually on fire when Talyn flew over. The side of the river running away from the edge of town was grey with floating ash. He extinguished the flames. He didn't think that was ambiguous at all.

The sides of the conflict had no uniforms, but it seemed like the opposition to the Yaanor-daan was wearing white scarves to be able to identify each other and avoid killing one another - which identifier was of course easy for the book's supporters to emulate, so people who didn't know each other avoided interacting or confronted each other with swords drawn.

People were still living in and around Pridetaal. There were still people on their farms, working, and not all of them had been hit yet or sucked into the conflict, although he saw a number of women doing work that they normally wouldn't, and younger children than was typical trying to herd goats and pick olives.

And in the streets, on the riverbanks, through the sacked and abandoned farms and orchards -

Was combat.

Mostly small groups, sometimes singlets. Everyone knew who the sides were, but they weren't *organized*, the leaders people followed were their cousins and friends, no military geniuses had risen to command vast armies yet. Some had aspirations of similar. Growing up believing that your culture was ripening to explode and conquer the world could do that, apparently.

Talyn didn't intervene when he saw fighting, which ranged from snipers with hunting bows picking off enemies from high windows to barefisted brawls in alleyways to groups of ten and twenty after each other's blood with blades. But he didn't watch fights for long when he saw them, either. He touched the dying, took the lifespan they weren't going to use, fought down training and Revenn's memories and his own meddling instincts to refrain from giving them healing they'd shudder to imagine.

(Except once, he found a little boy with his throat half-cut, and he *would* die if left but he was still gasping, unconscious, and Talyn dredged up a little-used working Revenn had known to heal him *partially*. To make it look like the depth of the wound had been misjudged, like it had never been fatal.)

The boy would have a nasty scar, but if no one else sliced him open, he'd live.

Maybe he'll live long enough to kill someone else, Talyn thought bitterly, but the kid had been *five* -

Pridetaal wasn't short on children, Talyn found.

Chapter 18: Bleeding

Talyn was practicing reading in Vansalese when Kaylo unexpectedly flung open his door. "Talyn," said the dragon, "tell me how well lifelinks work."

"Uh, really well?" Talyn asked. "Lifelinked-stuff-doesn't-die well? Why do you ask?"

"Cause I'm working on something," Kaylo said, pacing. "Not fully formed yet, but..."

The dragon's thoughts were shielded, but Talyn didn't doubt he'd be bewildered by the shapes of them if he could hear them anyway. "What is it?" he asked.

"Well, there's this problem with it - I can't just safely *experiment*, pretty sure someone'd object if I accidentally killed one - Korulen would, definitely - have no idea how I'm going to handle her uncle, damn him - but the general case -"

"Kaylo," said Talyn. "What are you *talking* about?"

"Lifelinks!" Kaylo cried.

"A wild or death kama'i working that tethers a subject's lifeforce to a kama's, until accumulated strain on the kama's lifeforce causes pain buildup to the point where it can no longer be held," Talyn parroted from his textbook memories.

"Yes. How long is that?" Kaylo asked. "How long could someone hold it - you for instance - Rhysel -?"

"Uh, it's really hard," Talyn said. "I practiced with it for a while because it was one of the first workings I learned that was actually hard for me, but I couldn't do more than a half-sub at my best. I think Rhysel held it longer once, but she actually cared about the person she was linking and was kind of desperate. I was just practicing with bugs and stuff." Talyn didn't think mentioning Eret would be a good idea around his dragon friend.

"Half a sub. That's a degree. Can I do it in a degree? Every time? Maybe. I'm not sure. If I compress the spell set - but then I'll make more mistakes, bigger mistakes, half the kinds of mistakes I could make would be fatal -"

"I can't do this *repeatedly*," Talyn said. "I can do it one time and then I need a break for like a week."

"*Damn.*" Kaylo stopped in his tracks and scraped his fingernails through his hair. "That's not good enough."

"I mean, the working isn't hard. Involves a little blood, but I know how to replenish that - I can't do it on myself but Leekath knows it and I could teach you. It's just too much pain."

"Can't you, like, move it or something?" Kaylo said, making a shoving gesture. "Ugh, that would be so much more convenient -"

"Yeah, you can, but then whoever you move it to has to -"

"Of *course!*" Kaylo shouted at the top of his lungs. "It's perfect! This will work! Can you do it ten, fifteen times a day as long as you can push the pain onto somebody else every time?"

"Uh, sure..."

"This will work," Kaylo said with a feverish smile. "And then I can get rid of them all and they won't exist and I can stop fighting with Korulen and I'll be rich and oh man, there will be an entire new word about me -"

"Get rid of who all...?"

"*Shrens!*" shouted Kaylo triumphantly, and he teleported away.

Talyn didn't leave that lie; he took a transfer point to Binaaralav and marched up to

Kaylo's room. When the dragon's roommate disclaimed knowledge of "that nutcase's" whereabouts, Talyn tried the library. Kaylo wasn't there, either.

Finally, casting out with mind kamai, Talyn pushed just hard enough past Kaylo's shields to *find* his mind, and then guessed at what to tell the lift until he got out onto the correct hall and found the abandoned classroom the dragon was using.

The place was wallpapered in sheets of notes, and the teacher's desk - the only table still in the room - was heaped with books and notebooks and had Kaylo hunched over it with a graphite stick clutched in his hand.

"What are you doing?" Talyn asked.

"Math, at the moment," Kaylo muttered. "This has to be exactly right - don't dare touch the language compartment - thank goodness it's down there instead of up where it'd be inconvenient -"

"If you aren't going to explain can you at least unshield?" Talyn asked, exasperated.

"No. Got lots of delicate secrets don't want you reading, thinking about them too often right now. Publication... has no *obvious* journal, but it's so huge, someone will want it. Worth the out, though...? Claim it later?"

"Kaylo," snapped Talyn.

"Oh. Right. I want your help and probably shouldn't alienate you. Right." Kaylo looked up from his math. "I'm going to cure shrens. Then they can stop existing and I can stop fighting with my girlfriend about them."

"How're you going to do it?" Talyn said, looking at the notes on the wall.

"Do you think you can actually understand the explanation? You're second tier, right? I mean, I would have understood about half of this in second tier, but I spent most of my time researching wizardry on my own then and also I was me."

"Maybe you can tell me how you're going to explain it to the shrens you try it out on," Talyn suggested blandly.

"I was thinking of saying 'hey, stand over there and do what I say and I can turn you into a dragon'," Kaylo said. "You don't think that'll do the trick?"

"Okay... probably, yes, that will do the trick," Talyn admitted. "What can you tell me?"

"I'm gonna need you to lifelink the shrens, and push the pain onto them. If we do baby ones we can get a grownup shren to take it, right? It doesn't have to be who you're linking?"

"Doesn't have to be," Talyn confirmed.

"And can you move other pain around too? I remember you told me outright anesthetizing a dragon brain is better not to mess with, but can you put it on someone else safely? The procedure *itself* probably won't be particularly comfy."

"There's a working to do that, and it's much different from any of the regular anaesthetic workings," Talyn confirmed, dredging up the information from Revenn's memories. "I haven't tried it on a dragon or a shren before, but it may work. I can find someone less busy than you and make sure." He'd ask Eret and Theedy - they wouldn't mind accepting some minor injuries, to be healed immediately, in support of this project to see if he could relocate their pain without shutting down other key functions.

"Because dragon magic comes in these compartments," Kaylo chattered excitedly, "but it's like a measuring cup, not like a bunch of different cups. And life support is at the *top*. So if one doesn't have all the magic one needs one dies, instead of, like losing the ability to talk, or breathe fire." Kaylo shuddered delicately and seized a book and began to flip through it. "I thought of a way to use the magic that's already there more efficiently. But if I just section it out

first without doing anything else, all the magic 'above' it sloshes down, no life support, dead shren. If I first prop up all the magic above it and then slosh it in on top, there's still the shren being a shren and having this sort of leak for extra magic - actually this part is really horrifying and I don't want to think about it again so no details on the leak thing - which is why their wings don't work - they're just constantly pulling energy out of their bodies to make up for defective magic, but they never actually fill their measuring cups. So doing that would just waste the magic. Are you with me so far?"

"Maybe?" said Talyn.

"See, it takes a lot of magic to be able to learn a new shapeshifting form, but not much to use one you've got - thudias and vampires have fixed alternate forms from birth and don't need hardly any magic to switch, but dragons have a lot of magic allocated to shapeshifting since we can choose what we become. But after we choose, the extra's just floating around loose. I can move that, if I do it in the right order. So I have to plug the hole first, stop them leeching from their wings, but then they can't top off life support the way they need to, and die. But if they can be lifelinked, I can prop up the magic, section off the extra, plug the hole, and then dump it on top. Poof."

"Poof," echoed Talyn. "Oookay. If you can do this, that's... that's great." He'd avoided thinking too much about the problems of shrens since the incident with the baby green one, Artha, but he knew Theedy and Eret would be beside themselves with joy if they were healed, and assumed others would be the same.

"I can do it," Kaylo said. "But you're not helping. I'll let you know when I'm ready to test it on an actual shren and you can lifelink 'em, okay?"

"Okay," Talyn agreed, and he left the room and went back to the lift.

Kaylo was ready to test on an actual shren a few days into the winter term. Rhysel wouldn't let him do it right away; Talyn overheard the argument. "Kaylo, any motive that gets you working on this is fine with me, but I know you aren't in it for shren welfare," she said. "I know you're very eager to have the project over with -"

"Yes, you see, the project being over with would mean I would no longer have to deal with self-righteousness about my motives and their relationship to shren welfare," said Kaylo acidly. "My spell set will *work*. I am not in the habit of producing spell sets that *do not work*. Get Aar Camlenn or that other person who got me all those data sets to check it if you don't believe me. They'll look at it and then they'll say 'Rhysel why did you make me look at this it will obviously cure shrens, Kaylo is a genius'."

"I will get them to," Rhysel said, "but they may miss something - if they were capable of inventing this in the first place they would have. You're the theoretician here, and I want *you* to double-check it all. And not just sarcastically scanning the pages in two degrees and then shoving them at me again. Take a few days, make sure it's all right, make sure you won't kill or cripple one of my friends when they trust me to give them safe advice and I ask them to be your test rat."

"Fine," snapped Kaylo. "Your friends can all enjoy another *few days* of being shrens, we'll see if any of them thank you." And he left the tower.

Kaylo was back half a week later, late in the evening. "I found two places I could make it more efficient," he said. "So now it's three forms I have to fix per shren, not four, but it would still have *worked* without the changes."

"All right," Rhysel said mildly. "Do you want another few days -"

"No!" Kaylo exclaimed. "I don't! I didn't even want *these* few days. Do you have a shren for me to test or not? Talyn, are you ready to lifelink?"

"I can do that, yeah," Talyn said, looking up from his theory assignment. It was about Voyan numbers, occasional unexplained places in the gesture progression with unique power-pull gestures instead of ones following the pattern of the others. It was designed for kids twelve-equivalent at the oldest, and bored him. "Now?"

"Sure, now," Kaylo said, thwapping the packet of papers in his hand energetically in Rhysel's direction. "I'm not tired."

Rhysel regarded Kaylo steadily. "I'm going to have my husband and my friend you've been swapping notes with look it over first. May I have copies?"

Kaylo cast a copying spell, twice, and handed her the new packets. "All right. See you later, then."

Talyn stood on the bottom of the world, with Kaylo, Eret, and Rhysel.

"I've *seen it done*," Eret said to Talyn, when Talyn tried to explain how the lifelink was prepared.

"But that was a while ago," Talyn said.

"I'm not likely to forget," Eret muttered darkly.

Talyn ignored him. "So, I have to be able to get at your forehead and your neck and all four feet - we should do this in your natural form because I don't know how being shapeshifted while I place the link will affect it, but even if shifting afterwards messes with something, I'll be able to tell and abort before you're in any danger."

Eret transformed into his natural form without further prompting. The overall color was red, but he was flecked with so many other colors - which changed so much in different lights - that he was almost hard to look at. Talyn took the little knife Rhysel had given him, sliced his hand, and went to place dots and stripes of blood where they needed to be.

He activated the magic, pushing the cost of the lifelink onto Eret in the same motion even though it didn't begin under any strain. He didn't want it to surprise him later.

"All set?" Kaylo asked, but he didn't wait for a reply before turning to the shren and rattling off instructions. He didn't look directly at Eret - he had his face pointed off slightly to one side, and his shoulders held a lot of tension - but once his subject confirmed that he understood what he needed to understand about the procedure, Kaylo cast fluently.

The garnet wizard wasn't bothering with mind-kamai shields - Talyn hadn't figured out the pattern for when he did and didn't - so Talyn, who didn't have to actually *do* anything to maintain the lifelink except refrain from flinging it away, could watch Kaylo's mind as he performed the spells.

Kaylo's first spell was an analysis, one of those spells that let him sense magic - but unlike the usual wizarding analysis that Leekath might use before casting a break, or like Talyn's native kamai-sense, this spell gave Kaylo the ability to see dragon magic. He'd engineered it so he didn't get distracted by his own, but Eret's flared into view. Kaylo ran through some perfunctory checks to make sure that everything was as expected for a shren. Finding the result unsurprising, he cast the second spell, which would let him insert barriers into Eret's supply of magic to prevent it from dropping down when part of it was moved.

"Shift," he ordered, and Eret was a duck. His magic wobbled - a section of it in particular. Kaylo took mental aim at the top edge of the moving magic and cross-sectioned it with one of the barriers. "Shift." Eret was human. A new section got a new block. "Shift." Eret

was an elf, and that form too was separated from its neighbors. "Shift." Red-opal reptile.

Kaylo abandoned the barrier-insertion spell and moved his attention to the "hole" at the top of Eret's magic. Through the dragon's eyes, Talyn could see it - the magic rippled, like a puddle in wind, and a separate sheen of something constantly poured in the top, glided over the magic, and leaked out on the other side. Talyn gleaned from Kaylo's identification that that was what Eret's magic stole from his wings.

"This is going to hurt, if you care," Kaylo muttered, and he cast a new spell.

The spell blocked the inflow of energy from Eret's wings towards the container of magic; the last of it dribbled out, the shren's wings twitched, and Talyn noted building pressure on the lifelink.

After the last stolen faux wing-magic drained away, Kaylo cast another spell that altered the container itself; it appeared through his analysis as a lid, but it began propped open.

One more spell, and Kaylo gritted his teeth to mentally move dragon magic with no more precision than he could conjure up by sheer concentration.

He reached into the three sectioned compartments, and sucked out the excess shapeshifting magic in such a way as to let what remained turn from "liquid" to "mist" and fully occupy their sections at a lower "density". (Talyn wasn't sure if the analysis gave an accurate representation, or just a usefully manipulable metaphor.) Kaylo then moved the magic up, poured it in through the lid, and slammed that lid closed before any of it could slosh out.

"There," said Kaylo, sagging, and finally looking Eret in the eye. "I'm a miracle-worker. Go on, fly around, make history."

Eret's wings rustled as he spread them out.

Up he went, lighting his way with triumphant fire.

Theedy was the next healed, confirming the viability of the basic cure. It was next time to try the more time-consuming spell set designed for shifting-incapable infants. "I don't have to try it for the first time on an *actual baby*," Kaylo said. "But I want to try it on someone with fewer than three forms picked out, so I can make sure I know how to siphon out the right amount of magic from the right place without the cues."

Rhysel talked to Jensal, and the third shren cured was one of the Paraasilan shren houses's childminders. The platinum woman could turn into a human and a tiny puffball of a bat, but nothing else. Kaylo directed her to choose one more species, which he'd fix in place for her. At the end of the process, she could fly in dragon shape, and could also turn into a delicate little tamarin without having learned the form as normal.

"So it'll work on babies the same way. Someone else manage getting them to pick out forms - I don't want to have six dozen conversations with tiny shrens about what they want to be when they grow up," Kaylo said when the platinum was flying around and singing to herself.

"We'll work something out," Rhysel said.

An actual shren baby was the next subject - just to make certain that everything would work as advertised for all ages, prior to publicizing the good news too widely. Artha, the green who Talyn had traumatized, wanted to grow up to be a kingfisher, an elf, and a pygmy goat, which suggestions Kaylo accepted only after more precision about the exact species of kingfisher and goat.

Artha's chosen forms were imprinted on her magic. The part of it no longer needed was incorporated into her life-support component. She fluttered about, tried a fancy trick she wasn't equipped to handle, and needed to be caught out of the air by the platinum woman who was

chaperoning her at the bottom of the world.

Rhysel and Kaylo hammered out a schedule between them, and a way to pay the dragon for his time. Talyn wasn't getting paid; the lifelinks were an apprenticeship chore.

They tucked "miracles" in between classes and spent most of every Lunen and Chenen with large blocks of them; they worked in breaks so Kaylo could recover from mental fatigue and both boys could eat, but within weeks Talyn felt like his entire life was a blur of shrens and ex-shrens punctuated by occasional time with Leekath or his wizarding teachers.

Every evening, Leekath bit him, then replenished the blood he'd lost from lifelinking and from feeding her. It wasn't safe to restore his supply more than once a day, but her increased interest in biting him seemed to have stabilized there; even superstimulus flavor didn't give her room to hold an infinite amount of blood.

Insofar as he could tell, the more frequent feeding was good for her. She seemed to sleep better after it, judging by the nights she stayed in his room overnight. That was sensible, when it sent her halfway into a trance all by itself. She'd also rounded out a little, which left her sleek and soft-looking for a vampire but slight compared to a human or even an elf of the same height. Her hair was shiny (so was her fur, when she became a bat) and, when she wasn't half-asleep, her eyes were bright. And of course, her lifespan went up every time.

"Why doesn't everyone eat this often?" Talyn asked. "Even apart from the lifespan thing that's specific to us, you look healthier."

"Most vampires don't know enough people," Leekath said. "And most don't know the blood-replenishment working either. When there are more kyma around I guess plenty of vampires will change how they drink. But some people don't like the tiredness. My brother usually waits two and a half or three weeks, between feedings, because he can dance better when he's not full."

"But you don't have to dance," Talyn murmured against her cheek.

She kissed him. <No. I don't.>

Her thoughts sounded nervous, though - and come to think of it they'd done the same, just a little, every time he explicitly mentioned how often she'd started feeding.

<What's wrong?>

<I'm fine.>

<Leekath...>

<You like it when I bite you, right?> she asked. <You wouldn't want me to stop, or anything.>

<Of course not. I'm glad I can feed you without any help now. The blood replenishment working is practically my favorite one. What's wrong, Leekath?>

<One time - I don't know if you remember - you were talking to Hihhliir, my roommate, while I was looking for my other stocking, and she was talking about how dragons taste, and you asked her ->

<How you don't get addicted to it if it's that good, I remember.>

<Well,> Leekath sent. <We don't get addicted to *dragons*.>

There was a pause. <But I taste better than a dragon. Or anything else with blood that you'd encounter in Elcenia.>

<By a lot.>

<But it's okay!> he sent, hugging her tightly. <Most things like potions or whatever that can addict people have bad side effects like making your hair fall out or something. Blood is your *food*, though, and there's none better for you than mine. It's *health* food. And I'm not going

anywhere, so it's okay, you can just go on biting me every day. You're not having withdrawal problems in the middle of the day or anything, are you? If you are I bet there's kamai to fix that directly, anyway ->

<No, nothing like that,> Leekath assured him at once. <I'm doing fine in school and everything. I could probably even miss a night and be fine. But - really - *don't* go anywhere for a long time. Okay?>

<If I do need to I can leave you some blood,> Talyn sent cheerfully. <You can put it under a preservation spell. I can even teach you to expand it with kamai and then you'd probably have enough for months on what I could leave you all at once.>

<And don't die or anything.>

<If I were planning to die any time soon,> he sent cheerfully, <I wouldn't be so tasty in the first place.>

<I love you,> she silently sighed.

<I love you too. I'm not going to let you go hungry. No matter what.>

<I love you,> Leekath repeated.

Chapter 19: Traveling

After almost four weeks of regular shren curing, Kaylo made a mistake.

"What did you do?!" Rhysel exclaimed as the copper woman under their ministrations started thrashing around. She had to duck a lash of the shren's tail. Talyn flung the shutters over his kamaï senses wide to try to see what was going on. The copper's boyfriend, a jade who had yet to receive his cure, was wringing his hands at Rhysel's side and biting his lip, but not, fortunately, doing anything distracting.

"I don't know!" Kaylo cried.

"She's dying - the lifelink is under strain - Kaylo, I *don't know* what happens if I hold it past a few degrees, the pain *could* get worse than even she can take," Talyn said. "It doesn't have a *limit*."

"I can't figure it out in a *few degrees*," Kaylo snapped. "Can you stabilize her - something -"

Talyn's brain was awash in Kaylo's frantic attempts to figure out what had gone wrong, and in the jade shren's panic over his girlfriend. Maintaining a firm hold on the lifelink, he strode forward, and stonesskinned himself in case the flailing, roaring copper woman breathed fire on him or sent a claw his way. He touched a scale on her foreleg, and pushed kamaï at her, turning her to living stone.

Rhysel gasped. "How do you know how to do that?" she demanded of Talyn.

"It's in *A Guide to the Kamaï of Stones*," Talyn said honestly. That was where Revenn had learned it.

"*What*, pray tell, is in *A Guide to the Kamaï of Stones*?" Kaylo asked, breathing hard and squinting through his analysis at the living statue.

"Turning living creatures into stone," Talyn said. "If I pushed a little harder it'd kill her and she'd just be solid dead rock - but there was a lifelink so I backed off a little when it put the link under extra strain. There's another way to do it safely but you need more setup. Anyway, she's not dying any more. Or conscious, which is good, because I don't think she'd like being rock. I could even let the link go, if you need more than a couple angles to figure out what went wrong."

"I might," Kaylo said. "At a guess, I didn't account enough for individual variation in compartment sizes and this is the first time it's been enough to make a difference, but..."

"Talyn, turning people to stone is forbidden kamaï," Rhysel said severely.

"No," he said firmly, turning to her. "*Killing* people *by* turning them to stone is forbidden kamaï. This lady isn't dead."

"You are walking a very fine line, Talyn," Rhysel said, narrowing her eyes.

"I can un-stone her if you have another way to keep her safe while Kaylo figures out the problem," Talyn said innocently.

Rhysel frowned, clearly wracking her brain. There were other things, mostly death kamaï, that could have worked for a normal problem, but might not interact well with the other pressure on the copper shren to slip out of life. "What do you see, Talyn?" she asked, finally.

"Her lifeforce is paused, since she's not being a biological thing right now," Talyn said. "But through Kaylo's analysis, I can see that it's poised to leak out. I don't think a wild coma will do the trick, Rhysel, or any of the four death workings I can think of. Especially since a lot of death kamaï doesn't even work here - Mendar's Ward is supposed to ward off, you know, Mendar, and he's in Barashi - I don't think a Soul Tie will -"

His Master was giving him an odd look, and he shut up, waiting for her reply.

"Fine," she said at last. "Kaylo, you're confident you'll be able to repair the problem?"

"Yes," Kaylo said. "It might take me a while, though. Maybe days. I need to invent a more precise analysis, redo all my arithmetic, maybe revise that one spell that -"

"Right," Rhysel said. She was studying wizardry a little - not in formal classes, just with her husband and friends - but she wasn't any better able to follow Kaylo's trains of thought than Talyn was. "Let us know when you're ready." She sighed, and turned to the trembling jade shren to comfort him; he seemed to be a friend of hers.

Kaylo was deep in thought, staring at the copper statue. Well, she wasn't copper anymore, she was a reddish-brown rock caught mid-convulsion with her teeth looking like smoothly curved stalactites and stalagmites. But at any rate, Kaylo was occupied with her.

Talyn, no longer needed, went to the transfer point, and brought himself home to catch up on the assignments he'd accumulated in the first third of his winter term.

That evening, when Leekath came over, Talyn said, "I think I want to go back to -"

"Ryganaav?" Leekath guessed.

"You must have met me, or something," he joked weakly.

"Why now, though?" Leekath asked.

"Because I thought of something I can do to help people there that I'm pretty sure is just plain okay," Talyn said. "If I find places where the combatants have cleared out - moved on to a front somewhere else, say - and then I help with food and water, in ways no one will notice, then the little kids and the old people and the women who aren't fighting won't starve to death."

"But you won't be gone long, will you?" Leekath asked.

"Nah, of course not," he said, pressing a kiss to her temple. "And I can only go now because Binaaralav gives Lunenik and Chenenik off, and Kaylo just botched a shren cure so I don't need to do any of those until he's fixed up the spell set. I'll be gone a little bit during the day, but I'll come home to you."

"Good," Leekath breathed against his ear, and after a perfunctory mental question, she pressed her teeth into his neck.

Pridetaal was barely inhabited. There were no businesses still running; everyone there was actively starving to death or raiding warehouses and failed farms for remaining provisions, and winter wasn't kind to either group.

Invisibly, Talyn flew over the irrigated areas. Water still flowed into most of them, as there wasn't much immediate tactical value to destroying irrigation systems over setting farms ablaze or just killing everyone who worked the land. Well-placed wild magic forced the plants that remained to bear out of season or uncommonly bountifully or both; he avoided doing it when any of the city's stragglers were looking. He concentrated on things that would be edible immediately, rather than stuff that would require cooking and time that desperate dregs of Pridetaal wouldn't have.

Someone might - someone probably *would* - notice the unseasonable behavior of the plants, but they didn't have to eat them. Anyway, it was a subtle sort of thing that might as easily be called a miracle as a devilish temptation.

When he found a particularly desolate area, he scooped out a hole, and made it into a mass grave for the corpses he found scattered everywhere.

Eventually, Talyn was too drained to keep working on the plants and remain invisible at

the same time. He dropped the invisibility to slow the drain, but still needed a proper break, and some food. He took some of the oranges he'd forced into fruit, and peeled one while walking towards the city for drinkable river-water as opposed to the muddy rivulets that ran through farms.

There wasn't anyone around likely to waste energy trying to kill him, and he'd hear them if they decided they were going to anyway.

He's got oranges! he heard someone think, when he was halfway to the river.

He couldn't immediately see who it was - she was hiding, apparently - but he didn't need to; he could sense her life force and hear her thoughts.

She went on following him while he walked, and he did catch glimpses. She was up on the rooftops, and very nimble, but she looked like she couldn't be more than twelve years old.

Deliberately, Talyn let one of the oranges drop out of his arms and roll away.

The girl leapt off a low roof and snatched it, then took off down an alley, her mind full of triumph.

"Hey!" Talyn yelled without heat.

She didn't respond, so he chased after her. She clambered up a trellis of dead grapes to the roofs again, but Talyn was capable of following even without resorting to flight. "Hey!" he called. He wanted to give her the rest of the oranges, but he was pretty sure she wouldn't believe him if he said so.

"It's mine!" she shrieked, when she looked over her shoulder and saw him gaining on her. "It's mine! You dropped it!"

"I'm not going to hurt you!" he shouted.

"It's mine! *I need it!*"

She was thinking about her little sister, with whom she was holed up in an abandoned house. Talyn wondered what had happened to their family - they ought to have *someone* left, who would have left just two girls and no one else out of a family as large as Ryganaavlan ones tended?

Talyn let her get away from him, as far as she could tell; when she wasn't looking he turned invisible again and followed her to her hideout.

Thoughts always eventually revealed a person's name, at least the one they used to think of themselves as most often. The girl was called Mekath, and when she got back to her sister, she peeled the orange and shared half.

"I said I wasn't going to hurt you," Talyn called from just outside their hiding spot. They were in a basement of a half-burnt hulk of a house, with a still-stocked wine cellar they'd been using to sterilize questionable water dragged in from the river in the dead of night. Mekath's sister had apparently been thirsty - her thoughts sounded tipsy even as she gobbled up her half of the orange.

"Go away!" Mekath yelled. Her voice floated up through a gap in the floor and an open window. She and her sister weren't getting in and out that way - there was a stairwell in the back, with a tree collapsed over it in such a way that anyone bigger than Mekath would have a hard time squirming through. It was a decent hideaway, if she wouldn't yell while in it.

"Look, I have more oranges," Talyn said. "Do you want them? You looked hungry."

"You're tryin' to trick us!" she yowled. Reading her thoughts let him understand her though the thick inner-Pridetaal accent, at least.

"I'm not trying to trick you! Look, there's lots of oranges where I got these, I can always go get more -"

"Liar!" cried Mekath bitterly. Talyn looked deeper. She and her sister hadn't personally been lured into any traps by the promise of food, but they'd seen unsavory persons talking loudly about access to reserves of beans, living herds of sheep, fruit-bearing trees, and they'd seen other kids from their part of the city follow such characters and not turn up later.

He spent a tick wondering why people might be luring vulnerable folks away to an unspecified fate and then decided to stop.

"Look, I'm just going to roll the oranges in for you," he said. "Try to catch them, or they'll get banged up. I'm not going to hurt you." He reached in through the window and dropped an orange onto the floor. It rolled towards the hole, and down onto Mekath's head.

"Hey - you - this is an orange," Mekath said, beginning at a shout and getting progressively quieter until she whispered the name of the fruit.

Talyn dropped in the two others he was carrying. Mekath caught them. She split them each in half between herself and her sister after diligently peeling them.

"Do you need more?" Talyn called. "I can bring you -"

"We're not gonna go anywhere with you!" Mekath shouted. "We belong to our uncle, not you, we don't hafta do anything you want!"

"I'm not telling you to do anything, I'm *asking* if you want me to get you some more fruit," Talyn said.

Mekath was obstinately silent. "Well," Talyn said. "I'm all out of oranges now. I think I'll head back to where I got them, and get some more, and come back here, and eat, and maybe I'll put down some of what I'm eating in a place where I wouldn't be able to do anything about it if a little girl ran up and snatched it away."

He walked back towards the farms he'd visited, and, as an afterthought, changed the shape of his ears under his shaggy black curls.

Talyn spent the rest of the afternoon collecting easily-rolled fruit and passing it to Mekath, trying to coax her into trusting him enough that he'd be able to get the sisters safely to their uncle without having to kidnap them. It was slow going. Eventually both of the kids fell asleep, and Talyn trudged and then flew towards his transfer point to go home for the night, eat dinner, and feed his girlfriend.

He returned early the next morning, and this time he brought his own food - he didn't expect Mekath to refuse cheese and sausage even if he had less of an explanation about where they might have come from. (He had no excuse whatsoever for bread that wasn't rock-stale. No one had been baking anywhere near Pridetaal in weeks. So he left that behind.)

Indeed the girls accepted cheese and sausage, although he refused to roll it and required Mekath to come out and gather it up and then scurry back underground with suspicion in her eyes.

"Your uncle is probably worrying about you," Talyn said. "I can try to help you get to him."

"No," Mekath said. To both the offer and the guess about her uncle. Talyn looked closer - she didn't think that uncle knew he'd inherited them. Technically, he *hadn't*. They had multiple uncles, and their father's youngest brother would have been next in succession after all the dead relatives, and they didn't know him to be dead. Mekath had picked their mother's brother instead because he lived farther away.

It didn't make much difference to Talyn if they wanted to shuffle around uncles to get as far away from the war zone as possible, although he didn't think it was necessarily any more

peaceful with the one uncle than the other. He got up and walked away from the wine-cellar hideout, intending to locate camels.

People who owned camels had ridden them away from Pridetaal long ago, and people who didn't had probably resorted to stealing them, but the animals were native to the area, and after a while flying around in the desert he got ahold of two wild ones. Using just enough kamaï to make them behave like they were domesticated, not enough to make them well-mannered, he rode one and led the other back to the city and through the streets to Mekath and her sister. "I've got camels," he called down through the window. "We can put you two on one of them and me on the other, and food and water on both of them, and get to your uncle's town in three or four days."

"We don't belong to you!" Mekath hollered.

"Yeah, I know. You want to go to your uncle, right?" Talyn said. "I'll help you get there. I've helped you so far, right?"

"You're tryin' to trick us!"

"Yeah, I always give cheese away when I want to trick somebody," Talyn said. "You and your sister will be on a separate camel from me. If I try anything awful you can run away on it. We can put most of the water on my camel so it'll be slower, if you want."

"Then if we run away we won't have any water!"

"We'll follow the river," Talyn said, "and you can bring some wine."

Mekath searched for flaws in this plan.

"You could lead us to devils!" she decided finally. "Or blasphemers' armies who want us dead."

"But you know the way to your uncle's town, right?" Talyn asked, and he knew the answer to that: of course she did, it was just upstream.

"But you could have them waiting for us on the way."

"If I could communicate with devils or blasphemers' armies and I wanted to give them a couple of girls, why would I want to lure you out like this, instead of just grabbing you?" Talyn asked. "That would be pretty stupid."

"Yeah, well, maybe you're pretty stupid," Mekath grumbled.

"Don't think so," Talyn said.

Mekath conferred briefly with her sister, who wanted to do anything that involved getting out of the wine cellar for good.

"We should leave tomorrow morning, before it's light," Talyn said, when he knew they were going to agree. "Be ready."

When he went home, he found Leekath, and asked her to make his excuses to his teachers when he missed a few days of classes. She wanted an explanation about what he'd found to do, but a description of the sisters placated her. "Make sure their uncle isn't awful," she said, but that was her only caveat. Besides, "Leave me some blood."

Talyn drained a pint into a bottle for her, and taught her how to expand its volume, and got her to test out the expanded blood to make sure it was the same flavor quality as ordinary blood. She sleepily confirmed that it was after she withdrew her fangs from her drinking bag.

The next morning, Talyn woke up early, and took the transfer point back to Pridetaal.

He found the camels where he'd left them - apparently no one had wandered down that street lately; Pridetaal was constantly shedding people as they reached the extent of their looting skills and moved on. He loaded one up with water and one with food, and then said, "Hey, time to go, girls."

Mekath and her sister crept out groggily, bottles of wine in their hands. He tucked the bottles onto the food-laden camel, and helped the girls up onto the animal (which spat, just missing Mekath's hair) before mounting his own and striking out in the direction of their uncle's town.

The trip was uneventful for the first two days. Talyn was able to steer them around the minor clashes of ideology that populated the riverbank - it was settled along its entire length, as the most reliable source of water in the entire country, but not every village and farm that sat next to it was actively embroiled in the civil war, and Talyn with Mekath and her sister looked like a set of three siblings traveling peaceably, and didn't stop near densely settled places enough to attract thieves.

Neither girl particularly wanted to talk to Talyn. They followed him, but spoke quietly to each other and pretended they were traveling on their own and just happened to be keeping pace with Talyn some fifty yards back. They didn't independently offer him any of the food on their camel. He took some every morning before they woke up, and every evening after they went to sleep, and found that sufficient since he was accustomed to doing a lot more kama'i and feeding a vampire every day to boot on three meals a day.

The little group then came to a part of the river that wasn't inhabited. The flood plain was as green as the neighboring parts, but it didn't look like anyone was trying to farm the place or live there.

"Do you know what's up with this place?" Talyn called back towards Mekath.

"Devils must steal water here," Mekath shouted back, and she kicked her camel faster until she'd passed him and was going as quickly as she could out of the place.

It didn't fit with what Talyn knew about Ryganaavlan humans to imagine that they'd leave the place alone just because leonines wanted to visit the river and take water periodically, but maybe the leonines were more trouble than the land was worth, and conversely the humans elsewhere along the river more trouble than the water was worth, so they'd settled into some uneasy equilibrium.

He obeyed the pace Mekath set as best as he could with his more heavily burdened camel. If leonines showed up, he wouldn't be able to pick up their language *instantly*. He'd alarm the girls and destroy the fragile, limited trust he'd developed with them if he communicated with the lion-devils via mindspeak. And of course the leonines might not *want* to talk.

They traveled a few angles through the unsettled place (did leonines here not settle at all, or just not so close to humans, Talyn wondered) without incident. And then the girls, ranging far enough ahead that Talyn had to push his camel with a bit of magic to compel it to keep up, veered suddenly to the right.

Off to the left, approaching fast, were tawny-furred leonines on camels of their own.

The leonine's camels were weighed down at least as heavily as Talyn's and the girls' were, so at first Talyn thought it might be a matter of simply outrunning them. He realized his mistake when several of the lionesses dismounted and ran faster than their camels could towards his group. It might still have been a simple race if not for the way the leonine women were snarling and displaying their claws.

His camels had been magicked domestic, but it hadn't occurred to him that "domestic" would mean something different for a relatively harmless species like humans, than for an obviously predatory one like leonines. Talyn was able to get his animal under control and keep

away from the part of the leonine pride that had split off to chase him, but the camel the sisters were riding was too far away - without some kind of wooden instrument to expand his wild kama range he couldn't calm it. It went berserk, and chucked both girls and most of their food off of its back to go charging out into the desert as fast as it could.

Talyn scowled and doubled back for the girls, who were trying to scramble away from the approaching leonines. He reached them - after the leonine women did. There were four - two had been after Talyn but changed targets when he'd proven able to control his mount. Two were binding the girls up hand and foot, one was helping hold them down, and one was standing guard against Talyn. Her claws were out and she had her lips drawn back in a snarl.

Talyn had no reason to be afraid for his own safety. If there were a mage among these leonines, or a sorcerer, she probably would have used her powers earlier, and even one of those would be hard-pressed to injure an innate kama with as much knowledge as Talyn had. But he'd taken responsibility for the girls, at least until he could check out their uncle and make sure he'd be an adequate guardian for them (though he didn't know what he'd do if he judged otherwise). And they were terrified and squirming in ropes.

"Get down," ordered the leonine woman standing guard in broken Leraal.

He hadn't expected them to try to order him around. "Let the girls go," he said. If he got Mekath and her sister enough of a head start, they might be able to get the rest of the way to their uncle on their own.

"Someone buy girls, we sell," said the leonine woman. "Someone buy you, we sell. Get down. Can't sell you, we kill you. Dinner." The other women, mostly finished with their job of tying the girls up, snickered, but it wasn't really a joke; human meat (or in Talyn's case, halfblood) was just as edible as other kinds for the lion-folk.

Talyn was sorely tempted to solve the problem with magic, let the girls hate him and run off to their uncle without escort, and go home to Leekath early. But the fact that at least one of the leonines could manage some Leraal gave him the barest hope that he'd be able to talk his way out of the situation. Setting things on fire was his next best idea.

"They've got a People-calm camel," commented one of the women crouching by Mekath's shivering sister. She said this in her own language, not Leraal, so Talyn couldn't hint that he understood it without having to produce a lot of explanations. Certainly he couldn't correct her that his camel wasn't "People-calm", just magically docile.

"Only one," responded the woman who spoke Leraal, switching languages. "Probably stolen." Apparently humans didn't have much wherewithal to teach their beasts of burden to behave around leonines, and the assumption was that any human with a camel who was must have taken it from a leonine. "But it can carry the prisoners. We'll make better time." She turned back to Talyn and said, again in Leraal, "Get down. Good prisoner we sell, ransom, give back home. Bad prisoner, dinner." She licked her teeth theatrically.

Unfortunately, Talyn could clearly read Mekath's intention to be a *very bad* prisoner rather than comply with any instructions she got from evil devils.

He put his hands up and slowly slid down off the side of his camel.

Chapter 20: Trading

The leonines tied Talyn's wrists and feet. Gestures were unnecessary for kamaï, except insofar as good manners dictated that you should signal what you were doing, so Talyn didn't even try to stop them. If he resorted to kamaï in front of the girls, it would be because he'd abandoned his attempts at mannerliness.

"Good prisoner," purred the leader woman in Leraal, patting his hair condescendingly. His ears were still rounded. "Someone pay bring you home? We send word, tell them, pay, bring boy home."

"They belong to their uncle," he told the woman, nodding his head at the girls. "He lives two days north of here."

"Yes? And you? Got wife at home, got father, got..." She looked at him a bit closer while her companions loaded Mekath and her sister onto Talyn's camel. "Not kid. Got uncle, too, like those kicking girls?"

Mekath *was* trying to kick her captors, but she wasn't very good at it with her feet tied, and when she caught one across the elbow she got a light claw-free cuff on the face for her trouble and a warning snarl.

"No one's going to give you money to get me out," Talyn said.

"Okay," replied the leonine, shrugging. She picked him up - she was strong, though not as strong as Leekath - and set him on the camel too. Some additional fiddling with ropes secured him and the girls there.

He could have forced the camel to run off, but the leonines could catch them; they'd proven that well enough, and now they were three people and a deliberately-overlarge load of water on a single animal. Talyn started concocting and discarding other plans.

He really didn't want to watch another little girl realize he was her "enemy".

The leonines camped in the shadow of a tall rock formation. The setup didn't look permanent, but it wasn't the sort of thing they'd want to uproot every day, either.

And there were other humans there. About half of them were tied up. The others were apparently trusted unsecured, maybe because they were actually collaborating with the leonines, maybe because it would be suicide to strike off into the desert alone and on foot.

The four leonine women who'd captured Talyn and the girls were apparently half the adult female population of the pride. The other four were busying themselves with assorted tasks - one was poking at the fire, to get it started blazing again overnight, one nursed two infants simultaneously, one was trying to teach one of the untied humans a few words of their language, one was grooming the sole male adult's mane. Cubs ran to and fro on other errands. Two half-grown boys were baiting the tied-up humans, poking them with sticks from the firewood pile and laughing when they reacted, or when they sat there stoically. A girl was swishing her tail through the sand and sewing a pattern into a long red wrap, and one of her sisters or half-sisters was minding the younger kids.

Mekath and *her* sister couldn't sustain a high level of terror forever. Their expectations had already been contradicted when the leonines didn't eat them immediately on capture, and they'd heard the conversation about ransoming them to their uncle and were trying to evaluate how likely he was to want to bail them out. Mekath was trying to calculate her value. She would be old enough to sell to a husband in a few years, but the leonines could demand more than she was likely to fetch, especially factoring in room and board for both of them in the intervening

period.

Talyn was trying to adjust his various rejected plans to see if any of them worked any better when he was trying to free a dozen people instead of two. Unsurprisingly, none of them did.

The four women in the returning party added Talyn, Mekath, and the sister - Talyn still had not caught the younger girl's name; she was singularly quiet-minded and Mekath only thought of her as "sister" - to the string of tied prisoners.

"Names?" asked the woman who spoke Leraal. "I Asha."

"Talyn," Talyn said.

Mekath was obstinately silent; her sister piped up meekly, "Senthel."

"And you?" asked Asha, nudging Mekath with her foot.

Mekath still wouldn't answer her, so Asha shrugged. "We call you Bug until you say something you like that we call you."

"Her name's Mekath," said Talyn, annoyed.

Asha shrugged again. "She not say so, we not call her so. Talyn, you got nobody home for you?" she asked, turning to him.

He wished he could think of a way to manifest his rapidly growing understanding of Asha's native language. Maybe they'd try to teach it to him and he could pretend to have an eidetic memory. "I've got people at home," he said. "But they're not going to pay you for me." Because he didn't actually have to be there, and he *would* bust himself out by kamai rather than let someone who loved him reach into their pockets to finance slavers.

He might not look Mekath or Senthel in the eye when he did it, but he would do it.

"They not like you?" suggested Asha with a snicker.

Talyn didn't dignify that with a response. "Why aren't they tied up?" he said, nodding in the direction of the mobile humans.

"They good prisoners," Asha said sagely. "They useful. These -" she waved at the other captives - "eat food, drink water, not useful. If we not sell them soon, we eat them." She clacked her teeth together menacingly. "More humans running around to find. War of gods. So many, running around." She snorted.

The other humans in the string - a broad assortment, men and women and children - were variously paralyzed by fear, holding out hope that they'd be bought back by family or friends, and righteously defiant even in expectation of their eventual deaths and consumptions at the hands of lion-devils. The ones who were freely walking around were pragmatic or faithless or just particularly afraid of being eaten, and their families were dead or estranged or poor or some combination.

"How much would it cost to buy *all* your human prisoners, the ones walking around and the ones tied up too?" Talyn asked Asha. He knew she wasn't going to offer to let him prove himself as a "good prisoner" until he'd spent a night or two under their "care" - the rationale, when he looked deeper, was that new prisoners might say anything out of immediate fear, but after more exposure to "the People" they'd be less likely to obey out of terror alone. A lower-level background fear was preferred.

But he could still talk to her; they hadn't gagged him like they had one apparently mouthy old man.

Asha blinked at him, confused, but her thoughts were answer enough - they negotiated and haggled for ransom prices, and did the same when they sold humans to other leonine prides. Prices varied: women were usually ransomed for more but sold for less, since humans could

resell female relatives (or, if they were already wives, they were expensive to replace) but leonine masters found men more useful for hard labor. Mekath's calculations about her value were likely to be informative. "You not have it," Asha said aloud, rather than voicing these complications.

"Maybe I do," Talyn said. He didn't think it would be hard to pay them in wild camels - which wouldn't act terrified of the toothy people until Talyn was long gone - instead of in coins.

"Not," Asha laughed, and she walked away.

Talyn sat and thought, watching the sun set.

Without much to do besides think, and listen to others, Talyn picked up a great deal of the leonine pride's language before everyone bedded down for the night. He hoped to stay up late enough, or else get up early enough, that he could talk to a leonine without any human witnesses.

The leonines didn't hate magic. This pride had a light in it, he'd seen: she lounged around half-naked to soak up sun, and healed her pridemates' cuts and scrapes, and was treated with immense respect even though she lacked seniority among the wives, and was excused from potentially injurious work. If the pride would let Talyn go, he could run home, get some enchanted trinket from Esmaar - maybe a waterspout - and trade it for all the prisoners they had, and lead everyone where they'd been going.

But that was if they'd believe him, if they'd let him go. Or he could try the camel idea, although they might want a large number of camels and he didn't know how long it would take him to find such a quantity.

And if they'd let him make the trade without letting on to the prisoners what he was trading.

His fellow prisoners would probably all be beyond suspicious, but if they didn't have details about *how* he got them free, their freedom itself might inspire them to trust him well enough that he could at least get Mekath and Senthel to their uncle and wash his hands of the mess. He felt so much less responsible for these people when he wasn't there among them, listening to them *feel*.

He was missing school. He couldn't even practice his gestures with his hands tied and Ryganaavlan humans watching him.

He missed Leekath.

Talyn looked around, frustrated with the wait and the possibility that the humans *wouldn't* all close their eyes before the leonines all did. He issued the subtlest command to sleep that he could to his fellow humans: the tied ones a few at a time over several degrees, the free ones when they wandered by and weren't occupied with a task.

"Excuse me," he said darkly, in the leonine pride's tongue. "I'd like a word with whichever one of you is in charge here."

Heads turned his way; young cubs started whispering to each other. The maned center of the pride stood and stalked towards Talyn where he was tied. "You know our words," he said in a low rumble that almost woke Mekath; Talyn shoved her back to sleep impatiently. "How? You care that little for your gods' favor? Learned it from an escaped prisoner?"

"I'm not like the others," Talyn said vaguely. "I'm Talyn. What's your name?"

"Nyahis," the leonine man replied, regarding Talyn with interest. "And how are you unlike the others?"

"What do you want to free them? All of them?" Talyn asked. "And release them safely with water and provisions near human civilization, not just send them out into the desert to die."

Nyahis's ears flattened. "What do I want to lose our good workers, our emergency food supply, our show of strength to other prides, and our trade goods, in a single blow? You don't have anything like that."

"If you didn't already have a light, you'd take one of those," Talyn said. That was a guess, but a good one. Nyahis's thoughts confirmed it as soon as he'd spoken. "You'd take a mage, too."

"You don't have one to offer me," Nyahis said.

"If I did, would you tell all the other prisoners about it?" Talyn asked. "If I handed you a mage - or something worth as much to you as a mage - would you tell them that I was associating with magic-users and trading with devils or would you let me keep that to myself?"

Nyahis laughed aloud at that. "You want to trade me one mage for these prisoners, I won't tell the other humans. You want to go among them pretending to love your gods? I don't care. But I don't *have* any mage who's here but who won't do as I say, who'll kill us in our sleep and sink into the sand or fly away. Lights can be threatened. Mages can't, unless you have another one."

Talyn had an uncomfortable moment of speculating about the leisurely lifestyle of the pride's light, who was also one of Nyahis's wives, but it seemed like the man had been speaking hypothetically. "A mage was just an example. You like magic, you can use magic, if I can get enough magic into your hands you'll trade for the prisoners' freedom."

"You know spells?" Nyahis asked. "But then if I untie your hands so you can teach them, you can disappear." He made a gesture. The Ryganaavlan leonines, as a population, knew a handful of out-of-date wizard spells, but Nyahis's pride in particular didn't have any of them. The knowledge was jealously guarded.

"I know a few spells. Anyway, if I just wanted myself freed I'd be long gone, ropes or no ropes. I want the prisoners out, too, and I want them out without knowing that anything magical was involved, because it would upset them," Talyn said.

"You'd be gone, hm?" Nyahis asked skeptically, eyeing the ropes around Talyn's wrists. "Just like that."

"I doubt this rope's cheap, and I need you in a diplomatic mood, or I'd prove it right now," Talyn said. It occurred to him a second too late that he could probably shapeshift out of the ropes - but he didn't know how that would interact with his autonomic defenses, like stonewall, and if he startled Nyahis he could wind up with a face full of claw marks. Revann had never shapeshifted much, and hadn't looked into it enough to know all those details. "I'm not a mage. I'm something else, something new to this world, and I'm a wizard too." Or he would be when he graduated.

"Prove it," Nyahis dared.

Talyn rolled his eyes and conjured a glob of water, which he floated in front of his lips and drank out of the air until it was gone.

"Real water?" Nyahis asked, interest sharpening. "Or mirage magic?"

"Real water, but I can do 'mirages' too," Talyn said. "I'm not from Ryganaav. I'm from Esmaar. I'd just offer to escort your whole pride there but I'm not sure if they'd want to retroactively punish you for having eaten people. What I can do is go there, get a magic item, and bring it back for you to trade for the prisoners."

Nyahis's ears swiveled forward thoughtfully. "Or you could run away and never come back."

"I could run away and never come back *now*," Talyn said. "I care about the humans. I

could just set them all free without help *now*. I care about them not being terrified. So I want you to let them go. I'm willing to go to Esmaar on a shopping errand for you to get that."

Nyahis's tail was lashing back and forth slowly. "What will you bring us?" he asked.

"How about a waterspout?" Talyn said. "It will conjure water for you whenever you want. You'll never be thirsty again."

"This is a little object you can carry with you?" Nyahis asked. "All that way? It might be lost or stolen. Do you know a spell to make water?"

"Not off the top of my head," Talyn said. "But I could go look one up and come back and teach you for the prisoners."

"A spout," Nyahis said, "and a spell. Hmm." He scratched the nape of his neck through his mane. "But how long will it take you to fetch these things?"

"Depends," Talyn said. "I made a magic transport place close to Pridetaal, but that'll take me almost a day to fly to. If I make one here, I can be there and back in just a few degrees, but I need to borrow some energy from either your pride or the prisoners."

"By all means, help yourself to anything you can take from the prisoners while you are tied up," Nyahis said, smirking.

The string of humans was tied close enough together that Talyn could in fact tap them all without needing to move much. He shrugged, and built a transfer point right under himself, carefully avoiding the visible glass that had happened with the Pridetaal point.

"Now," Talyn said, "remember, I don't want the other prisoners to know I can do magic. They'll stay asleep for a while. But after I get back, I'm going to turn invisible and follow you to make sure you keep your word. You can tell them you ate me or something to explain where I went. And when they're all home safe, I'll give you the stuff and teach you the spell." He switched to mindspeech. <You'll be able to tell that I'll be here anyway, though,> he said.

Nyahis had opened his mouth to speak again, but Talyn transferred back to Esmaar.

There was a transfer point in a shopping center in Paraasilan that one of Rhysel's students had requested. Talyn jumped there, went into the nearest store, and bought a cheap waterspout. Then he went back to the transfer point, jumped to Rhysel's tower, and hunted through his schoolbook for a water-conjuration spell, which he memorized.

Then he turned invisible and jumped back to the leonine camp.

<Here I am,> Talyn sent to Nyahis. <You can reply by thinking at me. No need to talk.>

<Let me see the waterspout,> Nyahis answered.

Talyn checked to make sure that all the humans were asleep, and then let the invisibility illusion drop away from the spout alone as he pulled it out of his pocket and willed it on. A fountain of water splattered into the ground. He draped it in illusion again and stepped back quickly as Nyahis's hand darted out for the object. <You get this and the spell when you've let everyone go home,> Talyn admonished.

<How do I know you won't just leave with it after we've done what you want?> Nyahis wanted to know.

<This is pretty useless to me. I can already make water out of nothing; you saw. And if I wanted a waterspout I could buy another. They're cheap in Esmaar. I'm not going to cheat you.>

Nothing more of moment happened between that and the pride settling down for bed, save Asha, who sat up to guard the camp.

<You'll probably just go out and catch more humans, won't you,> he observed, for lack of anything better to do until he decided to go to sleep.

Asha opened her mouth; he interrupted her, <Just think at me. You don't have to talk

aloud.>

<Can you always read thoughts?> she asked him suspiciously. <Or only thoughts I think at you?>

<I can't help but read thoughts,> he sent cheerfully. <It's sometimes annoying, actually. But that's how I learned your language today.>

<...Oh.>

<You're probably going to just catch more humans,> Talyn prompted.

<They're very easy to catch, lately. We didn't use to deal in them. But as long as they stay easy to catch, they're worth the trouble to take.>

<I'm kind of surprised you even want to ransom them for human money,> Talyn sent.

<The People don't have our own mints. Humans would destroy them; they destroy anything we build. We barter amongst ourselves, often as not, but some humans don't care so much for their gods and will trade with us for coins. Not our pride, much, but the one I was born to did that, and we meet other prides who will be able to use the coins and will trade for them.>

<Don't you destroy stuff humans build?> Talyn asked. <I only ask because you do kidnap and eat them.>

Asha snorted. <We eat them, but we don't *hate* the way they hate us. *Our* gods don't command us to kill and destroy for no purpose. Hunger commands us to kill only so much and no more. After that there can be fighting, for status and space and anger, but not for gods and not to death. Gods can kill anyone they like anyway.>

<What are yours like, then?> Talyn asked.

<Gods don't write books. They don't name priests,> Asha said. <They don't care much about People or anything else. They have their own lives, and sometimes bits of those lives fall on us, like sand shifts if People walk over it.>

<Huh.> It occurred to Talyn that he now knew more about Asha's religious beliefs than he did about Leekath's. He still scrupulously avoided reading his girlfriend's mind about her species' faith, because he was afraid that if he didn't she'd shield all of her thoughts - and so what he knew about what went on in vampire temples could have been scrawled on the back of his hand. In large letters.

<But gods have good ears,> Asha went on. <If enough People thank them for good things or curse them for bad things, they may notice, and maybe they won't care, but maybe they will.>

Talyn yawned, and flew up to a ledge on the mesa to sleep on overnight. He messed with the ledge for comfort and safety - a lip around its edge, sponginess to the rock under himself so he didn't wake up black and blue. He could have gone back home overnight, but he didn't want to be caught off guard when the leonines started letting prisoners go, or eating them, or whatever.

In the morning, Nyahis divided up the non-meat food the pride had around for the humans, distributed water containers too, and pointed all the humans in the direction of the river, which they'd be able to follow to their destinations with careful rationing. The explanation the released prisoners received was that they were too much trouble to feed and the pride didn't want to waste time trying to sell them off.

Talyn was announced to have been eaten overnight by Asha, who supported this story with a toothy grin while shooing the humans into the dawnlight. She claimed that he had tasted awful, and that she expected he'd had enough time to rub off on everyone else.

Talyn watched everyone go - Mekath and Senthel fell into the temporary protection of

an old woman who was headed to the same town and had met their uncle.

"Still there, Talyn?" Nyahis called aloud, when the humans were out of sight - though not out of recapture range, Talyn noted.

"I'm here," Talyn shouted from his ledge. "I'll give you the spout now, but let's wait a couple angles to let them get farther before I teach you the spell. I wouldn't want you running out and capturing them all again, you see, and it's *slightly* harder to remove a spell from your mind than a waterspout from your possession."

He tossed down the device, turning it visible halfway down. "Just want it on, and it'll be on," he instructed. Nyahis caught it, and immediately bestowed water on all of his wives in order of seniority, and then the children based on their recent accomplishments and according status. He watered himself last, and kept the water spout tied to his neck with a twist of leather.

The pride went about its business - though Asha cast occasional glances up at where Talyn's voice had come from - for the first half of the morning, and then Nyahis said, "I'll have that spell now, Talyn!"

True to his word, Talyn flew down, became visible, and patiently walked Nyahis through the gesture and the words. The patriarch didn't want any of his wives or children to learn it without more careful thought, because the wives could be seduced away and the children wouldn't be a part of his pride forever, but he picked it up himself without much trouble. His clawed hands were less dextrous than Talyn's, but Talyn had shared his first tier theory class with two leonine girls and remembered a few things about how the teacher had gone about adapting gesture instructions for them.

"Satisfied?" Talyn asked Nyahis.

"Quite," Nyahis said with a wide, thin smile.

"Grand," Talyn said. He took two steps to his transfer point and blinked home.

Chapter 21: Patching

"Oh, I did it wrong," said Talyn's classmate.

The little boy was a vampire, maybe ten years old, and he'd just checked Talyn's channeling capacity. Talyn had already been through the rigmarole of explaining it in first-tier theory, where they all had their CCs checked and noted in their student files, but in second tier they learned the spell themselves and checked it again as a prelude to learning higher gestures and training away spell-flinch. And Talyn's current CC was absurdly higher than that of anyone else in the room.

"You didn't do it wrong," Talyn said tiredly, but the little boy stood up and stepped on his chair to get teacherly attention.

"Aaral Fenbin, Aaral Fenbin, I've done it wrong but don't know how," he called.

The teacher, a plump human woman, bustled over to where Talyn's desk and the vampire boy's sat. "Show me what you did, Eeine," she instructed the child.

Eeine repeated the spell, frowning in concentration at Talyn, who sighed and watched the string of digits glow in the air again. Aaral Fenbin frowned, and looked between Eeine's hands and the number, till it faded. "Well, that's very puzzling..."

"If you check my file, it'll explain," Talyn said. "That's really my CC. Eeine didn't make a mistake."

Aaral Fenbin blinked several times, but then bustled away to answer another student standing on his chair. Eeine cast the spell one more time, and frowned at the number.

"That's not fair," he said, sitting back down and looking disgruntled. "Mine is supposed to be big."

Talyn cast the same spell to read Eeine's CC. It was 502, strikingly above average for someone without a familiar yet. "Yours is big. Mine's sort of cheating," Talyn said.

"Cheating's not okay," Eeine said sternly.

"They tell you that in Wizarding Ethics?"

"I didn't take that yet," said Eeine. "It's just bad." The little vampire's thoughts were drifting in the direction of moral instruction inside a temple...

Talyn shied away from his classmate's thoughts, reciting a poem Mysha had memorized long ago in his head, but then stopped. He hadn't promised Leekath not to read *other* vampires' thoughts about their religion, had he? But Eeine was already thinking about something else - someone who'd stolen and copied a first-tier assignment he'd done. Finding out more about vampire religion from Eeine would involve more active digging around than Talyn usually preferred when given the choice.

Class ended with supervised practice of the gestures from three hundred through three hundred ninety-nine, which stung everyone there except Talyn. He supposed he'd never have to bother with training away spell-flinch, like a shren, although for different reasons.

Talyn was done for the day, and if he remembered Fenen's schedule correctly, Leekath was too. She might be at Rhysel's tower already, waiting for him. He waited in line for the lift, took it to the pond exit, and transferred. *Next term I'm petitioning for early entry into the teleportation workshop*, he promised himself.

Leekath was in the tower, and not sitting in his room, either; she was on the couch on the first floor sitting with Rhysel's cured-shren nanny. (Talyn didn't know when Kaylo was going to be ready to resume shren curing. He'd ask the next day.) Leekath and Theedy both had one of Rhysel's twin babies in their arms. Talyn couldn't tell the babies apart, yet; he'd learn the

difference between their thoughts when they had any thoughts to speak of and have them down pat by the time they were sophisticated enough to care.

"She's not going to taste very good, if that's what you're thinking," Talyn remarked to Leekath, sitting down next to her.

"Who - the baby? I'm not going to bite a baby," Leekath said with an incredulous laugh. "That wouldn't be safe." <And you're right. She wouldn't taste nearly as good as you do.>

"Why're you holding her?" Talyn asked.

"Babies are nice to hold," Leekath said. "I guess you haven't been around when I've played with Rhysel's kids before? Here, see," she said, offering him whichever twin she had. "They're warm and cuddly."

Talyn took the baby more out of reflex than interest; she wasn't screaming at that exact moment, but that didn't render her fascinating. "I guess."

"Don't you like babies?" Leekath asked, as Theedy got up to put the other twin down for a nap and came back for the one Talyn had. Talyn yielded her gladly. "I thought everyone liked babies."

"Babies are just okay. I like little kids who can talk, like my little sister's age," Talyn said. "But I mean, we can't have any, right? So it doesn't matter."

Leekath looked away. "Well, half-vampires are hard to have and they get sick a lot if you do have them," she said quietly, nodding. She was thinking about her cousin, who, being on her aaihhhi's side of the family, was perfectly nice - but usually too ill to receive visitors or do much of anything.

"And I'm from another world," Talyn said. "On Barashi it's only elves and humans and halfbloods, or trolls and goblins and trogs, who can have kids between species..."

"That didn't stop Rhysel," Leekath pointed out.

"Well, no, but Aar Camlenn's an elf, even if he's not the same kind of elf, and - anyway, it doesn't matter, I'd rather have you than have kids," Talyn said, wrapping his arms around Leekath's neck and pulling her in.

"Shapeshifting doesn't work?" Leekath asked, after a prolonged silence.

"Well - hm." Talyn tilted his head. "Not the kind I know how to do. Maybe there's some advanced kind, that Master Bryn or somebody could teach me, where it would."

"And then we could have vampire babies," she sighed, tucking her head under his chin. "I mean, later. Not now."

"Maybe if I could shapeshift that well I'd be allowed into a vampire temple," he suggested.

"I don't think so," yawned Leekath. "I'm pretty sure you wouldn't count."

Talyn frowned. "If I could have pure vampire kids, I still wouldn't count?"

"I don't think so," she repeated. "I guess I'd have to ask a priest... Dragons can have kids who count as full vampires, if the kids are thudias, and dragons aren't allowed."

"Right." He started stroking her hair, out of habit. "I don't like that. The kids would be off doing... whatever it is... and I wouldn't even know about it."

"It's nothing bad or anything," Leekath said.

"I believe you," he said, although this wasn't completely true - gods who skulked around like that unnerved him - "but I still wouldn't get to be there."

She squirmed closer, pressing her face against his neck. "Well, I guess I could learn to shift halfblood, and we could have halfbloods?"

"You'd have to be one for a long time," Talyn said.

"I guess I might not like it. I don't know how you stand having a heartbeat *all* the time." He laughed softly. She was starting to trance. "Heartbeats aren't that bad."

"Mm," she sighed.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Mmhm."

He paused the motion of his hand, and she opened her mouth, and closed it over the familiar bitemark. She drank, and then let go, and tranced again as he ran his hands through her hair.

Talyn smiled.

Kaylo was ready the next day with a more precise spell set, and a patch for the mistake he'd already made with the copper subject. Talyn went back to the bottom of the world with Kaylo and Rhysel and the copper's boyfriend, replaced the lifelink, and reversed the stone working to restore her usual composition.

The copper ranted at Kaylo, until she was successfully distracted by the possibility of flying; Kaylo then turned his attention to curing the jade, and then Rhysel went and fetched the next shrens on the list. They got through almost forty cures before school started back up on Inen.

Talyn threw more of himself into his classes than he needed to just to pass them. He wanted to advance another tier at the end of the term, and another one at the end of the term after that, and finally be among people remotely close to his equivalent age. He didn't expect to catch up with Leekath, who was diligent and brilliant and a hearer and on track to graduate in less than a year if she didn't slow down. But he wanted to be taught by instructors who weren't accustomed to prepubescent children and didn't start class sessions with sentences like "Good morning, children, now let's settle down and learn".

But when he wasn't studying, maintaining his relationship with Leekath, or bleeding patterns onto shrens to keep them alive through Kaylo's ministrations, he popped into Barashi via circle and looked for books on advanced shapeshifting. If Leekath liked babies, she could have babies; it wasn't like he never wanted to be a father. He didn't know how long it would take to find - or invent - the working they needed, so he thought he might as well get a jump on things.

Interspecies marriages between races that *couldn't* naturally have children were rare on Barashi. Talyn didn't know where to start - he didn't know any famous human/fairy or elf/goblin or whatever pairs who had gone to heroic efforts to find ways to bring children into the world. There were few couples like that to begin with, not all of them wanted children, and the ones who did were steered towards bursting orphanages.

Talyn did *want* to meet Master Bryn one day, but she was rumored to like her privacy outside of the routine magical support she provided to her town. Before barging in on the kama said to know every working there was, he wanted to be able to sincerely claim that he'd looked everywhere else and wasn't just wasting her time.

A week before the end of the winter term, though, Talyn's various pursuits were abruptly derailed.

"Linnip's taking over Ryganaav," Leekath told him, in lieu of greeting. "I thought you'd want to know."

"Linnip? Who's that?" Talyn asked, frowning. "They're taking it over? What?"

"Linnip is this country over on Anaist," Leekath said, helpfully imagining a map.

"Mostly humans in it. They're a developed country and everything... kind of sexist but not in the

same direction as Ryganaav, so the motivation's obvious, I guess. We think - well, aaihhhi thinks - the civil war gave them an in or an excuse or something. We don't have very good news coming in out of Ryganaav and the Linnipese ambassador can't tell us anything about military operations except for really vague press releases..."

"So they just waltzed in and invaded Ryganaav?" Talyn exclaimed. "They can do that? Aren't there laws against it?"

"Nothing Ryganaav signed," Leekath pointed out. "Linnip didn't even have to declare war first for it to be legal. They could just show up."

"You're saying Ryganaav has been sitting there absolutely at the mercy of any country that wanted to snap it up and the only reason it lasted this long is because no one wanted the hassle or the desert it's sitting on?" Talyn said, but it was a rhetorical question. "I've been trying to singlehandedly do something any government that *cared* could have done with fewer people *dying*?"

"I don't think Linnip is trying to modify the Ryganaavlan religion, I think they're hoping to convert the natives to Aleism," Leekath said.

"So they're not killing them all, at least," he muttered.

"I don't think they're killing anyone. They have plenty of magic and except for the leonines Ryganaav doesn't have *any*. They can afford to be gentle. You know, for an invasion," said Leekath.

"For an invasion," Talyn laughed hollowly.

"I'm pretty sure they'll be able to stop the civil war," she said.

"Are they going to preserve any of the culture? It's not all awful," Talyn said, turning away and combing through his curls with his fingers. "They have stories and songs and food and their own dialect and customs that aren't all *awful*, and from what you're saying, what you're thinking, I don't expect Linnip will be very careful about preserving anything from this country they hate so much. Colony. Whatever it is now."

"Contested territory until they declare the invasion finished, and then colony, until they grant it empire status," Leekath said helpfully. "I don't know about their cultural assimilation plans... Aaihhhi had me talk to the Linnipese ambassador for him once, since she doesn't like to talk to male parliamentarians, but she wouldn't tell me much."

"Well." Talyn sighed. "I guess they'll make life safe for Oris. And people like Oris."

"Yes," Leekath agreed. "Maybe if the cultural assimilation goes well, you could even give Oris her light powers back, and she'd like them. In a few years."

"Maybe," said Talyn skeptically. He sat down abruptly, sinking deep into his chair. "Ugh. I don't like this at all. Maybe I'd like it more if I saw it, up close, but.. I guess the border isn't as porous anymore, is it? My transfer points should still work, but are the Linnipese going to be pissed off at me if I show up in their 'contested territory'?"

"I don't know," Leekath said.

"How're they treating the leonines? The ones with a taste for human flesh and prides composed of dominant males and their subordinate wives?" Talyn asked, rolling his eyes skyward. "Are they big fans of *that* culture's little intricacies?"

"I think there are some leonines who live in Linnip. They have precedents for handling the social structures. Maybe not the taste for human flesh part, I'm not sure."

"I don't mean are they going to ration out humans they don't like that much to feed the leonines, I mean are they going to punish them retroactively - they feed it to their kids, even, and they're starving half the time, it's not - but you don't know. Right." He sighed heavily; Leekath

came up to him and sat on his lap.

"Do you want me to find out Linnip's policy on foreigners in their contested territory?" she asked. "They have to have one. Ryganaav never had a lot of tourists, but it had reporters and anthropologists and charity workers who need to know if they're in or out."

"If you can, that'd be good," Talyn said gratefully. "I won't be able to go too long anyway - with school and shrens and research."

"The preserved blood tasted okay, but I do miss *you* when you're gone," Leekath murmured against his neck. "Mm?"

"Go ahead."

She bit.

"Do you want to learn to shapeshift the usual way," Talyn asked Leekath, "or do you want me to just send it to you?"

"The second one," she said. "If I had to never have kids, to have you, I would - but I want to know - and if I can't stand being a halfblood I need to know that now."

Talyn touched her forehead and pushed along the knowledge. "Shapeshifting is tricky," he warned. "You might want to try something like going from this form to your bat form and back via kamai, before you try anything unfamiliar - since you have a familiar other shape."

"That's a good idea," agreed Leekath. She closed her eyes, and blurred, slowly, carefully, into her bat shape, and then back. "I didn't make any mistakes, did I?"

"I didn't see any," Talyn said.

"Okay. Here goes." She shut her eyes again.

The only visible change was a dramatic pink blush flooding over her skin. But she opened her eyes and gasped and clutched at her chest. "I can feel it," she murmured.

"It'll get less noticeable -"

"It's *in* me, beating and beating -"

"Okay," he said, hearing rising panic in her thoughts and hoping she wouldn't do something regrettable, "okay, just shift back, you remember how, just shift back."

The pink bled away. She was chalky-pale again, and took a deep breath. "I don't like that," she whispered.

"Okay," Talyn said again. "You don't have to do it."

She nodded, lip trembling, and then tipped forward to hug him. "I'm sorry," she said.

"It's okay. I don't mind *not* having it when I'm a vampire-bat, so I shouldn't care if I turn into a vampire-humanoid, right?" said Talyn.

"I thought you didn't want vampire kids...?"

"I don't know. I keep going back and forth on it." He closed his eyes and squeezed her. "I don't suppose we could have vampire kids and just raise them outside the temple."

"No."

"Half-vampires aren't supposed to be in the religion, though? Maybe kamai could help one be healthy," Talyn said.

She sat back to meet his eyes. "Do you want to meet my cousin?" she asked.

"And see if I can do something for her? Sure," Talyn said.

"It'd be harder for us than for my uncle and aunt," Leekath warned. "It's harder when the mother's the vampire."

"Kamai can do anything," Talyn said. "I might take a while to find a way, but it can do anything. And we're not going anywhere. If I can help your cousin, that's a good sign."

"I'm sorry I wasn't up to seeing you the last two times you came by," Thiris apologized in a high, scratchy voice. "I get terrible insomnia and my parents won't let anyone near me when I finally do sleep, even if it's in the middle of the day and I promised..."

"It's okay, Thiris," Leekath assured her cousin. Thiris was a weak tan color, with thin black hair and unshining black eyes. She was thin, not in the graceful, angular sense that full vampires were but in the starved bony way a human might be if they ate twice a week. Her ears came to little points. "I'm just glad you're okay today."

<She doesn't taste blood the way we do,> Leekath sent to Talyn. <And her fangs don't work so she has to swallow it. If she asks, you can let her have some if you want. She won't find out anything by the flavor.>

<That won't bother you?> Talyn asked.

<No.>

"Today is a really good day," Thiris said earnestly. "I slept through the whole morning, and I ate lunch."

"Do you not usually eat lunch?" Talyn asked.

"Sometimes I just don't have any appetite, especially for solid foods," Thiris said. "I try anyway, or my parents get so worried, but..." She shrugged. "I don't suppose you have any blood I could drink? It seems best if I get at least a little every week or two, but..."

"Sure," Talyn said. He conjured a rock, shaped it into a cup and a little blade, and nicked his elbow. "No problem." While the line of red rose in the cup, he said, "So, one of the reasons we wanted to visit you was to see if kamai - do you know about kamai?"

"A little. Leekath writes," Thiris said.

"It might be able to help you out with some of your problems," Talyn said. The cup was full; Leekath healed his wound for him and he handed the cup over to Thiris.

Thiris bolted the blood down gratefully, clutching at the cup with shaking hands, and licked her lips when she'd finished. "Thank you," she said fervently. "And - if you think you can do something - you can sure try, but... Well, lights can't. I see one every week just in case, since the last thing I need is an infection -"

"Kamai's different from lightcraft," Talyn assured her.

"What do you do?" Thiris asked, cocking her head. "Put your feet together and conjure a ball of darkness?"

"No," laughed Leekath.

"I just need to touch you," Talyn said, holding out his hand.

Thiris touched his offered arm. She was chilly even though the room was kept hot.

Wild kamai was confused by Thiris. She was a haphazard blend of vampire and human systems - random parts of her lacked useful features such as veins, and were fed by a cross between blood and Leekath's interstitial fluid. She had a shrunken stomach that seemed like it was inclined to give up halfway through digesting anything she swallowed, though it was processing the blood she'd just drunk. Her heart beat, but sluggishly and irregularly. There was a low-level sunburn in the part of her hair and on her eyelids, where she'd neglected to spread suncreening potion. Her lifeforce was weak, and there was a pervasive tiredness to it, like she could only half-sleep without the ability to turn into a bat.

Talyn healed the sunburn, and Thiris made a soft "oh" sound, but he wasn't sure how to address the rest of it. He couldn't shapeshift someone *else*. And if a lifeforce this weak were hit with the drain associated with infusion it might just outright kill her.

After a few ticks of thought, he just reverse-tapped her, pushing life force at her and letting her own body figure out what to do with the spare energy. It wasn't very efficient, but she couldn't tap him the correct way around.

"I feel better," Thiris murmured. "I feel like I got a lot more sleep than I did."

"It won't last," Talyn said. "But until I learn more that's what I can do that I'm sure is safe."

"Thank you," Thiris said.

"You're welcome." He dropped his hand. "Do you want more actual sleep? Kamai can do that. It'd mess with your regular sleep cycle, if -"

"If I had one?" Thiris asked with a small smile. "Yeah. If you don't mind cutting the visit short... yeah. I always want sleep."

She sat down on her bed. Talyn touched her forehead. She slid down and her head hit the pillow.

<You don't know how to fix her,> Leekath sent. <I don't think you could have fixed the ones who died, either.>

<We'll figure something out.>

"Did you find out what Linnip's policy is on foreigners in their contested territory?" Talyn asked. She was thinking about it already, so he knew she had.

<Yes,> Leekath said, planting a kiss on his mouth. <You can go in as long as you don't make any hostile moves or annoy any soldiers - they can eject you at their discretion.>

<I'll do that, then,> he said. <Real quick. I'll go to Egalon, and see how Oris and her family are doing.>

<Okay. Can I have a nibble first?>

<You always can.>

<I still have to ask.>

<Why?> he asked as she brushed her lips across his face, to his ear, down past his jaw to the twin spots on his neck.

<Religious reasons,> she sent reluctantly. Vaguely.

<That's really starting to bother me,> he sent, as numbness spread under her teeth.

<I'm sorry.>

<I'm sorry too. I love you,> Talyn sent.

<I love you,> Leekath's mental voice sighed.

Oris was alive. She'd lost a brother - and another was missing a leg - in the war, but she was alive, she was not being persecuted for being an ex-light, and she was getting along as well as could be expected under the martial law imposed by the Linnipese occupiers. They were obliging her to go to a hastily set up school where a redheaded teacher instructed all the children from Egalon in the Ertydon language and basic Linnipese civics. Oris didn't like being told that magic wasn't evil, and didn't believe it for a second - after all, the gods had delivered *her* from her sin, so anyone who still had magic really did have to be irredeemably evil. But she went to school and conjugated verbs and went home to her family.

Talyn didn't try to talk to Oris, or anyone else in Egalon. He stayed invisible.

He jumped to the transfer point he'd made at the leonine camp to check on them. Nyahis was letting his senior wives talk to the Linnipese, and they were pretending to be in charge of the pride.

He jumped to Pridetaal. It had been transformed. Some team of wizards had gone through rebuilding things, cleaning things. It was sparsely populated, compared to what it had been, but it didn't look so dead.

He flew along the river and found the town Mekath and Senthel had been heading for. Talyn found their uncle, but not the girls. At this he did turn visible and talk to the soldiers occupying the town. Mekath and Senthel had arrived safely, but as orphans, they'd been made wards of the Linnipese Empire, and placed in a school across the sea - their uncle hadn't been judged a fit guardian.

"If he were married, it might have been allowed, but it's just not right for two girls to grow up in a house without an adult female presence," the soldier Talyn talked to explained. He didn't understand the ranks; she was something called an "imap" and that was apparently the lowest ranking a female soldier could have. "It's a very good school. It's sweet of you to be concerned, really. If you like, I can get you donation information for the school - they're a parochial public interest group..."

"No, thanks," Talyn said. "Did they want to go?"

"Oh, they were young girls. They'll get to decide where they want to go when they're sixteen," said the soldier. "If they'd like to live with their uncle for a bit after they reach majority, well, we won't stop them! But the schools we're setting up here don't have the capacity - it's good there are places back home that can take them."

"Right," said Talyn skeptically.

"Do you want that donation information?" she asked.

"I don't suppose I could go visit them?"

"I don't think so... it's a girls' school... They might have visitation days or something, but I don't know."

"No, I don't really want to give them money," Talyn said, turning around. He wondered how long Mekath's personality would last in a Linnipese school. Let alone Senthel's milder one. "Thanks for letting me know."

"No problem," the soldier said cheerfully. "We're trying to conduct this whole thing as gently as possible, and the international community's goodwill is really important to us. I'm glad you have friends here in Ryganaav. Maybe you can come back in a few years and watch the place bloom."

"Maybe," he echoed.

He flew back to Pridetaal as the sun set, and transferred home.

Book 4: Prisoner

Chapter 22: Invading

"Attention, Parliament," said the voice of one of a'vi'Naav's personal assistants. "This is a general notification that the Linnipese Empire has declared war on the nation of Esmaar. Further details are unavailable at this time. A'vi'Naav requests a representative of the Press Committee, a representative of the Committee for Linnipese Relations, and a representative from the Defense Committee to come to her office at once for emergency consult. Security has taken Ambassador Asaria into protective custody and she is not to be permitted off the custodial premises nor harmed. We will continue to issue announcements as more details are forthcoming."

Leekath would have stared at something, but the voice was conveyed, disembodied, from every direction; there was nothing to stare at. "Aaihhhi?" she said quietly.

"Don't worry, dear," said her father, getting up from his desk and patting her shoulder. "We have wards; this is at most a minor inconvenience. Keep doing what you're doing; I need to consult with the rest of the Press Committee."

"Yes, Aaihhhi," she murmured, and she went back to quantifying feedback statements from municipal government pilot programs.

It was an angle before there was another announcement. "Attention, Parliament," said a different one of a'vi'Naav's assistants. "The Linnipese Empire has communicated to us that at first-and-naught tomorrow, Sutaahel the sixth of the year 11253, they will follow through with an unspecified threat to an unspecified civilian target."

They're all civilian targets, Leekath thought. Where else would they hit?

"The complete Defense Committee and the complete Committee for Linnipese Relations are called to a'vi'Naav's main conference room," the announcement continued.

Leekath bent her head over the pilot program feedback, condensing paragraphs into a numerical assessment scale so the relevant committees could make decisions at a glance. Not everyone was on Defense or Linnipese Relations; Aaihhhi wasn't, and he would be back from his Press meeting any tick. Then what, would he carry on with drafting his imports bill? While Linnip had declared *war*?

The wards were good. Leekath knew a few things about the spells, how they were deliberately entangled to be unbreakable and how they kept out everything and how smoothly they responded to their assignee's wills. She was almost a graduated wizard, too, she wasn't just trusting that someone who knew mysterious things had it handled. But that didn't mean Linnip couldn't have come up with something that would pull Esmaar into the world's usual tussles. A new break that could cut through wards like a knife through silk; a new weapon that could saunter right through them; even just enough secret moles and collaborators in Esmaar would let them do some damage.

What Leekath didn't get was why Linnip wanted to be at war with Esmaar. Esmaar was harmless, Esmaar had no military, it was the *only* country without one. And wasn't Linnip still supposed to be busy, colonizing Ryganaav, their shiny new conquest? That had been less than a year previous. Maybe it was a miscommunication after all, an ambassador abruptly snapping or someone misreading bad handwriting.

The Press Committee decided not to say anything to the public. This was on the expectation that Linnip wouldn't really be able to do anything, that there had been some kind of

mistake or they were posturing for some unrelated reason. They thought that an announcement would do more harm than good. Everyone in Parliament was strictly enjoined not to share the information.

After Leekath was done with work, she hugged her Aaihhhi goodbye, nodded solemnly when he told her not to worry, and teleported to Rhysel's tower, directly into Talyn's room.

"Let's go visit your family," she said without preamble.

"Huh?" Talyn said.

"Tonight. They won't mind if we show up unannounced, will they? Or, if they will, I know, doesn't Rhysel tutor a pack of wolfriders in kamai on the weekends, ones who don't want to come down and enroll? Let's go hang out with her," Leekath said.

"What's gotten into you?" Talyn said. "I mean, sure, they won't mind, my folks or Rhysel either, but why do you want to go all of a sudden?"

"Can we go? Please say we can go," Leekath said.

"Well, I mean, you can go wherever you want, I bet my family would let you stay at their place overnight even if I weren't along, Cyranna loves you, but I've been practicing spells -"

"So we'll go to Rhysel instead of your parents, wizardry will work just fine in wolfrider territory," Leekath said, clapping her hands smartly.

"Would you stop *shielding*, I'm so confused -"

"I can't," she said. "Please let's just go. Please, Talyn."

"*Why?*"

"I can't. Please. I can tell you tomorrow probably. I'm going, please come with me," Leekath said. She'd never been to the wolfrider territories, but one of the wolfrider students had to have made a transfer point; she'd get a signature and use that.

"Did something happen at work -"

It was a safe guess; during school breaks she was virtually always at work. But she couldn't *say*. Was Aaihhhi at home now, trying to convince his husband and daughter to take a sudden vacation in Rannde and look at old temples? One that Aaihhhi himself wouldn't attend because he couldn't leave Parliament at such an important time. Khi, thank God, was already in Barashi studying foreign dances. "I know, we could go visit my brother," she said, clapping her hands again. "I know there's a bed in his room there just because all the rooms have them, you could take that, and I can share his sleeping bar, he won't care, we usually all sleep on the same bar at home."

"What has got you so keen to get out of here?" Talyn asked.

"I can't say. Please trust me." Why wouldn't he just...?

"This isn't about your religion, is it? Because you've established repeatedly that it has nothing to do with me," said Talyn.

"It's not that. I promise," Leekath said. "Do you want me to *beg* you? Do I have to *threaten* you to get you to come? Do I have to leave by myself and hope you get curious enough that you follow me just to ask again and again?"

"I'll come, I'll come," grumbled Talyn. "Which do you want to visit, my folks or your brother or Rhysel?"

"I don't care." When he didn't manifest a preference either, she said, "Khi."

"If they run a public dance lesson while we're there maybe we can grab Cyranna. Maybe Erryl too," said Talyn, getting to his feet and holding out his hand for Leekath's hand.

She grabbed her suncloak from where she'd left it under Talyn's bed, and teleported them both to the circle, loose-limbed with relief. "Sure," she said. "They're so cute when they

dance."

It was morning in Barashi, and Khi was in the middle of a lesson, but he waved them along agreeably when Leekath mindspoke a quick question about whether they could stay with him in his room. Leekath and Talyn amused themselves by wandering the rest of the artists' commune and looking at paintings and glass and impractical furniture. Leekath thought that one object intended to be a hatrack would actually make a nice perch, but it cost a staggering amount and when she tried it out *as* a perch, it wobbled.

Leekath was up fretting until Barashin nightfall, though Talyn crashed after they'd toured much of the commune. Khi didn't turn up to his room, and this kept Leekath up with more worry still (perhaps Khi had run back to Esmaar for - something? Without telling her?)

But then Talyn woke up, muttered a remark about how he hated sleeping near people like Khi and his girlfriend when they couldn't shield, and rolled over to go back to sleep. Leekath was only kept up another few degrees wondering why Khi hadn't yet told their family that he, too, was dating a non-vampire. She couldn't imagine that Fheel would take it much better from him than from her, though Khi had always been more resistant to their fheel's requirements than Leekath.

When Leekath finally awoke, she was sure it was later than first-and-naught on Elcenia. She wasn't typically awake that early anyway. But she didn't have a clue what time it *was*, and couldn't cast the spell that would check. At least she wasn't prone to oversleeping and likely wasn't late for work.

Talyn was awake, lounging in bed. Leekath fluttered down from the perch and shifted.

"Can we go back yet?" Talyn asked.

She wasn't sure; an "unspecified attack" might take any amount of time. It might still be ongoing. It might not have happened at all.

"I shouldn't be late for work," she said in agreement.

"Can you tell me what's going on yet?"

"No. Not yet."

"Soon?"

"Soon," she said.

They didn't say goodbye to Khi, as Talyn reported that he was sleeping in the girlfriend's room, but Leekath penned him a quick note before they went.

They transferred to the circle, and found it mobbed.

Based on the clothes and the proportion of the crowd who were vampires, halflings, and other non-Barashin species, most of the traffic was from Esmaar to Aristan.

At least whatever it was hadn't closed or destroyed the circle.

Leekath and Talyn had some trouble getting through the crowd in the opposite direction, but managed by taking to the air.

"I suppose you don't want me to listen to any of these people either," Talyn asked, looking at Leekath strangely.

"If they know, you can too," she said. "But I don't know *what* they know, so I can't just tell you instead."

Talyn nodded slowly.

They reached the circle, flashed their tickets, and went through.

<Leekath, everyone's thinking ->

<I'll find out at work,> she said. <I'd rather not go in confused by more rumors than I need to hear. Is the consensus that it's safe here? What about Daasen?>

<Yes.>

<I'm going to Parliament, then, and I'll see you this evening,> she promised with a kiss, and she recast her suncreening spell and then teleported.

She landed directly in her little corner of her aaihhhi's staff offices, but out the window, she could see that the place was thronged, and the crowd was testing the ward. Only some of them had press clips attached to their ears. She didn't spot anyone carrying a legible sign, though. Two of her co-workers hadn't come in. Aaihhhi was locked up in his office, levitating a communication crystal by his ear and shuffling papers frantically.

On her desk was an internal release, hastily written by Aaral Sathal or someone in her office; if Leekath remembered right she was in both Defense and Linnipese Affairs.

For Members of Parliament and political staff only, read the release, a summary of the events of Sutaahel 6, first-and-naught, Aabalan, Esmaar.

Leekath couldn't immediately call to mind where Aabalan was; she touched her municipal index and it flipped through itself to the relevant entry. It was apparently a tiny little town in the middle of the Iv Hills whose only feature of note was a pediatric psychiatric facility. It made no sense as a target of an attack - not unless the Linnipese were trying to be demoralizing and had gone after the hospital - those children...

Leekath looked back at the release. *The manner of attack is yet unknown, but it has the apparent sole effect of killing (without visible damage) all living things (including residents, pets, plants, livestock, and wildlife) within a half-mile radius of Aabalan Town Center. The nearby psychiatric facility and some remoter families technically resident of Aabalan were not affected by the attack and there are no apparent ill effects to any living things beyond the described radius.*

The kids in the hospital were okay. But not the ones who'd lived in town, apparently.

Preliminary death toll subject to possible mis-estimate is 442 deaths total, 84 of legal minors. Outskirts of town and pediatric facility claim 321 survivors, 140 of legal minors, within Aabalan's borders. The Empire of Linnip has confirmed responsibility for the attack and has asked the surrender of the nation of Esmaar. The Empire has announced its willingness to negotiate terms over a period not to exceed three weeks, after which it has announced its intent to repeat the demonstration of the unknown attack type unless surrender has been tendered.

The Aabalan wards had been centrally raised at the time of the attack, along with the wards of the rest of the nation. They exhibited no effect.

Press Committee, Defense Committee, and Committee of Linnipese Affairs members will receive separate notifications regarding meetings, assignments, and public statements. The Committee of International Community Membership is asked to produce two representatives to participate in same. Members of none of the above committees are strictly enjoined not to discuss the events of Aabalan elsewhere until and unless the Press Committee issues a release for general dispersal.

The following should continue without adjustment excepting that regarding Member of Parliament availability: work of priority 1-3 excepting that relating to the Empire of Linnip; purely internal Parliamentary matters; municipal work in category Aan. Other work should be stalled until such time as another release is issued.

Verbatim copies of the Empire of Linnip's statements (in Ertidon and in their endorsed Leraal translations) are available to Members of Parliament but not to their staffs at this time.

Leekath re-read the release. She shuffled through her inbox for anything of priority 1, 2, or 3, internal Parliamentary matters, and municipal work stamped "Aan". She found some of the latter and poked along through it, feeling very small in her chair.

No new assignments appeared on her desk for the rest of the day. No new releases appeared. She managed to stretch out her municipal work until quitting time.

Aaihhhi was still off at a Press Committee meeting, figuring out what to tell the population. Leekath thought she could probably get away with leaving before him. Likely he wasn't going to be out until the next day.

She didn't want to go to her family's home. She didn't want to go to Talyn, who'd expect her to be able to tell him all about it and wouldn't really understand if she couldn't, for all that she trusted him not to break through her mental shields.

Leekath teleported to her empty dorm room at school, which usually stood unused during breaks, and hung from her bar to sleep.

At work the next day, there was another release - a copy of the one that had been sent to newspapers and read aloud to the crowd around Parliament.

From the desk of a'vi'Naav:

By now, most of you have heard of the tragic attack on Aabalan. Our final count of the victims indicates that 441 people lost their lives; the complete list has been furnished to the press. The survivors are alive and healthy, but traumatized along with the rest of the nation. The weapon that Linnip has devised, whatever it may be, kills instantly within a precise sphere. One family home was on the border of the radius of the assault and only those on the near side of the house were killed.

Aabalan's wards were up. All of our wards were up; some of you may have noticed this if you tried to visit another city. No one has declared war against Esmaar since well before our system of defense was put into place, but we did not carelessly assume that were being lied to when we received the threat, and Linnip did not operate under the expectation that our protections were a bluff. They have created something we cannot identify and against which the spells our nation has depended upon are useless.

Esmaar, we have no army. We have no better wards for you than the ones that you already have. We have no great economic power that we can use to attack Linnip's livelihood. We have not cultivated warlike allies who owe us debts that we can call in at the currency of their populations' lives.

Linnip has given us three weeks to negotiate the terms of our surrender.

During those three weeks, our emigration policy remains as open as ever.

We will continue to update you as negotiations progress.

I, a'vi'Naav Letsaanlen Val, take full responsibility for the treatment of this disaster by the Parliament over which I preside, and invite the population of Esmaar to remove me from office if you judge that warranted.

And then there was a page of her sincerest apologies. And an invitation for feedback to pour in regarding how the negotiations ought to proceed, which someone like Leekath would skim and quantify and submit to the members of parliament.

Leekath's inbox filled up with letters. She handled them mechanically, making a template of common requests to tally up each one. *Wants protection of men's rights. Objects to prospect of state religion. Wants Leraal to stay official language. Objects to prospect of martial law. Wants to maintain clear border with Ryganaav. Wants corporal punishment to remain*

illegal. Objects to possible installation of noble rule over regions/municipalities...

She emptied her inbox at the end of the day - the clerical workers who directed incoming mail knew when she was scheduled to go home - and added one solitary tick mark in each category for herself, then turned it in.

She went to Talyn's room.

He was there, pacing.

"Do I know all the relevant stuff?" he asked.

"If you've been reading the news," Leekath said. "Yeah."

"The feedback office spat back my letter stamped 'inadmissible' in blue letters."

"You're not a citizen," she said. "We can't count you."

"I live here."

"We still can't count you. I could expedite a citizenship application if you want to get a letter in tomorrow afternoon, but this probably isn't a great time to get in on being Esmaarlan," she murmured, sitting on the edge of his bed.

"No. Let's move," Talyn said. "You're practically done with being a wizard; transfer to someplace in Saraan or maybe a vampire-language Ranndean university and pass your tier tests and then we can set up someplace safe. I mean, I'll still run around getting into trouble, but you _"

Leekath shook her head.

"Huh?"

"Not now," she said. "Maybe later, I don't think my aaihhhi's likely to keep his job under a Linnipese rule, but not now."

"Does Parliament have some plan that a'vi'Naav didn't mention to fight back and get the Linnipese out?" Talyn asked hopefully.

"If they did, I couldn't tell you," she said.

"Right," said Talyn, smiling slowly.

"You can move if you want," Leekath said. "I can teleport. I can still visit you lots. But I don't want to leave here unless it really does get really bad. They didn't even ban emigration in *Ryganaav* when they took over - we were still getting people who preferred what they knew about Esmaar to what they were getting from Linnip. I don't think I'll wind up trapped and I don't think they'll get to the point of attacking another place. I want to stick it out."

Talyn chewed his lip. "Promise me you'll duck out again if there's no surrender, no surprise counterattack, and no third option I haven't thought of by the three week mark."

"I promise. I'm not going to stand in the way of one of those... things," Leekath said.

"Okay." He sighed. "I thought you were just in politics for your aaihhhi, but..."

"Only mostly," Leekath said.

Esmaar negotiated the terms of surrender.

Linnip wasn't giving them any options *other* than martial law or the installation of Linnipese nobility. No one had any clever third options to compromise with, so the plan was the Linnipese army would spread itself around Esmaar like cheese on bread and handle initial unrest, and nobles would move in a few years later.

The Linnipese would tolerate Esmaar's religious plurality and large nonreligious population. It technically had freedom of religion within its own borders, but heavily endorsed the state religion, Aleism. It was agreed that this wouldn't be pushed on a state level, although of course there would be the usual missionaries, in greater numbers.

Men's rights took longer to hash out than any of the other issues. Ultimately it was determined that Parliament's female members (minus a'vi'Naav, ousted as being too symbolic) could remain to advise the occupiers on governance of Esmaar. A handful of male members who held particularly important mixed skillsets, while required to resign, were allowed to prematurely promote female aides to take their places instead of dissolving their offices entirely. Thiies Hhirheek did not qualify for this group. Linnip also demanded that only women be allowed to head the nation's few institutional schools. The Empire agreed, however, that men could go on occupying other positions of authority - for the time being.

The remaining skeletal and unisex Parliament would have to unanimously oppose any amendment to the original terms in order to stop it. That was the only non-advisory power they could retain.

Leekath thought about the one half-Linnipese practicing Aleist who'd made it to high Esmaarlan office and winced.

Leraal remained the official language of the Esmaarlan colony. The border between it and the Ryganaavlan colony would remain in its current form, geographically speaking, although of course politically both were part of the same Empire. Corporal punishment was to remain unlawful within the region, although other amendments that Linnip demanded in the area of family law meant that the penalties for breaking that regulation were sharply scaled back.

The relatives of all of the deceased at Aabalan were given large monetary compensation packages out of the Empire's coffers.

Leekath was presented with apologetic dismissal papers, as was her aaihhhi. He went home in tears. She went to her dorm room, numb and quiet.

An Address to the Population of the Esmaarlan Colony.

Hello, new Empire subjects. I am Ensiah Lasita-rimei, interim governor of Esmaar. I want to assure you that despite the unfortunate way in which we were obliged to begin the takeover, we absolutely intend that this be a decently conducted occupation. Our own history contains a period of time spent as a colony, too, and it was not well handled. If we can possibly, through the expenditure of any amount of our effort and dedication, proceed without a single additional casualty - the way we have in Ryganaav - we will do so. Complaints about the conduct of any Linnipese officer or Empire employee will be taken with the utmost seriousness and can be submitted at the military installation nearest you.

I wish to make a public apology to the families of the residents of Aabalan. Unfortunately, there was no way to demonstrate our seriousness without loss of life; only inhabited parts of Esmaar are warded. We chose the least densely populated target that we could, and have compensated the survivors as best we can. The Five Candle Convent nuns have also donated their personal time to ensure places for each of the dead in Sennah's embrace; I'm told not many Esmaarlanik will understand the ritual, but suffice it to say that we as a people acknowledge, honor, and regret the sacrifice of Aabalan.

We hope to leave your day-to-day lives as unaffected as possible while still integrating you into our Empire. You will begin as commoner subjects, but offices granting full Empire citizenship are opening already, and the requirements are modest; even nobility, typically a status obtained by birth or marriage, isn't out of reach forever.

Please do note that while we mean you no harm and do not want to impose unduly on you, any attack on, noncompliance with, or sabotage of our occupying forces is a crime and will be treated as such. Additionally, while for the most part the Linnipese Empire has laws

regarding the freedom of speech similar to what you are accustomed to, defamation in press or public statement of our royal family and royal line is prohibited. Other adjustments to the local laws can be viewed at your local police office; Esmaarlan-native police remain on duty under our supervision.

Emigration remains unrestricted. Residents of Esmaar who choose to depart the colony may still do so.

Our offices and installations are interested in hiring, particularly native speakers of Leraal with some competence in the Ertydon language. Additionally, there are many opportunities for anyone who would like to help our Empire with the continuing development of the Ryganaavlan colony.

Questions, comments, and complaints can be addressed to your local military installation or to my office.

Thank you all for your time and cooperation.

Chapter 23: Colluding

Talyn contemplated assassination.

Unlike his home country of Restron, governed by elected councils with no single controller or figurehead, the Empire of Linnip had a corresponding Empress who wielded actual power. She had to be behind the attack on Ryganaav, which he'd grudgingly refrained from doing anything about. And she had to be behind the attack on Esmaar.

"Is that how wars are normally conducted on this planet?" he asked Leekath. "If this were Barashi every civilized country on the planet would be after Linnip's blood now. You can't just kill hundreds of civilians. That's a war crime. Why isn't anyone after Linnip for war crimes?"

"They didn't commit any war crimes. They'd declared war in advance, we didn't take the chance to parley because we thought they were bluffing, and we didn't present them a military target," Leekath said tiredly.

"So they can just slaughter most of a random town? *Because* Esmaar doesn't have a military?" Talyn exclaimed in outrage.

Leekath switched to propping her head up with her other hand. "It's more complicated than that, but basically, yeah. Otherwise anybody could disband their military and save a lot of money and expect everybody else to retaliate against any attackers so they'd still be protected, and meanwhile do *anything* nonmilitary they wanted. We did disband our army because we thought our wards would work - they did work, for hundreds of years. But when they didn't that's not a war crime on Linnip's part and nobody else is going to play police."

"This is the second country they've invaded in less than a year," Talyn said. "Isn't anyone else *nervous*?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"What's to stop them going after Saraan next, or Mekand, or their ancestral enemy Ertido -"

"All those countries *do* have armies," Leekath said. "Ryganaav was an easy target. So were we, once they invented that... thing they did to Aabalan. You saw how easy a target that made us. Nobody else is so easy. Maybe Erubia, since they don't have wizards. They've got a few mages though, not many since they can't tell who can be one but they have some accidental manifestations. And those could put up a fight."

"Esmaar's full of wizards! And mages and lights and sorcerers and witches! And *kyma* now, too!"

"We're not *warriors* -"

"Esmaar contains *Keo*," said Talyn.

Leekath coughed. She had this one memorized; she expected half the school to ask her when classes started up again. "Keopyga is a citizen of Esmaar, and Esmaar does not require military service of its citizens. She is not employed by the Esmaarlan government and is not beholden to it more than a typical resident. She is not a combat asset, a soldier, or a weapon. She is a resident."

Talyn stared at her.

"Someone did ask," Leekath said. "But we expected her to say no and she did say no. She lives here *because* she thought we'd never even want to ask."

"Is everyone from Esmaar this *passive*?" Talyn cried.

Leekath looked up at him from dark eyes. "It never bothered you before we were attacked."

"I'll take that as a yes," he said disgustedly.

Leekath looked away. "A regular war would've killed more people than the Aabalan attack, anyway -"

"Not civilians, not *kids*, maybe not as many innocent *Esmaarlanik*."

"You want to know how wars happen on Elcenia, take Recent History of Warfare for winter term, there's still time to sign up," Leekath said. "They can kill *a lot* of people. Including kids. And on all sides. Besides, if we threw together an army it'd be made of people who now are civilians. That wouldn't make it *magically less sad* if they died."

"At least I'm still allowed to go to school," Talyn snorted, "even though I've committed the deadly Aleist sin of keeping my genitals on the outside."

"I've been reading up on Linnip and I think it's only their public schools that don't take boys. Private schools are allowed if they want. Esmaar doesn't *have* public schools, so nothing should change about that. Except maybe teachers, later. And Keo and Aar Inular have to switch jobs on paper."

"Doesn't that *bother* you?"

"About Keo and Aar Inular in particular? No... it doesn't really matter, for them, does it?"

"In general!"

"Yes, of course it does -"

"Because you don't seem very bothered!" Talyn shouted.

"My aaihhhi was fired, he's in absolute hysterics, you think I don't *care*?" exclaimed Leekath.

"You're talking about how it doesn't matter that they're making Aar Inular step down as headmaster!"

"It doesn't, because he and Keo were already running everything jointly anyway and it doesn't matter whose name is down on the paperwork. But it'd matter in any *other* case!"

"It's the principle of it!"

"Sorry, I thought I was talking to the guy who gave a five-year-old back to her Ryganaavlan parents expecting her to grow up to be *sold*!"

"I had every intention of figuring out how to fix that country -"

"And instead you started a civil war and got *way more than four hundred and forty-one people killed*! And it took *Linnip* to stop it!"

Talyn turned away from her. "Just - why don't you understand? You should understand."

"What don't I understand?" she challenged.

"That Linnip is *bad*, that they're obviously trying to take over the world."

"You only like bad countries that want to take over the world when they're incompetent and favor *your* gender? If you went and lived undercover in Linnip for a week you don't think you'd come home saying *they're not evil, Leekath, it's just that stupid religion*?"

"What do you want me to do, dictate a new Eialei to the whoever's-in-charge-of-Aleism?" snapped Talyn.

"No! I want you to calm down!" Leekath shrieked.

"It's not my country that got conquered, why do I need to calm down instead of you needing to *freak out*?"

"Because there's nothing we can *do*," she said, breathing as though she'd been running for a long time. "There's nothing we can do about it at all."

"That's not true," said Talyn.

"This isn't like Ryganaav where you could run around doing whatever you wanted as long as you didn't run into a leonine who happened to be a mage," Leekath said. "Linnip is a developed country full of soldiers and all kinds of magic-users. Rhysel even helped them set up a kamai program in Peiza, I don't know if you were around then, you might have been in Ryganaav..."

Talyn spun around to stare at Leekath. "Rhysel let kyma teach in Linnip?"

"There and in Tava and Reverni and Rannde and Nirlan and Ertydo and Corenta and Petar, yes."

"But there's a general order out to all the Barashin kyma that they can't teach Elcenians without Rhysel's say-so. She could shut down Linnip's kamai program."

"I guess, but I don't think she has," Leekath said.

"She *should*." Talyn spun around and marched down the stairs.

"I'm not planning to shut down the University of Peiza's kamai program," Rhysel said.

Talyn opened his mouth.

"Yet," Rhysel said.

He closed it.

"That's the best way I have to get the attention of people in power in Linnip, and I can only use it once, maybe twice," said Rhysel. "It would also mostly affect students, not people who had anything to do with the invasion; I'm sure the Linnipese army is interested in kyma but they don't have any trained up to the point of usefulness yet. It's better to hold in reserve."

"Hold in reserve while you do what?" Talyn asked.

"Can you keep a secret?" Rhysel asked, smiling.

"Yes."

"Want to join my little rebellion?"

"Yes," Talyn said.

"Great. Is Leekath around? I'd like her in on it too," Rhysel said.

Talyn made a face. "I'll ask, but I'm not sure she'll go for it."

"Why not?" Rhysel asked.

"She seems to think I'm overreacting to her country being taken over," he said, rolling his eyes.

"That doesn't mean she wouldn't like a chance to do something about it," Rhysel said.

"Anyway, I think we can trust her not to report us to the authorities even if she doesn't want to help."

Talyn supposed he'd trust her that far; Leekath didn't seem to be pro-Empire so much as vaguely defeated. "I'll ask," he said, and he went back up the stairs.

"What's she going to *do*, exactly?" Leekath wanted to know first.

"Don't know, she was shielding. You are too, why? She does it all the time but not you..."

"I don't like it when you read me when you're angry," she said. "I'll go down and ask, I guess."

Talyn wanted to ask her what she meant by that - what did he do when he was angry that made her want him out of her mind? - but he put it aside for later and followed Leekath downstairs to speak to Rhysel.

"I don't know yet," Rhysel said frankly, when Leekath asked her what the plan was. "I'll

depend on whose talents I can draw on and what Linnip does. Aar Camlenn doesn't want me to do anything in person besides planning sorts of things, because I'm pregnant -"

"Again?" Talyn asked.

"The twins were born a year ago," Rhysel said. "I don't think it's *terribly* soon. I'm also a little concerned about how to keep a rebellion quiet. I trust you both, and everyone else I hope to ask, and of course Aar Camlenn, but if Linnipese authorities can just walk around with lie-detection spells on at all times..."

"They can have the spells on," Leekath said, "but Linnip has really strong personal privacy laws, and they apply to subjects, not just citizens. They need a lot of evidence to scry inside a private residence, or oblige you to answer even a basic question. If we all just say 'I claim my Sixteenth Resolution rights' whenever a Linnipese officer asks us anything they'll think we're annoying but they won't be able to find out anything else."

"That's excellent," said Rhysel, "assuming they obey the Sixteenth Resolution."

"They have a good record," Leekath said. "I think there were two violations all last year and both cops who created them were fired."

"Are me and Rhysel subjects?" Talyn asked. "Since we're not Esmaarlan?"

"Rhysel got her citizenship, so she is," Leekath said. "I'm not sure about you. You might be a guest of the empire or something instead."

"Can you find that out for us, Leekath?" Rhysel asked.

"Okay."

"I'll see if my brother-in-law who works for a newspaper can make it public knowledge that the Sixteenth Resolution is in operation," Rhysel said. "Don't want to stick out for using it. And I need to ask Korulen, and Keo -"

"I don't think Keo will help," Leekath said softly.

"I'm going to ask her anyway," Rhysel said. "And some other folks. Talyn, would you ask Kaylo for me? I think you get along with him better than I do."

"All right," Talyn said.

"And if either of you think of anyone else who might like to be involved, let me know," said Rhysel.

"Okay," Leekath said. "What are you going to name your baby?"

Rhysel glanced at Talyn. "Reven," she said.

Talyn swallowed. "That's a good name," he said.

"I think so too," Rhysel said.

"Do you happen to know if you and I count as subjects or as guests?" Talyn asked Kaylo.

"No idea about you. I got Esmaarlan citizenship," said Kaylo.

"Why?" Talyn asked.

"Because it made me ineligible for the foreign student scholarship my aunt made me apply for," Kaylo said.

"Uh."

"Have I mentioned I don't like my aunt?"

"Yes."

"I'm sure this library has some book on Linnipese law. I don't know why, but I'm not going to complain about their policies on obscure books when I was able to find a copy of *Tenth Millennium Superstitions in Eastern Anaist* on my first try."

"Why did you need *that*?" Talyn asked.

"It's a long story."

Talyn got up and hunted through the stacks for a book on Linnipese law. When he'd laid hands on a plausible one he plunked it down near Kaylo. <Need a word about something private,> he said. Talyn flipped to the table of contents and found an item marked *Nobility, Citizens, Subjects, Guests, Opponents, Outsiders, Convicts, and Other Statuses*.

<What?> Kaylo asked, looking every bit as absorbed in his book of superstitions as before.

Talyn turned pages slowly. <What do you think of Linnip?>

<They did some good in Ryganaav, massacred some folks in Aabalan, and are pretty sexist so I'll probably move when I'm out of school. They'd be more inconvenient to deal with if my legal guardian weren't female. Why?>

<So you don't approve of them taking over Esmaar?>

<Nah, but the odds of me getting to age two millennia and change without ever living in a country while it's conquered were always negligible, and this one wasn't that bad. My dad used to live in Egeria, before the collapse, and he had so many stories about the revolution. It's something that he got out alive. Most wars have been way messier than this.>

<That's kind of... trivializing.>

<You're going to live for centuries, were you expecting they'd all be peaceful ones?>

<I hadn't actually thought about it,> Talyn confessed. <But even if they're not that doesn't mean I should treat it as routine.>

<Fair enough. Why is this private? I don't think we're defaming the royal family.>

<I may start at any moment.>

Kaylo sent the mental equivalent of a shrug. <Can't scare me.>

<So are you planning to make it to two millennia and change without ever participating in a rebellion?>

<I was sort of hoping to spend most of my time on research. Are you going to do something stupid? Linnip isn't like ->

<Like Ryganaav, they're a developed country, I know,> Talyn said.

<Are you going to do something stupid?> Kaylo asked. <Or do you just want me to do something weird like figure out how to de-power a light?>

<I don't know yet what I want you to do. I want to know if you're available for me to want things from.>

<I don't plan on moving *now*. And I'm not going to inform on you to the Linnipese.>

<So if I want something it's safe and possible to ask, is that the idea?>

<Yep. Provided it's interesting enough to be worth my time.>

<Good to know.>

Rhysel wanted to build a citadel.

"We should have a strongly protected base of operations that isn't someone's personal residence," she said. "Narax is willing to cast wards of all sorts on it - but we still don't know what happened to Aabalan or how to stop it, so we'll also have to *hide* the place."

"Hide it where?" Talyn asked.

"Did you find out if you count as a subject?" Rhysel asked. "Or if the Sixteenth Resolution applies to 'guests'? My brother-in-law is going to run an article on all twenty-two Resolutions, by the way, so we shouldn't stand out overmuch by claiming the Sixteenth

regularly."

"I count as a subject as long as I live here," Talyn said, disgruntled. The Resolutions didn't apply to mere guests who fell under any suspicion, unless they had diplomatic immunity, which Talyn did not. So it was technically good that the Empire counted him as being one of theirs. That didn't mean it didn't rankle.

"That's good," Rhysel said, ignoring his discomfort either politely or obliviously. "So it'll be safe for you to help me build the citadel."

"Where will you put it?"

"Deep under wolfrider territory. A random spot, miles down," Rhysel said. "I think that should be obscure and inaccessible enough. If you don't mind, I'm not going to tell anyone except Aar Camlenn where it is. We're going to fill up a power box and make a transfer point in a bubble underground, and you and everyone else can come in that way to finish the citadel without knowing more about the location."

"Makes sense to me," said Talyn. "How are we designing it?"

"I'm getting Eryn's help on that," said Rhysel. "She's better at designing things in general, even though she doesn't have the skills to help us with the actual building. You can talk to her if you want input on it."

Talyn didn't, really, he'd only been curious. "Do you want me to help build it?"

"If you don't mind. It's going to be a little bigger than my tower."

"I don't mind," said Talyn.

After Eryn's vision of the tower had been carved out of the ground - three wide floors of dormitories and storerooms and conference chambers and pointless halls better suited for revolutions ten times more formal - Narax came in to cast spells.

Talyn watched the dragon wizard at work, interested in the advanced magic. He wasn't near being as good a wizard as he was a kama, and probably never would be - there was no innate-equivalent for wizards, and if there had been, he wouldn't be one. But he liked it anyway.

"What was that one?" Talyn asked between spells.

"Another anti-scrying ward. There's six on my list," Narax said. "They won't interfere with each other, so it can't hurt to be redundant."

"What's that?" Talyn asked, a few spells later.

"Anti-teleportation, one-way. We can teleport out of the citadel, but no one can teleport in, except into a little alcove outside all of the barrier-to-entry spells. And that alcove is warded against teleporting *away*. If you teleport in there and you aren't keyed to all the entry barriers, you're stuck till someone keyed to the wards lets you out. When I get to spell number thirty-one you won't even be able to dig in or out. Not even if you're an earth mage - one of those can move around the rock and earth no matter what I do, but can't move him or herself past a ward more than anyone else can."

"What if a smart earth mage goes after us," Talyn said, "and moves the entire citadel by cutting out the rock around it so it falls?"

"If the citadel is *destroyed*, the wards break, but it's still retroactively covered by the anti-scries against investigations into the past," said Narax. "If it's just moved, most of them will move with it as long as it's intact. I'd have to recast a couple of things, including the anti-teleportation part."

"Is there a precaution like the teleportation one about using the transfer point?" asked Talyn.

"No anti-transferring wards exist," Narax said. "At least so far. I wouldn't know where to start on one; I'm not a kama."

"Maybe I'll ask Kaylo," Talyn said.

"Sure," Narax said. "And before you ask, this..." He cast another spell. "Is an anti-gap defense."

"I've never heard of that," Talyn said.

"If someone were ridiculously determined to find this place, they could just scry at every piece of the world one by one, maybe with a large team dividing up the work, and eventually find all the places they couldn't see, and then go in and check them out in person. But since this particular part of the underground was basically featureless before you and Rhysel did your architecture, I can just make it look like the next bit of rock to the left."

"Doesn't that not make sense with the anti-scries?"

"It supersedes two of them. Anti-gaps are easy to get around if you know that's what you're dealing with, and then we'll depend on the basic anti-scries to keep the details invisible. The others are against things like event scrying and person scrying which don't interact with the kind of manual search the anti-gap is for."

"This is really complicated," objected Talyn.

"Yep," said Narax, cheerful, and Talyn didn't ask what the next spell was for.

After Narax left, Talyn made his own circuit through the citadel, alone, adding things that his ostensible Master didn't know he knew. And wouldn't be able to find, so he wouldn't have to deal with any awkward questions.

Layered curses on doors, which would strike anyone who wandered the citadel with ill intent. A trap in the transfer point, which would attack anyone who didn't know where they were going when they went, if they'd just pulled the signature from a rebel's mind. Little decorative flourishes here and there, not superseding Eryn's aesthetic judgments but adding his own touch. He didn't live in the citadel, yet, but it was set up to allow habitation.

And in a solid piece of rock, next to the stairwell and not used in the design but contained within all of Narax's wards, Talyn made a little compartment. He sealed it back up, with no seam or door or anything to suggest that it was there. It would have to be opened by kamai if he wanted it open again.

He had nothing to put in it, yet, but he might want it later.

When Talyn transferred back to Rhysel's tower, Rhysel was sitting dejectedly at the kitchen table, with her husband beside her holding onto her hand.

"What's wrong?" Talyn asked.

"I'm wondering if this was a good idea," Rhysel said.

<If what was?> Talyn asked, though he thought he knew the answer and that was why he switched to mindspeech.

<The rebellion. So far, the only native Esmaarlanik who'll help are Leekath and Aar Camlenn.> She squeezed her husband's hand. <Korulen turned me down. Korulen.>

<Does she take after her mom?> Talyn asked.

<I didn't think so.> Rhysel sighed. <I understand Keo's position. She's reasonably well-known, so the Linnipese could easily suspect her of being involved and I know she'd like to be able to deny it under lie-detection. And she has ethical conflicts about doing anything significant with her powers. But I don't understand about Korulen.>

<Do you want me to talk to her?> Talyn asked. Rhysel looked at him, and he amended, <Get Kaylo to talk to her, I mean?> He wasn't really close enough to Korulen to have a better shot than Rhysel.

<I don't know,> sighed Rhysel.

<Well, then I'll decide,> retorted Talyn. <I'll talk to Kaylo about her tomorrow.>

<All right.> But Rhysel looked defeated. Korulen must have done more than turn her down. Or Rhysel was addled in the brain from being pregnant, maybe, Talyn didn't know.

He went upstairs to find Leekath holding a silent music crystal and sitting on his bed. "Hey," he said. "Hungry?"

Leekath nodded, and at his wide-armed invitation, clung to him and bit.

Her shields dropped away and he listened to the welcome storm of shrieks in her mind while she fed.

Chapter 24: Planning

"Did you ask Rhysel *how* she went about inviting Korulen into this little rebellion?" Kaylo asked, when Talyn brought his friend to the citadel to show it off and ask Kaylo about what was going on in Korulen's head.

"Uh, no," Talyn said. He was *still* not in the habit of asking questions like that. When he wanted to know something from a shielded person, he'd ask, but he was too accustomed to taking utterances-plus-thoughts at face value to become much more curious when the thoughts were inaudible. "Why? Did she botch it terribly?"

"Yeah, kind of. She had no idea what she wanted Korulen to do. She was trying to get Korulen to commit sight unseen to some nonspecific rebel action. And when Korulen was like 'well, I can't say yes to something that I don't know what it is' Rhysel acted like a toddler whose little sister didn't want to be her friend anymore."

"Well, we don't know what we're going to do at *all*," Talyn said. "We're just sort of assembling. How could Rhysel answer Korulen's question when she didn't know the answer?"

"It's not that she didn't know the answer, it's that she wanted Korulen's commitment without it," Kaylo said. "*You* just wanted to know that I wasn't going to rat you out and was available to be asked stuff. *Rhysel* was all about how if she couldn't trust Korulen completely to do what the rebellion needed, whatever that was, then that was bad."

"That really doesn't sound like something Rhysel would say," Talyn said.

"I'm open to the possibility that it was just a misunderstanding," shrugged Kaylo, "but Korulen said she tried several times to clarify and Rhysel seemed to mean what Korulen thought she meant."

"Ooookay," said Talyn. "I'll talk to Rhysel. Can you see if you can get Korulen to believe that it was probably some miscommunication? Even if we don't know what kind yet?"

"I'll do what I can," Kaylo said. "Korulen's kind of freaked out now though. She thinks Rhysel hates her now because she won't dedicate her life to Rhysel's nebulous cause on Rhysel's say-so."

"I'm sure Rhysel doesn't hate her," Talyn said. "Rhysel pretty much divides the world into friends and enemies and people she hasn't met yet, and Korulen definitely hasn't done anything to move into the enemy category unless she, I don't know, tried to strangle one of the twins."

Kaylo looked like he was trying to picture Korulen strangling a baby, but then shook his head. "Well, we'll see."

Talyn went to the citadel transfer point and hopped back to Rhysel's tower. "Rhysel," he said, finding her alone in the kitchen chopping strawberries, "what *exactly* did you say to Korulen?"

"I don't remember my exact words," Rhysel said. <But she seemed to think that agreeing to be in the rebellion meant that I'd ask her to do awful things and she wouldn't be able to refuse. I can't understand how she'd think that of me.>

Talyn clonked his head on the table. <Did you tell her that you would not ask anything awful of her?>

<I told her she ought to know me well enough to trust me.>

<Wow.>

<What?>

<I don't know Korulen as well as you do - well, but maybe I do, come to think of it,

even if half of it's from listening to Kaylo. She is *skittish*. I mean, when she gets her teeth into something and feels basically safe around the people she has to fight with to get what she wants, she's stubborn too, but rebellions aren't *safe*. So she'll argue with Kaylo about trolls because Kaylo's not going to do a thing to her. But she won't swear undying loyalty to a vague cause because a vague cause absolutely might do harm.>

<I wouldn't send Korulen into unnecessary danger!>

<Yeah, but apparently you didn't tell her that,> Talyn said, rolling his eyes.

Rhysel sighed and looked away. <If one of the people I was most sure of can't even trust me that far, maybe this won't work after all. Maybe the Esmaarlanik would rather I don't try to do anything. Maybe I should ask Tekaal, I mean Aar Camlenn, again if he's willing to move somewhere...>

<You know what, if Korulen misunderstanding you because you spooked her with unclear expectations is this discouraging maybe you *shouldn't* lead a rebellion,> Talyn snapped, forgetting for a moment that he was addressing his Master.

For all that she usually acted like a permissive elder sister willing to let him crash at her place rent-free in exchange for intermittent chores, she didn't have to be that way. He was obliged to obey and respect her until the apprenticeship ended, and she really had enough to justify declaring him a Journeyman and kicking him out at any time.

Rhysel didn't react angrily, though. <Maybe I'm not cut out for this,> she agreed.

<Look, no,> Talyn said. <Mishap with Korulen aside - and I'm sure you can smooth it out - who else could do it? The natives wouldn't know where to start, I'm a kid and no one listens to me, you've got better contacts than just about anyone I can think of, you can shut down Peiza's kamai program whenever you want, and you're probably not going to go mad with power.>

Rhysel sighed. <We'll see what Korulen says.>

Great. The rebellion depended on a freaked-out adolescent deciding to make up with her teacher.

Kaylo got Korulen to come around, and Korulen came for dinner to have a quiet and awkward conversation about how Korulen didn't *have* to take on any assignments she wasn't comfortable with. Talyn did a double-take at her green hair; he still wasn't used to it even after five months, and was not sure he bought the story that Arimal had transformed Korulen and her father into dragons just because Keo was her "friend". Gods didn't *have* friends. But he'd never been able to learn a different explanation.

Korulen-the-dragon wanted to know what assignments there *were* to be had.

<I think our first priority has to be figuring out what they did to Aabalan,> Talyn piped up.

<Well, somebody past-scried the thing, but it was invisible,> Korulen said. <If there was even a *thing*. It could have been some long-range spell and then we have no idea where we'd need to look.>

<The Linnipese know, at least some of them,> sent Rhysel.

<What are we going to do,> Korulen asked, <shapeshift into soldiers and wander into their headquarters and ask to be reminded of things?>

<Maybe shapeshifting,> Rhysel sent. <But probably not asking. Mind kamai.>

<That makes more sense,> Korulen admitted.

<I want a little longer to collect recruits, and then we'll call a big meeting in the citadel and solicit volunteers,> Rhysel said. <It'll be dangerous, and I can't go.>

<I'll go,> Talyn said cheerfully.

<You'll have to disguise yourself as a woman,> Korulen pointed out.

<Enh. It's for a good cause,> said Talyn, but he made a face. <I can always change back after I'm done.>

Rhysel collected her rebels. A lot of them were students; Talyn wondered how much luck she'd have had if Binaaralav wasn't on a break. Others included about two-thirds of the Binaaralav kamai teaching staff, Narax, and a guy whose thoughts identified him as Aar Camlenn's brother Ahin.

"What brings you here?" Talyn asked the last of those. If Rhysel had gone recruiting among Aar Camlenn's relatives in general he'd have expected a lot more of them.

"They took my daughter," said Ahin in a soft and dangerous voice.

"Oh." Talyn sat back, trying to block out the poisonous levels of anger emanating from the elf.

"And I'm a witch, so I may be able to help," Ahin added.

"Right," said Talyn. Those two facts explained his presence, and Talyn didn't really want to look at more replayed memories of soldiers leading a girl to a waiting woman Ahin apparently hated with a passion. Talyn scooted away.

He wound up next to Leekath after a little more maneuvering. Leekath had Emryl on her other side. Emryl had just completed her elementalism apprenticeship and reapprenticed as a mind kama under her uncle Corvan, which, since he spent a lot of his time teaching in Binaaralav, meant that she too had some familiarity with the place.

Corvan maintained his tower in Barashi during vacations - such as the current month - but had been living as roommates with another kamai teacher Talyn didn't know well during school terms. That meant that he and Emryl both lived in Esmar more time than they didn't, and counted as Linnipese subjects. Corvan was sour about this, but it was essential to his ability to safely participate, and Emryl's. He sat on Emryl's other side.

Kaylo, across the table from Talyn, waved.

Korulen, beside her boyfriend, was chatting quietly to her friends Lutan and Kaarilel. Talyn only knew Kaarilel from the girl's own thoughts; she was a wizarding student, having dropped kamai soon after picking it up, so she couldn't shield.

Talyn had tutored most of the kids there. He could remember the halfling kid, Ngen, struggling with wood-shaping. The wolfrider pair, Mata and Tama, were talented but exhibited shocking naivete about some things. Kutran, despite the arm of her best-friend-why-the-hell-weren't-they-dating Soraak around her shoulders, was shaking like a leaf.

What a rebellion they had assembled.

At least it had Talyn himself.

Rhysel was flipping through a sheaf of papers.

"Is that an agenda?" asked Lil, Lutan's girlfriend, who was sitting next to Lutan. Half in Lutan's lap, actually. "We have an agenda?"

"It's sort of an agenda," said Rhysel. "It's more like a list, of priorities and ideas. We can add to it as we go. First on the list, we need to figure out how to get information about what the Linnipese did to Aabalan."

Talyn listened with half an ear to the subsequent discussion, but no one had any better ideas than going to Linnip in disguise and trying mind kamai on soldiers.

"The Linnipese do know that kamai exists, and that they were invading a country that had some kyma," said Korulen. "What if they have everyone shielded against mindreading somehow? A spell we don't know, or kamai tools on everyone, or...?"

"I can break through a shield if I try," said Talyn. "But it's pretty easy to tell I've done it."

"So if they have defenses against mindreading, we can't subtly get through them," Rhysel said.

"Kidnap someone, bring them here, bust through shields unsubtly?" asked Lutan.

"They'll be noticed missing. I think it's to our advantage to be unnoticed as long as possible," said Rhysel.

"Impersonate the soldier, send the impersonator in for long-term undercover work, and then either fake their death or let them disappear depending on whether we still need to be undercover when the impersonation's lost its value," said Talyn.

There was some quibbling over the details, but after five degrees of talking it over, no one had a crippling flaw or a better competing idea.

"We should send a pair, so they can watch each other's backs and help each other out," Rhysel said.

"I'll go," Talyn said.

"Does the disguise have to be shapeshifting," asked Leekath, "or can it be image kamai?"

"I think the military headquarters are more likely to have illusion-busting wizardry than shapeshifting countermeasures," said Lutan. "And a lot of anti-illusion spells work on image kamai just fine."

Leekath shivered. "I don't like being turned into anything with a heartbeat," she said.

"Who wants to come with me, then?" Talyn asked.

"Anyone who volunteers can get shapeshifting knowledge directly taught via kamai," Rhysel added when there was a silence. "This is important enough to break the usual rule about learning things oneself."

"I'll go," said Emryl, raising her hand.

"Cool," said Talyn, and he reached around Leekath to touch Emryl's forehead.

Emryl got up, smiled, and spun around, turning freckled and redheaded as she did. "How do I look?" she asked.

"You have the colors right," said Korulen, "but the clothes are off. And you might want to change your face - have you seen many Linnipese people up close?"

"Here," said Lutan, conjuring up an illusion of a soldier she'd seen around somewhere. "Take her nose, and the shape of her eyes, but make them green instead, and her bottom lip but keep your top one, and point your chin a little. And you forgot your eyelashes - they're still black. That's not unheard of but it'd make you striking and you don't wanna be striking. Lighten 'em to reddish brown."

Emryl made the requested changes, and soon resembled a rather generic young Linnipese woman. "Anything else?"

"Costume, obviously," said Ngen. "You need either a soldier's uniform, or one of those ridiculous outfits civilians wear."

"The latter, I think," said Korulen. "You don't want to have to be able to identify yourself as a particular soldier until you're, well, trying to identify yourself as a particular soldier."

"Lutan, whip up a face for me?" Talyn asked.

Lutan produced another illusion, and instead of making verbal alterations, changed the image itself until it suited her. "Be that," she said.

Talyn frowned at the woman's image, but shapeshifted into the curly-haired, blue-eyed Linnipese woman with the excessively pink cheeks that Lutan provided for him. It felt weird, although admittedly not as weird as being a bat. His clothes didn't fit the shape either. "Like so?" he asked in a higher, smoother voice.

"Like so," agreed Lutan. "You'll look very nondescript in the streets of Peiza."

"Except you need costumes," Ngen said.

"I have an excuse to visit Peiza, to check in on the kamaï program," Rhysel said. "I'll load up on clothes while I'm there, pretend I just think they're pretty or that I don't want to stand out. And you can both shapeshift into sizes that will match me so I can get things that fit instead of having to invent a niece old enough."

Talyn and Emryl, shifting back to their normal shapes simultaneously, nodded.

"In case something happens -"

"Don't *let* anything happen," Leekath hissed in Talyn's ear.

They were in the stairwell, alone, and he touched her face and kissed her. <I won't. But if not this time, maybe later, this *is* going to be dangerous. I can do a whole lot but maybe not fast. So before me and Emryl leave tomorrow, I'm going to leave some blood here.> He touched the wall of the secret compartment. <Preserved. You can unpreserve it and take a drop at a time and expand it and represerve the rest. Even though you can't expand a given drop more than once it should still last a long time.>

<It won't *need* to last a long time,> Leekath sent.

<Right, I'll be careful. I promise. But I might have to go on an extended mission sometime, and we don't want to let on to anyone, do we?>

<I guess,> Leekath agreed. <In here?> She opened a little tunnel into the compartment and squeaked into it, echolocating its shape, then closed it again.

<I'll put it in after you eat tonight and do the replenishment working, and I'll be fine by morning,> Talyn said.

<Okay.>

"I wonder if anyone will notice that we're in the clothes Rhysel just bought yesterday," Emryl said, shimmying her foot into a stocking. "It's the sort of thing that would be important in a mystery novel."

"Only if we were the bad guys," Talyn said. He wasn't that modest to begin with, and in his borrowed pink-cheeked girl's form he didn't care at all that he and Emryl were sharing a changing room. "We aren't going to be there long, and we aren't going to do anything suspicious *in these outfits*. Do you speak Ertydon?"

"Of course. I wouldn't've volunteered if I didn't," Emryl said. "I picked it up as practice when I got to workings that help with learning languages. I didn't learn it in Linnip, though, I went to Ertydo for a little while to give Uncle Corvan a break from me while he was teaching classes."

"You'll have an accent, then," Talyn said.

Emryl coughed and said in Ertydon, "Do I sound at all Linnipese?"

"Maybe," Talyn said dubiously. "Try not to talk too much."

"Sure. Have we got names, if we need names?"

"Call me Sah, it's a nickname for like ten different things," Talyn said. "You can be Lai, same reason. Mindspeak improvisations if we need last names or full forenames but we probably won't even need the nicknames."

"Sure," Emryl said agreeably.

They finished getting into their excessive outfits. Linnipese clothes were complicated and everything clashed with everything else; Talyn felt like a clown in leggings and drapey pants and three layers of shirt and vest and a floppy hat and dozens upon dozens of bracelets. They were every color and every one bore the stamp or woven texture of a different obscure symbol.

Emryl was shapeshifting holes into her ears to add ear jewelry. "They really go overboard, don't they," she commented.

"After this trip we shouldn't need to wear anything more embarrassing than soldier uniforms," Talyn said. "And those don't, not so much."

Emryl finished adding earrings - not a single pair of them matched - and then stuck a comb into her hair and sat on a chair she drew up from the citadel floor. "Are you almost done?"

"Do I need to do something with my hair too?" Talyn asked with trepidation, touching red curls.

"It looks fine down," Emryl said. "Don't make such a face."

Talyn looked down at himself, made a face, and sighed. "Shall we?"

"You'll turn us invisible, we transfer to Peiza, we find someplace to hide and turn visible," recited Emryl, going out of the dressing room with him, "we make our way to the Shield, and we spiral outward till we find a *rimei* or a *laina* out in civilian territory and kidnap her." The Shield was the informal name of the military headquarters in Peiza, a big round campus dotted with round buildings and absolutely smothered in wards.

"Yep," said Talyn, dropping illusion over himself and Emryl. The University of Peiza, where their transfer point was, certainly wouldn't have anti-illusion spells around; that would annoy their wizardry students, as well as kyma-in-training. "Let me do all the work and all the talking unless something unexpected happens."

"Not going to argue with you there," Emryl said.

They stepped onto the transfer point and went.

Linnipese architecture was not unlike Linnipese fashion. The University looked like ornaments and filigree and colored glass were some sort of swarming insect, temporarily pausing in their path as they crawled over the swooping buildings. It was blinding, but no one could see through the invisibility to watch Talyn reel.

<Over there,> Emryl said, mentally indicating a spot between two carved columns painted with the Ertydon word for *knowledge* and *book* respectively. Empty stairs on one side and a corkboard with flyers about concerts and club meetings would cover their appearance; it was a good spot.

<Yeah.> They got there, only stepping on each other's feet a few times, by a path that didn't take them over the lawns that would mark their passage. Talyn un-invisibled them.

<You know the way?> Emryl asked. <I looked at a map, but...>

<Just follow me,> Talyn replied. He'd only looked at a map, too, but the thoughts around them were good for course-checking, and the streets were only labeled at about a third of the intersections.

They didn't have a prayer of getting into the Shield itself, but the soldiers left, all the

time. As they got closer the pedestrians were more thickly composed of uniformed women, occasionally men.

Talyn didn't have to listen to thoughts for ranks; he could count stripes and dots on sleeves just fine. He wanted someone with at least three stripes. Four would be better, but he was pretty sure there were only six or seven of those.

Emryl followed at his heels, looking around, gawking like she was from rural Omiria and had never seen a city like Peiza; it was a reasonable cover and he tried to copy her.

After an angle of wandering, Talyn decided to abandon the strategy of strolling around on the streets. <In here,> he said, pushing into a bar that catered to soldiers, but not exclusively.

<Tell me we're not getting drunk undercover in enemy territory,> Emryl said.

<Order us both, uh,> Talyn pulled the most popular nonalcoholic drink order from the surrounding minds, so as not to stand out. <Grape juice with cloves. Talk slow like you haven't totally decided what you want, it'll hide your accent. There's a *rimei* and her assistant in that corner. I'll get us seats. We'll sit here a bit drinking our juice and after we're about done I'll *suggest* that they need the bathroom and we can go in after them and grab them.>

<Then you teleport us all to the citadel?>

<Yep.> Talyn was glad he was licensed for an arbitrary number of passengers - not that he'd really care about the license per se, but at least he knew for a fact he had body memory to go with knowledge he'd lifted from his girlfriend.

<And nobody notices we never come out?> Emryl asked.

<In here? Not likely. The *rimei* and her aide have a long-term tab, the bartender's not going to charge out into the street yelling for 'em. You pay for our juice up front, though.>

There were coins in their pockets, so Emryl went ahead and bought them two grape juices with cloves while Talyn got them a couple of chairs near the target. Liria Meialek-*rimei* and her aide Annei Nepailah-*eian*. Desk jobs, he read, but Meialek-*rimei* had been deployed before, if you could call it that when she'd guarded the Embreyaeen embassy.

The juice was pretty tasty.

Talyn drank slowly, reading the *rimei* and *eian* until his juice and Emryl's were nearly gone.

You might need to duck into the restroom, he whispered to the soldiers' unconscious minds.

"I'll be right back," said Nepailah-*eian*, hopping to her feet.

"Here I was about to ask you to watch our drinks," said Meialek-*rimei*, also getting up.

"They're nearly gone anyway," said the aide.

And in they went.

Talyn caught Emryl's eye, and they waited a beat, two, and got up to follow.

His heart was pounding in his chest, but it wasn't like anyone could hear it.

He pretended to wash his hands; Emryl followed his lead.

And when the *rimei* and *eian* came toward the sinks, Talyn double-checked for witnesses, sent the both of them into standing-sleep, and then collected three hands and teleported.

Chapter 25: Spying

"Are they shielded?" Emryl asked, as Talyn led the women into the dormitory area. Talyn shucked his female form like an uncomfortable pair of shoes; Emryl kept hers, which probably didn't feel any different to her from the inside relative to her original.

"Not thoroughly," Talyn said. "But you know, my existence isn't a closely guarded secret. If I were a smart Linnipese policymaker I'd probably pay a University of Peiza mind kamai teacher to put in *deep* shields around the important secrets to lull me into a false sense of impunity. Then when a *rimei* started freaking out about somebody being in her head I'd know it wasn't just a kamai student practicing mindspeech. Or even me being inordinately curious about somebody's personal life, which would be rude of me but wouldn't require changing all their codes and stuff."

"Sure," said Emryl, "but are they even *deeply* shielded?"

"Let's find out," said Talyn, lacing his fingers and stretching his arms out.

Annei Nepailah-*eian* wasn't shielded, even deeply. But then, she didn't know anything or have access to any particularly secure areas. Talyn checked her commanding officer, and there he did find shields.

The standing sleep he'd put both soldiers in didn't allow Meialek-*rimei* a lot of leeway to realize what was going on around her. She could see and hear and would follow his mental instructions, but it was like a dream, and not a lucid one. Still, she definitely noticed when he punctured the protections around her inmost military secrets, and her face drifted into an expression of fear.

"Those were pretty nicely put together," Talyn remarked. "I'll have to ask Rhysel who's in the mind kamai department at Peiza."

"You wouldn't be complimenting her if you hadn't been able to get through," Emryl said, "you'd be cursing her name."

"You've met me," Talyn said. "But unfortunately, this lady didn't get personally assigned to the Aabalan mess and doesn't know anything directly about it. Also, while Nepailah-*eian* over here isn't expected anywhere until the day after tomorrow because her boyfriend canceled their plans for her day off, Meialek-*rimei* is expected to show up at her home in two angles, by her husband and kids." Talyn frowned. "Uh, now we have to decide who should be her."

"She doesn't know anything, you could wipe her memory and put her back," Emryl said.

"And then have to kidnap another one? I don't think so," Talyn said. "Same with the *eian*. Meialek-*rimei* wasn't involved with Aabalan but she has the security clearance that no one will be too suspicious if she asks her friends about it. And if we put Nepailah-*eian* back *she'll* be able to notice small irregularities in her commander's behavior better than anyone else. I can copy the *rimei's* entire mind, and fool most people who know her, but I'm not a literally perfect actor."

"So, I think you just volunteered to go home as her," Emryl said brightly.

Talyn scrunched his eyes closed. "All right, but I'm finding some excuse not to sleep there. I'll be lucky if I don't blow my cover trying to avoid kissing her husband."

"Don't avoid kissing her husband," said Emryl, touching Meialek-*rimei's* forehead herself to hunt for information. "Just peck him the once, act tired, eat dinner, complain about the daughter's teenage rebellion, and say you need to crash at the barracks overnight to be ready for work first thing in the morning. Husband'll never check the story."

"You do it," said Talyn.

"Give my uncle a chance to get me up to speed on what I'll need to do to convincingly be Liria here," Emryl said.

"I can just transfer the -"

"The shapeshifting one worked," Emryl said, shaking her head, "but I don't know why, because I remember you trying to teach me stuff that way when we were apprentices together, and it was always confusing. Not enough words, just instincts I don't really have. Did you learn a new way to send knowledge?"

"Not exactly. Fine," Talyn said, in lieu of explaining that his shapeshifting expertise was *Revenn's* non-innate understanding. His mind *kamai*, as the aspect that came most naturally to him of all, mostly *wasn't* from *Revenn's* stolen mind. Emryl would probably find it confusing.

"I'll poke around in Annei's mind for knowhow about who *does* have something to do with Aabalan," said Emryl, "and you can get to work copying Liria."

"Why are you calling them by their first names?" Talyn asked.

"We're going to know them awfully well," Emryl said. "And the honorifics are cumbersome. I mean, how many do they have?"

"Seven in the military, but there's noble titles, work titles, religious titles, generic ones," said Talyn, sitting the *rimei* down on one of the dormitory room's beds and putting his hand on her head. "It's a lot."

He pulled.

"I'm home!" Talyn called. The uniform was uncomfortable, but except when she was on extended leave, *Meialek-rimei* - heck, he might as well call her Liria - wore it all day long.

"Liria!" exclaimed Nal, her husband, rushing to the door. "I'm so glad you're home, Satalia has been absolutely unmanageable today and she won't listen to me."

"I'm just here for dinner," said Talyn tiredly. "I need to sleep in the barracks overnight, I have work first thing in the morning."

"Oh," Nal said. "I understand, but dinner isn't ready yet. Could you talk to Satalia while it finishes simmering...?"

"All right," sighed Talyn, and he managed to peck Nal on the cheek as he passed without looking overtly repulsed.

Since Liria's conversations with her daughter mostly consisted of exchanging standard arguments, Talyn didn't think he'd have any trouble with it. "Satalia!" he said, as he climbed the last stair. The girl's door was closed. "Come out of your room now."

"No!" shouted Satalia's voice from behind the door.

"Satalia, if you don't open this door right now, you'll get no supper," recited Talyn.

There was a silence, and then the door dragged open. Satalia glared up at Talyn-as-Liria. "What?" she snapped.

Talyn felt very weird addressing a fourteen-year-old girl like he was her mother, but continued. "Your father says you have been misbehaving."

"I didn't *do* anything!" she shouted.

"Are you saying that he's lying?" Talyn asked.

Satalia bit her lip. "He's... he's got a different *opinion*."

"What did you do, Satalia?"

"I wasn't even talking to Dad! Larain came home for lunch!"

The middle kid, the son who'd joined the military like his mom. "And what did you say

to Larain?" Talyn asked.

"Just stuff! I don't remember!"

"Satalia, you will answer my question, or I will go speak to your father again, take everything he has to say at face value, and punish you for that," said Talyn, feeling ridiculous. What kind of mother was this person? "You have the opportunity to explain yourself now, but I am losing patience."

"I just said Larain was different because of how he's been ever since he went into training and he's not like my brother I grew up with anymore," grumbled Satalia. "It's true! He sits different, he talks different, he's more like - like *you* than himself."

"We are very proud of Larain," said Talyn. "And you were so close growing up. It is a shame that you can't look past your prejudices to accept your brother's choice."

"You bullied him into it!" Satalia accused.

"I did no such thing," Talyn said. "Sein, for example, exhibited no interest in the military; if I were the type to do that, he would be a *nem* by now, wouldn't he? Larain, on the other hand -"

"Larain used to be *nice*!" shrieked Satalia. "Now he's just another soldier, he has no personality, he -"

"Be silent," said Talyn, without the real heat Liria would have used.

"You wanted me to talk, *I* wanted to stay in my room and draw -"

Talyn couldn't help rolling his eyes out of character at the line that came next. "And that's another thing, you spend too much time on that impractical hobby. You are fourteen years old and you should be considering a career. Even if nothing I say can dislodge this absurd distaste you have for the armed forces of our nation -"

"I'm not going to be like you! I'm never going to be like you!" Satalia cried.

"When you complete school, you will most certainly need to find *some* form of employment, because with this attitude I will not long tolerate you in my home!" Talyn said. "There will be no supper for you tonight. Stay in your room quietly. Tomorrow you will apologize to Larain - I will ask your father whether you've complied."

"That won't make it not true that he's not even himself!" Satalia yelled after her departing "mother", and Talyn heard the door slam.

Talyn acted tired during the family's dinner of onion soup, buttered rice, and sliced pork. It was all undersalted and near-flavorless; Liria would have liked it, but even borrowing her tongue and her memories, Talyn did not have the finesse to borrow her tastes. "This is lovely, Nal, thank you," he told Liria's husband anyway.

"You're welcome," replied the man.

Satalia was not at dinner, and neither was Larain, who ate most meals with his training unit, but the eldest of the family, Sein, was present. Talyn asked him perfunctory questions about his fiancée and how their church counseling was proceeding, and Larain answered briefly, but he was polite enough for Liria's standards and so Talyn didn't have to take him to task in order to stay in character.

"Well," said Talyn, when he'd eaten a plausible amount, "I'm heading back to headquarters. I'll be there overnight. I'll let you know the next time I can get away, Nal."

"Of course, dear," said Nal.

And he pecked Talyn on the forehead before Talyn could get away, but then the infiltrator was out the door and out of sight.

"That was really unpleasant," Talyn said to Leekath, safely in his own form and out of that scratchy uniform. "He kissed me! I had to kiss him! I don't like guys! I don't like middle-aged Linnipese guys who make terrible onion soup!"

"He probably doesn't like adolescent rebel guys who impersonate his wife," said Leekath.

Talyn frowned. "You're not mad at me, are you? It's not like I *wanted* to go around kissing anybody but you."

"Mad? Over a couple of pecks? No. But it's kind of... It's one thing to pretend to be them at headquarters, but to their families is... kind of wrong."

"She was expected home. The ones who work in Peiza are pretty much all expected home. I don't know if there even *are* any single friendless *rimeis* who aren't close to their families, but if there was one she'd take a really long time to find," Talyn said. "Long enough for them to dig in deeper into Esmaar and maybe scoop up some other country while they're at it." He paused. "You're not mad at me for going on the mission at all, are you?"

"No, not really. But... there should be some other way," mused Leekath. "That lady's husband and kids didn't do anything. They don't even belong to an organization who does anything."

"The middle kid does - but you're right," said Talyn. "Do you have a better idea?"

Leekath shrugged. "You already told them not to expect her home much."

"Someone's going to have to do the same thing for the other one, but I think she can be missed long enough that Emryl will be ready," said Talyn.

"Does Emryl have to be both of them?" Leekath asked. "How is she supposed to do that?"

"Uh... good point," Talyn said.

The rebellion's next meeting, that evening, set up Kaarilel as Annei Nepailah's replacement, although Emryl was to (in her capacity as "Liria Meialek") give "Annei" as much time off her duties as possible and Kaarilel was to avoid making any plans with Annei's boyfriend. Kaarilel hadn't learned much kamai at all, but Talyn pushed shapeshifting knowledge and the contents of Annei's mind. Kaarilel wound up basically competent at what she needed in order to put in a few appearances as Annei; Emryl would be able to handle both ends of mindspeech if they had to communicate secretly in the field.

"Next," said Rhysel, "I want to wake up our prisoners."

"What?" Talyn said.

"We can restrain their hands so they can't cast spells, if they know any more dangerous than telling time," Rhysel said. "But as long as we're keeping them prisoner I think it's only appropriate to ask them whether they'd rather pass the time awake or asleep. If they'd rather be asleep, we can look after them that way and let them go when it's all over -"

"Or if we have to trade them," said Emryl.

"Or then, yes. But if they'd rather be awake... We don't need to show them our real faces, tell them where they are, or give them anything we don't think it'd be safe for them to have, but if they'd still rather be awake, that seems harmless," Rhysel said. "We have to feed them either way."

"I'll do it after the meeting," Talyn said. "Assuming we have a way to get me and Emryl and Kaarilel past the headquarters wards. If we don't, we have to tamper with their memories and let them go *now*."

"I think I have you covered," Kaylo said. "Now, you all have to keep this buttoned up as

tight as can be, because it would be *utterly trivial* to redesign a spell to patch this hole. But unless the Linnipese Imperial Mystic Forces are up to some really futuristic stuff without any good reason to be, you should be able to pass yourselves off as the soldiers we've got with a token like this stashed on your person." Kaylo held up a nugget of copper.

"Does it have to look like that?" Lutan asked. "I can't think of a way to incorporate it as-is into an outfit..."

"I can make it look like whatever you want, as long as it's made of a conductive metal so you can do mind kamai to it. What you have to do is copy the *entire* mind of the person you need to be onto the nugget or whatever you turn it into, and then I cast a spell I invented on you to suppress your own identity for spell purposes. This won't fool a green-group dragon." Kaylo nodded to Korulen, and to Narax. "But I really don't think they have one - I mean, the country might contain some, but I don't think they work for the army. It does fool all the wards I tested it on. If the nugget person is keyed in and you aren't you can go through."

"What about alarm spells?" Narax asked.

"I tried a couple of those and refined the spell to get around the one it set off. There are a *lot* of kinds of alarms, I couldn't do it exhaustively. But every alarm spell has false positive conditions," said Kaylo. "If somebody sets off an alarm, they must have a procedure for that - check our prisoners to learn about the procedure and we'll know how to beat it."

Korulen chose that moment to crook her elbow around Kaylo's neck and demand a kiss from him, and Talyn remembered the man with the whitening orange hair who'd thought he was kissing his wife.

"I'll check into that before I wake them, then," Talyn said.

"I'll come with," said Kaylo. "So you can tell me what you find and I can tell you what to look for."

The boys went to the room where the soldiers were sitting, and Kaylo walked Talyn through figuring out what would happen if this or that alarm spell over headquarters were tripped. Liria knew some of them, but Annei knew others; they just had to hope that between the two of them they had all the relevantly distinct alarms covered. This one required an interview with one's commanding officer about what one had been up to lately; that one required reciting the officer's oath of loyalty under lie detection; that one just called for face recognition by someone who knew one personally.

"Can we beat lie detection?" Talyn asked Kaylo.

"Again, I don't know what Imperial Mystic Forces have cooked up," Kaylo said. "But yes, standard ones will cave if you just open up a mental connection to your nugget-impersonation-aide-thing. I tried it."

"I'll have to teach Kaarilel to do that, I guess," Talyn said.

"Why did Kaarilel even want to go?" Kaylo asked. "She doesn't have any of the relevant skills. Didn't, I mean."

Talyn shrugged. "She likes it when learning things is easy - she's not a great student to start with or she'd've stuck with kamai in the first place like her friends. And she thinks Linnipese clothes are pretty. Kaarilel's not very interesting."

"Oh. Korulen likes her," Kaylo said.

"She's perfectly nice, she's just not interesting," Talyn said. "Anyway. Want to be around when these folks wake up? You'll have to be more nondescript..."

"And, do you know why Rhysel wants them woken up at all?" Kaylo asked.

"I think *Rhysel* wants them woken up because she's nice and thinks it would be kinder to

let them, I don't know, catch up on their reading and their arithmetic puzzles," Talyn said. "I didn't give her a hard time about it because if they're awake we can use their skills, not just their knowledge. I've got Liria's mind stashed in mine, but that doesn't mean I'm as good at, like, predicting what her co-workers will do, as she is. I have access to what she remembers about their past behavior but I don't know them like she does, I can't manipulate the information like she can. And I can't make her do arbitrary mental tasks while she's in standing sleep, but I can suggest them to her while she's awake and she won't be able to help making progress on them. Anyway, here goes - do you want to be around?"

"Nah, I'll get out of here," Kaylo said. "But, hang on, let me see what you think *nondescript* means."

"I was considering being invisible, actually," Talyn said. "And using a girl voice so they'll respect me. I mean, more than they would if I didn't."

"Oh, nice," Kaylo said. "Bypassing all layers of they'll-think-I'm-thinking-they're-thinking-that-if-I-look-like-this-I-must-be-from-such-and-such-a-place. Nice."

Talyn turned invisible and Kaylo left.

Liria Meialek, hands prevented from spell-gesturing by stone handcuffs, woke up.

"My name is Liria Meialek-*rimei*. My serial number is 09844216," was all Liria would say.

"Yes," Talyn said in a voice that was more like his sister Coryl's than his own. "I understand. The question is, do you want to be awake, or asleep, until we let you go? The answer to the question isn't encoded in your serial number somewhere, I promise."

"My name is -"

"Yes. I know." Talyn rolled his eyes and gave up on getting a verbal answer; he could tell Rhysel that he'd at least tried to do what she'd asked the polite way. Liria wanted to be awake; this was because she expected to be able to escape, but she still wanted it. "Well, in that case, we'll just leave you awake, feel free to change your mind about that at any time, just let one of the folks who bring in your food know."

Annei was in another room; Talyn left Liria where she was and sauntered invisibly over to that one to wake the *eian*. Since he was invisible, Annei didn't say anything immediately, but she blinked and took in her surroundings.

"Hello, Annei," said Talyn. "I already know your name and honorific and serial number. I have a different question."

"Wh- well, I've got questions too," said Annei indignantly. "Where am I? Who are you?" She was looking at the ceiling, and seemed to think that Talyn was broadcasting his voice from another room like a Linnipese prison operator might. "What do you want with me?"

"I just want you to tell me if you'd like to spend your time here awake, like you are now, or asleep, like you have been," said Talyn. "And if you want to be awake I suppose you can make requests about your living conditions."

"Um, you're keeping me prisoner, but you're asking my permission to knock me out?" Annei asked.

"That's about the situation, yes," said Talyn.

"Well, you don't have my permission to knock me out, or to keep me prisoner for that matter, but if I'm still here I guess that shows how much my permission means to you," she said snippily.

"Noted," said Talyn.

"And I want an Eialei and a copy of the most recent Peiza Chronicle and notepaper and pens," Annei said. She clearly thought she was pushing her luck, but none of that sounded like it would actually give her a way out, and she didn't have any clever escape plans in mind.

"I'll see what I can do," said Talyn.

"And a copy of *Janafai's Guidance*. I'm *right* in the middle of it," she said.

"Noted," repeated Talyn.

"A window?" she asked.

She meant one that led out, not one that was just pretty pictures of scenery. "No can do."

"Where's my boyfriend? Is someone going to feed my pets? Is it just me you've taken?"

Talyn sighed. "I have no idea where your boyfriend is; he doesn't interest me. I'll see what I can do about the pets. I'm not sure whether I'm supposed to tell you whether you're the only prisoner or not, but I'll check."

"Where am I?" Annei asked insistently.

"This," Talyn said grandly, "is your very own room. It's actually as nice as all the rest of them, apart from the matter of the uncooperative door."

"Aren't you funny," said Annei. "I haven't committed any crimes. You know holding me here is illegal, don't you?"

"Is it?" Talyn asked, but while he affected nonchalance he was actually curious. Was it actually? Was there some set of international laws that didn't protect Aabalan but did protect this annoying soldier?

"The Empire of Linnip isn't currently in a state of war with anyone," said Annei, "so I can't be a legitimate prisoner of war, and I haven't committed any crimes and this definitely isn't police procedure for if I was suspected of one, so I can't be a civil detainee either. So yeah. It's illegal. Are you going to stop being illegal?"

"No, I don't think so," Talyn said. Who had drawn up those laws? Did all rebellions against all occupying forces, however improperly they'd conducted their occupation, have to do so in violation of international law? Did they need to declare themselves in a state of rebellion or something?

"Yeah, didn't think so," Annei said.

"Aren't you clever," said Talyn.

The next day, Emryl and Kaarilel, up to speed on all the kamai they needed to know, went in to Linnip (Kaarilel with instructions to look in on Annei's lizard, parakeet, and tarantula).

They came back with copies of the Eialei, Peiza Chronicle, and *Janafai's Guidance*, generously bankrolled by Rhysel. And they came back with a lead about the fate of Aabalan so promising and so *obvious* that Talyn smacked himself in the head when he heard it.

"There's another summoning circle," Emryl said, "to another world."

Chapter 26: Signing

<I can't believe we didn't *think* of this,> Talyn sent.

<I feel no less ridiculous about it,> Rhysel agreed. <I'm just glad we have an excuse to visit the world.>

<What *is* our excuse, if someone asks? Not that I expect anyone to talk to me here while I'm not pretending to be a girl.>

They stepped off the transfer point at the University of Peiza and Rhysel gestured at the school. <They want to enroll some people from the third world here in a few terms. Including in the kamai program. But the teachers won't introduce kamai to *another* world *through* Elcenia without my permission, thanks to Aziel. I don't know how we'd get to visit the place otherwise, but my contact at the university called this morning and brought it up.>

<And you said,> Talyn put in, <that you wanted to have a look at the world in question first? And bring your apprentice?>

<Exactly. So now we have tickets, and we need to discreetly see what we can find about the possibility that this world has to do with Aabalan.>

<I bet if it does, you won't let them have any kamai.>

Rhysel's expression was grim. <I can take their university teachers, but I can't take the students they already have.>

<You control the infusion,> Talyn pointed out. <I think it's you and Aar Camlenn who know how, here, and that's it. Nobody from Barashi who has access to your notes would do it.>

<And they don't like that - none of the universities do,> Rhysel said. <The University of Desinni bribed Kaylo to reverse-engineer it for them, and *he* doesn't care what Aziel says, or much about what I say either. I had to *outbid* them to get him to drop the project.>

Talyn couldn't help laughing. Rhysel smiled ruefully, too.

It was a long walk to the circle. The building was unmarked, and there were military guards around it, but most people going in and out were not in uniform. Talyn listened to thoughts. Apparently, a wizard employed by the military had discovered the world and made contact, and the military was still overseeing the whole operation, but some businesspeople, would-be translators studying under the handful of dragons employed at the circle, and select high-status movers in Linnipese society were permitted to travel.

No one seemed to think of the world as particularly dangerous, although everyone agreed that the blue, earless creatures who were the sole sapient species on their planet were strange. But strange in a harmlessly alien way. They looked odd, they communicated in sign language, their entire (spherical, vacuum-occupying) planet was unified into a single culture that acted as a surprisingly cohesive unit, and the entire place was the windiest climate any visitor had ever been to.

It didn't seem an overwhelmingly likely location to find a superweapon, but it did seem overwhelmingly likely to be fascinating anyway.

The guard they checked in with didn't recognize Rhysel or Talyn, but she swept the ticket with some kind of enchanted device, asked both to confirm their identities aloud in complete sentences, and reminded them that they would be found and punished if they advertised the contents of the complex anywhere unauthorized or made independent contact with the world. Rhysel nodded and the guard let them through.

Inside the building, there were a few of the aliens walking around, although not many. One smallish one, perhaps a juvenile, was signing energetically with a silvery-haired dragon

adolescent; another was patiently correcting the hand positions of a white-haired Linnipese woman who kept consulting a stack of papers; another was tinkering with something made of metal. They were humanoid, a little shorter than the human women they were mostly interacting with, and variously-patterned blue. Only the two adults wore clothes, and those appeared to be strictly ornamental; the juvenile was naked, but had no obvious reason to cover anything up.

<Can you read them?> Rhysel asked.

Talyn listened. The thoughts were strange. There were no audible words, anywhere, and even the sign language seemed to be stored as proprioception instead of visuals. But as long as he worked on listening enough to get language-independent thoughts, they were there. The juvenile blue alien was making plans with its dragon friend for when the aliens' existence became public: they intended to go swimming in the dragon's lake. <Yeah.>

"Does this world have a name?" Rhysel asked the thirtysomething woman out of uniform who was manning the information desk.

"Of course!" replied the information desk person. "It's..." She made a sign with her pinkies crossed and then lifted her hands. "But aloud, we've been calling it Isatei - that's a mashup of two Old Linnipese languages but it means 'windy world'."

"Convenient that we have the same number of fingers," Talyn remarked, fully expecting the woman to ignore him.

"Yes, it is!" she agreed. "We do have trouble with some signs, because our thumbs are jointed differently, and most of us can't extend our fingers out of their sockets, but that only affects about six percent of signs, and we can work around it at the cost of seeming a little stilted."

"How long have you been studying this world?" Rhysel asked.

"About a year now," replied the woman. "I was one of the first anthropologists they brought in, to pick up the language from our new friends and from the dragons we have working here, and to learn about the culture. I'm so glad we're finally opening it up to more people now that there's a permanent circle. The partnership between Linnip and -" She made the sign again, apparently disdaining the use of the spoken translation, "has so much potential."

"What are the people called?" Talyn asked, since apparently she would pay attention to him if he talked.

The anthropologist made another sign, this one just displaying her palms. "Or you could call them Isateian, but actually, the sign they use to refer to themselves means 'hands' in an old dialect, so it might be technically more accurate to call them 'people with hands' or something rather than 'windy world people'."

"Noted," said Rhysel. "I think we'll go on through now -"

"Wait!" exclaimed the anthropologist. "Here, take an info packet. There are a few cultural missteps that can really upset a -" She made the palm-displaying sign again. "And that would be just really unfortunate."

"Dangerous?" asked Rhysel.

"Oh, they're not at all aggressive, they won't hurt you if you don't hurt them, but we really value their friendship," said the anthropologist earnestly. "And we want them to be comfortable with continuing to allow visitors. Please read the info packet."

Rhysel shrugged, picked up a packet for herself and one for Talyn, and went over to a corner with a bench in it to sit and read up.

Talyn skimmed his; he could read the Isateians and cover for anything he skipped on the fly. It looked like the main issue was that, outside of extraordinary circumstances, the "people

with hands" didn't accept gifts of goods or services or even access to information, only equitable exchanges. An Isateian who accepted, or was tricked or coerced into accepting, something for free was at the mercy of whoever had provided the something: without predetermined value for the thing given, arbitrary value could be assigned, potentially extending into a debt that could never be adequately repaid.

Economics and the carefully justified determination of what exchanges were and were not equitable was apparently a major field of scholarship. But in practice it seemed that it being generally agreed that an item was worth thus and such an amount was no protection against crushing debt if one got it without securing such agreement on the individual case.

"Do the poor ones just starve in the street?" Rhysel muttered to herself, and Talyn snorted. She was going to have some trouble with this.

Whoever had written the pamphlet - Talyn suspected the anthropologist lady, but she hadn't been thinking about it - was very positive on Isateian culture in general. Their cohesive society and ability to cooperate was credited to the fact that as children, they were raised by communal creches, and so each and every one considered itself in debt to society. This was repaid by unswervingly dedicated citizenship. Apart from the mentally ill, Isatei apparently had literally zero crime, and they were very good at coming to consensus about what actions their society should take together.

It was looking less and less like a good place to find a superweapon, despite the black-and-gold uniforms milling around the circle.

Then he got to the part according to which Isatei *had no magic*.

"Rhysel, this can't be it," he said, pointing.

"Let's read the whole thing, Talyn," she said.

Talyn rolled his eyes - a trip to the windy world at least sounded like fun, even if it wouldn't be rebelliously productive.

The very next section said:

But despite their lack of any phenomena that could be called magical, Isatei has made advances so fantastical in the realm of nonmagical devices that they appear to those with less knowledge as though they might as well be magical. Isatei boasts devices which fly, which manipulate information, and even which produce their young (they are natively an asexually reproducing species, but modern Isateians do not typically bud; instead, public creche institutions design children from scratch). These and other devices are part of what Linnip can hope to learn about by maintaining a friendly partnership with Isatei.

"Oh," Talyn said.

"I haven't gotten that far yet," Rhysel pointed out. She was still puzzling over the bit about gifts.

"You might want to skip ahead," Talyn said. He turned to the next page, which was all about Isatei's art and dance and architecture, and then he turned the page again and that was the whole thing.

"Oh," said Rhysel, a degree later, when she'd caught up.

"Yeah," said Talyn.

The dragon girl - Talyn couldn't tell by looking if she was a silver, a platinum, or a spelter, but by her features she had an Ertydon-looking human form - came up to them as Rhysel finished the pamphlet, her blue friend following her. "Hi! Are you going through soon?" she asked. "Me and Splay - that's what I call it 'cause it's name is -" She splayed her hands out, wrists

crossed. "We're going through too, and you don't look like you'd know where you're going. And Splay doesn't believe me when I tell it that you'd probably let us help you without insisting on paying us."

"We're not going to be in Splay's indentured servitude forever if we do let you, are we?" Talyn asked.

The dragon giggled. "No! But don't try to give *it* anything."

Splay tapped her shoulder and signed at its friend. [Zinc, Zinc, what are you saying?] it wanted to know. Well, that told Talyn what kind of dragon she was; she probably wouldn't go by "Zinc" if she weren't spelter. Talyn supposed she didn't have an actual sign language version of her real name.

[I'm telling them that you won't demand anything if we help them,] Zinc signed back.

[I won't, but this is so strange, are they sick?] Splay answered.

"I don't mean to intrude, but I can't follow this conversation," Rhysel put in.

"Oh, just, um, Splay doesn't quite get the difference between being a mentally disturbed Isateian and a perfectly healthy... are you guys half-elves?"

"Yes," said Rhysel.

"Perfectly healthy?" Zinc asked, shadowing the conversation with her hands for Splay to watch.

"As far as I know," Rhysel agreed.

"See, Splay," Zinc said aloud, although Splay was watching her hands and couldn't hear a thing. "They'll let us escort them through without talking about how much that should cost first, but there's nothing wrong with them."

"You don't need to go around with us the whole time we're there to prove your point, do you?" Talyn asked.

"No, no," Zinc said. "We'll show you around as long as you want, and then we'll leave you be and go do our own thing. You can shout over the wind if you've got to and can read lips a little bit."

<Or we could do this,> Talyn sent, language-independently, to all three. Splay jumped in alarm.

"Or that," Zinc agreed. "Cool, kyma." She signed at Splay, [These people, or at least the taller one, are magic like I told you.]

Rhysel glanced at Talyn, then said, "Sure, we'd appreciate that."

Zinc had a distinctly triumphant look on her face as she communicated the acceptance to Splay. Talyn couldn't read Splay's face, or the posture that it was more likely using to show incredulity, but he could read its mind.

"C'mon," Zinc said, and she and Splay led Rhysel and Talyn through the circle.

For a planet inhabited entirely by deaf people, Isatei was *loud*. Actually, maybe that wasn't a weird contrast. Their machines were loud, but why make them quiet if they couldn't keep you up at night? The wind was deafening, so why bother growing ears to begin with? Talyn conjured up some image earplugs, a pair for himself and a pair for Rhysel. He squinted his eyes against the wind, too. Splay didn't seem to mind the rushing air at all.

The circle was in an open square in the middle of -

Talyn didn't even recognize it as a city at first. He'd never seen buildings so tall and slender, made of so much glass and glinting metal. They were *swaying*, back and forth like languid grass, in the pounding wind. He felt like he was surrounded by giant alien plants.

The city was teeming with Isateians, ranging from younger than Splay all the way up. Most of the fully-grown ones wore clothes in a dozen styles, and heaps of colorful jewelry.

<What's good to see around here?> Talyn asked.

"*How do I answer you?*" Zinc hollered at the top of her lungs, signing for Splay's benefit.

<Just think what you want to say! I'll get it!> Talyn exclaimed.

<*Like this?*> Zinc "shouted".

<You don't have to yell! The wind isn't going to interfere! And I can pass it along for Splay too, you don't have to keep signing.>

<Oh,> she sent. <Well, there's museums, and all these cool buildings, and I really like the subway - it's like a chain scoot but it goes through tunnels, underground - and there's a big lovely park with cool alien plants in it, and this town doesn't have a zoo but there's one a two-stop subway ride away, it just takes a degree and a half to get there once you know how to find the right subway.>

<I'd like to see a museum here, but I don't have any of the local currency,> Rhysel sent. <I didn't see an exchange near the circle...>

[Watch this, Splay!] Zinc signed, and then she grinned broadly. <I'll buy you both tickets if you want! I can afford them, I get a nice stipend for working at the circle.>

<Okay,> said Talyn, shrugging.

Splay took a few alarmed steps back while Zinc giggled; she reached out to pat it on the shoulder.

<We're harmless!> Rhysel exclaimed.

<Yeah, but if you were from around here, you would be in an institution,> Zinc said.

Splay and Zinc led the way to the nearest museum. <It's a history museum,> sent Zinc. <It's huge. I've only seen the first two floors. Do you care if we start on the third one? It's organized by topic, not chronological, you can look at the floors in any order.>

<That's fine by me,> Rhysel sent.

Splay did something involving a machine and a lot of buttons on that machine; Zinc produced orange strips of something that looked sort of like glass paper, from her pockets, and fed them into the same machine. <There's no physical tickets,> she remarked. <Nobody here would just walk in without paying. The only reason there's a machine instead of a wide-open jar is so people with fund accounts like Splay can have the money taken out of their accounts instead of paying in cash.>

The inside of the building wasn't as preposterously windy as the outdoors, but it was well-ventilated and breezy. Talyn supposed Isateians might feel uncomfortable in still air. He couldn't make heads or tails of any writing Splay or Zinc weren't looking at directly, but he followed Zinc to a circle marked on the floor, which, when they stood on it and Splay pressed a button twice, floated upwards two floors and let them off onto a balcony.

Splay, conveniently for Talyn, looked at the label for the floor's contents. *History of War*, it said.

Zinc was reading the label too. <Actually, maybe I want to skip this one, it doesn't sound fun. Next floor is History of Religion!>

<I want to check out this stuff,> Talyn said.

<Me too,> said Rhysel. Fortunately, Rhysel wasn't trying elaborate subterfuge to pass herself as a war buff; Talyn had seen her trying to act and didn't think she was any good at it.

<Would you mind going through the floor with us?> Talyn asked Zinc and Splay. <I

can use your understanding of the written stuff, but only if you're around understanding it.>
<Uh, sure, why not,> Zinc replied, and they went out onto the floor.

Within the floor devoted to the history of warfare, things *were* organized chronologically. Talyn started at the beginning, which had antiques: recognizable if strange ballistae and blades, a massive catapult, Isateian-shaped armor and tall dented shields. Roughly the sort of things he'd expect a war on Barashi to be fought with, except there were no ranged weapons with small ammunition: perhaps it was impractical to correct for wind with anything that weighed less than fifty pounds.

And then there were things Talyn didn't recognize, even when Splay or Zinc obligingly looked at the screens that displayed descriptions. Explosives and caustic chemicals and alien animals of war. A slideshow about battles that involved infecting enemies with diseases, attacking their water or their food or their air or their vermin. Explosives that aimed objects, large objects, faster and more accurately than catapults or ballistae.

And then it wasn't just futuristic, but incomprehensible: concepts related to physics that even Splay was little help in understanding. Custom-made germs, attacking lineages or subraces or people who'd *eaten particular foods recently*. Explosives that didn't just force apart shrapnel and structures, but also emitted what Splay settled on describing as "a kind of thing like light or heat", in a dozen types, which killed or burned or melted.

There was a long description describing how Isatei had once been conquered and occupied by a race from another planet, which served to unify the divided Isateians into a single cooperative society even after they rose up and made their conquerors *extinct*.

Isatei was looking like a better and better place to find a superweapon.

They'd wiped out the conquering species with another one of their abundant bioweapons, but even though there had been peace on their planet since, they didn't stall development of weapons of war. There were other species on other planets in their world, and Isatei was currently on friendly terms with all - but wary.

More exotic types of "things like light and heat". Research on attacks against calculating devices, which were sophisticated enough that enormous critical systems could be trusted to them.

The Isateians knew how to disintegrate *planets*, blow up *stars*, if that struck their fancy. But that wasn't what had been done to Aabalan.

<Excuse me, Splay,> Talyn said finally. <Do you happen to work for or with the Linnipese government at all, in any capacity?>

Splay tilted its head. <I don't believe that would be a good description,> it replied. <Zinc, when asked by that government to work as a translator, wished to learn about our society from someone close to its own position in lifecycle rather than from an adult, and so a request was put out for someone of my age willing to take on this task as part of our collective project of working with Linnip. But my job is only to be available as its companion, and it could replace me with another respondent at its discretion without consulting its government.>

It was weird that Splay referred to Zinc as "it", but the Isateian language didn't have gendered pronouns available. Even language-independent mindspeech couldn't get around the fact that Splay wasn't encoding gender information into its thoughts. <Can I ask you a question?> Talyn asked. <It's important to me, so if I have to come up with something to trade you, we can work that out ->

<I would not *accept* a gift, but it remains interesting that you will, and I am not a

storybook villain trying to indebt you through trickery. And the transaction costs of associating a system of micropayments with ordinary conversation were ultimately determined to be intractable, so typical questions and answers outside of the service industry must be held exempt anyway at most times. What do you wish to know?>

<Is there a weapon that doesn't explode, or leave any marks, but will kill all living things within a certain radius?>

<No, that type of weapon does explode,> replied Splay.

<What type?> Rhysel asked.

Splay led them back the way they'd come. <It is a *small* explosion,> it said. <The radius of effect is much larger.>

Talyn directed his next remark at Rhysel alone. <Large enough that they could sit it right on *top* of the ward and it would still get a space underneath.>

<The wards let light through,> Rhysel answered slowly. <Maybe they let this too. But wouldn't the explosion have been seen, heard...?>

<Invisibility spell, inaudibility spell. Just because this world doesn't have any magic of its own doesn't mean its stuff is immune to magic after it's been imported to Elcenia. The *ward itself* would stop it from scorching or damaging anything apart from the light-heat-stuff,> Talyn said. He resumed sending to Zinc and Splay too. <Is there a defense against this weapon?>

<Oh, yes, it's obsolete,> Splay said. <There are shields against it covering our whole planet.>

<Excellent,> Talyn replied, smiling.

Splay and Zinc weren't interested in continuing to show Rhysel and Talyn around the city after they'd finished looking through the History of Warfare floor of the museum, but Splay produced from a little bag it carried a device, which it somehow used to locate a tour guide for them. Zinc was willing to trade Rhysel Isateian currency for some of Rhysel's Linnipese coins on the spot, and then the four parted ways.

<I didn't get her name,> Rhysel realized.

<Does it matter?> Talyn asked. <She seems perfectly happy to go by Zinc. Maybe it's her nickname now since Splay has to call her that.>

<I suppose.> They followed Splay's directions to the tour guide. <Do you think it's safe to ask outright for what we need? If the society is so tight-knit and they're working so closely with Linnip, won't Linnip find out?>

<We could pay them for their discretion,> Talyn suggested. <They'll be completely trustworthy if we buy their trustworthiness at a fair price.>

The tour guide seemed to find both halfbloods fascinating. It readily agreed when Rhysel offered to pay it some more of her slips of currency on top of its usual fee in exchange for not telling anyone what they needed.

<We need to buy shields against the "neutron bomb",> Rhysel said, carefully copying the mental message Splay had used to refer to it. <Lots of them.>

Chapter 27: Capturing

Leekath peered at the writing on the IOU ticket. "Why do you need one of these for the shields, if they're so perfectly unable to tolerate debt?"

"So the one who sold us the shields can find us in his records. Usually it's all on the machines but obviously we didn't have any, so it wrote it down," Talyn said. "We'd have just brought home the shields but they don't keep them in stock. We'll go back in a week for them; Rhysel got permission to make another trip and told the circle guard people that she bought 'sculptures'. We got enough to cover all the population centers in Esmaar. And I got Kaylo some textbooks on Isateian physics so maybe he can figure out regular magic wards that do the same thing and we can cover more ground that way, but he's more confused than I've ever seen him, even though he can read the darn things without help."

"How did you buy them? That dragon girl can't have had that much money to trade Rhysel," said Leekath.

Talyn yawned. "We made the guy a bunch of stuff. They can make things really cheap there with their machines, but not to the point where gems and so on are worthless, and not to the point of duplicating magic things. Most magic things. We couldn't figure out how to make some mind kamai items work with the Isateians but Rhysel made a couple of golems, I think it's going to sell them, and I made some illusion crystals, probably also going to be sold."

"This all seems really traceable," Leekath said nervously.

"Yeah," Talyn admitted. "The Isateians won't volunteer the information, because we paid them not to, but there's always scrying and so on. From Isatei's end they seem to have a purely economic trading relationship with Linnip, and Linnip just happens to control the access to the world. I bet some Linnipese people just went in and paid for their bomb the same way we went in and paid for our shields. Isatei isn't really Linnip's friend and won't volunteer the information even if someone we couldn't pay knows what happened. So Linnip needs a reason to be suspicious first. But Zinc could tip them off even if the tour guide and the shield person can't, or they could just want to know about Rhysel way more than we think they do and follow up on everything we did while we were there, or something. It is risky."

"Maybe you should've made a separate trip. I don't know all that much about summoning spells, but there's probably some obscure one that you could've cast after you'd looked at one of the Isateians, or gone to the world and done perfectly non-suspicious things," Leekath said.

"We weren't sure if there was such a thing when we went," Talyn said, "and our visit was scheduled suddenly so we couldn't wait for someone to look it up, and if there hadn't been we might not have had a chance to go back. I asked Kaylo after, and he said that I couldn't do it because Barashi is technically my homeworld and that'd foul the spells that work that way, but maybe Rhysel could because she's got hers reset to Elcenia, but she's not that good a wizard and there are complex intentional components so maybe she couldn't, and then he started signing angrily at his physics textbook and I left before asking him whether it made sense to reset *my* homeworld."

"Oh."

"Besides, the Linnipese specifically said that unauthorized contact with Isatei would get us in trouble with them, and we don't know what kind of monitoring they have set up to look into that," Talyn said. "Kaylo's never even heard of a spell to look out for transworld traffic, but I don't think they'd be this casual about it if they didn't have anything of the kind."

"What's the world like?" Leekath asked.

"You'd hate it," Talyn said. "It'd be too windy for you to fly without kamai, and you couldn't echolocate over the noise, and it's bright and sunny and your sunscreen spell wouldn't work and I think if you walked outside with your suncloak on the hood wouldn't stay over your face and the whole thing might catch enough wind to blow you away."

"Lovely," remarked Leekath. "So we'll have shields in a week?"

"Yeah, and we need places to put them. We got them so they work by being in the sun and will still work at night - that cost us two extra golems and a crystal - and the person who sold them thinks Elcenia's sun will work just fine, but it means they need to be aboveground and not in shadow. Ideally invisible and placed by someone under personal anti-scry and covered in wards so they're hard to find or disable. Narax is going to handle the wards, and we'll all help out with placement. Rhysel's taking a bunch of students on a between-semesters transfer point making field trip once we know where the things need to go."

"Put them on roofs?" Leekath asked. "How big are they?"

"You can pick 'em up and carry 'em around. Roofs, yeah, is what we were thinking," Talyn said. "Each'll cover a big radius, but in circles - spheres really - so we need to overlap some to cover the whole country. We bought forty, we think we only need thirty."

Leekath called up an illusion map of Esmaar, and Talyn started poking spots on it, overlaying illusions of circles. "Wait," he said. "What's the scale?"

She added a scale line and he adjusted the circles and rearranged them. "Thirty-two," he said. "If we leave this chunk here undefended."

"Empty desert," said Leekath. "Cactuses and maybe three crazy campers. It's the sort of place you'd clear out to safely *test* a weapon."

"That's all right then," Talyn said. "They won't even know it's uncovered, anyway."

"Let me get a better map and figure out what towns these spots are in, and then we can tell Rhysel," Leekath said.

The revolution was not well-organized. People fell into roles - Lutan whipped up disguises, Kaylo (with Korulen's assistance) did the magical innovation, Narax did the heavy spellcasting. Leekath had found herself the local legal expert, and while she knew something about Esmaarlan law, Linnipese was another matter. So she studied, relying on hhikiiias to translate books from Ertydon into vampire for her. People asked her questions about the Resolutions and the privileged status of Aleism relative to other religions and about how noble families were supposed to work. Half the time this was only for their own curiosity: the rebellion was proceeding in fits and starts and there wasn't much for some of the recruits to do when they showed up at the citadel.

Leekath helped put down the "radiation shields", which chattered about themselves to her in bewildering fifteen-word strings of attempts to render their features into her language. They talked about particles and charge and dampening fields and how they were powered by sunshine. They promised, when asked, that no one would die of what they were supposed to protect against. That was good enough for her. Hhikiiias never lied.

The day after the shields were placed, Emryl didn't come back from her impersonation of Liria Meialek.

She didn't call to warn everyone that Liria's family had demanded her presence or her commanding officer had called an emergency meeting. She just didn't come back at all.

Kaarilel was home, so if her cover had been compromised too, at least they didn't have

her in their possession.

"Can they trace her communication crystal to our end?" Soraak asked everyone who *had* turned up to the meeting. At the other end of the room, Corvan paced.

"They could," Kaylo said, at the same time as Leekath said, "No."

"What?" Kaylo asked her. "As long as we're under the anti-scries, sure, but -"

"The other end of our crystal to her is dead," Leekath said. "This one doesn't have a mate anymore. She had enough warning to crush it, maybe, or they did."

Everyone was staring at her, but she wasn't going to let idiot notions about her being mentally ill endanger Emryl. "It *said so*, and if anyone's going to give me a hard time about having heard it *say so*, why don't we wait two degrees for Kaylo to come up with a good test you'll all agree to believe and then move on? Emryl's in trouble. Corvan, I need a hair or something of hers - something from her hairbrush will be fine."

<Very well,> said Emryl's uncle, and he stalked briskly towards the transfer point and disappeared.

"What exactly are you claiming?" Kaylo asked. "I need a precise hypothesis to exhaustively test -"

"Oh for the love of God," Leekath said, looking at the ceiling, "look, I'll turn around, somebody can hold my hands so I can't cast anything and most of you could tell if I were doing any *kamai*, and then you can write something down on a sheet of paper and I'll tell you what it is. Write it in vampire, Kaylo, so no one can nitpick about translation."

Leekath turned around and held her hands out until Kutran tentatively walked up and held onto each wrist for her. There was a scratching sound as Kaylo wrote a sequence of vampire numerals.

Leekath recited them a beat behind as he wrote, and he switched to words, random non-sentences she couldn't have reasonably predicted he'd write.

Finally he stopped writing. Leekath pulled her hands free of Kutran's and turned around, crossing her arms. "Is anyone going to waste our time defending us against a dead communication crystal trace?" There was silence. Kutran was hiding her face behind Soraak, maybe thinking about embarrassing stories her skirt could recite. Korulen was looking over Kaylo's shoulder at the piece of paper, and then at Leekath, and then Narax seized it to have a look too, making an incredulous face. "Okay then," said Leekath, ignoring all of that. "I'll make a proxy with Emryl's hair, and it'll tell me what it can, and we'll go from there."

<I love you,> Talynt sent.

<I love you too.>

Corvan reappeared with the hair, and made no fuss about the questionable nature of Leekath's abilities.

"What are you going to do?" asked Ngen.

"Just a proxic working, same as Rhysel does when she wants to do some kinds of healing," Leekath said. "Once it's connected to Emryl by the hair it's 'about' her, and it'll tell me about her instead of about the rock it's made from. Then I can ask it questions."

Kutran was clutching her ponytail with both hands.

"I don't go around doing this all the time," Leekath said testily.

Leekath made a statuette out of part of the table, and sank the hair into it.

"Tell me," she whispered.

"Emryl is alive but unconscious," Leekath said. "She's not injured, but she is a little

hungrier and more dehydrated than she should be, and she's still in Liria's form. Her hands are restrained - not too tight, but enough to prevent spellcasting."

"How did they catch her?" Rhysel asked.

"I'm not sure," Leekath said. "Too much of that is about other people and spells and not about just her. I can't tell if she has her token of Liria's mind with her or not, either, because that's about the token, not about Emryl. But if she lost it, that could be how."

"Do you know *where* she is?" asked Talyn.

Leekath asked the figurine in a whisper, then looked up and shook her head. "I can play nearer-farther if I bring the figurine with me, but I can't sustain it for all that long and we don't know where to start."

"The Shield, right? Wouldn't we store someone here in *our* headquarters, if we went around taking prisoners?" asked Ngen. "Hypothetically, wouldn't the both of our prisoners be in adjacent dorm rooms -"

"They have more options than we do," said Rhysel.

"And the *laina* of internal affairs, who'd be handling something like this, is *paranoid*, from what Liria and Annei know of her," Talyn added. "She's smart and she works like she expects every security measure she has to fail; we shouldn't expect her to put someone in the middle of the public and obvious Shield when she could just as easily put them in a secret prison or a base in the middle of the ocean or something."

"Do we know the locations of secret prisons and ocean bases and the like?" Rhysel asked tiredly.

"Liria used to work at a base in Tenebirokalamikikek, but it doesn't exist anymore, and neither knows about any others, and ones our prisoners know about would be the last ones Teiat-*laina* would pick," said Talyn.

"Can you tell if Emryl has coughed up any information about us, this rebellion here?" Narax asked.

"Hm?" Leekath murmured to the figurine. "She hasn't - yet. I'm not sure exactly how they're questioning her because that's about them, but she hasn't said anything *yet*."

"We have to get her out," said Kutran.

"We have to disable the transfer point," Ngen said. "Replace it with a new one with a different signature she doesn't know. Can you make it *impossible* for her to talk with that thing?"

"Not at this range -" Leekath began.

"We have to get her *out*," Kaarilel interrupted stridently, echoing Kutran. Leekath wondered if Kaarilel was so shrill about it because she could easily have been caught too. Did she want to be reassured that she'd never run a risk of being captured and then also abandoned?

"We also need to change the transfer point," Talyn said, walking towards it. "Good idea, Ngen. Rhysel, a little help?"

Master and apprentice worked kamai that Leekath couldn't hear happening, because neither transfer point nor floor was an "object". They called for volunteer sources of lifeforce for a replacement; the dragons present sufficed.

All of the kyma in the room learned the new signature.

<Can we now formulate a plan for retrieving my niece?> Corvan asked testily as he stepped away from the new point.

"Can I?" Leekath whispered under her breath to the figurine. This would be such a good time for hearing to turn up a previously unknown working, one that would let her pull Emryl from wherever she was. If she could just make Emryl appear by doing something to the figure, or

swap their places -

"No," said the little statuette of her friend.

"From any distance?" tried Leekath, while Kaylo watched her with a curious light in his eyes. It would be so much easier to get within five miles, even one mile, than to get Emryl back any other way.

"No," said the statuette, and then it began counting Emryl's teeth aloud.

Leekath hung her head.

She dismissed the figurine; there was no use letting it go on draining her when she couldn't think of anything else to ask.

"Be careful," Leekath said, again.

"I know, I know, this isn't Ryganaav, attacking a *laina* in her house to get information is way more dangerous than a dude with a sword," parroted Talyn.

Leekath clenched her teeth; maybe she was repeating herself, but he kept smiling that cocky smile that made her want to kiss him and smack him at the same time. "I *mean* it," she said. "Most of your Resolution rights evaporate if they catch you red-handed doing something like that! The officer you're going after is paranoid and smart and she'll have protections you know nothing about, she's not foolish enough to have overlooked kamai, she's -"

"She's bad news, if I get caught," Talyn said, "so I won't get caught, I'll just get what I need and come home to you." He kissed Leekath's mouth and she sighed, half in exasperation, but she kissed back. <I'm not leaving you here alone. But I've got the best shot out of anyone. Even if all the kamai teachers at Peiza are working for Teiat-*laina* I'm stronger than them all.>

<I'm going to watch a figurine of you the whole time,> Leekath sent. <If you're in trouble ->

<If I'm in trouble you'll tell the others and plan a hostage exchange, or something, because it'll mean the direct approach doesn't *work*. Don't you come in after me if I get in over my head. I'm taller than you,> he teased.

<This isn't funny.>

<I'll be fine, Leekath, seriously,> Talyn assured her. <I'll pick through whatever's between me and the *laina*, I'll knock out her shields, I'll get what I need about the place they've got Emryl stashed, and then I'll fix her memory and even put her shields back. Then I'll get out and check in here and then we get to form a rescue team. You won't even need to dip into your blood stash.>

<It's not just about the *blood*,> protested Leekath. <I love *you*, I did even before you tasted better than dragons do.>

<Relax, I wasn't suggesting that,> Talyn sent, starting to stroke her hair. She let him, stiffness in her muscles falling away as the trance started to take effect. <I love you too. I'm not going to get caught.>

<I'm still going to make that figurine.>

<If you want. I don't need any secrets from you,> Talyn sent. <There's no way for us to communicate that way, is there?>

<I could ask it what you want to say to me, but only if I don't want it to also tell me anything else at the same time,> Leekath sent. <And I can't talk to you at all.>

<Oh well.>

<Don't bring a communication crystal just so you can talk to me in the middle of the mission. They *could* trace it. You being actually safe is more important than me being able to

reassure myself by talking to you.>

<Okay,> he agreed.

He broke the kiss and the trance in one motion, pressed a hair from his head into her palm, and left to visit Teiat-*laina*, director of internal affairs.

Leekath hung from the bar in her dorm room and listened anxiously to her figurine, but she couldn't keep it up the entire time, and gave up in exhaustion after the second angle of him waiting impatiently for the *laina* to be alone. She wished she'd eaten before he'd left. That would have given her another angle's worth of figurine maintenance at least.

She forced herself to take a nap. An angle later she woke up, having gotten just a few degrees of actual sleep, and made the figurine again. Her roommate was asleep for the night on the other end of the bar; Leekath didn't make a sound.

He was still just waiting. The *laina* was apparently having company over. If she hadn't had a moment alone for him to make his move after four angles, five, six, surely he'd give up and try another day...? Maybe not. He'd been co-prenticed with Emryl; he liked and cared about her; he'd try to sit and wait. And maybe he'd get impatient, and do something idiotic.

Leekath wished she'd given him a communication crystal after all. He was in a disguise, a generic teenage girl Lutan had invented for him to be; generic Linnipese teenage girls could talk on crystals without attracting much attention, surely? But he didn't have a crystal with him. He was just waiting.

She had to let the figurine go again, but she was too fretful to sleep any more, even though she hung with her eyes closed against the ceiling's faint light that was best for vampire sleep.

It occurred to her that as long as she was up at this hour anyway, she could go to a temple service. The district that covered the school should have one that night, unless she had the calendar turned around in her head. It had been a while since she'd gone.

But the vampire god wouldn't listen to anything she asked about Talyn, who wasn't a vampire, and she didn't think she could focus on anything else.

Leekath let herself down from the bar and teleported to the citadel for a swallow of blood from the stash. Even when one drop was expanded to fill her drinking bag, it tasted the overwhelming, delectable same. She missed the way Talyn held her when she drank from him directly, though, the warmth and the smug look on his face when she pulled away and looked at him deliriously.

There wasn't anyone around. She put the blood and bag back where he'd hidden them for her.

She made a new figurine right there, rather than teleporting back to her room.

He was in the middle of doing kamai; the *hhikiiiia* could barely speak quickly enough to tell her everything he was doing, but he was attacking the *laina's* shields. And then he was done, and he wasn't invisible anymore, and he was using a different disguise than the one he'd left with. What was going *on*? He was doing more mind kamai, sifting around; probably that meant he'd broken through and stunned her (probably); Leekath couldn't hear what he was looking at, because that was about Teiat-*laina*, not Talyn.

Talyn was performing a memory erasure -

And then he was terrified, he'd turned to vapor, he'd solidified and he was teleporting -

Where had he gone? The figurine wouldn't tell her.

She dismissed it, clutching the hair between her fingers in case she needed to remake it,

and ran to the teleportation alcove in the citadel. It was either there or Rhysel's tower, and the alcove was better-protected, if he was worried about someone or something.

There he stood, still in disguise, hands on his knees, panting.

"Talyn," she said. "Are you okay?"

"She managed to trip some kind of alarm before I broke through her mind shields, and I didn't notice her doing it, because she was still mostly shielded then." He swallowed a lungful of air and switched to mindspeech. <I pretended to be her granddaughter running from something unspecific to get her to let me through the wards on the *house*, because I needed close range, she has this huge garden, and she changes her wards often enough it was plausible she'd have forgotten the granddaughter on the most recent casting - and I was doing what I needed close range for, looking for stuff about Emryl, and I wiped her memory, but then there were these soldiers surrounding the house, I had to turn into air to get out of the ward they threw up to keep me *in*.>

<But you're okay?" she asked, reaching out and pulling him into a hug.

<I'm not hurt. But I didn't get a chance to put her shields back. I erased the memory, but she and all those soldiers that she called in know something happened and it involved a kama who was strong enough to break the shields! That's me and like half a dozen other people, it's *not* going to be hard to narrow it down ->

<So you stay here,> Leekath sent firmly, squeezing him hard.

<Yeah, but they're onto us now ->

<Do they know anything other than that there's an innate kama - admittedly, probably you - who has something against them? Do they know what you were looking for, or who you're working with?> Leekath asked, maintaining a firm grip on her boyfriend. It seemed to calm the tremors that were shivering their way up his body.

<I don't think so. Not that I know of. Narax put an anti-scry on me before I left, even if I missed a memory to wipe because I got interrupted I looked like her granddaughter the whole time...>

<Then you just stay here, until this is over,> Leekath sent. <And you'll be fine.>

<Okay,> sent Talyn wearily.

<You should get some sleep. So should I, really, but I had a little nap earlier and you didn't, do you want me to help you fix up one of the dorms, or get you anything?>

<No, I'm fine,> Talyn sent, hugging her and then releasing. He pecked her on the lips. <I love you. I love you so much.>

<I love you too. You'll be okay,> Leekath sent.

He went to the dorms, and she went to the transfer point. It took her to the one in front of Binaaralav, and she decided to take the lifts to her room rather than teleport while tired.

She wasn't paying enough attention to hear the voices of the uniforms that stood outside her door until she was almost on top of them.

"Aaeihhyleekatheeei Hhirheek," approximated one of the redheaded women standing outside her dorm room. She sounded like the name tasted bad. "You are under arrest on suspicion of criminal collusion."

Chapter 28: Exchanging

"I - I'm a Linnipese subject," Leekath tried. "Twelfth Resolution -"

"Being a subject doesn't mean we can't arrest you, Aaralan Hhirheek," said the taller of the soldiers. "It means we need sufficient suspicion. Please be advised that resisting arrest is a crime. Place your wrists in these cuffs -"

Leekath backed away. "Si-sixteenth -"

"We haven't *asked* you anything, Aaralan Hhirheek," said the taller soldier. "None of the Resolutions apply; we have sufficient suspicion and we're placing you under arrest, and if you don't put your wrists in these cuffs before the timer goes off we'll be authorized to use force to apprehend you."

Leekath took another step back, lifted one arm in a defensive gesture and tried to teleport with the other hand, but nothing happened.

"We're not stupid, Aaralan Hhirheek," said the shorter soldier.

Leekath stepped back again.

"I really, really don't recommend resisting arrest," said the taller soldier. "We wouldn't have been sent for you if we weren't the pair of us equipped to take in a wizard kama vampire."

The wizard kama vampire in question was shaking, and looking from side to side at her neighbors' doors, but nothing else came to her, no one appeared to help.

She held out her hands and dropped her head and let them snap the cuffs on.

The short soldier touched one of Leekath's hands and one of the other soldier's, and teleported away.

The scry failed to follow beyond that; it blurred into a blob of white in the air in front of Talyn.

Talyn swore and swung his fist through the scry's display. The spell dissolved.

Leekath was the legal expert. Leekath was the one who'd know how long they were allowed to hold her, on what charges, when there'd be a trial - *would* there be a trial? Did Elcenian countries really not do trials? - what her rights were, how they had to treat her.

Talyn knew none of those things.

Everyone was leaving him alone after he'd snapped at Kutran, and that was very good, because if someone had bothered him, he'd wind up doing something illegal to them.

He could've strangled Emryl. The possibilities were that she'd voluntarily provided the information (acceptable, but meant that he might wish to kill her) or that the Linnipese did awful things to their prisoners (not acceptable: they had Leekath).

He didn't know what had been going through his girlfriend's mind when they'd taken her. There were, he'd found, no past-scryes that read thoughts. He could only watch her face, listen to her stammer the numbers of resolutions that the soldiers brushed off. He could watch it a dozen times if he wanted. It wasn't a secret arrest, under an anti-scry. They weren't hiding from him that she'd been taken. Her roommate had told him.

But they were hiding her from him now.

He considered drastic actions. Shaking the entire nation of Linnip into rubble had the problem of aim, as it was not a round-bordered country. Assassinating the Empress would be all well and good if she didn't keep her palace buttoned up so tight. Maybe he should just blow up the entire blasted Shield.

No. No, that wouldn't be a good idea. Not before he got Leekath out, anyway.

So. Getting Leekath out.

From where? They didn't know where she was any more than they knew where Emryl was. Rhysel had gone to city hall to ask the occupiers in charge of Paraasilan, but Talyn didn't think they'd put Leekath in a normal, civilian prison where she could get visitors. No, she'd be somewhere obscure, somewhere hard to get at even if he knew where it was.

He took her hairbrush. He made a figurine with one of her black, soft hairs. It wouldn't talk to him, the figurine or the hair. He deactivated it, but he couldn't stand to slag it; the little image of her went on standing where he'd made it.

Leekath had to get out. They'd starve her. They might *try* to feed her (maybe), but would they do it to her exacting religious specifications in a way she could believe? They certainly couldn't have anyone on hand as palatable as Talyn himself. Could she even choke down human blood anymore? If they even got human blood for vampire prisoners. Maybe they were giving her cow's blood or something.

Talyn shuddered.

He had to get her out.

There was no new security on Teiat-*laina's* house. Maybe there was nothing to add.

She was home, which was good. He couldn't sense her directly through her shields, and she had some kind of opacity on her windows, but he could detect an obstinacy in the air - her shields, a part of the world that didn't like him and wanted him to go away. It was important that she be home. If he camped out waiting for her for angles on end again, one of his well-meaning alliance compatriots might figure out what he was up to and pull him out.

Her shields had been boosted relative to what they were before. Nothing he couldn't dismantle, but he'd really rather she didn't set off another alarm while he worked on that. Maybe he could pour in more force, get speed that way? Probably not enough. What was the alarm trigger? Could he destroy it?

Unfortunately, he couldn't read her mind.

He expanded his gaseous form as far as was safe. None of the wards stopped air; no one could see air. An air *mage* might notice something amiss, but wouldn't be able to identify it. He was looking for one of the people on the response team, any one of them, who'd rushed to the house the first time she'd tripped the alarm.

There was one. He was off duty (*he*; what kind of self-hatred drove a Linnipese *man* to join the army, anyway? Talyn never ceased to be bewildered) and he was home with his kids. And his mind wasn't shielded, and he knew where Teiat-*laina* kept the crystal that sounded the alarm.

Talyn contracted himself again, and sought out the alarm crystal in the heel of the *laina's* boot. There it was. He considered shattering it into a million pieces. It was only supposed to activate when struck with intent, or it would summon soldiers every time she took a step, but maybe breakage would activate it too, for safety purposes.

He melted it instead. Magic was so *easy* when he was really, truly focused - not on floaty theories or high ideals but on what he wanted to *do*. And he had never wanted anything as badly as he wanted Leekath free and safe.

He couldn't see her or hear Teiat-*laina*; maybe she was removing the boot. It would have warmed up, maybe enough to burn her foot. At any rate, no soldiers appeared.

Talyn swooped in through her wards and materialized in the room with her. His desperation coalesced with him, finding a home in his body that it didn't have when he was a

cloud of air, and his face twisted into a grimace.

He didn't bother with the disguise. His idea depended on the Linnipese knowing who they were talking to. Knowing who they had pissed off.

"Hullo, Emia," he said, before she'd reacted to his presence, and he broke her shields apart.

"If you're here to kill me," she said, from where he'd commanded her into her chair, "that's not a very efficient way of achieving anything. All six of my potential replacements are competent and will carry out the goals of the Empire as faithfully as I will. I'm also eighty-two, so no one's been counting on me to stick around forever in a long, long time. Maybe that's not what you're after. You'd be the fifteenth person to fail to extort me into using my position for their ends, if that's the idea."

"I'm not here to kill you, and I don't think extortion's the right word either," said Talyn with false pleasantness, sitting in the other chair. "I just want to talk. You don't make it easy, you know. I tried sending a letter first." It hadn't even been an explosive letter, which had been his *first* plan.

"And you found out that I don't receive mail, so the obvious next step was to break into my house and psychically pin me to my seat after melting my alarm crystal," she said flatly.

"Yep," said Talyn. "But you might be glad I want to talk to you." But not as glad as he was *enraged*. He was down in reserves he didn't know he had, forcing out casual words when his heart was pounding and his jaw ached from clenching.

"Not really," said Teiat-*laina*.

"There's this prisoner you've got hold of," Talyn said. "I want her out." And if she didn't get out, there would be semi-random destruction, in quantity.

"We imprison people we're willing to let free *constantly*, so I'm sure that won't be any trouble," said the *laina*.

"Yeah, normally I'd be in the mood for sarcastic banter, but I find I'm really not at all," said Talyn. And if she kept trying it he might be in the mood for setting her hair on fire. Then it'd be red again. "Do you know who I'm talking about?"

"No."

She was actually not lying to him. How was Leekath not important enough to make it to the attention of a *laina*? For that matter, why wasn't she lying to him, stringing him along? Maybe she just avoided lying because she thought everyone went around with lie detection on like she did. "Name Leekath Hhirheek sound familiar?" he asked.

"I assume you can read my mind, since you ruined the shields around it. Is there a reason you're asking me questions?"

"Well," Talyn said. "I've noticed you have... I'm going to say 'annoyingly'... managed to *not actually know* a *surprising* amount of information, or I'd already have what I want. If you'd been paranoid a *little* differently you wouldn't trust your underlings, you'd do everything yourself, and then you'd know everything."

She coughed. "I'd be a single point of failure for everything. You can see I'm not."

"Yes, you're clever, but you're running the risk of making me *even more* upset, which is *not* clever," Talyn snapped. "So her name doesn't sound familiar. But you did order a reaction to what happened here the other day."

"You haven't answered my question," said the *laina*.

"Yeah, that's not really the point of the exercise," said Talyn, standing up abruptly and

peering at her. She wasn't even faking her calm, like he was. At least she couldn't see through his bravado.

"But you seem to want to talk to me," she said. "There's something I can do with my own brain that you can't. What is it?"

"Think with it," Talyn said. "So you don't recognize the name? Leekath. Hhirheek. Aaeihhyleekatheeei. She's the daughter of one of the members of parliament your lot forced out. I don't think you arrested *him* or anyone else from his office so it's not that. Why?" Why did they *take her* -

"Sennah's breath, I don't *know*."

"Right," Talyn said, stalking a step closer. "But you can *think*. I recommend thinking."

She didn't have to talk for him to hear. She was thinking it was his fault, that someone had figured out what he was up to and his connection to Leekath, someone had noted that she had skills or history or connections that he seemed likely to be using, and had brought her in when he himself had proven unavailable.

"Interesting," said Talyn. It wasn't. He hadn't gotten Leekath arrested, had he? He hadn't even been there - they hadn't mentioned him during the arrest -

"But I don't know where she is, don't know *who* knows where she is, and have a drastically incomplete list of locations where she might be," said Teiat-*laina*.

"Yeah, I know," Talyn said, smiling grimly. "But you're going to find out, because whichever one of your people took her, wouldn't they rather have me?"

The *laina* was looking at him quizzically. "You're serious?"

"I want Leekath out. I want her to go home and go about her business like you never thought to touch her. You've made it hard for me to *find* her, and I want her out *now*, so let's make a deal," hissed Talyn.

"I doubt you think we could hold you," said Teiat-*laina*. "I think we'll take your word for it rather than pay for a test with someone worth arresting."

"I didn't *say* - well, you *can't* hold me if I don't *let* you," Talyn said. "You've heard of geas spells. If you - and whoever else in your organization has the power to follow through - will swear on one, so will I. I want Leekath out *now* and I will *actually* hand myself over and stay put to get it if we can work out a way to orchestrate the whole mess. Pull any tricks, and yes, I'm out and more pissed off than ever. But if you'd rather have me than Leekath, you can have me - *instead*."

The *laina* was intrigued. She was idly considering if she'd have done anything so "reckless and shortsighted" for her husband, when he'd been alive. Well, if she wouldn't, she couldn't have cared much about him. "Interesting," she said. "But I'm not sure this will fly. We can't give your girlfriend diplomatic immunity, she can't go around doing whatever she wants just because you bargain yourself in. I'm not even sure we'd rather have you than her as it stands; I don't know what she did - but if we let her out and she commits a crime in broad daylight? Are you saying you're so valuable that we'd like to let her get away with that to keep you?"

Talyn couldn't think of anyone he'd ever met who he liked less than Emia Teiat at that moment. "Well, the alternative is I start destroying stuff until I get her back," he snarled.

"Unfortunately, Empire policy is never to respond to threats," said the *laina*. "It's been quite consistently followed, too, as you'd know if you read up on the War of Independence, the Saishi poisonings, the Linthi disaster..."

And she wasn't lying about that either.

Talyn considered kicking her, but that would probably only get him a smart remark about how the *Empire* didn't kick its prisoners.

"I have an idea," suggested Teiat-*laina*.

"What?" Talyn snapped.

"I assume she can be geased too."

Talyn's component parts rebelled at that idea, but he swallowed bile and listened.

"To, for instance, comport herself as a law-abiding subject of the Empire, and resist attempts to break the geas to the best of her ability. And then I think the trade you propose would look more attractive to the relevant parties. We don't *usually* release prisoners with geas spells on them, simply because the spells are terribly complicated and even most wizards can't learn to cast them. We don't have the wizardpower to make it a typical thing. But with the stakes you're describing..." She shrugged. "I know we have one geas-competent wizard available. She could be spared to assist with an exchange like this. If other parties deem it appropriate."

Talyn chewed the inside of his cheek. He was beginning to really, really hate the fact that Teiat-*laina* was so honest (sarcasm aside) and unflappable.

"Why are you helping me?" Talyn asked.

"I think I'm trying to get you locked up," she said, raising an eyebrow.

"Why are you helping me get what I want?" he clarified, clenching his fists.

"Because you seem willing to buy it very dearly," she said. "I'm sure you can tell that I don't think you're being very smart, but as long as you prefer to go on not being very smart anyway, that puts me in a cooperative mood."

Talyn's teeth ground together and he turned away from her. "Well. What needs to happen to set this up?"

"Do *you* receive mail?" she inquired archly.

"No. Not someplace I want stuff about this sent, anyway."

"Well, then, I suppose you could invade my house again, since you already know where it is and I'm going to want to move *anyway*, sometime tomorrow evening."

"That's not fast enough," said Talyn, turning back to scowl at her.

"That's already pushing it," she countered. "In addition to *annoyingly not knowing anything*, I am *annoyingly not empowered to do anything quickly*. For some reason, that seems to be a demand that terrorists and the like make frequently." She coughed. "But I can most likely have a deal on the table for you in twenty-five angles."

So irritatingly honest. If she'd been hiding anything, instead of singing like a teakettle, he could have worked out some of his anger getting her to be more forthcoming, as a poor substitute to rescuing his girlfriend from starvation and withdrawal and whatever other mistreatment she was enduring.

"If," she said, "speed is such a concern, we might as well cover possible modifications to the trade now. Anything else you'll throw in if my people won't take the trade straight across?"

"What, like somebody else I'd turn over? No, that's not happening," said Talyn, trying to sound resolute. That would be a stronger bargaining position. Maybe. He didn't understand how that worked.

"What about helping us while you're in custody?" Teiat-*laina* suggested. "Even with an expertly applied geas, I doubt we'd entrust you with anything sensitive, but -"

"No," Talyn exclaimed. "I can't *stand* you people!"

"- but it would doubtless be more mentally stimulating than sitting around in a cell with nothing to do," she said. "No? Not even something we could be doing with our own resources

anyway so you'd only be saving us money, or letting a few of our people go home to see their families an extra day a week?"

"I said no," snapped Talyn, looking away.

"You're not very flexible," she remarked.

"Why, what do you want to throw in if I don't like the terms of your deal?" He considered offering the soldiers still imprisoned in the citadel, but he'd made up his mind that he didn't want to hurt the rebellion by taking any resources other than himself away from it. Leekath wanted to live in Esmaar, not something named Esmaar that Linnip held as a province.

"This is *your* deal. Yourself for this Leekath individual, enforced by geas on all sides," said Teiat-*laina*. "It remains to be seen if we'll take it."

"It would be stupid of me to tell you in advance how high you could talk me up, anyway!" Talyn exclaimed.

"Yep," agreed the *laina*, tilting her head to look at Talyn from another angle.

He made an incoherent noise.

"But if you don't, then you run the risk of having to wait an extra day for a revised exchange to be put through," she went on. "In case you aren't tempting enough for the decisionmakers to come to an agreement."

All the gods *curse her*.

"I'll consider work you could have done with your own resources if you throw in my friend, too," Talyn said. "Someone on your staff will know who I mean."

"I'll mention it," Teiat-*laina* said evenly.

"Right," he growled.

"Anything else?" she asked.

Talyn dissolved into air and released the command that kept her in her chair with a single motion.

He went back to the citadel, invisible, even while people were there talking about him and wondering where he'd run off to. He put as many bags of blood as he could draw from himself without passing out into Leekath's stash. He'd have left twice as much, but she wasn't there to replenish the supply in his body.

And then he wrote a note.

Dear Leekath,

You're probably thinking I'm stupid, but I couldn't leave you there for a tick longer than I had to.

I'm sort of hoping you'll come up with a good way to get me out of jail, but just in case, you should probably ration this - wean yourself off if you can. Try biting Barashin fairies (don't overdo it) or Barashin dragons. I think they live longer than Elcenian dragons and might make it easier to step down.

I'm not actually stupid. I'm going to leave a wizard - not going to tell you who - a note saying they should get you to Barashi as soon as possible. That'll break the geas, and if you don't know who it is maybe you won't be able to obey the geas telling you to make a sincere effort to keep it on. (Maybe they won't even remember to include anything about that, but I'm not betting on it, so I'm leaving the note just in case, but it'll take a few days to find, I don't want to tip anyone off early.)

I love you.

I love you so, so much.

- *Talyn*

"I - I have to ask," said the wizard, looking at *Teiat-laina* and then *Talyn* and then back, "is this really safe for us to be here - what if it's a trick -"

"Did you cast all of the wards I asked you to cast, *Nina-eian*?" *Teiat-laina* asked the wizard.

"Ye-e-es, but the kamai briefer at Mystic Forces says -"

"Has he killed us yet, *Nina-eian*?" said *Teiat-laina*. "Are you even now a watchful spirit beholding your own funeral?"

"No-o-o..."

"Then proceed, please."

Nina-eian read over the geas specifications again. Finally she pursed her lips, closed her eyes, and performed a gesture while murmuring a long word. "Emia *Teiat*," she said. "Contingent on the geasing of *Aaeihhyleekatheeei Hhirheek* and *Talyn Casten* carried out as agreed during this casting, this spell compels you to cause those on whose behalf you act to release *Aaeihhyleekatheeei Hhirheek* from custody within one angle, without in so doing treating her in any way you would not accept for yourself were you a vampire; she is to be left free and her behavior is not to be interfered with beyond the parameters of her geas. Do you accept?"

"I do," said *Teiat-laina*.

"*Talyn Casten*," said *Nina-eian*, "contingent on the geasing of *Emia Teiat* carried out as agreed during this casting, this spell compels you to make no attempt to resist arrest, escape custody, or aid attempts by others to bring you out of custody; you are to comport yourself as a well-behaved prisoner for the duration of your sentence. Do you accept?"

"I do," said *Talyn*, gritting his teeth. The contingency meant that the spell was void if the *laina* or anyone else in her command structure messed with *Leekath*. That even included the other *lainas*, and the Empress herself, who'd ratified *Teiat-laina's* position and in so doing did empower the *laina* to act on her behalf. He'd checked in the wizardess's mind, which he knew had to be left accurate at least on the subject of the geas lest protective ignorance foul the spell.

Nina-eian then got up and walked out of the room. They'd moved *Leekath* to somewhere in the building, or so he'd been told, but she was swathed in every kind of ward, and he couldn't feel her presence.

But he could feel the geas settle into place, like a giant clawed insect on the back of his neck.

"Well," said *Teiat-laina*, rubbing her own neck and picking up the cuffs that lay on the table. She held them out with a thin smile. "*Talyn Casten*, you are under arrest on suspicion of criminal collusion, on known actual trespassing, on known actual assault of an officer of the Imperial Military, on known actual destruction of Imperial Military property, on known attempted extortion by threat of terrorism..."

Chapter 29: Geasing

Leekath didn't know *why* they were letting her out. There was a contingency in the geas about Emia Teiat, but that didn't seem too important if Leekath accepted the obligation to begin with: if Teiat-*laina* defied hers, whatever it was, Leekath's would just dissolve.

"C-can you repeat that?" she asked the wizard.

"Aaeihhyleekatheeei Hhirheek," repeated the wizard obligingly, "contingent on the geasing of Emia Teiat carried out during this casting, this spell compels you to, on release from custody to be carried out within one angle, make a diligent good-faith attempt to obey all laws and statues applicable to you as a subject of the Linnipese Empire with the sole exception of those obliging you to report criminal activity already known to you; to refrain to the extent of your ability from traveling to any other world or allowing others to transport you there; and to sincerely avoid and resist all attempts at breakage or circumvention of this geas and to refrain from attempting it yourself. Do you accept?"

This wasn't standard practice. It wasn't illegal either, but why would they dig out a wizard who could cast a geas for her? Why would they explicitly build in a clause that meant she didn't have to sell out the rebellion?

"Wh-why -"

"Just say 'I do'. Or 'I refuse'," the wizard said.

Leekath took another moment to think, but she was fuzzy-headed. Not from hunger exactly. She hadn't been without blood long enough to be truly hungry. But she missed that taste, and that was very like hunger.

"Well, Hhirheek-*tepei*?" the wizard asked.

"I do," said Leekath, and she felt the geas fall into place. She'd never had one on her before; there was a sharp enrollment limit on the class about them, because only one teacher could do it, and she'd never considered it very important.

The wizard released Leekath's cuffs, and Leekath rubbed her wrists. "You're free to go, Hhirheek-*tepei*."

"I-is there an anti-teleportation ward -"

"Nope," said the wizard.

Leekath twisted her hand in the air and murmured, and the stark holding room was gone and she was in Talyn's room.

He wasn't there.

Talyn wasn't home at all, and neither were Rhysel or Aar Camlenn. Presumably they were at the citadel. Leekath wasn't sure if it was legal for her to travel to the citadel. She also wasn't sure if it was smart. Certainly she couldn't help them with anything they were doing. She didn't have to sell out people she knew of already, but she might find herself obliged to turn in any new recruits. The citadel was in wolfrider territory, somewhere, which wasn't illegal to visit. But it was under the control of a force with which Linnip was in an adversarial state, if not technically "war" because the rebellion wasn't a recognized nation.

Leekath teleported to her room and looked through her books on Linnipese law.

Apparently she could legally travel to the citadel and other "regions and edifices" controlled by forces with which Linnip was adversarial, and speak with said forces as long as she didn't make "commitments or insinuations thereof". *If* she could sincerely bill herself as some kind of diplomat. Did that seem reasonable? *Actually* reasonable - the geas wouldn't let her con

herself into believing it just to get what she wanted. But the definition of "diplomat" was extremely fuzzy. She looked it up. "Ambassadors" were more specific, but "diplomats" were any people who had professionally interacted with a representative of one government on behalf of another regarding a joint venture, agreement, stance, relationship, etcetera.

She'd talked to the ambassador from Larotia once, on her aaihhhi's behalf, about the International Seed Bank, which was a "venture". That sounded defensible. The geas didn't squeeze her.

So she could go to the citadel, and she could have ordinary sorts of conversations with people as long as she didn't suggest that she could be of any help with anything they were doing. And she could get at Talyn, or if he wasn't there either, at least at the stash of blood.

But if there was a new recruit -

Well, there probably wasn't. There hadn't been since the beginning. If Leekath ran into anybody down in the citadel she'd warn them, and -

Wait, could she warn them, even about that? They'd want to break the geas, especially Talyn, and everything she did at this point would suggest that it was there. Aar Kithen and Narax were both good enough at breaks that they could probably do it, or they might haul her to the geas instructor at school, who might also be able to even for a spell he hadn't cast. That wouldn't exactly *bother* her, but if she went around doing things that would cause the geas to be broken, the geas would not like that.

Okay, could she go to the citadel blindfolded and wearing a sign that said "please don't interact with me, I'll explain later"? That would be weird, but no one's first guess would be a geas, since that wasn't how Linnip generally released prisoners. Did she have any coherent story whatever about how she'd gotten out that didn't give away the geas? Would that matter, if people obeyed the sign? And then she'd be able to navigate by echolocation, well enough not to bump into things but not well enough to recognize individual people.

Unless they were wearing distinctive objects that she'd then hear later, or they had unusual builds that would be distinctive even as echoes, or, or, or.

She wished Talyn had been in his room at Rhysel's tower.

In her desk was a communication crystal to him, but he was bad about answering it, and he might have gone tearing off to Ryganaav or somewhere that he couldn't bring it when she'd been taken in, in which case he wouldn't have it. She tried anyway. No answer.

Well, she could *call* the blood out of the hiding place, couldn't she? Narax had an anti-calling ward on the citadel but it might be one that only applied to people. No, probably not.

She might just have to wait until school started up again and cut a class to go and fetch her blood. Then everyone would be busy with classes. Only a handful of rebels weren't teachers or students, and she didn't know them well, and they probably wouldn't stop her and introduce her to a new person if they spotted her running around.

The new term would start in a week. She could last a week, maybe. Couldn't she?

Talyn wasn't going to be off wherever he was for a *week*, was he?

For that matter, Rhysel and so on wouldn't let her alone all week unless she were inaccessible for some reason -

Her geas pinched her, just a little, and she winced.

It looked like she was going home to visit her family during the last week of Sutaahel break.

She groaned aloud at the ceiling.

It was so fortunate that her family already thought she was insane.

Withdrawal from the blood, *that* blood, was competing with Leekath's sister and fheel for greatest contributor to increasing instability.

Iilha was at her most tolerable when her fiancé was around, and next most so when Leekath permitted her sister access to her hair. Leekath sat in resigned displeasure while Iilha ungently combed and braided and rebraided and pinned and trimmed and sprayed and gelled. It was better to have Iilha's brain occupied with the task and not with coming up with elaborate snipes.

Leekath's fheel didn't have any such distractions that Leekath could throw his way. She didn't mind going to temple services, which were one of his most strictly enforced requirements. She *did* mind the lectures, the endless, endless lectures about how dating a bleeder was beneath even her, how Talyn would never understand how to take care of her, how he'd eventually abandon her for someone of his own kind, how she would put her health at risk if she tried to have his children and any children that lived would themselves be in her cousin Thiris's condition, how she could never get married to a bleeder in the temple, how he would never understand her special relationship with God, how he was taking advantage of her and her condition, how she'd been raised better, how he was probably responsible for getting her arrested.

That she minded.

She sat through it, and said "Yes, Fheel" and "No, Fheel" at appropriate moments, and her fheel took that as his due and went on to explain how the only appropriate lives for her involved either marrying a vampire and living at home and having vampire babies who her not-insane family members could help her bring up, or else committing herself entirely to academics and tutoring her young relatives, and by the way her cousin Kae needed her help with his botany experiment.

"Yes, Fheel," she said, and went to help Kae with the plants.

As she left, her fheel muttered that she *could* have simply gone on working in Thiies's office where he could supervise her and she could be useful, but that was obviously no longer an option.

She'd held out some hope that she'd get to spend part of the visit home with her aaihhhi. Without his job, in theory, he should be much more available.

That hope didn't last long once she arrived. Instead, Thiies was completely non-functional. He'd gone nocturnal, without any incentive to fight the natural vampire sleep cycle, and slept for at least thirteen angles a day. When awake, he was as often as not hanging upside-down from his sleeping bar in bat form anyway, staring at the wall or sometimes crying.

Once during the week she spent home he went to one of his old friends and fed, but only after his husband spent most of an angle coaxing him into doing it.

Thiies didn't go to temple, he didn't participate in conversations unless prodded into it, and he shouted at Kae - the only time Leekath had ever heard his voice raised - when Kae opened the drawer of his desk that contained his old work.

Leekath had mixed feelings about Kae, since through no fault of his own his education often served as a punishment for her, but he ran to her for a hug after aaihhhi chased him out of the office.

She hugged him, hoping that he wouldn't notice her shakiness. She wondered what her aaihhhi was thinking about. The plans he'd had for where to go next in his work that he couldn't implement anymore? He wasn't even reading newspapers; he couldn't know much about what the

skeletal remainder of Parliament and the Linnipese occupation were doing with his country.

Leekath wished Khi were home, to distract her. He still had his dance; he'd go on having it his whole life. He wouldn't ever collapse like their aaihhhi.

The wait between feedings shouldn't have been a problem. She'd gone a week, two weeks even, without feeding. It had been a matter of course before. Her brother often went three, to spend as little time as possible lethargic with new blood and unable to dance effectively. But the taste, the *taste*, better than a dragon, where the taste of dragons was mentioned in their very holy text as a nearly unattainable treasure of unfathomable preciousness -

There was the shaking, with something similar to anticipation. She dropped things; she touched walls to avoid falling; she avoided getting from place to place by flight. Eventually, somehow, she would find Talyn. (She was at this point fairly confident that he was in Ryganaav or somewhere similar, working out his frustrations this way or that. Otherwise he'd have called.) When she found him she would bite him, and he would taste so, so good. It would be so, so good, and soon... one of these days... not too long in the future... she would have it. And she shook.

She was having bizarre and vivid dreams, about biting and blood and flavor and pleasure, and hunting, and about Talyn, and about the flow of time unraveling and her persisting forever in the void until she was as old as God.

Maybe that was where God came from, suggested her dreams; maybe he drank enough to become immortal...

She slept little, because the dreams were frustrating and unsettling, but even apart from the shakiness she was listless and her attention span was shot. Iilha was nasty to her about it. "Are the voices *distracting* you?" she snapped when Leekath's mind wandered before she answered some question Iilha had asked.

By the end of the week Leekath was in a kind of constant pain. She took an analgesic potion, which rushed tastelessly through her fangs but had no effect, and she decided that she *wasn't* in pain: she'd just gone long enough without a peak sensation that her body was interpreting *that* as discomfort.

Her fheeil noticed her taking the potion and sternly diagnosed her with guilt over her rebelliousness.

She almost laughed.

Leekath botched her teleportation away from home twice, her hand was trembling so badly. It was a small enough spell that she didn't hurt herself, she only covered her face in soot. She rinsed it off and went to the transfer point outside her house instead. She wasn't even going to stop at school first. She was going to transfer into the citadel and close her eyes and make a run for it. She needed *blood*. She still hadn't heard from Talyn. But Talyn loved her and didn't want her to be thirsty and he had put some of his lovely, lovely blood in a hiding place for her...

The citadel was mercifully empty on the first day of school.

Leekath hurtled towards the secret compartment, shrieking to avoid walls and corners. She flung it open, and as rapidly as she could she separated a drop of blood into her bag, unpreserved it, and expanded it into a full feeding.

She sank her fangs into the bag and moaned aloud. It was a good thing there wasn't anyone there, for more reasons than one.

When the bag was empty, she sighed and opened her eyes. She finally felt like herself again.

She put the bag away, humming along to the tonal recitations of the containers that held

Talyn's blood.

There was also a note in the compartment. She'd been in no position to pay attention to it a moment ago, but there it was. He must have left it for her.

She listened to it, tilting her head and slowly beginning to shake again.

The geas itched at the back of her neck.

She skipped a class; for all she knew, Talyn had left the note for her Spell Diagrams 4 teacher and as soon as she walked into the classroom he'd send her to Barashi. As long as she suspected that, her geas wouldn't let her anywhere near the class. She also didn't dare go to the kamai class taught by Aar Camlenn, because he too could send her, but at least she wouldn't have that until Inen. This term began on a Sinen, oddly, so she only had two days of classes before she'd have Lunen and Chenen free to think.

Not actually stupid, he'd said. He'd left her a *note* saying that he *wasn't actually stupid* so he was going to *tell a wizard to break her geas*. No, of course he wasn't stupid, she went to a school full of wizards capable of sending spells, that was all, now all she had to do was carefully avoid each one.

She wondered if she could pass the last tier test as she was, without further studying. Then she could rearrange her schedule to only be in kamai classes, and she could arrange to have only those teachers who were not also wizards.

There were her classmates, though. Would Talyn have left the note for Kaylo? They were friends. Kaylo could undeniably cast the spell.

She skipped every one of her first-day classes and wrote polite notes to the teachers asking for the syllabi to be delivered, as she wasn't feeling well with her boyfriend missing.

The geas wasn't allowing her much time to worry about Talyn himself, though, when it demanded so much mental effort to fully account for Talyn's *plan*. Did his note say that whoever it was should entrap her, surprise her? Or did it suggest outright kidnapping her? Would the geas let her *sleep* in her room, or was she going to have to teleport to her family home every night to be "safe"?

She decided the best course of action would be to find the note. She ought to be able to hear it, if it had been left anywhere within the school. (Which was pretty dumb of Talyn all by itself, but didn't seem out of reach.) She prowled the halls, making little questioning noises to seek out the paper with the message in question written on it, but found nothing.

Eventually she'd covered all of the office halls and every dorm hall that contained someone she knew. It occurred to her, however, that even someone she did know could have destroyed the note, or stored it in a friend's room or at their family's home, and she'd never find it. She really *would* have to go back to her own family for the night. She really *wouldn't* be able to attend classes. *Ugh*.

The lift carried Leekath back to her own dorm hall, and she trudged into the room for her suitcase. It was barely unpacked; she could throw her textbooks into it and take it home. She'd have to write to the headmistress later to officially take the term off. She could study for her tier tests, she could take them - in another city with no one she or Talyn knew. That would cost money, where taking them at Binaaralav would be free, but her *not stupid* boyfriend had thoroughly cut off that option.

As for kamai, well. Maybe she could get a student who was only studying kamai, not wizardry, to tutor her as she fell behind. If she asked very nicely Kutran would do for wild kamai. None of the other kamai-only students were as well known to her, though. If she fell behind

Binaaralav enough, she'd eventually be at pace with the University of Daasen students. She could apply there. Maybe.

She opened her door; her roommate was back. "Hi, Leekath," said Hihhliir.

"Hi," said Leekath, picking up her books and putting them in the suitcase. "Sorry, I -"

"Surprise!" said Hihhliir gleefully, and Leekath saw the chalk on the floor and Hihhliir's hand moving before she could do a thing about it but smile.

"What are you doing here?" Khi asked her, nonplussed.

"Surprise!" Leekath laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

Leekath spent her time in Barashi catching up with her brother and giggling manically. She didn't tell him all the details, but he was good for commiserating about their sister, and he danced with her, and he had a friendly elf girlfriend with bite marks on her neck. It got to be quite late in the Barashin night, and Khi was in the process of offering to let her stay the night in his room when she reappeared in her dorm.

"Did you have fun with your brother?" Hihhliir asked, grinning. "Talyn's illusion note thing - could you really not see it? I didn't know you could do illusions that only some people could see! - said you probably missed him tons but were too responsible to go visit when he's at the dance school but he's going to be there for months and months so Talyn said tonight would be good since it's night there too and he would probably not have lessons at this angle and if it wasn't your idea you wouldn't feel guilty -"

Leekath hugged her. "Thank you," she said. "It was the most wonderful surprise."

Leekath found Rhysel after classes on Fenen and told her everything, except the parts about the blood.

"So that's where Talyn went," Rhysel murmured.

"If I'm right about how he had the geases set up, I'm safe," Leekath said. "The contingency was on my getting geased, not on my staying that way - contingencies about ongoing things are really complicated and their wizard probably couldn't do one. So the *laina* is still under hers, and I bet you Talyn made her promise not to arrest me."

"I thought you said that if you defied a geas, the contingent one dissolves," Rhysel said.

"If you *defy* it, yes," Leekath said. "I didn't, I got tricked into having it broken. So hers is still active, and if she defies it Talyn's will dissolve, if this is set up the way I think. I guess we shouldn't put it past her to have someone trick her into it getting broken, though. That could even have happened already. She might not even have needed a trick; Talyn might not have thought to make her geas include a self-protection clause. She still couldn't do anything that would predictably lead to me getting arrested, but if she didn't *want* to arrest me, like if she just expected me to go on being geased to obey the law forever... then she might have been able to just walk up to the same wizard who cast it and get it broken."

"So she might be perfectly free to take you into custody again," Rhysel said.

Leekath frowned. "Yes. She hasn't yet, obviously, but then, I haven't been drawing attention to myself. Also, they have Talyn and Emryl, and that needs to be fixed."

"Maybe you should stay here in the citadel. We can bring you your assignments and tutor you here," Rhysel offered. "And work on a plan to get Talyn out."

Leekath mulled that over. "That seems safest, but dangerous for whoever's transporting my assignments."

"I'll do it," Rhysel said. "If the kamaï teachers at the University of Peiza don't hear from me for two days running, classes shut down - that's generally known. I think they'll hesitate to annoy me for something as small as taking home copies of assignments."

"And you're Keo's blood-sister," said Leekath.

"Yes, well. That might not help, but perhaps they'll think it will," Rhysel sighed.

"Let's work on ideas for breaking Talyn and Emryl out," said Leekath. "Is there more advanced proxic kamaï I could learn to make some kind of object that would tell me about their locations? Because that's one kind of magic we know they're definitely not watching for. Or, I know! Trading them for our prisoners. Two for two. As long as we can think of some way to secure the exchange, and I bet there's a way to do that."

"Ah," said Rhysel. "There's... there's a slight problem with that."

"What?" Leekath asked. "I know Talyn's more valuable than either one, but we could probably at least get Emryl that way, and then she could help us break Talyn out more, um, traditionally. We do need to know where to find everyone... If we negotiate extensively about the exchange, I could maybe get hairs really surreptitiously and make figurines and learn about what they know about secret prisons, shields or no shields! Unfortunately I don't know where mine was, but, you know. And -"

"Nepailah-*eian* has escaped."

Chapter 30: Distracting

"How did Annei *escape*?" cried Leekath.

"It's my fault," Rhysel admitted.

"What did you do?"

Rhysel winced. "She was going stir-crazy. She wasn't even faking, she was really having serious problems. I asked her again if she'd rather be knocked out and she said no, again, and I asked if there was anything I could do, and she said she had to be outside and talk to people who weren't - and then she was very insulting."

"You *didn't* just -"

"I had her sent to Barashi," Rhysel said, shaking her head. "I didn't let her out of the citadel to somewhere she'd be able to teleport away! I went with her, but I gave her space. Too much, apparently."

"She wasn't anywhere near the *circle*, was she?" Leekath exclaimed.

"No. It was a tiny town in Aristan. But she went straight to the Watch and told them - I don't even know what she told them. I was informed that I wasn't allowed to take her with me."

Leekath stared. "So you left her there. On purpose. Just have whoever sent her undo the spell and -"

Rhysel groaned. "*Aristan* has a legitimate, non-evil government, with legitimate, non-evil asylum treaties it made with Esmaar before the takeover. My sister's in the Senate, for crying out loud -"

"So talk to your sister -"

"I can't, for her own protection, she can't know about this business. They're in an ongoing diplomatic mess with Linnip about Esmaar's status already. Apparently that means that they're willing to keep Annei there. They're not sending her home, they're keeping her in a sort of custody. But I'm sure she'll figure out a way to communicate with Linnip. She knows just about nothing - she's never seen any of our real faces and has no way to have an accurate count of how many of us there are. But it means we can't trade her."

"Who sent her?" Leekath asked quietly.

Rhysel pursed her lips, then said, "I don't think I'd better tell you."

"But it's someone who cares more about Aristan's asylum laws than about Talyn."

"Leekath, please, calm down. We're all happy to defy Linnip. Aristan is another matter. That decision has been made, Annei's in Aristanian protective custody, and that's the end of it. We'll come up with something else do to about Talyn."

"Well, she was lower-ranked than the other one anyway," said Leekath, recalculating furiously. She was no longer by any stretch of the imagination Rhysel's *friend*, but Rhysel was still offering her aid as a limited-purpose *ally*, and Leekath would be foolish not to take it. "Can we try to trade Liria for Talyn?"

"We can try," Rhysel sighed.

Figuring out how to negotiate with Linnip safely was not easy. Ultimately, Annei proved to be a resource: they could send letters directly to the little house Aristan had provided her to take asylum in, and she passed them along after confirming with her government that they were willing to entertain proposals.

It took days before Leekath realized that they simply did not value Liria Meialek-*rimei* highly enough to give up their rebel innate kama prisoner for her.

"Well," Leekath said. "We'll just have to keep kidnapping people, then, until -"

"No," Rhysel said. "That's just going to make things worse, and put more of our people in harm's way. Without the geas on him, Talyn could get out of almost any tight corner one way or another. The rest of us don't have that kind of power. Leekath, I know you're particularly partial to Talyn. I am too - he's my apprentice, however little he actually learns from me. But I think we should take one of these hints -" She gestured at letters from the Linnipese military. "Which suggest that they'd take Liria in exchange for Emryl."

Leekath liked Emryl, had liked her from the first time they'd met in Revenn's tower, but she *needed* Talyn. She'd only managed to stretch out her time between feedings to two days. If she tried waiting longer, she became so miserable that she started cutting corners on secrecy when making a run for the compartment. So two days it was. Even taking a drop at a time to redouble and multiply for an entire feeding, she would eventually run out.

And she was so lonely without him.

Khi was too busy for her to make regular visits, her *aaihhhi* was comatose, she couldn't stand her sister, she hated being around her *fheeil*. Her ordinary, non-rebel teachers and classmates were inaccessible as she was hidden away in the citadel to avoid recapture. She couldn't stand to socialize with Rhysel, who was sitting on a perfectly simple way to increase their leverage and refusing to budge. And she had to be suspicious of every wizard capable of a sending spell in the rebellion, because one of them was cooperating with Rhysel on that. Talking to Corvan was awkward because he was more interested in getting his niece out than in saving Talyn and blamed Leekath for dragging their collective heels on the offered trade of Liria/Emryl. There were a handful of other nonwizards around, but none of them were truly her *friends*.

The fact that Emryl herself was a friend, and would probably understand Leekath's position where her uncle didn't, was a significant factor in Leekath ceasing to object to going through with that exchange.

She missed Emryl too. Emryl, too, could help with loneliness.

They began to work on ways to secure the swap.

While they were doing that, Linnip graduated a class of Esmaar-native peacekeeping forces they trusted to enforce their laws, withdrew most of their soldiers from Esmaar except those needed to command those forces, and then summarily conquered Tava.

Barashi was a problematic site for the exchange. It worked fine for returning Liria: if she was sent to any point on Barashi, she could then be unsent by a summoning circle, which worked equally well at undoing its own sendings or others. Emryl, on the other hand, was a Barashin native, brought to Elcenia by circle. The Linnipese couldn't send her. They didn't want to bring her to a summoning circle when there were only a handful and they could be easily covered for ambush. And the circle placed extremely rigorous, regular summons, without the chinks in them that any ordinary break could exploit.

The rebels couldn't say "well, what about whoever cast your circle to Isatei, why not have that wizard cast a circle to Barashi" because that would guarantee to the Linnipese that someone who knew about Isatei was involved with or passing information to the resistance. Of course the Empire already knew about Talyn, who'd gone to Isatei, but they didn't want to narrow down a window of time during which Talyn would have had to interact with or leave messages for other rebels.

So instead it was determined that Emryl would have her homeworld reset. Mercifully,

Aar Camlenn had published his spell for that back in 11251. It still wasn't exactly *common* knowledge. But that they knew to suggest it was not highly identifying information given that the rebellion was already understood to contain wizards and suspected to be largely Esmaarlan.

Leekath didn't know if there was a way to undo the reset later, if it bothered Emryl.

With Emryl magically treated as an Elcenian, she and Liria could be simultaneously sent to Barashi, one near the circle in Aristan and one near the circle in Restron, and then they could come through. Since both circles led to the same building in Paraasilan, the ambush possibility remained, but it was mitigated by the symmetry and the simultaneity. Liria could teleport away; Emryl could transfer away. Everyone would be where they belonged, except Annei, who was still stuck in custody in Aristan but could at least have visitors.

And except for Talyn, who it seemed the Linnipese wouldn't part with for anything.

Emryl didn't know the citadel's new transfer point signature, so Corvan went to pick her up; it was generally agreed that he had plausible deniability because he was her uncle and she'd been living with him, and even if he'd been personally unaffiliated with the rebellion he'd be a logical choice for them to contact for Emryl's collection. Leekath wanted to go along, but there were so many reasons why that wasn't safe.

(Leekath was terribly tired of having to do things or avoid things because so many of her choices were not safe.)

Corvan checked Emryl for nefarious sleeper-agent style mind edits, and brought her to the citadel when she proved empty of non-Emryl contents.

Emryl then went to one of the dormitories and slept for a day and a half.

"Hi," Emryl said.

Leekath looked up from the history assignment Rhysel had brought her as part of the latest batch of schoolwork. (Talyn was absent from school entirely. She wondered if he missed it.) "You're awake! Hi."

"Before you ask, I don't remember anything," Emryl said. "They wiped my memory up to just before the first time I impersonated that *rimei*. I don't know what it's like in Linnipese prisons or anything."

"They didn't wipe me," Leekath said, confused.

"I hear you weren't in there that long. Maybe they handled us differently or they only do it when they keep you a long time."

"Maybe," said Leekath. "Do you think they did something awful to you...?"

"What was it like on your end?" Emryl asks. "If you want to say, I mean."

"Boring," Leekath said. "Little cell with a perch and a chair and a bucket of water to soak my feet in. I had to have my arms in cuffs so I couldn't cast anything and they had a spell that detected it if I accessed my telyn conduit to do any *kamai* and if I did they dropped a stasis spell on the cell and I'd wake up an angle later. They asked me questions and I ignored them and sang songs to myself. Are you okay? Do you think they hurt you? You slept for a long time."

"I... don't *think* the sleeping means anything. I always crash after I've been under stress - I slept for ages after Master Revenn died too. As for the wipe, maybe they figured they were doing me a favor. For all I know they asked nicely first before they cast the spell and I just don't remember that either. I'm not traumatized, or anything. And it sounds like I probably didn't miss much." She laughed, a little. "I - I don't know if I told them anything. I might have. I don't know. I'm sorry, if I did."

Leekath smiled tentatively. "I'm glad you're okay. The only thing we know they know that might have been you is my involvement, and... and Talyn got me out. And I'm really glad you're here."

"But you're worried sick over Talyn?" Emryl asked, half-smiling.

"Yes," moaned Leekath. "They know he's important, so they won't let him go. We don't know where he is, and it's not safe for me to leave the citadel anymore playing nearer-farther with a figurine of him, so we can't find out and get him out that way. He most recently got here by summoning circle, so we can't just reverse his summon spell. There's nothing we can *do*."

"Do you want to work on the problem furiously until it's solved because you can't bear not to be making even some tiny amount of progress, or do you want to be distracted because you can only have a certain number of ideas over a day or a week anyway?" Emryl asked, plunking down into a seat beside Leekath at the table.

No one had asked Leekath anything like that, and she was nonplussed by the question at first, but Emryl was looking at her earnestly and so Leekath gave her inquiry some thought.

In practice she'd been alternating between doing tasks that were presented to her ("here is an assignment: do it", "now you have been awake fourteen angles: sleep", "you are drying out: take a bath"), or ignoring everything in favor of railing at Rhysel about her continued refusal to call back Annei, trying to convince other rebels to capture arbitrary other soldiers so they'd have something else to trade, and redoing her studies of Linnipese law all over again to try to find some technicality according to which they had to let Talyn go, just in case the Empire was as lawful as it pretended.

She hadn't made any headway on that last. Talyn was still in prison, and she'd had no flashes of insight, had made no headway on convincing anyone that Talyn was worth going around Rhysel's terribly obnoxious principles.

"Distract me," said Leekath, pushing the history book away.

Leekath taught Emryl some of the dances she'd picked up from growing up alongside Khi, and showed, but couldn't teach, flutterdancing for a bat form Emryl lacked. Emryl taught Leekath increasingly obscure vocabulary words in Martisen. Leekath tried to teach Emryl some vampire words, and they gave up when Emryl confessed she'd always been hopeless at image kamai and wasn't going to be able to patch her deficiencies of pronunciation.

Emryl wasn't qualified to help with wizardry homework either, but she was interested in how academics were covered at Binaarlav and would hover over Leekath's shoulder while Leekath did assignments and caught up on readings, gleaning the meanings of words out of the vampire's mind (after she'd learned to do arbitrary mind kamai workings through or around the hhikiiias, which took practice all by itself).

Leekath had nightmares, one night, and told Emryl this the next morning when Emryl thought she looked short on sleep.

Emryl installed a sleeping bar in her dorm room.

Leekath was skeptical that it would help, because she'd never slept more easily near her entire extended family than she did alone, but she moved into the room that night anyway. It turned out that Emryl had learned a dream-sharing working from her uncle but had no excuse to practice it with anyone else before - Corvan was too private to *actually* coexist in sleep with anyone, he only knew the magic for academic reasons.

Lucidity was only intermittent, but when terrifying dream-logic attacked Leekath, she was not alone in the universe.

Emryl taught Leekath a game her second Master had shown her and Jenn, when they'd reapprenticed after Revenn's death: it involved slinging elements at each other, starting with harmless puffs of air and then moving on to water, earth, and then fire as one became better at dodging. They moved to the second element after Leekath had learned the rules, and splashed each other.

Leekath tried to let all this distract her from Talyn's absence.

It helped. It didn't work, but it helped.

"Did you dry yourself off?" Emryl asked, while they took a break from mutual soaking for the halfblood to eat a snack.

Leekath looked down at her blouse, which was damp but not soaking anymore even though she'd been repeatedly drenched. "No, I just absorb water," she said. "Through my skin. I *could* drink it, but it's not naturally occurring in pressurized containers and the kinds of bags I can use to drink potions weren't around all that long ago, so vampires get water this way instead."

"It's interesting how you look so much like a halfblood - like me, even - in this form but you're so differently put together," Emryl said.

"I have lungs," said Leekath. "And bones and eyes and skin and a brain and muscles. I think that might be it that's like you, though."

"No blood?" Emryl asked.

"No. I don't *have* blood any more than you *have* sandwiches," said Leekath. "When I've just eaten I guess there's some recognizable blood still being processed floating around."

"Huh. I guess..." Emryl trailed off.

"What?"

"Well, there's this thing, but it normally involves both of the people doing it having blood."

"What kind of thing?" Leekath asked.

"A blood sibling ritual. Rhysel's got two blood sisters," Emryl said. "My father has a blood-brother. On Barashi, if you do it then you're considered siblings after that, just like if you shared parents."

Leekath made a face. "I don't think you want to have my sister. I don't want to have my sister."

Emryl laughed. "It doesn't work like that. It's just the people who do the ritual. Everyone else is left how they are."

"So I can't replace my sister with you, either?" Leekath asked ruefully. "I'd rather have you than her."

"Sorry," Emryl chuckled. "I don't know a ritual to actually swap us. Would you rather have me for your sister than *not*, though?"

"Yes," Leekath said. "But I don't have any blood."

"It's just a ritual, not magic that needs exact ingredients," Emryl laughed. "I don't think you really *need* to have blood. We'd just have to change the wording - it says 'blood' four times. I'm not sure what we'd say instead. What happens, if you cut your hand open?"

"It would have to be deep, for anything much to happen," Leekath said. "We've got thicker skin than you, I think. But if you cut deep enough a vampire will sort of leak interstitial fluid. It's white, not red, and it's pretty bad to lose too much of it because it takes longer to make more of it than it takes you to make blood, but if I got healed right away it wouldn't be a problem really."

"Well, I don't know any healing, but we could get Rhysel or someone to spot us," said Emryl.

Leekath nodded. "But I'm not sure what to say instead of 'blood' in the ritual. 'Fluid' sounds weird, doesn't it? Not very ritualish at all."

"It doesn't really matter. There's some blood *in* you, isn't there? Like there might be sandwiches in me sometimes?" Emryl said.

"I suppose." Leekath had never fed so often that she'd visibly turned color, probably in part due to thick pale skin, but for all she knew drinking as frequently as she tended would actually render her interstitial fluid a little pinkish. "Okay."

Emryl grinned, and touched the floor, drawing up a little blade as she pulled her hand away. "We each cut our right palms," she said. "And press the cuts together. And then we say, at the same time, 'Family is blood and blood is family. Chance family is blood and chosen family is blood. I pledge to be your sister for now and always.' And that's it. Since you have to cut deeper than me, do you want me to anaesthetize you? I'm fine without, but I don't know how you work."

"I don't think I've ever actually had a cut deep enough to leak before," Leekath admitted. "If you wouldn't mind..."

"No problem."

"And repeat the poem?"

Emryl recited it over until Leekath had it memorized, and then the halfblood sliced open a thin cut in her palm and handed over the stone knife.

The knife murmured to Leekath as she stuck it firmly into her hand, gritting her teeth. It twinged, but didn't truly hurt, thanks to Emryl's mind kamai. Leekath widened the cut until it would overlap somewhere with Emryl's, and then dropped the blade and held her arm out.

"Family is blood and blood is family. Chance family is blood and chosen family is blood. I pledge to be your sister for now and always," they said together.

"Let's get Rhysel to heal us so I can hug you without getting blood on your blouse," Emryl said.

Leekath turned into a bat and fluttered to Emryl's shoulder, and wrapped one wing around the back of her head. <This form's not cut,> she pointed out.

Emryl laughed, and wandered through the citadel in search of Rhysel with Leekath perched there.

That night, there was a meeting.

"Frankly," Rhysel said, "we don't have a good plan for retaking Esmaar on behalf of the complete Parliament. The place is too *defensible*. Placing the anti-bomb shields as we did means that they can't massacre another town, but the original wards are all still up, and the Linnipese and the forces they've trained can use them. And even if we could collect everyone into a traditional battlefield and make all their native forces defect, we don't have the numbers or training to beat them. Siege doesn't work when everyone can teleport. But now they've taken over Tava."

"You don't sound too upset about that," said Kaylo.

"It means," Rhysel said, "that they are now more obviously angling to gobble up a great deal of territory over a short time scale. And their forces are spread thin. I think this will improve our ability to get help from other nations, and our ability to confront the Linnipese here."

"Esmaar is still too defensible," said Ngen. "No one attacked us before Linnip got its weapon."

"Esmaar is defensible against attack," Rhysel said. "But the remaining Linnipese forces are in a limited number of buildings, and Aristan is no longer convinced that it can keep itself and its immediate neighbors safe in the long term by compromising its principles - so they'll help."

"What are you going to do?" Leekath asked.

"Narax, do you want to...?" Rhysel asked.

Narax coughed. "The spell for the summoning circles in commercial use has a deliberately inflated power pull, to max out the CC I had then. But CC is now a fungible commodity, and except for the fact that we don't know gestures beyond a certain point, we can now cast even bigger spells. We're working on a sending-only 'circle' that will cover a whole building and doesn't require a diagram. There's no reason for a Standard Structure Ward to block it out, and we can send everyone in such a building - like city hall - to Aristan. The Linnipese soldiers won't be able to use wizardry or wizardry-based items, and Linnip won't be able to unsend them manually. Aristan can sort out any regular Esmaarlanik who are caught in the diagrams and send them home by one of the regular circles."

"But even with the reduced occupying force," said Leekath, "they're spread out into every city bigger than Isapor. You can't cast over all those places at once, not unless you're talking about a spell so big we don't even have gestures for it yet. No one's figured out the gesture for six hundred yet, that would be huge news."

"Right. I'll have to do it in pieces," Narax said. "I think there's a good chance I can teach Kaylo the spell I have worked out. Others can try, if anyone else wants a crack at it, but it's a terribly complicated intentional component without the diagram to help. So I'm going to go under all the wards there are, and invisible and the like, and so will the people who will be along to cover me."

"If they find out they'll have military-grade ability to respond," said Leekath.

"But we'll have a fighting chance," said Narax. "If we start with the most important bases of operations and move around unpredictably."

"And," Rhysel said, "while it's been determined that Aristan's soldiers wouldn't have a reasonable chance in Elcenian combat, we think that might not be the case with trolls."

Chapter 31: Protecting

Leekath tried to wrap her head around the mass sending spell.

Specifying Barashi wasn't hard. Untrained foci could do *that*. Even specifying the location Aristan had prepared to receive the sendings wasn't hard, once she'd seen it in a scry.

Those things weren't what diagrams normally covered.

The diagram, if they'd had the leisure to draw one around each building harboring Linnipese soldiers, would have specified people and not the entire structure around them. It would have said that these people were to be sent along with the air in their lungs but not any extra, so they didn't suffocate nor make earsplitting pops at their destination. It would have included a clause about not placing its targets intersecting with solid objects, nor coextensive with air or liquid ones. In the case of this particular spell, a diagram would have been useful in landing everyone on the ground instead of at varying heights above it. A diagram would have gone into technical detail about what a sending *was* - that it required a continual push of someone native to Elcenia away, away, away, lest they snap back, but that they couldn't be pushed so hard that they couldn't move around within the target world.

Most of the parameters there sounded like, if the casting wizard made a mistake, they should kill the people - the occupying soldiers - whom they were sending. But it didn't work that way. The spell wasn't designed to be fatal; casting it without keeping in mind some protective feature was casting it *wrong*, and casting it wrong would be dangerous to the *caster* alone.

Leekath decided against suggesting aloud that they design the spell to be fatal just because that would be easier. The buildings would probably contain plenty of innocent people; inconveniencing them with an impromptu trip to Aristan was one thing, and killing them was another.

Ultimately, Leekath realized she didn't have the knack to cast the spell without a diagram. Even Kaylo barely thought he'd manage it, and he was muttering the entire time about being a theoretician, not a practical caster. He eventually decided that he wouldn't be able to handle the spell under stress safely and withdrew.

A clan of trolls which included a friend of Rhysel's, the Blackroots, would help the rebels cover Narax while he casted. Hopefully, they wouldn't be needed, but he'd be going around with a contingent of Blackroots (including two who were kyma) and other wizards and kyma.

The only person going with Narax who Leekath really cared about was Emryl, but Emryl was more competent than some of the others. Leekath couldn't evaluate the trolls, and suspected that the teachers were able to handle themselves, but a few students besides Emryl were in the contingent too. These ranged from Korulen (a dragon, a good wizard even if she hadn't graduated, and a talented mind kama) to Kaarilel (who'd dropped out of the kamai course after one term, but seemed desperate to help somehow, and claimed to have memorized useful combat spells). Rhysel didn't seem comfortable forbidding anyone to go. She actually encouraged Korulen, maybe hoping to provoke Keo into intervening if Narax's involvement didn't do the trick. So a variety of students formed up around him, along with faculty and Blackroots. Half the participants were kyma, and the entire group would travel by transfer point.

Leekath was staying behind. Since she couldn't manage the sending spell, her job was to wait for Parliament to be cleared, then teleport into it and call in the deposed Members of Parliament. The ones who'd retained their positions after the takeover would be sent to Aristan and sorted out from the Linnipese there. She had a calling diagram drawn on rolled-up paper

designed to cling to the chalk, so she could begin the callings immediately on entering the building. She'd met every member of Parliament as it had stood in person, so she could call each one herself.

Rhysel was going to be there with her - pregnant, she was hanging back from the contingent that would follow Narax, but she was equipped to brief the reconstituted exiles of Parliament on what was going on while Leekath cast.

And each member of Parliament, barring a handful of lights and sorcerers and mages, was a wizard, and could adjust the wards on their building to keep out reinforcements from Linnip, should they appear.

When Narax had shooed soldiers out of all of their bases of operations, and they'd been sorted from the bystanders in Aristan, the rebellion would be supposedly over.

And maybe then Leekath could figure out how to get her boyfriend back.

The calling spell was starting to sound like nonsense syllables in Leekath's head, even though the particular spell she was using had a *word* as its spoken component. After her aaihhhi (who perked up *instantly* after Rhysel's first explanatory sentence), she'd called in the male half of the Defense Committee. After that, she let her aaihhhi dictate her priorities, since those callings had taken long enough for him to receive Rhysel's entire speech and reassert his leadership qualities.

"Bring in a'vi'Naav," he told Leekath, so she did, and "next let's have Linnipese Relations, there were only two men on that committee but we'll want them soon, we'll need to hash out a treaty - get us the Squarewide Agreements Committee next, there's three of those who aren't on any of these others - and I suppose we'll have to wait for everyone besides me and those fellows over there on the Press Committee to be sent back from Aristan, but goodness, we will need them - who's missing - ah, call in whoever's left from Tavan Relations!..."

Leekath occasionally struggled to remember who was on which committees, as she was out of practice, but eventually a hundred and change members of Parliament were restored to the seat of Esmaarlan government, running around at high speed and chattering to each other at urgent pitches and earsplitting volumes.

Thiies seemed to find no reason why Leekath shouldn't resume her old job at once. He took her by the hand and led her on a brisk walk to his old office, which he rearranged by telekinesis from the state the occupation had left it in while muttering to himself. A book soared past Leekath's ear, and desks scooted to where they'd been when he'd left. Soon there was a stack of things in the inbox on Leekath's old desk.

"Aaihhhi," she said. "School is in session."

"Oh," he said. "Oh, of course it is, I'm sorry. I suppose I'll have you back here in... what month is it now?"

"Today is Marahel 22," she said.

"Oh. In Pehahel?" Thiies asked.

"Yeah. Even if I pass my last tier test at the end of this term I'll still have kamai," Leekath said.

"Of course, of course. But you don't have classes today?" inquired Thiies.

"No, we still have Chenenik off," Leekath said patiently.

"Can you perhaps help me get this place into shape, then...?"

"I would, but I need to help Rhysel with something," Leekath said. This was not the time to explain that the something involved being "crazy" at a statue of Narax to make sure he

was as yet uncaptured.

"All right. I could use your help here, though, any time you have free from school," Thiies said with a wide, fanged grin.

Leekath nodded and slipped out of the office.

Narax himself remained unmolested through the entire process, according to his statuette and his subsequent verbal report. He sent away the contents of every Linnipese-occupied government building and new military base before reporting back to Parliament and acting self-congratulatory.

His entourage was not, however, unnecessary, and he was missing three of them on his return. He couldn't remember their names, and Leekath feared that Emryl had died until she learned who it had really been. One was a troll, whose death seemed to have particularly shaken Korulen. One was a wild kamai teacher Leekath had been planning to take a class with in the spring, sister to an image kamai teacher. One was Kaarilel, whose competence as a student wizard and barely even a beginner kama had been questioned, but who'd begged to go.

Leekath wasn't too close to any of them. Emryl, her friend - her *sister* - was safe, sitting in Parliament with the rest of the rebels and looking unsettled but whole. Leekath felt light and floaty, not so much numb as sensorily-deprived, and had no impulse to grieve for the dead. No one she was close to was particularly fond of the dead either; no one wept on her shoulder. (She knew Korulen reasonably well, but Korulen had other, closer friends who were her first port of call.)

Leekath dismissed the figurine, when Narax came back. She left the room, when the talk turned from spare summary to details that didn't concern her.

She went back to her office and leafed through her inbox, which was piled high with work her aaihhhi had sent zooming in the direction of her desk. He was still making merry with special Parliamentary issue communication crystals, talking animatedly about a Restoration Project to get the country back as it had been.

She picked up the first packet of papers. *Write a synopsis of all significant legislative alterations by occupying Linnipese force, with pointers to full texts*, it read.

Between writing synopses of what had gone on in her aaihhhi's absence regarding this and that, she brainstormed about how to get Talyn back.

Thiies was on the committee that drafted the treaty with Linnip, and he let Leekath help.

So she wrote in Talyn's release, while she was separating out the walls of text into clauses, marking key phrases in colored ink, and adding in all the requisite titles and honorifics for named persons.

32-Aan: Talyn Casten is to be Released [Details: free of obligation or entitlement, unharmed in psyche or body, memory untampered with, and devoid of geas] to an Esmaarlan escort [nominee Parliamentary Aide Aaeihhyleekatheeei Hhirheek] as part of this Exchange of Custody. This clause is not to be considered voided if Details cannot be executed. This clause will be considered unfulfilled if Details executable are not executed.

No one called her on it or questioned her right to add items to an international treaty.

After revisions - all outside of Section 32, let alone her Clause Aan - the treaty was signed, and Leekath got a formal letter informing her that she'd been nominated to serve as an escort and should turn up at a certain field outside Aabalan that had been chosen as the prisoner exchange site.

This position, absurdly, required that she hold a sign indicating who she was and who she was there to escort. She felt ridiculous clutching a rectangle intended to identify herself to Talyn.

(But it was possible that the "memory untampered with" Detail had proven unexecutable...)

(She shook that thought away.)

Talyn didn't seem to need the sign, when he was brought in. He hurtled into her arms and squeezed her so hard she might have thought he was shapeshifted vampire for extra strength.

<Are you okay?> she asked. <How are you? I'm sorry I couldn't do anything sooner.>

<I'm fine. I'm fine,> he soothed. <What about you? Are you still under your geas? Did the thing with the ->

<It had me freaking out for a few angles and I wish you hadn't warned me, but Hihhliir managed to spring it on me and I haven't been under the spell since,> Leekath assured him. The two of them attempted to begin a kiss simultaneously, bumped noses, and tried again to better effect.

<Gods. Oh, gods, I missed you,> Talyn sent. <Rhysel's bound to chew me out for the swap but I couldn't, couldn't leave you there, there was no faster way, but I missed you so much.>

<I missed you too, I was half out of my mind, you can ask Emryl ->

<I love you.>

<I love you too,> she sighed into his mind.

<Marry me.>

<Huh?>

<Not soon. We're both sixteen, in our own years anyway. After we're out of school maybe. But later. I just want - I want you to be mine, forever, I want some kind of promise about it. I thought about it a lot while I was in jail. Well, I didn't have much chance to do anything except think... But anyway I don't mean soon. We don't need to start planning a wedding or naming our kids. But I want that to be a definite part of the future. Will you marry me?>

Leekath deepened their kiss. <I will.>

"Have you read this thing?" Talyn said, looking at Leekath's copy of what had been named the Aabalan Treaty.

"Yes," she said. "I wrote clause 32-Aan."

Talyn flipped to it. "That's how you got me out?"

"Yeah."

"I think you're smarter than me," he remarked, and he went back to the part of the treaty he'd been reading. "But I'm talking about sections five through, um, sixteen. If I'm not very badly mistaken they add up to Esmaar being a *protectorate* of the Linnipese Empire."

"The word protectorate isn't actually used until paragraph 40," Leekath said.

"Gods. This is what I went to prison for?"

"I thought you went for me."

Talyn sighed. "Of course I went for you - I mean, this is what the whole rebellion got us? Protectorate status?"

"The actual details aren't that bad -"

"If you were rewriting parts of this damn thing why didn't you do something about this? Linnip shouldn't be anywhere within a hundred *miles* of Esmaar!" cried Talyn. "They killed all

those *people* in Aabalan, you can't have forgotten that, this treaty is named after the town! They pulled all kinds of legal *crap*, they hurt you and me and your aaihhhi and Emryl and - who died again - Mysel and Kaarilel and Kreshk!"

"I wasn't supposed to mess with most of the treaty - the Linnipese Relations committee was -" excused Leekath.

"And they did such a great job with Linnipese affairs last time," growled Talyn.

"But except for the word 'protectorate' is it so terrible? We're self-governing again, we just pay them a tiny fraction of tax revenue and they're obliged to stick up for us if we get attacked."

"By whom? They're the only ones who've shown an interest in attacking us!" Talyn cried.

"And now they don't have an incentive to buy another weapon from Isatei, one we don't have shields against, to try again!" Leekath exclaimed. "Now they can save face and they'll stay out of our business except we give them a little money and their military works for us if something like this happens again from *any* quarter."

"And they can break a tie in Parliament, and their noble classes' special rights extend here, and Esmaar has to stop taxing Aleist churches!"

"There are virtually never ties, those rights are trivial ceremonial things, there are like twenty Aleist churches in the *entire country* so that's not much of a revenue hit," Leekath said.

Talyn swatted the paper. "This joke of a treaty is a doorway for them to creep in and take more control, make Esmaar more like them, and eventually get exactly what they wanted in the first place without having to tie up their forces here. This farce is going to make rebellion seem less worthwhile to other countries they gobble up. It doesn't even mention Tava!"

"On the last page," whispered Leekath, but she knew he wouldn't like it.

He turned pages violently and re-read. "The protectorate nation of Esmaar recognizes the conquest of the Imperial Territory known as Tava and will make due arrangements to route interactions therewith through Imperial Offices," he read aloud in disgust.

"We didn't write the whole treaty. Us and Linnip each wrote parts and then negotiated on them and this is what we could agree on," Leekath said. "They wouldn't take that part out, and they insisted on a 'continuing interest' in Esmaar, but we got you back, we got amnesty for all the rebels, we've stricken all the law changes they made. And they're funding half the Restoration Project to go through and undo all the changes they made like giving Rhysel's niece back to her dad and stepdad. And under the Imperial umbrella we can trade tariff-free with Linnip and Ryganaav and Tava."

"It's an insult," Talyn said. "They walked up to Esmaar and grabbed it by the throat and now it's saying that they can hold onto its sleeve if they really want, but that just means they can still haul it around."

"I'm sorry," Leekath said helplessly.

"Is there anything I can do about this? I'll take you up on that expedited citizenship thing if I have to, this is outrageous."

"I can get you citizenship but you're still just one person. I think most citizens don't want to provoke Linnip," Leekath said. "We did *do* quick polling before the final treaty went through. But it's a *treaty*, we needed Linnip to sign it. We don't have the resources to attack them on their turf, we couldn't bully them into anything besides staying out of our country, and even that would have been risky if they weren't willing to take the diplomatic solution because they could buy something different from the Isateians!"

Talyn sighed. "I shouldn't be yelling at you, I know it's not your fault. I'm sorry."

Leekath hugged him tight. "You're upset. You've got a right to be upset."

He laced his fingers in her hair and held tight. "I still shouldn't've yelled." Talyn sighed. "It's just so - I can't stand those - ugh." He paused, breathing progressively more slowly, and finally kissed her forehead. "Are you hungry?"

"A little," said Leekath, because she'd been holding herself down to once every two days but she'd last eaten the prior evening. "Please..."

"You don't have to say please," Talyn told her, and she tilted her head and bit into his neck.

The flavor was just the same as the expanded droplets from her stash, but for some reason - maybe the temperature, maybe the fact that this was magically untampered-with blood, maybe just the fact that she was taking it directly from Talyn instead of a bag - it was better.

<I love you,> she sent.

<I love you too. Let's get married,> he sent back, and she could see the corner of his mouth slide up out of one half-closed eye.

<Okay,> she replied dreamily. When she was satiated, she pulled her head up. <Oh, I forgot to say. Emryl and I are blood-sisters now. She helped me keep my head on straight, when you were gone and I was frantic and fighting with Rhysel all the time about Annei escaping.>

<How did Annei escape, anyway? Not that they'd have traded me for her, or even her and Liria; while there was an ongoing rebellion I was way too valuable to it.>

<I guess they wouldn't have. She didn't exactly *escape*...> Leekath relayed the entire story as Rhysel had told it to her, kissing Talyn all the while.

<Rhysel is really rigid about her principles,> groused Talyn.

<I know. She still hasn't told me who cast the sending spell. I wonder what Aristan will do with Annei now? They weren't letting her leave before. Maybe she'll get lumped in with the other soldiers Narax sent and returned per paragraph twenty-one.>

<I want to think about anything other than Linnipese soldiers right now,> Talyn sent grumpily. <I'm out of prison, Esmaar is sort-of-free, and I have my beautiful fiancée in my arms.>

<Your beautiful fiancée, huh?>

<Yup, and I missed her very, very, much,> he said, trailing kisses down Leekath's neck. She smiled against his hair.

Keo kept the job of headmistress. There was no reason to switch back, even once they could; it had been a formality. So it was she who regretfully informed Talyn that between the term he'd failed to show up for and the fact that he'd enrolled older than was usual anyway, he was now significantly too old to be a student at Binaaralav in second tier. If he wanted to study like mad until the spring term and take several tier tests over the course of a week to get placed in fourth or above, they would keep him, but she recommended applying to universities.

Talyn started doing that, rather than cram for exams he wasn't ready for. Leekath was studying for her tenth and final tier test, after which she'd be a graduated wizard and entitled to a more than minor functionary position in her aaihhhi's office (when she had breaks from kamaï classes).

Leekath visited her brother, and told him she was engaged expecting it to filter through him to the rest of the family, only to be told that he wasn't in touch with anyone in the family except her and didn't want to be ("except if Aaihhhi ever troubles himself to write me a letter I

guess I'd answer it," he clarified).

So she told her aaihhhi, enjoyed a congratulatory hug, and let him make the announcement. She didn't have to be at the family house if she didn't want to be, anymore. Though she didn't anticipate ever going as far as Khi had, she found she liked the idea of never interacting with her sister again. It would be too much to hope if she wanted to never disappoint her fheel again, but maybe cutting off contact would be one big disappointment and he'd never need to know about the many little ones she committed just by hearing voices.

She and Talyn started having brief arguments about their future children, in spite of the distant nature of their expected wedding. These arguments were not about said children's names. It was about their species. While Talyn was confident that sufficient applications of magic could yield entirely vampire children who wouldn't have her cousin's health problems, he was uncomfortable with the fact that the details of vampire religion were hidden from him. It bothered him plenty in Leekath's own case, but he was profoundly annoyed by the idea of being fenced out of his own children's upbringing.

The arguments usually ended with Talyn suggesting that Leekath might be hungry. Sometimes they instead ended with Talyn suggesting adoption, so he wouldn't have to be kept out of the kid's religious life and Leekath wouldn't have to shift halfblood again, but Leekath didn't like that idea. She wanted their babies to look like her, and Talyn. She didn't want to have to constantly worry about making sure they felt like they were *really theirs*. She didn't want to forever precariously balance her culture and Talyn's and *also* that of the child's origin.

Apart from that problem, which they had years to solve, Leekath was busy and well-fed and happy.

Book 5: Dreamer

Chapter 32: Applying

Makaadam University's wizarding program is best known for its work in advanced spell diagrams, including specialized runes; medical wizardry (in conjunction with our lightcraft, witchcraft, and biology departments); and the novel application of one-trick spells. The campus is spacious and located on the north side of Meren City; see map on page 4. Our faculty includes the celebrated Mir Kithen -

Talyn didn't know the local famous people. He could ask Leekath if any important choices came down to that. The school sounded all right. He put it in the "apply" pile.

The University of Daasen is widely recognized as the world's most competitive and rigorous program of wizardry on the square. Particular areas of interest to our world-class faculty include the theory of installed spells, weather magic, subconsciously controlled dynamic spells, sophisticated analyses, covert breaks, and the frontier of pull efficiency on utility spells. All University of Daasen students may take classes from any of our world-renowned departments of magic, academics, observational studies, and the arts (see attached catalog), and may participate in any number of student-organized special interest associations. Our main library holds over twenty million titles, as well as audio resources and -

It had been hard to find an informational pamphlet on U. Daasen. They seemed to mostly coast on their reputation - which was excellent. Talyn had asked Aar Camlenn about it, though, and Aar Camlenn said that their emphasis on research reportedly left them with brilliant professors who were terrible at teaching. The program was supposed to be very much "mage-or-corpse", with little help available for anyone who struggled. U. Daasen could always fill its slots. But Talyn liked learning without too much supervision anyway, and Daasen had to fill their slots with somebody; why not him? And they had a kamai department he could lurk in.

Bekat and Otilaar University of Wizardry offers a standard ten-tier wizarding program, and, through our partnership with neighboring University of Nelchar, optional access to academic programs. Our focused approach is ideal for would-be professional wizards who want a modern, practical understanding of spellcraft for promptly applicable use. Most can finish our complete curriculum in six to eight years, and an accelerated version is available -

Trade school. Talyn tossed the packet aside. He wasn't in a hurry and he wasn't interested in workaday spellcasting.

The University of South Harper prides itself on its interdisciplinary curriculum. Tier advancement for wizarding students is contingent not only on theory and practice of wizardry, but also on a respectable grounding in mathematics, the history of wizardry, international magical law, economics for wizards, academic writing, two seminars in Intermystic Studies, and one foreign language. We expect -

Talyn started a "maybe" pile. He did want to learn other stuff, but he was wary of having that much of it chosen for him. "Economics for wizards"? What was "Intermystic Studies"?

Six Crystals University -

The University of Lelek at Aam Aarbol -

Mitasorik College in conjunction with the Saaven-Inseeni Consortium of Learning -

And that was it. He had three very short piles.

There weren't that many universities in Esmaar. There weren't that many schools.

People learned general knowledge at home, from books and family; they learned their jobs *on* the job, or took isolated classes in skills where that was impractical. What schools there were tended to be specialized in things that most people didn't care to learn intensively - so families wouldn't be able to teach them and the average town wouldn't be able to sustain a class in them.

Wizards schools were the most popular of these, which was why Talyn had actual choices to make - if he'd wanted to be a dancer, like Leekath's brother, it would be an Osaan guild school or nothing.

He was planning to stay in Elcenia for the long haul, for Leekath who needed her suncreening spells and loved her job in Parliament, and he wanted to know more than just how to do its magic. People *still* made historical and fictional references he didn't get without mindreading on a regular basis, and he'd been around for a while now. So he didn't want to go to a trade school; he wanted someplace that would at least *offer* classes on history and literature. Maybe one class of review math to pick up the different vocabulary, but he didn't think there would be much changed between worlds on that count.

He could leave the country, but he didn't want to be away from Leekath. Teleportation and transfer points being what they were, that might have been less of a concern - but with Linnip empire-building, and other countries starting to notice and close ranks against it, he didn't want to risk being trapped across a political divide from his fiancée and perhaps prohibited from going to her.

He didn't much like that she was so attached to Esmaar, either, since its protectorate status put it explicitly on the Empire side of the divide.

But between the choices... he'd stick with Esmaarlan schools unless they roundly rejected him. He didn't want to go to school in Tava, where everyone was half his height and everything was even more tightly controlled by Linnip. There were no wizards universities in Ryganaav, yet. And there were no schools he'd heard of that took boys in Linnip proper. If he could even set foot in the country without vomiting.

Leekath teleported into his room. "How's it going?" she asked.

"Okay," he said. "What do you know about Daasen?"

"The city, or the school?" she asked. "I know more about the city. I work there."

"The school," Talyn said.

"I know less. The reputation of course is that it's the very best for everything, that no one goes anywhere else if they can get in there, that all the best wizards - or mathematicians or historians or botanists or whatever - went to Daasen. I think about half of Parliament studied there."

"Narax went to the University of Nenise. Even though Ertydo is awful about dragons," Talyn observed. "And he's the best."

"I know," Leekath shrugged. "I don't know why, though. I suppose you could ask him. And I'm going here, I didn't wait to be eligible for university, but honestly, that was more because I wanted to go to school like Khi, sooner rather than later."

"I think I will ask him," Talyn said. "I guess I might as well apply to every place where I'd go if they were the only one to take me. The fees are pretty small. I can just make more translation nuggets."

"Do those sell very fast?" Leekath asked.

"Yeah, and Kaylo thinks it's beneath him to make them in any quantity. He used to do them for obscure languages when the kiosk at the circle got a special order but lately I think Korulen's doing most of that instead. I can do Martisen-and-Leraal nuggets just fine, though, and

they sell heaps of those." Talyn scooped up his yes and maybe piles, and started looking for the attached application forms for each. "How were your classes?"

"Fine," said Leekath absently. "I really thought tenth tier theory was going to be hard. It's mostly review, to make sure we haven't forgotten anything critical. I could have fit in another politics unit, I think."

"Does Binaaralav have a lot of academics? For a school of its type?" Talyn asked, glancing at the trade school he'd discarded.

"More than most specialized magic schools do, I suppose," Leekath said. "A perfectly normal amount for a school that takes children. We spend less time at home and there's less chance for our families to educate us, so the school picks up some of the slack in other subjects. Khi's school had non-dance classes. He took as few as he could get away with, though."

"I'd imagine," Talyn said. "He's kind of obsessive."

"He's like Aaihhhi," Leekath said. "Just about something else."

"Are you?" Talyn asked.

"I don't think so. Maybe I would have been, if I wasn't a hearer," she said.

Talyn reached out to bat at her ponytail; it was getting long. "Well, I like you how you are," he said.

"Good," she said, sitting on his bed and peering at one of the discarded pamphlets.

Talyn started filling out forms. *Name, entry tier, desired start date, academic records (if any), letters of recommendation -*

"Who should I ask for letters from?" he asked Leekath.

"How many do they want?" she asked.

"Three. Four for Daasen."

"A parent is customary - you should substitute Rhysel, I think, since your parents haven't taught you in a long time and couldn't write in Leraal. And whichever wizarding teacher from Binaaralav has the most respect for you even if you never took a wizarding class with them. Maybe Aar Camlenn. And me for the third. For Daasen's extra, ask Narax, even though he never personally taught you."

"You, really? But we're engaged."

"They're not expecting unbiased reporting - often they have nothing to go on but a parent or an uncle or something, and a couple of friends, since plenty of perfectly acceptable candidates won't have any school history. I'll disclose that we're engaged and everything. But I'm going to be a graduated wizard in a month and a half, and I work in Parliament, and I'm in a position to know something about what you can do. I'll be - and you should tell Rhysel to be - really *specific*. We can't just say that you're great because of course we'd say that, but if we can come up with exact ways that you're great, that's more informative. I'll start mine tonight."

"I guess," said Talyn dubiously.

"What're universities like in Barashi?" Leekath asked. "Or Restron, I guess."

"A lot of the Martisen-speaking places are about the same really, it's not important to specify," Talyn said. "Everybody goes to school when they're kids, for a few years - optionally for more, and a lot of kids do that, especially ones whose parents aren't professionals and can't take their kids as apprentices -"

"Not everyone does apprenticeships?"

"Some people can't get one or don't want one or are hopeless at what they start on," Talyn said. "There's unskilled workers, and people who just stay home and raise kids, and unemployed layouts, on Barashi. Farmhands, retail workers, carriage drivers - you don't really

need an apprenticeship to do that. Come to think of it I don't think my mom finished her apprenticeship. She started on one for... seamstressing? Something like that. And quit or got dismissed and never picked up another one. She's actually pretty bad at sewing even still. So she sells the things my dad digs up on his expeditions, and other knickknacks."

"Oh," Leekath said.

"But anyway, people who want to do more school have plenty of options. I never attended a university so I don't know much about them. I didn't even go to as much school as most people. Innates can access kama young."

"Is finding apprenticeships a problem with kyma too?"

"Not really. If you have kama ability at all, you can find a kama to take you, even if you're not very bright," Talyn said. "Some won't take spontaneous manifesters though. Grandfather wound up with more than his share of those, including Rhysel. And Nevyn."

"Nevyn was one? I didn't know that," Leekath said softly.

"Yeah. He was all trained out of the periodically annoying the spirits of the dead into haunting him by the time you met him."

Leekath suppressed a giggle. "That sounds awkward. Anyway. You can reuse the letters if you want, but it's better to edit them a little for each to play to the strengths. Like, for Daasen, I'd go on about how you don't need much supervision, and how you're an innate kama they'd be proud to claim later, but for - what else have you got?"

"Makaadam, South Harper, Six Crystals, and Lelek," Talyn said.

"I'd say something about how you're doing in non-magic classes, for South Harper, and for Lelek I'd probably go on a bit about how you're from Barashi because they try really hard to have lots of student diversity. Six Crystals gets to hear all about your kama background and your involvement with the shren cure. Makaadam hears about all your interesting connections with interesting people, at one remove or two - through me, through Rhysel, through Master Revenn, etcetera."

"Good to know," said Talyn.

"You'll want that kind of emphasis on your petition papers, too," she said. "They give you an idea what they look for in the pamphlets. By the time they call you in for a wizarding aptitude test or an interview or both, you've gotten in, you just have to not offend anyone or demonstrate that you have no aptitude at all."

"So Daasen wants a mutually beneficial attachment of names?"

"That's a good way to put it."

"I can probably pull that off," he said with a smile.

"Probably. But apply to the others too," Leekath laughed.

"Why didn't you go to Daasen?" Talyn asked Narax. He'd loitered outside the dragon's office with a book until Narax came down the hall.

"Hello, Talyn, how are you?" Narax asked rhetorically. "Because I was vaguely nauseated by the way Daasen acts with prominent graduates. The University of Nenise does it too," he laughed, "but I knew they'd stop the instant they knew what I was."

"Oh. What do they do, exactly?" Talyn asked.

"University publications go after anyone who's accomplished anything - even if it's not in the field they went to school for - and want interviews, credit, endorsements. If you make money, they want it. If you make policy, they want that. They like naming buildings after people so they can casually mention them to students or faculty they're hoping to recruit. I wouldn't have

minded a building, actually, but the solicitations for money and the telling reporters that the wonderful professors taught me everything I know - didn't fancy it."

"Makes sense. But Daasen's good?"

"Daasen's good. Go there if you can get in and if you think you can take it."

"Will do," said Talyn.

After a few weeks of waiting, Talyn got three acceptances, and two rejections. He was a little surprised that one of the acceptances was from Daasen. It was very condescendingly written, but it was still an acceptance.

Makaadam's acceptance permitted him to defer until the last quarter of 11254. That would give him a full three-and-a-half-month term at Daasen to determine if the pressure would cook him.

The evening after his last letter arrived, when he was penning his acceptance to Daasen at the dining table, Rhysel asked him if he'd thought about moving out.

"Not really, no," Talyn said, looking up. "It's not hard to get between here and Daasen - oh, they accepted me, I decided to go there, if it's too much I can go to Makaadam instead. You don't charge me rent or anything. And I'm still technically an apprentice."

"Well," Rhysel said. "If you were thinking about it, this would be a good time. I can add another floor to the tower..."

"You've got a spare room already for - the baby, though," Talyn said, not sure how he felt about Rhysel's forthcoming child's name of "Reven". "Or are you thinking you'll move the twins into separate rooms?"

"Not until and unless they ask to be split up, no," Rhysel said. "But I've agreed to take on another apprentice. And you're really well beyond apprentice level, however little of it is because of me."

"Well, um," said Talyn. "Thanks."

"Don't feel pressured to go," Rhysel said. "It's really no trouble having you here, and I can expand the tower -"

"Maybe I should think about it anyway," Talyn said. "I'm engaged, and you're not related to me, and we're definitely not moving in with Leekath's folks."

Rhysel nodded. "Well, I'll put Evlain - the new apprentice - in the baby's room-to-be for the time being. If you're out by the time he's born, she'll take your room then. If you're not, I'll add a floor."

"Sounds good," Talyn said. "Er, but can you not officially Journeyman me until I do move out?"

"Why?" Rhysel asked. "You know that you're -"

"I understand I'm good enough and everything," Talyn said hastily, "I'm not standing on ritual or anything. But I think my parents expect me to move back in with them for a while when I'm done with the apprenticeship - to help out with the little ones, or around the shop, or on digs, or just generally to not be so far away all the time. Ranel did, before she got her own tower. And I don't really want to move there. Visit lots sure, but not live there again. If I already have a house or an apartment or a tower or whatever by the time you promote me, I can make like I never thought that and they won't give me a hard time."

"Okay," shrugged Rhysel. "That's your business."

"Where did you find a new apprentice?" Talyn asked.

"Through a very circuitous route," laughed Rhysel. "There are a lot of miracles in early

adolescence whose parents didn't pick them up and who couldn't find adoptive parents - and interest from parents is petering out, so they're not very optimistic. The shren houses are collapsing, and they don't have much of anywhere to go. Ryll decided that it would make sense to set them up with Barashin apprenticeships. Evlain wanted to be a kama, but enrolling in regular school didn't appeal to her. So I'm taking her on, because I'm the first kama Ryll thought of."

"Fun," remarked Talyn.

"One hopes," Rhysel agreed.

The more Talyn thought about it, the less he thought that he wanted to live in a tower. The point was to make a kama's location obvious to the neighbors, so they'd be easily found by anyone needing help. But random Elcenians didn't know that, and that didn't seem to be the lifestyle he was headed to anyway.

Talyn didn't know what he *was* going to do, career-wise, but "sit in a tower and wait for people to need help" didn't sound like it.

Leekath would remain entitled to live in Binaaralav student housing until she finished her kama's classwork, as well as her wizarding program, but maybe she'd want to live with him. So rather than going on a househunt in Daasen by himself, he asked her.

"Ooh," Leekath said. "I think that would be a good idea, to get a place in the city. Or maybe a suburb like Kantar. But living right in the city would be nice - it's easy to think teleportation means it doesn't matter where you put your home, but that's not true. You can only teleport places you've been. Daasen's full of great stuff, so much that it'd take forever to have already been to it all."

"You can go to transfer points you haven't visited," Talyn pointed out.

"Only if someone teaches you the signature. You still have to know you want to go to the place before you can arrive there. We'll be able to walk out the door and go *exploring*. And people who can't teleport will be able to get to us easily. Daasen's got very good city scoots, and it's on most *intercity* scoot lines. Aaihhhi doesn't know how to teleport - he gets other people to bring him to and from work from Mifaar. But he could fly to anyplace within Daasen and just visit, and it would still be really inconvenient for my fheel or sister to do it."

"Fair enough. Apartment or house?"

Leekath made a thoughtful face. "The categories are kind of blended in the middle of a dense city. Daasen's got a lot of buildings with ten- and fifteen-bedroom 'apartments' stacked on top of each other, a floor or two or three apiece with a stairwell on the side of the outer wall. I think those have noise problems, though, and we can't fill that kind of space. Maybe a roof cottage?"

"Roof cottage?"

"They're expensive for the amount of space, but I make good money and I've barely spent any so far, I think I could ask for a raise after I graduate and then comfortably pay for one myself," Leekath said. "They're little almost-freestanding houses on the tops of those buildings, and they use the rest of the roof as a yard. I mean, usually everybody who lives there can use the roof, but the cottage has more convenient access."

"Sounds interesting," Talyn said. "But why are you assuming you'll pay for it?"

"Well - no reason, I guess," Leekath said. "What are you planning to do for money? More translation nuggets?"

"It'd be too easy to flood the market," muttered Talyn. "There's definitely a limit on how

much of that I can do. Um."

"For that matter, how are you going to pay Daasen's tuition?" She wasn't even challenging, just curious, like he was liable to have pulled a source of income out of nowhere.

"Uh, Rhysel said way back that she'd give me some money to start out. That'll cover tuition for at least the first half and by then I might earn a scholarship. I guess it... might not cover rent," he said sheepishly. "I was going to look into tutoring in Daasen's kamaï department... but that's not a guarantee I guess..."

"It's not a problem," said Leekath. "Even part time, working in Parliament is a good living. We handle sensitive stuff; no one wants poor government officials tempted to sell national secrets, or take bribes to put in lines in legislation, or go to fancy restaurants with special interest representatives and listen to them argue a lot because that's the only way we can eat well. This is a general statement I mean - obviously I eat great." She grinned at him.

"Right," said Talyn with a weak smile. He'd actually had no idea that Leekath was drawing an appreciable salary, let alone one that would let her rent a house on a roof in the capital of Esmaar "comfortably". If her aaihhhi had asked her to she'd probably have taken the job for free. But she *had* been picking up the tab on more of their dates since she'd started working...

"The more I think about living in a little roof cottage with you, the more I like it," Leekath sighed.

"It sounds great to me too," Talyn said. "You don't mind footing the bill for rent? While I'm in school, I mean. I'm sure I'll find something to do after that."

"It's fine," said Leekath. "Actually, if I move out of the Binaaralav dorms, I get a break on my room and board bill. Which Aaihhhi's currently paying, and I bet if I ask him instead of Fheel he'll give me the difference for as long as *I'm* still in school."

"Right," said Talyn. "When would be a good time for you to go poking around Daasen for places?"

"Fenen afternoon," Leekath replied. "I'll come here and teleport you there. I'd like to be as close as work as can be, to make it really easy for Aaihhhi to come by whenever he might want to - he's really sensitive to how long distractions from his work schedule take."

"Sounds like your aaihhhi, yeah," said Talyn.

"Speaking of how very well I eat," murmured Leekath, leaning her head onto Talyn's shoulder.

"Drink up, love," Talyn said, smiling and wrapping his arms around her as twin spots on his neck went numb.

Chapter 33: Enrolling

Talyn and Leekath signed up for a house tour - they wrote down their criteria, waited two weeks for the agency to match them with a few other people who had similar criteria (on location, if not on exact house composition), and then got into a scoot with representative members of four families and an agent. The scoot flew around over Daasen to houses that interested the people present and they stopped at particularly nice ones for interior tours; the agent went on about the features and tried to entice the passengers into bidding wars. A gray-haired elf man and a middle-aged human couple were shouting at each other over a fourteen-bedroom place with two kitchens and a kitchenette by the end of it.

Leekath and Talyn were the only ones who weren't there on behalf of at least six other people. They looked at the handful of roof cottages themselves, and had plenty of time to give everything a leisurely look while the rest of the tour trooped through places with six bathrooms, two parlors, and roll-out temporary walls to divide the bedrooms in half.

And they had plenty of time to determine that they still weren't on exactly the same page.

"I like this one, and I've been in the nearest temple once and it's nice too," she said. It wasn't designed for vampires in particular - there were no perches; the windows were not made of enchanted glass to screen out the awful parts of the sun. But it had a very nice bathtub that she was thinking she wouldn't mind sitting in twice a day, and it didn't spend much of its area on a kitchen. And she was imagining taking little vampires to that temple. He had to sheer away from her thoughts when the mental image passed the door, and that made him press his lips together, annoyed.

"I may not cook on a regular basis, but what about kids eventually?" Talyn asked in a low voice, gesturing at the miniature barely-a-kitchen. It had a freezer, a cooler, and a warmer, and a one-burner stove, but no proper oven or much counter space. *He* was thinking about adopted kids, the only fair solution to their dilemma really. "One of them might get sick of eating out or having convenience food, and then -"

"So you're expecting us to have children who need kitchens?" Leekath said testily.

"You're expecting us to have children who need temples that won't even let me through the door?"

"I didn't say that! *I* go to services sometimes -"

"You were thinking it."

"I didn't know I had to shield to express an opinion on a *house*."

"You don't!" he backpedaled. "But - look, you *know* it'd drive me up the wall to have our kids going off somewhere secret, even if it was only once in a while. It wouldn't be fair. I don't like it with you either but you're in charge of yourself - I ought to have some charge of *our* kids, when they're around."

"You don't trust me with it? You can have your own things with them - take them to puppet shows once a week or tutor them in kamai when they're old enough or read all the bedtime stories -" And she was imagining said bedtime stories being read to dangling bats. Great.

"It's got nothing to do with trust! If I took them somewhere once a week and you didn't know where -"

"You'll know *where*, it's visible from the street!" Leekath exclaimed.

"You know what I mean! Suppose I took them to a certain theater but wouldn't tell you what they were showing, maybe."

"Because a god told you to? I wouldn't complain to you about that," Leekath said, "not if a god told you to - get Aziel or someone to order you to take our kids to a secret puppet show every Chenen and I won't squeak one complaint - but a god *didn't* tell you to."

"You could go to a Barashin temple and take it up with Aziel if that happened!" Talyn cried. "How am I supposed to complain to *your* god about his ridiculous unfair rules?"

"You don't have to be in a temple to pray," Leekath said, snappishly, quickly, but Talyn was brought up short by the suggestion.

"Could I convert?" Talyn asked. Because that would be perfect, that would solve everything, the Barashin gods wouldn't care as long as the vampire's deity didn't claim jurisdiction there, and he didn't want to fight with Leekath.

"No, you're not a vampire. People don't convert to our religion. We're all born to it."

"I can shapeshift into one," Talyn said, although he didn't demonstrate that ability, because he didn't have a sunscreen spell on. "They couldn't tell."

"They *could* tell, you'd have to explain why you weren't already in the temple rolls and didn't already - other things, if nothing else. And it would be wrong. You don't lie to priests," Leekath said. "It'd be like lying to God."

"Well, now I know a new tidbit about the religion, don't lie to God," said Talyn mirthlessly.

"Don't do that," said Leekath, soft and hurt-sounding. "Don't try to learn things you shouldn't know when I'm careless -"

"I don't have *any* secrets from you, you know," Talyn said. "You don't read minds as directly as I do, but anytime you want, you can make a proxy of me and ask it anything. And I'd let you."

"It's not up to me," Leekath said. "I don't have any *other* secrets. The religion isn't mine. I'm not the pontiff."

"If they'd let me convert - I mean, how is there even a rule about that? I'm unprecedented! Barashi hasn't been in contact with Elcenia for long. I'm probably the only Barashin who's learned to shapeshift into vampire forms and learned the language and gotten engaged to a vampire and *willing to convert even without* knowing what I'd be getting into," Talyn said.

"It's a very *general* rule, that only vampires can..."

"By what logic don't I count as a vampire? I'd go around white in the face and fanged all the time except when one of us was eating if that would do it. *You* turned into a halfblood for a tick one time and you haven't been excommunicated, have you?"

"Suppose I write a letter to the pontiff," Leekath said desperately. "And ask. And if he says no, there's *really nothing I can do about it* and you have to stop taking it out on me, but if he says yes, then you can convert and everything will be fine."

"If he says no, we're adopting, or asking Coryl to carry halfblood kids for us," Talyn said, "or we're not having kids. Those are the only choices I can live with if they won't let me be involved in vampire kids' whole lives and you won't keep vampire kids out of temple either."

"I'll write to the pontiff and see what he says," Leekath said uncomfortably. "And the other thing... I can stop showing up to temple if I want, but I have to put my kids through all the - stuff, until they're grown up, if they're vampire enough to count. If I tried to keep kids out of the temple, my family would bid for custody and they'd *win*."

"There's *legal enforcement* about this?" Talyn exclaimed.

"Not in so many words. There's not a law that says vampire religious participation is

compulsory for minors, or anything... But 'unusual deprivation of culture' gives families a basis to make the bid, and the fact that it'd be all about vampires gives them basis to demand a vampire adjudicator. And the vampire adjudicator would listen to their priest, even if they didn't think it was wrong to keep a kid away from temple themselves."

"Let's move to Barashi," said Talyn.

"Wizardry?" Leekath said. "Your school? My job? The *suns*?"

"Let's move to an uninhabited island in Maiiv, then, or make one if there aren't any, we can commute -"

"That won't work," said Leekath. "Even if we find - or *make* - an island, I still have to be legally an Esmaarlan resident to keep my job. I'm an office worker, not a foreign diplomat."

"I hate this," Talyn said, rubbing his temple. "I hate fighting with you. I love you."

"We don't have to figure it out now," Leekath said.

"Write the pontiff," Talyn said. "*Sell* it."

"I will," promised Leekath.

Talyn wasn't allowed to read the letter, or read Leekath's mind *about* the letter. They picked a house. It didn't have room for kids anyway, because they were going to wait on having kids until they were both out of school, and that would take years, and they could move again then - and in the meantime the little one-and-a-half-bedroom cottage on the rooftop was inexpensive and cute and there was a swimming pool for the building occupants six steps from the front door.

He vacated his room in Rhysel's tower and briefly met the gold-haired ex-shren, Evlain, who moved in to replace him. Evlain seemed to like fire, and talking about fire, and taking fire apart with kamai, and setting things on fire. Talyn was pretty glad he didn't have to cohabit with her after all.

Leekath worked long days. Talyn explored the Daasen campus, got books out of their library, skulked around the kamai department meeting all the professors there, and read recruitment literature from clubs about everything from Flag Team to the Bimonthly Avehali Poetry Slam. He registered for courses (spending two angles in line) after the final exams of the term ended, on Nidhel 26. He'd find out if he got into them and whether last-minute swaps needed to be made after the new year began and he met with an advisor.

Thies didn't come over to their new, convenient-to-his-workplace home at any point, but Talyn didn't bring that up to Leekath.

Khi did visit once. He stayed for two angles, let his sister coax him into playing a board game, and then left. He was dating a Barashin elf and wasn't in touch with any family members but Leekath and was still dancing like his life depended on it.

Talyn went on a New Student Resource Tour on the first of Shuraahel. The point of it appeared to be to awe him with all the many privileges and tools he had at his fingertips so long as he was a student of the University of Daasen, lucky him.

It was particularly amusing to listen to the tour guide talk about the kamai department as though it was the most exotic thing of all time, like no one in her audience would have even heard of it before. It seemed like no one else in his tour group *had* heard of it before except for one person who'd come to Daasen to enroll in that department. The others were all thinking about courses in Mrynish folktales, the development of pidgin slang in mixed-language communities, something called "Kemeform dynamic geometry", the history of Giad toe-dancing, mycology, merfolk color magic, tropical climates, and fey/nonfey social integrative styles.

"When is he going to answer the letter?" Talyn asked Leekath, after he'd finished tromping around campus being told how grateful he should be for the opportunity to earn a greenhouse access stamp if he took enough credits of botany, and for access to the ceramics studio, and for Peer Arbitration if he had a dispute with a classmate. "The pontiff, I mean."

"He might not answer it at all," Leekath said. "It's not like he *has* to."

"What, seriously? He might just ignore you?"

"I don't know. I've never written to him before. But I'm sure he gets a lot of correspondence, and has priests helping him with sorting it out. He might not have even seen it yet."

"It's been a month."

"There are almost two hundred million vampires in the world. He has to be the pontiff for all of them," Leekath said.

"I guess," said Talyn dubiously. "Will you at least get some kind of 'sorry, you don't rate a real answer' form letter if he's not going to get back to you?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

Talyn snorted. "It's a good thing that my wanting to convert has nothing to do with admiration for how stuff is handled in the religion."

Leekath didn't comment. She just glanced at his neck.

"Drink up," he offered, and she did.

"Tell me, Talyn," said Aar Sosrik, Talyn's advisor. "What makes you think you can handle a six-course term?"

"That's how many classes I was carrying at Binaaralav," said Talyn.

"Mm, yes, but this is a *university*, in particular it is the University of *Daasen*. You'll need the theory course and at least one practicum to have a reasonable chance of passing your tier test, but with these others... are you aware that all of your reading and most of your assignments and practice will need to be conducted outside of class? In-class time is for things that can only be accomplished with an instructor's help. And you have here government, political geography -"

"I'm not from Elcenia, Aar Sosrik. I want to learn more about the stuff everyone here already knows."

"...and contemporary literature and a *very* high paced math survey," Aar Sosrik continued as if Talyn hadn't spoken.

"I know some math, I just don't know how it's studied here," Talyn said. "That seemed like the best way to -"

"I've looked at your marks for Binaaralav, and frankly, I don't think they have anything to do with how you got in here," said Aar Sosrik. "You're what I call an *independent potential*. For some reason, the admissions committee thinks you're going to do something attention-getting, and that this is more likely to involve inventing a cure for poverty than sinking the Taavlas Isles or something. So they'd like to be able to claim credit for you. This doesn't mean they think you're *smart*. It doesn't mean they think you can *handle the workload*. It means you're going to go out and make waves and Daasen wants our name attached to you."

"That's kind of what I figured about why they took me. I wondered if anyone was going to admit it," Talyn said frankly.

Aar Sosrik snorted. "At any rate, my job is to get you through at least one term without producing such abominable results that we're forced to suspend you, and I don't think you can

take six courses and still be here at the end of Rohel. Our terms are longer than Binaaralav's. You have to remember more material to pass the final exams. Our standards are more rigorous, most of the students are past your equivalency, and, as you say, you do not have background general knowledge to help you with Elcenian topics. My strong recommendation is that you drop two, perhaps even three, of your non-wizarding courses. Most particularly if you plan to remain signed on for tutoring in the kamaï department."

"Yeah, I do," Talyn said, because while he could wrap his mind around Leekath paying rent and his former Master paying tuition, he didn't think it would make any sense for either to pay for his food, or his clothes, or anything else he happened to want to grab. Tutoring paid, and except for the professors, there were not yet any students qualified to tutor the higher levels available, because the department was still so new.

"Of the four non-wizarding courses, if we assume you can do arithmetic and basic algebra -"

"I can," said Talyn, insulted.

"- you will get almost nothing of value towards your goal of becoming a wizard by taking the mathematics survey. Are you planning to work for the government, Talyn?"

"No, my fiancée already does, and -"

"The first word of that sentence was all I asked for, thank you. There is little point in you taking a government course unless you plan to work for the government, with the government, against the government, or around the government."

"The course description recommended it for anyone, because the law applies to everyone -"

"Don't go around believing course descriptions; they're designed to be appealing so the professors can cut the applicant list down to the course size and have only the most desirable students. Omit government. You could stop there, but political geography - really?"

"Just as a way to learn more about the world. It's very introductory, if I'm allowed to believe the course description and the fact that it didn't have any prerequisites."

Aar Sosrik snorted. "Well. You can drop more courses as late as three weeks into the term. Contemporary literature is a fluff course. I believe the class doesn't even require written assignments, depending on who teaches it. I imagine you can complete that one without trouble, since you do seem to speak the language."

"Fine," said Talyn snappishly. "I'll drop the math and government. I'm keeping the others."

"It is of course completely up to you," Aar Sosrik said smoothly. "I am your *advisor*."

"Is this all you do? Tell people they aren't smart enough to handle six courses, twice annually?"

Aar Sosrik smiled thinly. "No. This is an additional duty that junior faculty take on at the beginning of certain terms. I'm also your theory professor."

The classes were brutal. Talyn had contemporary literature first, and it turned out that he was already supposed to have looked in his student mailbox as shown to him during the Resource Tour to find the syllabus so he could purchase the required novels and anthologies. He had to ask six people before he found one who'd let him sit next to her and read over her shoulder. Everyone else was desperately poring over the text, trying to catch up or refresh their memories, and skipped around too often for him to even read their minds coherently; one wouldn't even acknowledge that Talyn had said anything, and another decided that the request

was a good opportunity to call him an irresponsible child for not having his own book already.

There was no chance to correct this mistake and get the Theory syllabus and text from the mailbox and bookstore before that class began. It started right after Literature ended (and Literature took up its full time, talking about how halflings had been represented in Esmaarlan fiction since the immigration boom). Talyn could only teleport so close to the theory building based on his Resource Tour and was almost late from having to fly the rest of the way and climb four flights of stairs.

Perhaps fortunately, Aar Sosrik turned out not to be present. The first class was conducted by a graduate student of his who seemed like she would overwhelmingly prefer to be working on her thesis suite of dynamic spells. It was a hundred-person seminar. Seats were assigned, so he just read neighbors' minds for peeks at the syllabus. The teaching assistant was running through the syllabus, getting everyone's "stupid questions" out of the way before their real professor had to deal with them:

"To what extent is this a *pure* theory course?" (It wasn't. They'd have to demonstrate understanding of new principles on the Chenen sessions.)

"Is there extra credit available?" (Yes, for assisting with any of a list of projects on the last page of the syllabus.)

"How strongly recommended is the supplementary reading?" (There was a strict University-wide limit on wordcount for assigned readings a given class could officially require. The supplementary readings were supplementary in name only.)

"Will we be covering anything about large gestures?" (No. They were expected to have memorized *all* of the gestures in their last term. If they didn't know them, they needed to get a tutor or practice on their own.)

"Are there recommended lectures?" (They could attend any extracurricular lectures they wanted, but at their tier level they would be in over their heads on any subject worth lecturing about.)

"Who grades our assignments?" (Aar Sosrik, or the graduate student, or a different graduate student, or a third graduate student.)

"Will *any* attention *whatever* be paid to the perfectly respectable academic theory that the Generous Lord is -" (No, it was not a religion course. Talyn wasn't sitting near enough the questioner or the grad student to figure out what that was supposed to mean.)

"How much flexibility is there on our demonstration projects?" (Arbitrary amounts, as long as they demonstrated the principles and had good notes.)

"Is there a minimum CC to be able to complete the course without accommodations?" (Three hundred forty; anyone needing accommodations had to contact Aar Sosrik.)

"Or me," Talyn called out when the teaching assistant said that.

"Was that a question?" she asked.

"No. It was an answer. If anybody's got less than three hundred forty CC I can help them," Talyn said.

"Aaran... Casten," said the grad student, looking at the seating chart. "I don't know what you're talking about, but it's not on the syllabus."

"Nevermind," said Talyn, feeling the minds around him annoyed at the disruption, rather than intrigued by the offer.

"If we already have our teleportation licenses, can we replace the project in unit nine?" someone wanted to know, and the answer was "partially".

Talyn teleported to the mailbox and emptied it. He had a quick break for lunch, which he bought at an on-campus sandwich shop: open-faced jam and goat cheese with a side of fried-egg-over-greens. He bolted it down and teleported as close as he could get to his practicum. That one didn't meet every day, unlike his other classes, but it did meet on day one. The class size was smaller, and there was a teaching assistant in *addition* to the professor, so they could divide into two groups of fourteen and make sure everyone knew some basic spells they were going to build on in the future.

Talyn thought this class was going to be much better until the grad student he was working under started correcting his gestures. "Stop! Sloppy! What are you, a transfer student?"

"Yes," snapped Talyn.

"Well, these are going to get spells out, or you'd have cleaned them up yourself, but really! Everyone slurs their gestures as they continue their studies. You need to start nice and crisp, so they don't smooth to the point of no longer working. Go on, try the color change again."

Talyn turned his boots blue. It was a practicum, his boots were blue, what else did she want?

"No, tuck your thumb in," she said. "Fingers snug together. Move from the elbow, not just the wrist! Watch him over there, he's got it." The other student was performing gestures like he had a crossbow bolt held to the back of his neck, he was so stiff. "Keep trying." And finally she moved on.

Talyn turned his boots back to their original color - *crisply* - and went - *crisply* - through all of the other spells on the list except the five he hadn't learned at Binaaralay. He frowned at the notation for them before finally just reading the grad student's thoughts about it; it was on her mind anyway. Then he levitated one of the provided apples, turned the pages in his syllabi (since he still didn't have any textbooks), made an illusion mirror that floated in front of his face, bisected one of the supplied apples (and then ate half), and called the other half of his apple to his hand from where it sat on his desk. (And then ate it.)

By the time he'd shown that he could do all the spells, class was running two degrees overtime and he had to bolt to make it to physical geography. The class periods were very closely spaced; it was good that after going to each class once he'd be able to teleport to them all. He was also grateful for the apple. He should have had more lunch.

Political geography looked to be a lot of rote memorization. Countries, mountain ranges, cities and landmarks and borders, rivers and seas and lakes. Plus theorizing about it - why was Paraasilan there, not five miles east? Did the Erthyo Empire fall because of mountains? (Hint: yes, at least according to the professor, who actually taught the smallish seminar alone.) How did Pleia's seaboard affect its (the professor coughed politely) *culture*?

Talyn dragged himself to the bookstore at the end of that class, bought all the textbooks he needed, and teleported home to collapse onto the sofa.

It was another two angles before Leekath was due home.

He picked up his syllabi, prioritized his readings, and started hurtling as fast as he could through the first fifteen chapters of "Makaaral and the Sorcerer's Guild".

He'd just made up his mind to drop the blasted geography course by the time Leekath came home, holding a black envelope marked *From the Office of the Pontiff*.

Chapter 34: Petitioning

"What does it say?" Talyn exclaimed. The letter was still sealed, but that wouldn't matter to Leekath. It was hard to pick out specific hhikiiias from the storm of them -

"It's good news!" she said. "But it's not exactly what you wanted, I think... he said you can have a dispensation to go into just the front chamber of a temple, *no farther*, as long as you're in vampire form the whole time and wear a sun cloak and don't tell anyone but me, and a priest will talk to you and send up a recommendation to the pontiff about what to do next. I mentioned our address in my letter, so you have an appointment in a week at the nearest temple. It's at midnight. And I have to make the priest a mindshield pendant so you can't read his mind."

"I don't need you to shield to avoid reading *your* mind about religion," Talyn said. "I don't because you *asked* me."

"You don't read me automatically, because you have to go around the hhikiiias," Leekath said. "And - other things. I have to make the pendant, anyway. The pontiff doesn't know you personally, it would be weird if he trusted you not to read the priest at all."

"I guess," muttered Talyn.

"This has never happened before," Leekath said. "No one has ever been *let* into a temple without being a vampire. People have tricked their way in, and forced their way in, but you are literally the first non-vampire to be *let in*. Don't make it out to be nothing."

"Sorry." Talyn said. "One week from today at midnight?"

"Yep. Don't be late, wear a suncloak -"

"A suncloak, at midnight?"

"A nice *formal* suncloak. They're not just practical, they're also a really visible way to signal that you're a vampire doing vampire things. Even lights wear them to temple. I can go with you to buy one tonight or tomorrow evening," Leekath said.

"I don't understand how things are kept so secret anyway. Isn't your religion older than anti-scraying wards?" Talyn asked. "Even if everything's carefully protected now, couldn't anyone do a past-scry into the temples a few hundred years ago?"

Leekath's lips thinned. "There's laws against that, and against publicizing anything found by doing that, in a few places, where we have enough of the population to push it through - here, Rande, a few other countries. But they don't actually prevent anyone from doing anything. Until recently, translation spells didn't work through past-scries, and that helped, but now they do work. What we'd really like is retroactive warding. No one's cracked the problem yet."

"You could ask Kaylo," Talyn said lightly.

"I don't think Kaylo would help me do something designed to hide secrets from him. I'd rather not draw his attention to our faith at all," Leekath said. "And don't *you* try anything like a past-scry on old temples either -"

"I wasn't going to!" yelled Talyn. "Honestly! I can resist reading your mind and you're *right there* but you think I might spend all day figuring out a diagram and casting a spell tiers above my level just to have a look?"

"Just making sure," Leekath said, looking ruffled.

"Can I see the letter?" Talyn asked.

Leekath shook her head. "You can listen to the hhikiiia if you want, but you shouldn't read it directly," she said. She tucked it into the shirt pocket at her hip.

Talyn had temporarily given up on trying to find explanations for her religious

prohibitions. "Fine."

"How were classes?" she asked.

"I'm dropping political geography," Talyn said.

Talyn determined very quickly that he didn't like contemporary literature, at least not the selections from Esmaar and Saraan and the one example each from Petar and Imilaat that the course was offering. However, he was able to talk about *why* he didn't like them, so he got good grades on his first two assignments, with half-legible marks like "insightful" and "refreshing".

He used the time freed up by dropping geography to join a book club that was affiliated with the lit course and its other sections. He just wanted to figure out what people were getting out of the impenetrable, overlong plots with characters he couldn't sympathize with. He made a little progress, but not much, and dropped the club after two meetings to have more time for homework.

There was a lot of homework.

And it was graded harshly. He could half-ass the literature essays (one on every short story, one on every five chapters of the novels, and one every two weeks about the Theme of that two-week period that he was supposed to guess - "it's a puzzle!" - based on the reading selections).

But he had to know what he was talking about in the theory courses when he filled out the page of sentence-answers and paragraph-answers he picked up at the end of each class meeting. That included all of the supplemental reading. He could ask questions during class, but in six attempts hadn't managed to elicit a more helpful response than "Did you *read* the assigned pages of Meket Pabaar's Introduction to Static Theory?" or "For simple questions like that, just use the glossary in the back of your primary text."

He didn't know if he just wasn't very bright or if the other students had just had a better introduction to wizardry than Binaaralav had provided him or what, but they didn't have that problem.

Talyn spent the entirety of theory classtime reading his neighbors' minds just to keep up vicariously. He started sitting in the third row so he could be near more of the chronic questioners, and the professor or the teaching assistant of the day, and learn what in the world was going on when they asked questions like "do familiars affect sting with Voyan numbers" and got answers like "yes, except in cases of fractional capacity, and even then only the Corenta Study ever yielded that result; if this interests you, consult Aaral Mikaten, room 1557-Av, she's working on the methodology for a replication".

In the practicum, he was immediately caught and chastised any time his gestures were insufficiently precise, or if his pronunciation was off including by way of his lingering accent, or if any of a thousand telltale signs let the sharp-eyed professor or graduate student determine that he was being sloppy with his intentional component.

At Binaaralav, practica had been about teaching vocabularies of spells and talking about what they were used for. At Daasen it seemed to be about making sure that he could cast anything he was going to cast so neatly that he'd still be able to get out passable pulls and words if he were repeatedly punched in the mouth and had all of his fingers broken. "You can always look up a spell," the professor had a habit of saying, "but only practice will let you cast it safely and correctly!" At least, he thought, later tiers would have to focus on the more interesting topic of intentionality rather than just endlessly repeating "Crisply! *Crisply!*"

Fortunately, with only three classes, he was capable of keeping up with the work, but

after term had been underway for four days, someone took him up on his kamaï tutoring offer.

Talyn set up an appointment for his would-be tutee, Natalen, in the time slot that dropping geography and then the book club had freed, and met her in the kamaï department lounge.

"You're a kid," said the student incredulously. She was a human, and looked to him to be mid-twenties.

Talyn rolled his eyes at her. "I'm an *innate kama*, Journeyman rank, and I can help you. What's the problem?"

"I wasn't expecting you to be a *kid*," she said.

"I wasn't expecting you to be focused on that when you're four days into term and already need a tutor. What's the problem? Image, mind, elemental -"

"I didn't know they let kids even *go* here."

Talyn fumed silently, and reminded himself of the pay-by-angle plus a bonus if the professor noted an improvement in the student's progress. He then shapeshifted into a decent likeness of his father and crossed his arms. "There. Can you concentrate well enough to ask your question now?" he asked.

"Augh!" exclaimed Natalen.

"So, your problem is that you're terrified of kamaï. You want me to do a mental edit on that?" Talyn suggested. "I can't imagine why you'd have taken the course, though..."

"No! That's not it! I just suck at flying. But I don't want to get shown up by some pathetic *child*."

"How about a not-pathetic child? Look, if you came to me, you already decided against going to a teacher, so your options are basically to run to a little elementary magic school for *pathetic children* over in Paraasilan and asking someone there - someone about my age, tops - or going all the way to Barashi and seeing if you can get a suitably venerable Master to give you the time of day. Which you probably can't, because the ones who are interested in teaching have a lot of apprentices already and the ones who don't are already teaching here or at one of the other schools with a kamaï department. So, let's go outside and troubleshoot your flying, okay? It's easy."

"It's not easy!" exclaimed Natalen. "It's hard! There's so many tones to juggle all at the same time!"

"So, let's go outside," Talyn repeated impatiently, shifting back to his normal shape because he was rapidly less interested in indulging Natalen.

He finally got her out of the building and into the air, and made sure she knew what all the tones *did*, and ran her through the exercises that he'd seen Emryl and Jenn use to learn to fly. (He just flew *directly* ever since he'd learned the chord, but he'd spent enough time around non-innates to have an idea of how to teach them.) Natalen got through the prescribed exercises well enough. It was when he told her to "just fly around" that she ran into trouble, dropping to the use of only two axes and thinking loudly uncomfortable thoughts about how anyone walking below them could see up her skirt.

"Okay, first," Talyn said, "wear some *leggings* -"

"This school doesn't have a dress code!" Natalen said. "You can't tell me what to wear."

"Right," said Talyn, grinding his teeth. "You might *choose* to wear leggings under your dress *voluntarily* so you don't make that *face* every time you get more than six feet off the ground, how about that. Are you taking image kamaï too?"

"Yeah..."

"Are you good enough to make some illusion leggings so we can move on? Or I could do it, but I doubt I'd get the fit right."

She frowned. "I'm new at this, I can't do anything useful yet."

"Natalen, you can *fly*. Could you fly before?"

"I suck at it!"

Talyn entertained the uncharitable notion that she didn't want to be around a "child" because he highlighted how immature she was even more than someone her own age would have. "Okay, so you can't make yourself leggings. Let's go higher and then you'll just look like a bird or something to anyone on the ground and I'll stay above you and you can relax, okay? I have a fiancée, I am not going to look at you funny."

"You're *engaged*? You're what, thirty, thirty-five?"

"I'm not an Elcenian half-elf, Natalen," Talyn said, climbing higher into the air. She followed unhappily. "It's not the same thing. Let's pay attention to what we're doing, okay? Now we're up here, nobody can see anything, run through the slalom exercise again. Remember to tilt as you go." He conjured up illusions of poles for her to swerve around, floating in midair.

Natalen groaned, and she rigidly slalomed through the course and rigidly slalomed back.

"I'm going to make a complete guess here," Talyn said, "arrow in the apple tree - are you also a wizarding student?"

"Yeah?" Natalen said. "Why?"

"Because you're *stiff*, and kamaï isn't *stiff*."

She blinked. "Huh?"

Talyn swooped and barrel-rolled and looped and spun in the air until he was dizzy, and came to a stop. "Right there, like that. I have an advantage, because I'm an innate, but I wasn't thinking 'okay, now it's time to bank, now it's time to pitch thisaway thirty degrees', I was thinking I wanted to be over there and then after that I wanted to be over there. And if you keep flying like you expect a professor to yell 'Crisply! Crisply!' at you -"

"Did you have that one *too*?"

"Yes. That professor would suck at teaching kamaï way worse than you suck at flying. Kamaï's a natural thing, wizardry's invented and also explodes a lot more than anything you'll learn in beginner kamaï will. Just *fly around*."

Natalen didn't become an expert flier instantly, but she loosened up by increments, ultimately completed the slalom course with an elegant drifting motion, and had made up her mind to at least borrow a pair of leggings by the time she and Talyn descended to ground level.

"Thanks," she said.

"Get your teacher to write the progress note," Talyn replied.

"Sure," said Natalen, and they parted ways.

Talyn kept on top of his assignments but did not excel, overall. Some of his classmates were breathtakingly, effortlessly smart - almost like Kaylo, but generally without the heavy layer of contempt. Some of them had no conceptual advantage over him but seemed to pull extra time out of nowhere, and they turned in all their homework for five courses and then accepted dinner invitations and thought about the nine club meetings they were going to attend that week. Others neglected their coursework entirely, expecting to make up enough of the grade in tests - in fairness, advancement was controlled by tier tests, not by the margin by which one passed a class. And a few others were burnt out or floundering and were unlikely to see the end of the term.

He didn't have any more meetings with Aar Sosrik. Advisors didn't do much, besides those initial interviews in which they insulted one's intelligence with infuriating accuracy.

Talyn didn't try to join any more clubs. Or special interest groups. He just showed up to classes, snuck in lunch between them, set up meetings with flailing kamai students when called for, and went home and spent angles upon angles on homework.

At midnight on Shuraahel the ninth, clad in his brand-new black silk suncloak with white and red triangle detailing around all the edges and leather backing for the gloves, Talyn went to the temple.

Leekath had taken the evening off from her own schoolwork to coach him. "He'll have lie detection on. Priests always do, on duty. Don't lie to him. Just don't even try. Be very respectful. He's *important*. If the pontiff wanted his recommendation he's basically the difference between you getting to convert or not. Don't try to make any guesses about his identity or if you know him from somewhere. Don't do any kamai, at all, besides being in vampire shape - mindreading's the only thing you do uncontrollably so that should be doable, right? Stay in vampire form the whole time. You shouldn't need to shift bat, but if he does, you do too and hang opposite him wherever he goes. Don't get indignant, don't get sarcastic, don't get pushy."

"Okay," Talyn had told her.

"Call him 'Ieeht'. That's not his name, I don't know his name and I'm not supposed to, but it's the title. Speak vampire. You can shapeshift precisely enough to really pronounce it now, right? You're not just using image kamai?"

"Right."

"Good. Oh, and - um - I don't know how much he's going to tell you, or what he's going to talk about, but don't take any *bait*, about me - or anything but mostly about me - okay? About the hearing or anything like that? This isn't a good time to argue about it being magic and not a disease. Anything even *like* that, ignore it, just be respectful and assume he knows everything and is right about everything -"

"What, is the priest God in disguise?" Talyn had asked.

"No! But you might as well pretend that he is," she'd replied, and then it had been time to leave, and she hadn't been allowed to come with him.

So he was standing at the door of the temple, wishing he'd remembered to ask her whether he ought to knock or something.

He was still deliberating about that question when the door swung outward, revealing a vampire whose face was completely obscured by the hood of his own formal suncloak in black with stars of silver splashed across each shoulder and hip.

At the priest's throat was a silver pendant Leekath had made, and it was working. The stranger's mind was dead of audible thought.

"Talyn Dalenn Casten," said the priest. He didn't sound familiar, but he was speaking in a formal, serious tone that Talyn might not recognize even if he'd known the guy.

Talyn didn't stop to wonder why Leekath had bothered to include his middle name in the letter. "Yes, Ieeht," he said, pronouncing the vampire words without the help of kamai.

"Come past the threshold, and no farther," the priest instructed, and Talyn's cloak whispered around his ankles as he obeyed.

The front room of the temple was either habitually bare or made so in anticipation of his arrival. The floor was thick glass over red-marbled rock; the walls were white, with stylized vampire characters in blue protruding a half-inch from the surface and spelling out words Talyn

didn't recognize. The ceiling was glossy black, and barred with rows of silvery perches. Faint lighting emanated from the white parts of the walls rather than the ceiling. Apart from that, the diamond-shaped room was empty, with only silver-handled black doors interrupting the two rear walls. Talyn wondered abruptly if he was going to have to stand up for the whole interview, and how long it would be.

"Why are you here?" the priest asked. His suncloak had a pocket in the front, open on each end, and his hands were hidden.

Talyn blinked and fended off the first six flippant answers that came to mind. "I want to convert," he said instead.

"Why is that?"

He's probably got a lie detection on, Talyn reminded himself. Even if that wasn't *always* true, the cost of it being true was low. He picked his way carefully through the sentence, "I'm engaged to a vampire girl, and I want to be involved in her life and our future children's lives, and being shut out of the religion is - an obstacle."

"An obstacle," repeated the priest thoughtfully. Talyn couldn't read anything in his expression past the hood. He couldn't read anything of the man's *thoughts*. Blasted pendant. "But of course you know very little about the religion you propose to join. It is not like that of the Sand Dusk Chanters or the Thanetans, who offer tracts and their holy texts to anyone who asks for them." Talyn took a moment to retrieve the words for the other religions mentioned. It was much harder to speak a foreign language without being able to root around in others' minds for vocabulary.

"I know it's important to Leekath." Maybe he was supposed to use her full name? The nickname was mostly for the convenience of people who couldn't pronounce the shrill pitches... He couldn't tell. The priest's blasted mind was shielded.

"You've appeared in vampire shape," the priest observed.

"Yes, Ieeht." Was he supposed to elaborate? Was he supposed to claim to be a vampire in spirit too? Was he supposed to offer to go around like this all the time to prove his sincerity? He didn't know what the priest wanted.

If Leekath had been there to ask she probably would have told him that he was doing fine with his minimal, conservative answers.

But he didn't *know*.

"But this is also something dragons can do. And dragons, too, can have vampire children, who despite their additional shapes are accepted into our faith."

Talyn swallowed. "My children won't be thudias, Ieeht."

"No, perhaps not. But half-vampires whose parents are one vampire and one human, or elf, or half-elf as I understand you to be, can have children who are more than half vampire, if they marry accordingly. The half-vampires themselves, despite this power, are not admitted into the temple. You have already come farther than Aaeihhyleekatheeei's cousin Thiris, who has genuine vampire ancestry where you do not."

This priest from the neighborhood they had just barely moved into seemed to know an awful lot. Was there a file on Leekath and her family somewhere? "Thiris can't speak the language, or shapeshift -"

"But a dragon can," interrupted the priest. "A dragon can make every claim that you do to vampirehood, if so inclined. And yet a dragon is not a vampire. A dragon does not practice vampire religion."

Talyn thought about that one, hard. The priest didn't interrupt him.

"Are they so inclined?" he asked finally. "Dragons?"

"No," the priest replied. "And that is why you are in this room."

"Because I asked to be?"

"Because you wished to be - and because of your other claims. But the question remains of *why* you wish to be here. *Why* you have changed your shape, learned this language, asked your fiancée to petition the highest mortal office of our faith, and have appeared here in our manner of dress."

Talyn swallowed. He'd already answered that question. Was it one of the things Leekath had said not to be if he repeated himself? He looked at the hood draped over the priest's face. He couldn't even see the man's mouth. *Was* it a man? He wasn't good at telling by voice alone, when all the pitches were so high. Were women even allowed to be vampire priests? Leekath had said "he" throughout...

Finally Talyn asked a question. "How is it determined, who's vampire enough to be here?"

"Would you care to guess?" suggested the priest.

Talyn hated that pendant. He hated it very fiercely.

"God decides?" Talyn offered.

"How else? And I am speaking to you now to determine whether God has rendered a decision about you."

"What would that look like?" Talyn asked, doing his best to mask impatience.

"Since the very earliest years of our religion, there have been no converts, and it was clear, in those years, who was and who was not a vampire. Your case would be the first of its kind - and so we can expect that if God has a plan for you, unlike any others of your kind, he will make his wishes clear. He will bestow signs of his favor on you. But I see no indication that any of the traditional indications of God's attention are about you, nor any spectacular show of a less typical signal."

The priest had a lie detection on.

Talyn couldn't think of any signs of divine favor. He was an innate kama, but that had happened before any Barashins had even discovered Elcenia. And not even the Barashin gods took credit for individual instances of that, though they were recognized for inventing kama in general. He got into Daasen? There were reasons to expect that without divine intervention and lots of non-vampires got in. He was going to marry an awesome vampire girl? Leekath's cousin Thiris's parents were married too.

"What are the typical ones?" Talyn asked weakly.

To his surprise, the priest answered him. Maybe there wasn't any reason not to with lie detection so common and easy, but it was way more information than Talyn had expected:

"Overpowering inclinations towards prayer or ritual - or, sometimes, flight. Unaccountable knowledge of secrets beyond one's station - *unaccountable* the operative word. Prophetic dreams, on any subject, but some are more common than others. Lightcraft and sorcery have both been considered signs of favor in the past but are now less so, as they do occur in other species who may be safely assumed not to have the scrutiny of God. Magery is still considered a sign despite the same fact, but not mere mage potential. Certain astrological circumstances surrounding one's birth or important milestones. Exceptional precociousness, preternatural luck. Spectacular talent at dance, singing, rhetoric, or listening."

"*Listening?*"

"Yes. Usually, only one signal is not sufficient to have any practical effect on one's

status."

Listening? Weird talent. Talyn dropped it. "I was precocious," he said softly.

"Yes," agreed the priest equably.

Talyn had no urges towards prayer or ritual, and his urges to fly were not overpowering. He could account for his knowledge. He did not have prophetic dreams. He was not a light, sorcerer, or mage, and didn't think he'd get anywhere making a bid for innate kama'i to count in the same class. Elcenian astrology probably didn't apply to his birth. He was not lucky, just powerful and occasionally clever. He did not sing, dance, orate, or *listen* particularly well.

...Maybe he did listen. He couldn't listen to the priest (damned pendant), but maybe...?

"What kind of listening?" he asked.

"The ordinary sort. A skilled listener will cause those around him or her to pour out their secrets gladly, relieved to unload them. It is not to be discounted as a talent."

Not his sort of listening. Mostly. He was probably better off not making a case for it.

"What should I do?" Talyn asked. "To get God's attention?"

"Prayer, as you may have heard, is customary," said the priest with a sigh. "You may go."

Chapter 35: Praying

"What can you tell me about how praying works?" Talyn asked Leekath.

"It works like... praying," Leekath said. "I don't do that much of it. How do you pray to Barashin gods?"

Talyn shrugged. "Technically anything invoking their names or titles counts. 'Aziel, I want a pony', 'begone rain in Arimal's name', 'pilots of the suns, fly away and leave me alone, I'm tired'. Like that."

"Well, you don't get God's name," Leekath said tartly.

"That doesn't surprise me."

"But you can address him as God if you want," she said.

"God," said Talyn loudly, but she made a shushing gesture.

"Not while I'm *here*," she hissed. "Do *I* pray in front of *you*?"

"I figured that was a coincidence, or you didn't want to let anything slip -"

"That too, but - here, I'll go in my study and do work," she said. She kissed his temple, and slipped away into the cross between a closet and a bedroom that she kept her school assignments and extra Parliamentary work in. (His textbooks and school supplies occupied a levitating table with shelves under it in the living room.)

Talyn was left sitting on the edge of the bed in their bedroom, wondering what he'd been going to say after addressing the vampire deity.

"God," he said again, more quietly. "God, I need her. I love her. I can't lose her over this. And I can't let our children get swallowed up by something I don't understand. Let me in."

There was no answer, but from such a secretive deity, any communication would have been a surprise.

"Please," Talyn added.

Talyn learned the sunscreening spell, and started going around in vampire form habitually, changing only to eat meals or let Leekath eat hers - and even then he kept up a visual illusion of the bloodlessly pale skin, the fangs. (Leekath didn't find the facade appetizing the first time, but after she'd gone ahead anyway this was corrected.)

His classmates noticed, or at least a few of them did. The teachers noticed too. Several of them even asked him about it instead of minding their own business or making quiet assumptions. He told the curious ones that it was "an exercise" in kamaï shapeshifting.

He couldn't blink instantly from vampire form to bat (although he could make it look like he was, with image kamaï on top of the blurrier transition) so he didn't spend time in bat form during the day - but he slept beside his fiancée, hanging from the perch above the bed. It was surprisingly comfortable.

Vampire ears were better. Vampire eyes were worse. He held books closer to his face, and got used to echolocating over long distances to hear/feel the space around him when it was unclear. He was stronger and faster, but not enough that he accidentally broke things or performed absurd athletic feats when he was just going about his life. He reacted to temperatures differently: warm objects were appealing but warm ambient temperatures distressing, cold days pleasant and cold surfaces aversive. Esmaar's weather was just as congenial to either shape on average, but the indoor climate control wasn't always.

When he got home, before he started chipping away at each day's pile of homework, he took a moment to haul himself up to a perch, hang there, and talk to the silent god of the

vampires. Usually he said the same thing. "Let me in."

Sometimes he got creative. "I'll be a good vampire." "I don't know what you want your followers to do, but I trust Leekath that it's all right." "I won't tell anyone about what's in the rest of the temple. Or the part I saw. Or what the priest said to me. Not even my dad. Even if he badgers me for a week." "It's not like the Barashin gods have a great hold over me, they don't care what I do. I'm not going to have divided loyalties. I don't even live there." "I won't even tell anyone but Leekath *that* I convert, if you don't want a lot of people trying. If you let even me."

"What do you want?"

"What should I do?"

God did not reply.

Talyn let himself down to the floor and watched white hands belonging to a species that wouldn't take him flip through *Contemporary Short Stories from the Leraal Speaking World, Volume Three, Edition Six*.

Unbelievably, he got used to the classes. He became accustomed to the weird ways the local literature unfolded, and the similarities it shared with plays, which he often did like. The vampire shape had steadier hands and was better suited to gesturing *crispily, crispily*, so he no longer dreaded the practicum so badly. He applied himself to theory, studying the Elementary Components of Intentionality, and the standard notation systems, and the differences between manipulating an installation and casting it in the first place.

Then the first large swath of tests approached.

Aar Sosrik casually informed the class that when he started teaching low-level theory courses, no more than a third of them ever passed their first test, and that even after he began issuing warnings the pass rate never cleared fifty percent - "so the problem, you see, is that none of you yet believe that wizardry is *difficult*, that you must *study*, and even though I'm telling you this now, you'll have to see your mark on the test to believe me."

Talyn decided it would be most efficient to believe him in advance. He took the study guide and went over it four times. He bought the recommended book of practice intentional-component-identification exercises, and then went through Leekath's spellbooks for more advanced practice. When she had spare angles she wasn't spending practicing kamai or doing take-home work from Parliament, she'd check his work.

He still slept beside her - when he slept. Darkness didn't mean *time to sleep* to a vampire body; his wakeful periods stretched beyond all previous limits. He hung on the bedroom perch only when exhaustion compelled it. At least he couldn't literally fall asleep over his books. He'd stay conscious until he became a bat. (Or a halfblood, but that was only for mealtimes.)

For that matter, he wasn't sure he needed to eat on a daily basis if he was spending most of his time in vampire shape. Leekath drank her fill every evening, but that was a special case. He tried skipping lunch, and felt fine, and skipped dinner, and pulled an all-nighter writing his practice tests and working out exactly how he'd made all the mistakes that didn't correspond to the answer key.

He was too exhausted to safely teleport by the time his last class let out the next day. He didn't feel hungry, exactly, just drained - his life force was accustomed to being replenished with food and sleep frequently. He took a transfer point most of the way home, which mercifully took only a tiny spark of energy. He climbed the stairs that zigzagged up the wall of the building, because he didn't have the wherewithal to fly *or* shapeshift.

In the kitchen, he stared into a cabinet, and sluggishly realized that if he didn't have

enough life force to shapeshift he had no way to *eat*. Not *food*.

Talyn was going to have to sit or hang, doing nothing, not even sleeping, let alone applying himself to studying. He would have to do that until Leekath came home and he could tap her.

Or he was going to have to find somebody to bite.

He wasn't so utterly perfect at shapeshifting that he could get any lifespan gains - or losses, more likely - from doing that. Probably. *Probably* without divine intervention blood would be only nourishment, not lifespan adjustment. Maybe it'd drop him down to the span of whoever he bit. Or average with what he had. He didn't have any communication crystals; he was used to *finding* people he had to talk to. Otherwise he could call Kaylo...

It occurred to him belatedly that he could find someone to *tap* just as easily as he could find someone to *drink* from.

But...

Well, it was an essential part of the vampire experience, wasn't it, depending on the people around oneself - people who weren't family, usually - for sustenance. Asking over and over that they let someone bite into them and suck blood, asking to be trusted to stop short of taking too much, asking without offering any repayment that could ever fall into the category of coercion. Beggars by biological constraint. Ethical parasitism.

Also, he wouldn't have to explain to a random neighbor how vampire bites worked, whereas tapping would be extra degrees of conversation he couldn't easily afford.

But mostly the essential vampire experience part.

"Thanks?" he said wearily to the air, to himself, to God, and he went to find the stairs down to the next house down in the building.

An elf answered the door. This meant she wasn't bewildered by the question when he knocked as humans (or other vampires) might have been, and he didn't have to make a clumsy excuse and try another house. "I'll go see who's home," the old lady who answered said. "You just wait right here."

The person who was home was Memin, also an elf, was probably in his fifties or early sixties, and while he didn't have visible bitemarks, he was clearly familiar with the procedure. He leaned on the doorframe. "Don't think we've met," he said.

"I'm Talyn," Talyn said. It didn't sound much like a vampire nickname, but some of them were more mangled from the source than others, and his name was sufficiently pronounceable in Leraal that this might appear to be the point of it. "So can I -"

"Yeah, go for it, you look hungry," Memin said.

Talyn didn't need any further encouragement. The elf's warmth stood out like a beacon against the room-temperature hallway. He bit.

The blood didn't taste like anything, which Talyn found a profound relief. If it didn't have a taste, in all likelihood it wasn't messing with his lifespan. If he'd been less desperate he would have offloaded the extra span onto Leekath before making an experiment like this, but he hadn't been thinking clearly except insofar as continuing to be that drained was unacceptable.

He stopped at about the point in the feeding that Leekath did in hers, which was a little earlier than Memin had expected - she took short sips, since she ate daily. "Thanks," he said, a world better.

"No problem," Memin said. "Friends are all out of town?"

"I really need to get some communication crystals," evaded Talyn with a weak laugh.

"All right. Well, drop by again if you need to," offered the elf, and he closed the door. Talyn returned to the cottage, looking hopeful in a vaguely upward direction.

Leekath came home, and he told her about what had happened, and she frowned a little and wanted *exact words* of how he'd asked. Then she wanted to check his lifespan, but she nodded to herself and confirmed that it was the same. Then she wanted him to tap her and shapeshift and let her drink, so he did.

He was, though, beginning to understand what she'd found so unsettling about having a heartbeat when she'd tried halfblood form. It wasn't an intrinsically unpleasant sensation, but after a day of lacking it, he could definitely feel a palpitation in his chest when he blurred his heart back into existence.

"Don't try to go without sleep again," Leekath told him. "It's probably more tempting in vampire form because we have to stay at least minimally functional on very short sleep - we need to at least be able to shift and get to a perch or we could die of it - but you still, really, can't go without. You need to sleep a reasonable amount of time every night."

"I will, from now on," Talyn said. "But I think it might have been important that I try actually biting someone, just once. Even if I shouldn't make a habit of it."

"You shouldn't. You don't need to - or at least, you don't have to need to, even if you did today because you were careless," she said. "I guess once doesn't hurt anything."

Talyn nodded agreeably.

"Maybe we should keep a power box in the house all the time," Leekath suggested. "For emergencies."

He winced. "That sounds maybe too tempting to have around all the time. I'd wind up using it *to* short myself on sleep."

"We can make it really inconvenient to get to," she said. "And you'll have to justify it to me if you use it. Just more convenient than going around looking for someone to tap or bite."

She put it on her to-do list, for later when either of them had lifeforce to spare to fill such a thing with. They decided that it would go on the top shelf of the linen closet, behind the towels.

Talyn ate dinner in halfblood form, studied for his exams in companionable silence beside Leekath, and went to perch with her at seventeenth-and-naught, utterly wrung out.

When he woke up the next morning, she was already gone, and he was left with the residue of some odd dreams.

Talyn wrote down the contents of the dreams so he wouldn't forget them, although they weren't tearing themselves to shreds yet. They didn't seem *interesting* - he did not ride astride a giant loaf of bread to a half-sunken isle and become its king, as he had in a dream the previous week. But that was only part of what made them unusual. They'd been in black and white, while he normally dreamt in full color. They'd been about Leekath, which was common enough, but they hadn't featured him at all - in first or third person. And they'd felt - unusual.

Dreamed that Leekath was handling citizenship forms, he labeled one piece of paper, and then he peppered it with all the other details he could conjure up - where she sat, the time of day that appeared when she cast the spell to check. He'd never even been to her office before and yet he had such a clear picture of it... He made an illusion of it, and then decided that he didn't want to leave that draining him all day, so he flattened it and traced the lines onto the paper before letting it go.

Dreamed about Leekath in temple, singing, and again, there was a picture, of a room in the temple he *hadn't* seen, and Leekath in it among a hundred other bat-formed vampires in ultrasonic chorus. He didn't draw that one. It seemed rude - sacrilegious? - to create a picture of a place that was so aggressively kept private, even if no one had mentioned that specific thing as something to avoid.

The memories of the dreams held vivid all day long. He wanted to tell Leekath about them, but it was Lunen and she was at Parliament; even going home between classes wouldn't let him catch her. She took her government-mandated "lunch" break at unpredictable times, or he'd call.

So he went about his day as though nothing was out of the ordinary, and listened attentively to the reviews of test material that two of his three classes were going through. And less attentively to the prolonged, animated tangent about the love life of indecisive protagonist heartthrob Endin Ataanimer from the novel *Contemporary Literature* was finishing up.

He got home, and he went through another one of Leekath's spellbooks ("200 Miscellaneous Spells People Will Expect You To Know If You Are A Wizard") to practice what he knew about identifying intentional components. That particular book let him check his own work on the opposite pages.

He still reliably missed components, especially temporal ones - too many of the elementary spells took effect immediately and instantly, while others had delays or lasted all afternoon if desired. He gritted his teeth and made an explicit checklist in his head to go through each time, though it was tedious and he routinely felt that he *knew* the answers without it.

When Leekath got home, he showed her the writeups of his dreams.

"You had these dreams *last night*?" she asked softly.

Talyn nodded.

"You've never been to my office," she said.

"No, I haven't."

She frowned at the second page. "Can you send me a mental image - I'm glad you didn't draw it, that's good - but -"

Talyn sent her the wispy remaining impression he had of the temple in which she'd sung.

Leekath pursed her lips. "You didn't *sneak past the priest*, did you? You only went into the front room like you were supposed to."

"Swear to God," Talyn said, half-intending irreverent lightness but not managing it.

"I'll write another letter to the Pontiff," Leekath breathed.

Talyn grinned at her.

The tests for classes were scattered around Shuraahel 49 and 50 and Shuraahel-for, with a handful even scheduled for the first of Berehel. *Contemporary Literature and Theory* had blocks of time during the first of these days; he'd sit his practical exam the following day. Someone in the faculty had been alerted to the fact that Talyn could easily, maybe inadvertently, cheat by mindreading. He hadn't been going to, but everyone in his exams was tapped on the head by the university's mind kamai professor and rendered unreadable for the duration. So were the teachers and graduate students.

The theory test was hard, although the lack of chattering thoughts in his head actually helped him concentrate. And despite the fact that it was a *theory* test, Talyn had to prove his understanding with a few practical demonstrations: on his turn to go up to one of the graduate

students, there was a section where he had to cast spells without being told what they *did*, only knowing the word and gesture and intentional components.

First tier had drilled into him that one *never* cast a spell without knowing what it was supposed to do, but the grad student assured him without prompting that everything was safe to cast, and that he was to aim the ones that called for targets at the test mice. Talyn verified for himself that everything was small enough that it wouldn't kill him if he botched it.

Talyn managed to cast two of the three unknown spells, causing his mouse to emit a high tone and then adding red polka-dots to it. The third spell didn't go off, and he wasn't allowed a second try.

Then he went back and wrote about fine distinctions between intention types, and the interaction of Voyan numbers with sting, and review material from first tier that he floundered on because he hadn't expected it and had done his earlier studying at a different school.

At the end of the exam period Talyn still had six questions of a hundred and twenty-five left to answer, but the grad student whisked his paper off his desk anyway, leaving a smear of graphite along the incomplete page from where it smudged against his hand. He couldn't help emitting a curse word. All that studying and he still wasn't at all confident he'd pass. At least he could still pass the course if he failed the first test.

The literature exam was easier, but more tedious. There was a section of trivially easy questions ("Who is the protagonist of *Lulel's Song*?") to prove that he'd read everything, and then he got his pick of essay questions ("Compare the theme of *finding one's place in one's family* as expressed in *Redreeds*, *A Houseful of Palanik*, and *An Assembly of Birds*.")

And there was a section in this exam too, where he had to go up to the front of the room and talk instead of writing. He took his turn with the professor instead of a graduate student and was obliged to give an oral description of what he thought of the trends in the Esmaarlan selections as opposed to the Saraanlan ones.

Talyn elected to go on a lengthy rant about how he didn't like anyone in any of the books, but he disliked the Saraanlan characters because they lacked significant emotional connections with each other and disliked the Esmaarlan characters because they were directionless and had only the shallowest of interest in anything they did. He couldn't read the professor's mind, but the expression on his face seemed neither impressed nor disappointed, which was something.

The exam sections were longer than the regular class sections, so even with only two during the entire day, Talyn arrived home later than usual to find Leekath already there.

She was holding another one of those envelopes from the office of the pontiff.

"That was faster," Talyn remarked.

"I don't know how they organize the pontiff's office, but at Parliament this sort of thing would have a case manager on it who'd have gotten it straight away; it wouldn't have had to be picked out of an unsorted pile and evaluated," she said.

"What's it say?"

"You're supposed to go back to see the priest again and talk to him about the dreams," said Leekath. "On Shuraahel-for at midnight."

"Well, at least I'll be done with my exams then," Talyn remarked. "Does it say anything else?"

"That's all," she said.

"Will it be the same priest?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter," Leekath said.

Talyn got out of his wizarding practical exam without soot on his face, which was more than he could say for a good fraction of his classmates, so he assumed he'd done all right. The person he was supervised by at least didn't tell him "crisply!", but maybe that was because it was a test and not a learning exercise. After he was let out, he decided to take the rest of the day off, even though he had more Contemporary Literature reading to do for the class on the first of Berehel.

He spent the time before Leekath arrived home in the most prolonged and haphazard sequence of prayer he'd ever attempted. It was exhausting, considering that it consisted solely of hanging from his knees and begging an unresponsive God for consideration, for welcome, for admittance. "Please let the dreams be enough. Please let them be really from you, and not anything else. Please let me become one of yours. Tell the priest, please, tell him to let me in."

There were no classes on Shuraahel-for, only exams, and his were over with. He went to campus anyway, and wandered around, practicing walking and flying with his eyes closed so he navigated solely by echolocation. He wondered if there were analysis spells that would render examined magic as echoes - or for that matter regular sound. Leekath would probably know.

When that became boring - well before he ran out of campus - he teleported to Rhysel's tower to meet her new baby boy. She'd called him "Reven", as she'd said she would. She noted Talyn's vampire appearance, obvious by her expression if not by her concealed thoughts, but she didn't comment on it, just let him hold the infant. Talyn stayed until the awkward pauses between either of them having something to say grew too long, and then he went home to do his literature reading.

A little before midnight, Leekath adjusted his suncloak for him, then wished him luck and sent him out.

Talyn went to the temple, glad that he had no heart to pound in his ears.

Chapter 36: Unfolding

"Talyn Dalenn Casten," said the priest. Talyn couldn't tell if it was the same one or not. This priest was an inch shorter, but that could be posture or shoes; the voices were much alike even to sensitive vampire ears and had the same solemn tone to them. Maybe they had to practice sounding the same to be priests. The priest's suncloak was different - this one had white stitching, rings around the sleeves and lines slanting across the body. Talyn didn't know if that meant anything.

"Yes, Ieeht," said Talyn.

"Come past the threshold, and no farther," instructed the priest. Talyn stepped forward, head bowed.

The room looked like it had before. And the priest began as he had before. "Why are you here?"

"I'm supposed to speak to you about dreams I had," Talyn said.

The priest waited silently, and Talyn went on after an awkward pause. "My dreams showed my fiancée in two locations I've never been to or seen before. Her workplace at Parliament in her father's office, and - another room in a temple, maybe this one. I'm not sure if they showed the past or the future or neither, she didn't tell me - but when I showed her the images of the second one, by magic, not by drawing them or anything, she had to ask me if I'd snuck further into the temple. I haven't," he added.

The priest regarded Talyn quietly. Talyn wasn't sure if he could see clear through the cloak, by magic or clever fabric - or if he just didn't need to actually look at people. The priest wasn't squeaking. Talyn would have heard that.

Talyn wasn't sure if he was supposed to say something else or wait for the priest to move on. Should he bring up the bite he'd given the downstairs neighbor? The endless prayers? More details about the dreams?

He decided to err on the side of silence.

It was a great challenge, and it got worse with each passing silent tick.

Finally, *finally*, the priest spoke. "What will you do, if I should recommend to the pontiff that you be admitted among us? Attend ceremonies for your children, when you have them?"

The tone was neutral. Talyn couldn't read a damn thing past the pendant.

"I don't know," Talyn said. "I don't know what there is to do. I guess I'll attend the ceremonies for my children. If that's even allowed; if you meant to imply it. At least I'll know what they are." He realized he wasn't even sure if that was the case. "Or maybe there are a dozen kinds, and I won't know which kind my kids get, but I'll be closer to knowing - I'll be as close as Leekath is - probably - *I don't know how this works*, but I want to know as much as I can. Even if I can't tell anyone else. Even if I can't know literally everything."

"Do you believe that God wants you?" the priest asked quietly.

"Didn't he send me dreams?" Talyn asked desperately. "About a vampire, in a vampire temple, singing -"

"You have been told," the priest said, "that dragons do not attempt to join our faith, though they can make largely the same claims you can towards membership. Do you know why that is?"

Talyn shook his head. "They don't talk about religion, do they? Beyond generalities."

"No. But it is generally assumed that they do not wish to join us because they do not think that our god exists, and therefore cannot imagine that he might be calling them into his service," said the priest. "Do you believe that God wants you?"

The dreams. Talyn had gotten *dreams*. They were a sign; the priest - or a different priest - had said so. They were about places he'd never set foot in.

Any reasonable deity would want Talyn, and the dreams had to clinch it.

"Yes," Talyn said firmly.

"Your fiancée will receive correspondence from the pontiff again in due time," the priest said. "Or perhaps you will."

Talyn hoped that meant good things.

Term resumed. Talyn got his tests back. He'd flunked the literature test, although not by very much. He passed wizarding theory by four points of five hundred, and the practicum by a more comfortable margin. At home, he went over his mistakes on the theory exam, noting what they were and getting Leekath's help when he still didn't understand why he'd been marked down. He made an appointment with the literature professor to ask about that grade.

"I keep getting the impression," said the professor, "that you think disliking things makes you sophisticated, Aar Casten."

So I rate an Aar now, Talyn thought. "I don't think it makes me sophisticated, I just don't actually like the things we're reading."

"I'd like to see more range, regardless. You have some potential, I think! And the comparisons you've made here and there to Barashin literature are truly interesting; I'm starting a bit of research in that direction myself. But you're getting too much mileage out of contempt, and I'd hate for you to coast your whole term that way. I chose our texts for a reason - because they have impact, because they represent prominent or profound themes, because they are good examples of the sorts of stories that move the Leraalophone world."

"I'm taking this course as a way to learn about the Leraalophone world," Talyn protested. "It doesn't make any sense if I have to already know about it to pass tests."

"You live here, don't you? You've even made yourself to resemble a local species - we'll be covering a short novel about a vampire protagonist soon, *Kahi's Night*. Have you seen any of these plots play out, in part, among the families you know? Do you hear people repeating stereotypes about Saraanlanik that you see echoed in the books? I'm sure you can think of more to say, but you need to apply to yourself, not just come up with reasons to hate everything."

Talyn nodded obediently.

It was too late in the term to drop the course.

Theory class moved into a unit on the wizarding reservoir. The two Sand Dusk Chanter students in Talyn's section became very talkative around this subject - apparently their religion worshipped the source of wizarding power as a deity. Talyn thought it would be very weird to believe that and go on to learn to be a wizard, using God to tell time and conjure water. Apparently they felt differently.

The practicum became more interesting over time, which for most of the students made it harder, but Talyn found himself better able to pay attention and keep pace.

Talyn started incorporating a little more variety in his literature assignments, although he hadn't met enough families to have a sense of the zeitgeist and didn't want to admit to copious mindreading. His grades rose, though not to particularly impressive levels.

The letter didn't come.

And didn't come.

"How long does it take for the pontiff to make decisions? He doesn't have to run them through a committee, does he?" Talyn asked Leekath, reminded of her complaints that committees dragged everything through months of review even in acknowledged emergencies.

"No, but there's God Himself to consider," said Leekath tartly.

"Does *God* take forever to make decisions?"

"He can take as long as he likes."

Talyn dropped the subject and concentrated on school.

And finally, after a month of delay, after he'd been through a second round of tests and passed them all, a black envelope appeared on his desk.

Not on Leekath's. His, with *his* name on it.

He frantically snatched it up and broke the seal.

It was written in vampire script, which wasn't nearly as facile for him as the spoken language. It was less used; the primary reason vampire continued to be its own language was that it could be spoken even in bat form, and bat forms could not write. He deciphered it anyway, word by word, looking up a few things in Leekath's vampire-to-Leraal dictionary that she kept for when she learned a new word in one language or the other.

Exclusively for the eyes of addressee Talyn Dalenn Casten. (Well, that explained why Leekath would let him listen to her letters but not see them, if that was how they tended to open. She had enough legal background to exploit that kind of loophole as a matter of course.)

This correspondence acknowledges that you have been admitted into the service of our God.

Talyn let out a loud, shameless *whoop* into the empty cottage, and picked his way on.

Your late arrival into the faith renders you delinquent in the Rituals and Observances.

Okay...

You are obliged to set aside a series of days no less than one week in length during which you have no other pressing obligations, and arrive at the temple you have previously visited on the midnight at the beginning of that time to begin said Rituals and Observances.

Um. Talyn wasn't sure he could afford to miss a week of classes. The final exams were spread out over a week, so if his were all on the first day he could use the rest of the period... otherwise he'd have to wait until the intersession break. Either way, that was nearly a month and a half to be kept waiting for something he was so painfully eager to start.

...Why did he need a week free, anyway?

What was going to keep him in the temple for a week solid?

Several years's worth of Rituals and Observances, apparently, but... a *week*?

He'd talk to Leekath.

Delay will be interpreted.

That sounded ominously unclear. Maybe there was an idiomatic usage of the word that the dictionary didn't mention. It would be okay if she read his mind about the letter, presumably, even if she wasn't allowed to see it.

Via private mental magics, you are permitted to learn all those secrets that Aaeiihyleekatheeei Hhirheek would share with any other new vampire.

Yes. *Yes*, no more dancing around iffy thoughts, no more watching her squirm uncomfortably midsentence. And "new vampire"! He liked the sound of that. Until he realized it put him in a class with infants. Oh well. He had to start somewhere.

Appropriate care will be taken to ensure that these secrets spread no farther.

Of course, he'd agreed to that...

Further information will be divulged upon your arrival at the temple. All blessings on you and yours.

Excellent. *Excellent.*

All he had to do was find a week.

The University of Daasen had no schoolwide absence policy for absences shorter than "not completing term". (Except one that applied only to *lights*, the only class of people who might miss periods of time small enough not to ruin a semester due to illness or injury.)

Contemporary Literature took points off for every absence "because class discussion is an integral part of coming to understand the assigned works from multiple perspectives", but it wasn't such a huge point loss that he couldn't pick it up with an extra credit project on a book of his choice. He could get Rhysel to recommend something; she knew a little about his taste and liked Esmaarlan fiction.

The practicum had no attendance requirements. It also didn't make it easy to get the information needed to pass tests without showing up, though. He'd have to get a classmate to pass him the handouts, and then practice like mad.

Theory was the tricky one. Only about half of the material that showed up on tests and was required at the demonstrations appeared in the textbook. And just practicing wouldn't do even if he got someone's notes; he had to *understand* it.

But he didn't want to wait another month to show up at temple and catch up on his Rituals and Observances.

Ugh. He might have to find a *tutor* to help him with anything classmate notes couldn't fix in his brain properly. He thought of the vague contempt with which he regarded his occasional kama'i tutees and made a small involuntary hiss.

He wrote polite letters for all of his teachers indicating that he'd be gone for no longer than a week, "for religious reasons", and that he'd appreciate it if they'd find a classmate with good notes for him to borrow but he'd do it himself afterward if necessary. He kept them back in case Leekath had a reason for him to wait until later. He skimmed ahead in literature, since that was the one he could best prepare for in advance. And then he studied in theory until Leekath got home.

He was holding the letter. "I don't understand the time period, or the 'interpreted' part," Talyn told her, assuming she'd hear the letter at once.

Leekath stood still in the doorway, listening. <It won't take a week. Probably. That's longer than it would take to do everything they could conceivably want you to do. You'll probably be faster than the time limit on at least some things. And if you fail something you do fewer things after that.>

<What are the things?>

<The first is the Outward Face. You get told what you are allowed to tell people besides vampires, and who counts as a vampire, and what you're allowed to tell even other vampires. That takes a few angles, longer if you have a lot of questions.

<The second thing is the Reading. You read through the holy book - well, the only one I know about; if there are more they're secret and they don't keep copies in any temples I've been to. And you have to pass a test on it. If you don't pass it you have to read the book again and try again, and if you still can't pass the test there are some rank penalties. It took me about a day all

told, but that was before I could read two parts of a book at the same time by sending the hhiikiii ahead of where I was looking. And I was six. You'll probably be faster at it by the time you go in.>

<Then what?>

<After that they might do something extra for you, because you don't have a line or a rank or any stars, and they might want to assign you some just so they know where to put you during services and what to do when we have kids and that sort of thing. After the Reading is where I'd expect them to put something like that. And then there's the Test of the Empty Room, which I don't know what it's for because I didn't pass it, but it involved a priest putting me in a room in the temple and seeing what I did for a few angles. I didn't know what to do so I just sat there and listened to my clothes talk.>

<Okay, so just sitting there isn't the correct answer,> sent Talyn lightly.

<It wasn't for *me*. But for all I know that's because I'm a White Line rank zero female with a Vampiric Inanimate Audition diagnosis and a specific array of stars. Anyway, I don't know if there are things I've skipped because I failed that, but regardless when I turn eighteen I'll do the Dance of White and the Song of Glass, which are a coming-of-age thing with Witnesses instead of priests, and if I were Red Line like Aaihhhi I'd be doing the Dance of Red and the Song of Blood instead but I'm not, and so on for other lines. There's White and Red and Black and Silver and Blue.>

<That explains the color scheme. You're going to need to tell me what this all means, you know.>

<I know!> she sent happily. <And now I can. When my parents got married, the First Witness - priests don't do weddings, Witnesses do weddings and a couple of other things, and Witnesses can be men or women and you can know who they are too - decided that my fheeil would pass on his line, so me and my brother and sister are all White Line like him, but my aaihhhi is Red Line. If there's only one dad his line gets passed on and if there's two moms it depends on which one carries the baby.>

<What's the rank, then?>

<People start with different ranks depending on their stars, and then get added or subtracted ranks depending on their portents and tests. I started with two, and dropped to zero when I started hearing hhiikiii ->

<That is the *most unfair* ->

<I know, I know. Khi has nine ranks, I think - dancing so well got him an extra and he started with eight because he had better stars than me. Iilha has eight ->

<You've got to be kidding me.>

<I'm not. She passed her Test of the Empty Room - I don't know what she did, or what anyone else who passed did; they're not allowed to say. She started with three.>

<Okay. And the stars?>

<Literal stars. They look up which and how many stars showed in a certain part of the sky the second midnight after you're born. They might figure out exactly when it was here when you were born and check the records from then, or figure out a way to translate it for Barashin stars. Or they might just make you Cloudy.>

<Is that what it sounds like?>

<Exactly what it sounds like! I'm so, so glad that I can finally, finally tell you all this -> She leapt into his lap and kissed him fiercely.

He held her tightly as he returned the kiss. <What's after the Song and Dance?>

<Then there's the First Veil, when you turn twenty. I don't know what happens in it, just some of the results - the Veil is about secrets - and I don't know anything about Second or further veils either. For all I know the 'first' thing is just an outright lie.>

<What *do* you know about the First Veil?>

<I do know that after the First Veil you're required to go off and be by yourself and not tell anyone what you do, a certain amount every month that I think varies from person to person, if you're a guy. That's to throw off suspicion from priests if someone's trying to figure out who they are and to give you an excuse if you ever become one. And I know that you add something to a Book of Secrets instead, if you're a girl. I *can* hear the Book of Secrets, in the basement. I don't know if I'm strictly supposed to know about it yet, but I can. I don't think it counts as a holy book.>

<What age do I count as?> Talyn asked.

<I'm not sure. They'll either convert it to Elcenian years or use your Barashin age since that's closer to the right equivalency, I guess.>

<I suppose I'll find out.>

<Oh, and, you should learn temple dialect before you go.>

<Temple dialect?>

<It's a lot like regular vampire. It shouldn't take you more than a month or so,> she sent.

Well, that solved his timing problem. <I didn't know there was another dialect.>

<It's never spoken or written outside of temples. We learn it growing up, but I think the idea is that I can teach you in mindspeech to make up for you not having been raised in the temple. Without it you'd have a hard time with your book test - you're not even up on regular vampire script, I hear the dictionary saying it was moved.>

<How hard is the dialect?> Talyn asked.

<The alphabet is the same but things are pronounced and spelled differently. And they'll administer all the other Rituals and Observances in temple dialect too. It was pretty irregular for you to get an interview with a priest in anything else, though not unheard of.>

<Okay. Well, let's start working on that, then,> Talyn sent.

She replied, in distinctly altered words, <Yes, let's.>

Talyn finished the term, scraping a pass in all three classes and then sitting the tier test to enter third. He passed that, too - it was actually easier than his theory final. And then he had a few weeks of intersession, and he'd picked up enough temple dialect to get along okay even without being able to read priestly minds.

He turned up at the temple at midnight on Rohel twenty-sixth, wearing his formal suncloak.

Outward Face. Reading. Stars and rank and line, or some facsimile. Test of the Empty Room. If they assign me a line and decide I'm 'old enough', maybe I have to learn a song and a dance, but Leekath is sure they'll give me prep time. If I pass the Test then there might be stuff she doesn't know about. If they count me as twenty-three instead of seventeen I might have to do the First Veil... Outward Face. Reading. Stars and rank and line? Empty Room. Song and Dance. Veil...

This time he didn't have a specific appointment. No one was waiting for him.

But he could just open the door, and go in.

So he did.

He already knew much of the Outward Face: he was allowed to say those things that Leekath had said to him. He was not allowed to say those things that she'd had to keep from him. Anyone with more than half vampire ancestry counted as a vampire, apart from some surprisingly complicated rules about dragons (who might have any number of vampire ancestors, as long as there was a long enough run of parunias) and thudias (who were simple enough in the first generation, but occasionally had throwback children).

Still, he listened carefully to the priest, who paced while Talyn hung from a perch in the main temple chamber. He repeated back his summaries when prompted, in accented but clear temple dialect.

"And lastly," the priest said, "you may reveal nothing about your stars or rank to an outsider at any time. Stars may be spoken of with other vampires, as may the rank of young people; you will be informed if you must begin falsifying your rank. Lines are not kept secret, but much about their significance is."

"Ieeht," Talyn said, "what age am I meant to count as? I'm the equivalent of a seventeen-year-old vampire, and that is also my age in Barashin years, but I have lived for an amount of time equal to twenty-three Elcenian years."

"It is the order of the pontiff that you be treated as a seventeen-year-old, at this time; decisions about how to adjust when you reach the point when a vampire would have ceased to age, or the point where you will in fact pause in aging, will be issued later," the priest replied. "The question of your line, stars, and rank cannot be so easily postponed."

Talyn nodded, though it felt weird to nod, hanging upside-down. "What are those going to be?"

"What do you think?" inquired the priest.

Talyn blinked. "Uh. Leekath thought I might be Cloudy, since I was born on another world where the stars don't match. That seems simplest. I have no idea about line - do I have to find some vampires to adopt me? Can I just pick a color, or do you do that? And I think rank depends on stars and signs, right...?"

"Do you know why we investigate the stars the second night following a vampire's birth?" the priest asked.

"No, Ieeht," said Talyn. He had guesses, but he didn't know, and it sounded like he was about to be told.

"Before that time," the priest said, "there was always, before magic became so commonplace, the possibility that a child's mother has betrayed her husband, and that the child might not be a vampire. This is often visible, but not always - again, this was established before magic became so common. The coming of dawn will, in a newborn vampire, provoke a shift to our sleeping shape. And so the second night is the night on which we can always know if a new vampire has entered the world."

"You want to know... when I first learned to shapeshift? When I first turned into a bat in particular? When I started sleeping that way?" Talyn asked.

"No," the priest said. "We will count your stars as those that appeared the night after it became clear that you were a vampire. The first of Pehahel."

"Oh," Talyn said.

"You, and children born on that day, as seen from this temple, showed five stars in the viewed region of the sky," the priest said.

"What rank does that start me with?"

"Well, this will depend on your line," the priest said. "The auspices differ. Supposing I

were to invite you to choose your own line. What would you choose?"

"Um. Leekath is... White Line," Talyn said. "I might just... I haven't learned anything much about what's different between them. She makes it sound like all the things that lines *affect* go on behind the scenes. But I know about how the descent works, and it sounds like our kids are going to be whatever I am even though it's supposed to be about biological connection to the original founders of these lines. So that will make the most sense if I'm White Line, because our kids will in fact be descended from a White Line ancestor. That's what I'd pick."

"Do you know why Leekath is White Line?" asked the priest.

"The Witness at her parents' wedding picked her fheel instead of her aaihhhi to pass on his line," Talyn said.

"In this country, families live together in large groups. Whose family did your fiancée grow up with?"

"Her fheel's."

"And the Witness would have known that this was their plan, to bring up the children among a family of the White Line. Ancestry is powerful, and we do not change lines when a child is adopted - but it is not the only factor. We do not change lines in cases where it is discovered that someone has betrayed her spouse, either. I believe you and your fiancée live alone."

"Yes, Ieeht."

"We will not assign you a line until the Test of the Empty Room. You can perform the Reading without a line. Come with me," said the priest, and he led Talyn through a door from the main temple chamber. "Another priest will conduct the service, which will begin presently. We will conduct your Reading here, out of the way."

Talyn looked at the new room that had been revealed, and at the thick book that lay open on the platform in the center of the room.

Time to study for his test.

Chapter 37: Reading

The print in the book was large, so it wasn't as much reading as the huge tome suggested at first glance. "The Book of the Most Holy Founder," intoned the priest, shutting the door behind them. "You will read it, from beginning to end, and then you may go over any parts that you might not remember clearly, and when you are ready, I will administer your test. The test consists of questions so basic to our faith that you must answer them all correctly to pass. It would be disgraceful for an adult vampire to be ignorant of any of the answers."

"I understand," said Talyn. Leekath had done hers when she was six, but she hadn't mentioned a standard age for it. She was smart, and a *hearer* who'd probably taken the test while standing right next to the text; he shouldn't assume that average six-year-olds managed. He was going to have to read through the book at least as carefully as he did his University assignments.

He flipped from the middle section it was open to back to the first page. It began with an index, detailing its chapters and subchapters:

An Account of the Times Prior to the Most Holy Founder's Revelation Song of the Predator Song of the Lost Song of Sound Song of Night

An Account of the Most Holy Founder's Revelation From God Song of the Mentor Song of Revelation Song of the Founder Song of God Song of Glass

An Account of the Establishment of the Service of God Song of Welcome Song of Stars Song of Silver Song of Law Song of Secrets

An Account of the Favor of God and the Preservation of His Servants Through a Great Trial Song of Learning Song of Hardship Song of Blood Song of the Apostate Daughter

An Account of the Ascendancy of the Service of God Over Other Ways of Life Song of Seas Song of the Conqueror Song of Building Song of the Ordained Song of the Witness Song of the Holy Successor

Talyn turned to the first Song of the first Account.

Each Song opened with a verse of tightly rhymed poetry, some with a few stanzas; Talyn presumed that these were the lyrics to the relevant songs. It was actually very pretty. He paused over the lines to make sure he understood it through his just-functional knowledge of temple dialect.

The rest of the text was prose. It was fanciful, but readable, and it even compared pretty favorably to the Contemporary Literature he'd been swallowing recently.

Inconveniently, the book contained no names at all. The people in it were referred to by title or epithet, and not always the same one, and that slowed Talyn down as he moved through the story.

The first Account was a take on vampire life before the religion was founded. As the first Song title suggested, it was a predatory lifestyle: vampires, lone or in small family groups, preyed on other species. They took enough blood to kill, and those they attacked fought back with deadly force. The quarry were outmatched in hand-to-hand combat, but sometimes had advantages in weaponry, knowledge of their home ground, or, during the day, the ability to get out of a vampire's hideout into the sunshine where the vampire's only defense was to become a bat and therefore unable to eat. Let alone fight.

Because every meal was so dangerous, vampires waited for long periods of time between hunts, preferentially attacked the sleeping and the weak, and, frequently, got themselves

killed. There was one unclear reference to "farms" that Talyn didn't get - maybe vampires sometimes "farmed" unarmed prey in shadowed locations for easy access to food. It didn't go into detail.

It didn't sound very pleasant, although the whole thing was rendered with a half-nostalgic tone for the freedom or maybe the aesthetic. It afforded little room for flavor-based food selections - and certainly vampires didn't dare assault dragons for *their* blood. Elves were as good as they could hope for, and elf communities spent commensurate effort on defenses against the menace in the night, more than overbalancing the gains in maximum lifespan.

The second Song detailed the spiritual hunger in predatory vampires. Not just spiritual, but generally they seemed to hunger for - civilization. They couldn't stay put; they were treated like mad, dangerous animals by the neighbors and would have been hunted down. They couldn't band together and found cities for safety in numbers; they would have nothing to *eat* there. So they moved around, encountering each other in the obvious hideaways and sometimes marrying, sometimes fighting.

They had a little culture. Stories passed to children too young to strike off on their own. Ultrasonic music that they could sing aloud at night without any danger of those with worse ears hearing. But there was no organizing focus to vampire lives; no edifices that were their own; and no purpose to guide their spirits.

The language made it sound miserably bleak; Talyn was sure he would have made a derisive remark if he'd gotten Leekath to summarize this for him, but he was concerned for the unhappy, nameless vampires in the book.

The Song of Night was the first to mention anything about lines, but it was an aside remark: "The children of those who were least deprived in this state, the children of those who thrived best even without God, became the Black Line."

Talyn flipped back and reread the Night poem. It was the longest one so far. Maybe Black Line vampires sang it at their ceremonies.

The second chapter introduced the Most Holy Founder - or so Talyn gathered from the chapter label. Said Founder referred to himself in the first person and never gave himself a name. He was twenty at the time the chapter began. He lived on his own, as his parents had gotten themselves killed by a dragon - they'd kidnapped a baby one, too small to shift, while its parents slept, expecting flavor if not portion size. After they'd drunk its blood the baby's father had come after them and incinerated the pair. The Founder had been out of their current hideout at the time and saw the dragon leaving as he was on his way home.

This set the Founder to wondering if there wasn't some better way to go about things.

He was in the middle of not having any good ideas and traveling to another part of the world when he encountered another vampire. Like him, this other vampire was an adult man - and in vampires that made him of highly indeterminate age. He could be twenty, he could be two hundred. If he were like "the legendary Wife of the Dragon, who enticed her meal into her arms, and gave her body for her long life, sipping from dragon's guises vast enough to sate her and vast enough to yet live on" then he could be a millenium and a half.

The Founder asked the stranger (Talyn began to strongly suspect that the latter was God) how old he was, and was told that he had drunk of the blood of the world.

The Founder asked - surprisingly enough - for God's name, and was told that none had the strength to hear it and live; that it had to be uttered loudly and piercingly enough to shatter skulls like glass.

And the Founder took that as a joke, and asked if he could travel with the stranger for a while, and God acquiesced.

They went around together for months. God demonstrated the power to walk in the sun unharmed, and bade the Founder follow. The Founder had never stepped into the sunlight before, but when he did, he found that he was protected from it by a miracle. They traveled by day as well as night, encountering no one, vampire or otherwise, and yet the Founder felt no hunger, no urge to hunt as he had in the past.

The chapter was broken up within the first few Songs into dialogues between the Founder and God on ways of life on all subjects, ranging from proper conduct between married persons to the spiritual importance of dance (in both forms). Some of it seemed to be out of sequence, and none of it had a lot of context - it seemed like the pair of them had just wandered all around Anaist (the weather and flora only made sense for that continent) for months in constant discourse, pausing only to sleep.

The Song of God included the unsurprising reveal that the Founder's friend was in fact God, in a mortal form adopted to save his chosen people from a terrible destruction.

It extolled the virtues of God, who was mighty and compassionate, who was knowledgeable and subtle, who was great and wise. It enumerated the secrets of God: no mortal knew where he dwelt, what he did there, where he took the spirits of his dead, what his true face looked like, or what the blood of the world on which he subsisted might taste like.

And the Song of Glass remarked on mortal fragility - it was surprisingly morbid, actually. A mortal would shatter like glass if they tried to apprehend the full splendor of God.

And it was not appropriate for things of glass to fight for their lives with other things of glass. Things of glass clinked together with that much force would break.

God's final words to the Founder were on that subject: "Fight no bleeding creature which has a mind. Kill no bleeding creature which has a mind. What is theirs they have by nature's rights; what is yours is innocence, if you will take it. Bleeding creatures must kill to live. My children need not; your children *must* not."

And the Founder asked, "If we starve, among those who fear pain, or who are full of rash hate and terror? If we are murdered, for imagined crimes, or for being what we are?"

"Yours is innocence," said God. "If you give up your innocence, now that I have restored it to you, to draw transient breath, the consequences are beyond your comprehension. If you hold it fast and precious, never to be relinquished against any hardship, then you will reap immeasurable rewards, concealed until it is time that you learn of them."

"What of those who falter, who stray?" asked the Founder.

"Innocence is glass. Glass shatters. But it can melt and heal, if I will it - under terrible heat."

Well, that was ominous.

This Song mentioned a line too: "The children of those who first broke and melted, the children of those who lost innocence and won it back, became the White Line."

Also kind of ominous.

Come to think of it, the Black Line wasn't that great either. It would be really weird if a religion celebrated people doing well without its help. Were all the lines founded on weaknesses?

It had taken a while to get through the first two Accounts. The print was big, but the book was bigger, and the pages were thin. "Ieeht, what if I need to sleep?" Talyn asked. Midnight meetings weren't that convenient for a diurnal schedule.

The priest gestured at the ceiling; it was crossed with perches like the other ceilings in the temple. "Sleep. But you will remain in this room until you have passed your test."

Talyn would have swallowed, if he'd been in a shape that allowed it. "Yes, Ieeht," he said, and he changed into a bat and flew up to hang and close his eyes.

Talyn had no idea what time it was when he woke up. There was still a priest in the room, but this one - or the same one - it didn't matter - was wearing a different suncloak. He was getting more used to the idea that priests were just interchangeable, that the occupant of the role didn't matter. "Hello," Talyn said awkwardly, shifting to hang from his knees and then swinging down to the floor so he could go on reading.

The next chapter was about the early years of the religion. It started very small. The Founder walked into a village of elves who worshipped a sun god, in broad daylight. They beheld that he was not burned and did not attack; and he in turn did not attack them. He offered to live among them, fighting off any who would prey on them, if they would let him take small amounts of blood from volunteers.

The elves warily agreed, and the Founder took a small, largely symbolic sip from a willing member of their ruling council while everyone else had weapons trained on him in case he overdid it. He didn't, of course, and the elf he bit announced that it was a miracle, that he'd felt no pain when the Founder's fangs pierced his skin. After that the reception the Founder got was much less chilly. He built himself a house in the center of town and bathed in the nearby waterfall and went among them peaceably.

Ultimately, other vampires - a couple and their teenage daughter - did turn up with less benign motives, but they were stunned to find a defender of their own kind in the town. The Founder fought the father of that family to a standstill while the women looked on. The intruder was forced to yield, and then the Founder explained the comfortable setup he was enjoying and suggested that they join him.

They did, and the Founder then took the teenage daughter for his wife; about half of the Song of Stars was an elaborate ode to her beauty and virtue. The other half was astrology - a lot of records of what stars appeared when various events in the book occurred.

The next Song was about further recruitment efforts. It seemed like the Founder got into fights with about half the would-be converts, but he was beating up people whose options boiled down to "convert" or "murder a bunch of people", so Talyn couldn't well blame him. Others were easier to convince.

Another Line was mentioned: "The children of those who held their innocence as though it was precious silver, who never felt the wrath of the righteous Founder fall upon them, became the Silver Line."

That sounded better than the other two, unless there was some wrinkle Talyn didn't understand. It also sounded almost mutually exhaustive with White. Maybe only the first few lapses counted for White, and others fell into other categories.

In the Song of Law, it was shown that most of the converts had lapses where they got hungry and bit someone without asking, and they had to be punished, usually with more violence. The Founder and his inner circle meted that out personally, to maintain elves' trust for other vampires: they had to be self-policing.

In the Song of Secrets, the first temple was established, and it protected vampires from the sun if they wanted to be awake during the day like their neighbors. (The Founder was the only one with miraculous protection around). And it also gave them a place away from the

too-prying eyes of elves. The elves - in the limited handful of communities where faithful vampires were established - were mostly willing to let vampires punish their own for deviations from God's laws, but they seemed too interested in spying on their new friends just in case. The temple gave the vampires a safe staging ground from which to prove that they could remain safe without constant supervision.

The next chapter was less happy.

At its opening, the Founder and his wife had fourteen children, and the faith had grown to include thousands of vampires spread out over a wide area. That wasn't the unhappy part.

The unhappy part was that the entire continent of Anaist was suffering from a blood plague.

This was a problem for the Founder and his followers. They were suddenly very short on people who could helpfully offer them meals.

Not because of a population drop. It wasn't universally fatal, or even *frequently* fatal. For its "bleeding creature" sufferers, the only significant symptom was a sudden onset of tiredness. Inconvenient and unpleasant, especially when it lasted for a month or two or three, but not particularly dangerous except to the very old and to infants.

But the blood of an infected person was a lethal poison.

The religious vampires resorted to biting livestock - cows and so on - from which permission was not needed, and which were immune to the disease. But they put it off as long as they could, because every bite shortened their lifespans. They were hungry for the entire time they had to wait out the blood plague.

Vampires who were *not* among the faithful had a much more serious problem.

The only symptom of the disease appeared suddenly. It was easy to fake. Anyone they tried to bite would have to be a fool not to pretend to be sick, even if they were not. Faithless vampires took their chances with ignoring protestations of illness, yawns, unexpected apparent narcolepsy.

And they died. In droves.

Talyn imagined that their protection from this swath of death did wonders for the religion's recruitment efforts.

In the Song of Blood was another line: "The children of those who through luck or self-abnegation survived the plague without guidance, who fed on animals or the healthy despite lacking God's help, became the Red Line."

The plague burned out in due course. Most of the vampires within the Founder's sphere of influence were fine, if with a few years knocked off their maximum lifespans. But the Founder's youngest child, a little girl, had been accustomed to elf blood, and when she'd been denied, she'd gone ahead and bitten a sick friend of hers anyway despite the friend warning her off. The friend had lived. The Founder's daughter had not.

The "apostate daughter" title belied the grief the Founder had written in the pages of his book. He prayed for pages and pages that she was reforged glass, that she'd get her innocence back.

In the final Account, the next generation of the Founder's followers spread out to convert the rest of their own continent, and overseas to find the handful of vampires who'd left Anaist for other shores. "The children of those who left the ancestral lands of our people, who braved sunnier homes across the ocean, became the Blue Line."

The Song of the Conqueror had adventure-type stories about more conversions, mostly forced, of Blue and Red Line vampires. The Song of Building was about scaling up - building

temples, writing books, establishing traditions. The Song of the Ordained was about the first priests. It was very, very short. Talyn wondered if there were redacted parts stored somewhere else. The Song of the Witness was a little longer, and it had recountings of some of the first temple weddings, birth ceremonies, more astrology, that sort of thing.

The Song of the Holy Successor was the only Song in the book that referred to the Founder in third person. It was about the succession of the Founder's great-grandson into his position as the highest authority in the faith - the first pontiff after the Founder himself. "The Most Holy Founder whispered all of his secrets into my ear, and God whispers more," concluded the last Song. "This people is now mine to guide under God's power and law."

"Wow," Talyn breathed, closing the book.

"Do you wish to take your test at this time?" the priest in the corner asked. Talyn had quite forgotten that he was there.

"Uh," Talyn said. "Just a couple degrees - I want to go over Stars again, and maybe Glass too."

"There's no hurry," the priest said, "unless you're hungry, in which case there is, as you may not leave until you have passed your test. If you need water, there is a pool in the room through that door." He pointed. "It is customary to wear one's cloak into the pool, if one fully immerses oneself. You needn't worry about getting water on the floor."

Talyn did feel a little parched, come to think of it. He went where the priest's gloved finger indicated, and found a shallow pool. There was a little vampire girl and her mother sitting in it, with their suncloaks on. They didn't have anti-mindreading pendants on. It didn't matter, Talyn supposed, with non-priests. Although he wondered if Leekath would make enough for them to be randomly issued to adult male vampires so he didn't run the risk of encountering one off-duty and figuring it out.

He toed off his shoes and hopped into the pool. The woman and child didn't seem inclined to talk to him, so he didn't start a conversation either, just mulled over the book. He *liked* the book. It was forbidden to take a copy out of the temple, or he'd have wanted a nice high-quality volume of it to take home with him and read from on a regular basis.

After he'd soaked up enough water, he got out of the pool - the others were long gone and he'd been joined by an adult man. He picked up his shoes and went back into the room.

He reread the Song of Stars, and the Song of Glass, and for good measure the Song of the Predator too, and then he turned to the priest and said, "Okay, I'm ready to try."

The test was only twenty questions long, and it was all basic things that it really would be disgraceful not to know after reading that entire book with anything resembling respectful attention ("who was the Founder's companion during the second Account?"). There wasn't even a question on the astrological bits that he'd been worried about having to memorize. Talyn got everything right on his first try.

When the priest told him so, Talyn relaxed, smiled, and said, "What's next? A line?"

"Yes," said the priest. "Now that you know something more about them, do you have a new idea about which might suit you, or would you still choose White?"

Either it was the same priest or they were really thorough about briefing each other. "I think," Talyn said, "that Black might make more sense. I did okay without God - and I wasn't overseas and I didn't survive the plague through luck or self-abnegation. But I'm going to do better with him."

Talyn couldn't tell if the priest was smiling. "In fact," said the priest, "Black Line is the choice that has been made for you."

"What are the auspices of five stars for a Black Line vampire?" Talyn prompted.

"Poor," remarked the priest. "You begin at a rank of one."

"Oh." Oh well. There were ways to add to it.

"And next," said the priest, "is the Test of the Empty Room."

Talyn followed the priest into the main, currently-empty hall of the temple, and through another door into a cube-shaped room of featureless blackness.

The priest remained outside of it, and closed the door, leaving Talyn in the dark.

Just sitting there wasn't Leekath's right answer, but she was a different line, gender, rank, and star array than Talyn was. Maybe it would work for him.

Maybe it wouldn't.

He squeaked and listened. There was really nothing in the room. It was about ten feet to a side. Could the priest see him? Hear him? Talyn couldn't hear anything from the main room, but it'd been quiet when he'd gone in.

There wasn't a perch, or Talyn might have hung to be more comfortable. Sitting was *okay*, it just wasn't as great as hanging was when he was in vampire form.

Was there something to do *other than* just sit there? He could lie down or walk around, he supposed, but how would significance accrue to *that*? And it wasn't just an impassable test to teach him humility, or something. Leekath had said that Iilha passed hers.

Unless that was a lie. He was pretty sure that most of what he was hearing was true, but he'd been told outright that he'd be informed if he had to "falsify his rank". Other secrets might require supporting lies too.

Leekath was allowed to tell him everything she knew, so she probably wasn't harboring anything like that, but Iilha might be. (Ugh.)

Talyn walked to the wall, and touched it, and walked around the room until he'd made a complete circuit. The wall felt like it might be made of onyx. Was it black for everyone, or just for Black Line vampires?

He went back to the middle of the room and closed his eyes; it didn't make a difference, it was pitch black either way. He squeaked again.

Yep. Empty room. Cube-shaped. This was a weird test. He wished he'd asked Leekath how long it lasted.

"Am I supposed to pray?" he wondered aloud.

There was no answer.

He'd been praying, but admittedly not as often as he had been before his admittance, when he had something to beg for. "I liked the book," Talyn said. He wasn't sure whether to address that to God or the Founder. Could the Founder hear prayers too?

"I'm glad there was a line for me. It would have been awkward otherwise, I think." He opened his eyes again. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do here. I still have a lot of questions, about a lot of things, but now I get to learn about at least most of it."

The door opened, and the priest showed him out. He'd been in there for a degree or two, which was, he supposed, better than being stuck in the Empty Room for a whole angle or a day.

He looked at the priest expectantly. This one was again either different or just wearing a different suncloak. "Well?" Talyn asked.

"What do you think?" asked the priest.

Chapter 38: Continuing

Priests - or a priest - kept asking Talyn what he thought. What would his stars be? What line would he belong to? Did he think he'd passed the Test of the Empty Room?

"I don't know what passing would look like, or I'd have just done that instead of guessing," Talyn said. "I don't know what the test is meant to show, or what it means to pass it. I could guess, but if I guessed that I passed I'd be hoping that this would pass me, and if I guessed that I didn't I'd be trying to look humble hoping *that* would pass me. So - I don't know. What do you say?"

Talyn could see just enough of the priest's chin to hazard a guess that maybe he was smiling. Maybe they were always smiling; maybe priests walked around in continual religious ecstasy. "But I have asked you what you think, and you have not answered me. You have only told me what might motivate either answer."

Talyn sighed, and wracked his brain for a sincere reply. Had he passed...? "I think I failed," he said. "I think people fail by default, and I'm not special in any *relevant* way, just in unrelated things. Being an innate kama can't have anything to do with it, I think, and that's my biggest advantage in, well, anything. I wish I'd passed but I don't think I did."

"Why do you want to pass?" the priest then asked.

"That's - what people do on tests, is try to pass," Talyn said, puzzled.

"Tests exist to differentiate groups of people," said the priest.

"And I shouldn't want to be in a specific group, just in whichever group is right?" Talyn hazarded. He thought he was getting the hang of interpreting priests. Slowly. "Even if one of them is called 'failed' and the other is called 'passed'?"

The priest's hood dipped.

"I think I failed," Talyn said again. "I'm a weird, marginal member of the faith, passing probably means extra responsibilities or secrets or something, and there's no reason to expect God to trust me with anything besides the minimum stuff he needs to let me in at all - and even that was a huge privilege. I bet people who pass the Test are divinely inspired to do something specific that no one could guess, so you can tell who's supposed to do... something. I wasn't. Divinely inspired, I mean. I bet people who pass go on to do special things that they need to be very deeply trusted to handle discreetly and properly, and I haven't demonstrated enough faith in the short time I've had to do that."

"Correct," said the priest.

"Is there any way I can take the test again, later -"

The priest shook his head under the deep hood.

Talyn couldn't help but feel a little disappointed, but at least he was in decent company with Leekath in failing the test.

"When will I need to be ready to do the Song of Night and the Dance of Black?" he asked.

"When you have turned eighteen in the years of your native world," replied the priest. "You will want to choose a time soon after that day, when vampires who are close to you are free to attend and you can secure the assistance of a Witness. Witnesses wear leather bands around their wrists in temple, if you need to know who to speak to."

Talyn filed that information away for later. "Am I finished here for now?"

The priest nodded. "Save one thing. Come with me."

Talyn followed the priest back into the room with the scripture on its platform. "What is

it?"

"We do not know the names of the figures from our history. They are hidden from us. You do not know my name, or the Pontiff's name, or God's name. And, accordingly, vampires each receive a secret name."

Leekath hadn't mentioned that. Perhaps it was so secret that it didn't fall under the umbrella of things she was allowed to tell other vampires - at least what her specific secret name was.

"Most vampires have another layer to our names. As our language - and thus our names - are unpronounceable to others, we use nicknames, which often serve the purpose of making the names we are given at birth lesser-known, though not truly secret. You will be without this layer, as 'Talyn Dalenn Casten' is quite pronounceable and it will remain your legal name and that which you go by. But you will still have the name I am about to give you. It must be concealed from all except for priests and the Most Holy Successor to our Most Holy Founder, the Pontiff. It is to be used only in private, protected correspondence and communication between you and the hierarchy of the faith. Not even your fiancée may learn it, and you may not learn hers."

"Yes, Ieeht," Talyn said, hoping that it would be a good name. But not so good that he'd go nuts wanting to tell someone about it.

A gloved hand settled on Talyn's head; Talyn closed his eyes. "I name you Aieenaahheeisaaali."

Talyn picked apart the compound word; he was pretty sure it meant something like "strange echo". Or "unfamiliar shape in the dark". Interesting choice. He'd take it. "Thank you, Ieeht."

"And now, you may go," said the priest, removing his hand from Talyn's head.

Talyn half-nodded, half-bowed, and went out of the temple to go home to Leekath.

<I wonder what your fheel would say. Or Iilha,> Talyn sent. <If we told them I converted.>

<I told Khi. He didn't believe me,> Leekath replied. <I haven't had a chance to bring it up with Aaihhhi yet.>

<Is there a way to prove it, short of showing up at the same temple service as one of them?> Talyn asked. <How is Khi keeping up with everything, anyway?>

<He already Sang and Danced,> sent Leekath. <He doesn't have to go to services if he doesn't want to. I think he does, when he's at Osaan instead of with his Barashin Master, but it's not a requirement. Even children don't have to go more than a few times a month so that they can learn the dialect and that part of the culture.>

<I think I'll go more often than that,> Talyn sent. <It's late at night, but Rhysel came up with a good array of potions that are safe and compatible with kamai drain if you swap between them often. I'll dip into those when I need them. The emergency power box can stay what it is, don't worry.>

<So you didn't pass the Test of the Empty Room either, did you?>

<Nope. Is it obvious?>

<If you had you'd have bragged about it first thing,> Leekath pointed out. <And then you would have stopped midsentence and tried to talk about something else, because you couldn't give me any details.>

<I think you might know me awfully well.>

<Oh, yes. On an unrelated topic, Emryl's coming over Fenen evening to stay overnight

and I'm taking Lunen off to show her tourist traps around the city. I thought we'd put an illusion bed in the living room for her. I don't know if you want to appear in vampire form to her or not.>

<I might as well. I'm going around in public like this all the time, and it's not like my family who don't even live in the right world. But I'm not going to explain about the conversion. I think that's supposed to stay a secret - and we don't want the pontiff flooded with requests just because they let one guy in. Let her think I'm a slightly pathetic failed wannabe.>

<I'm not going to talk about you that way to her, but we'll see what we can do to imply it,> Leekath sent with a mental laugh and a physical smile.

<Is there a good way to rub it in your less beloved sister's face? Or your fheeil's?>

<If I think of one I'll let you know. But maybe it should even be a secret from the people it'd be really satisfying to tell,> Leekath said, suddenly solemn.

<I'll trust you on that, then,> Talyn sent. <At least until I learn more.>

Leekath smiled again, and pressed her lips to his.

Talyn signed up for another term of classes for the term starting in Komehel: Third Tier Theory; a practicum on Spells To Alter The Self (Or: Asaamen Folktale Blessings You Can Actually Have!); and History of Wizardry Overview, which he chose in favor of a three-course series on the same subject and hoped would be more fun than contemporary literature. At least he couldn't complain that people who'd actually existed weren't arranging their lives for entertainment value. His advisor didn't complain about his course selection during their brief meeting before term began.

The new term started on the first of Komehel, Talyn got all his syllabi and textbooks as soon as they were available, and he got off to a decent start in everything. He had a different theory professor, who was dry but inoffensive. The practicum had long blank spots in its syllabus marked "Student Choice", and Talyn was supposed to submit a list of self-enhancement spells he'd like to learn in two weeks - "If you don't have any ideas, look to literature, history, or even the newspaper!" the professor exhorted.

Talyn picked up a newspaper and flipped through it, since he had an idea of what he thought of literature and had not yet learned much history. There was a personal-interest piece on Ryganaav with cherry-picked quotes from natives - mostly women and leonines, he observed - who had nice or at least non-outraged things to say about Linnipese rule. There was a fair amount of Linnipese news, too, for an Esmaarlan paper - "*Sali-peiradeima* joins *sasaideima*", "*Kaimia-ai* rumored to succeed Empress over *Tia-ai*", "Rebels Quashed -"

Talyn put down the newspaper. He wrote down a handful of self-enhancements he already knew how to do with kamai and would be vaguely curious to see how wizards would manage. He turned that in.

He didn't think there was a spell that would let him reshape politics with impunity and no moral issues or unexpected fallout.

Leekath was still studying kamai at Binaaralav, though only four classes of it, as she'd run out of death kamai to take - an exhaustive search by the death kamai teacher had revealed what did and did not work in Elcenia, and so the entire course formally came to an end after only eight terms instead of the projected twenty or twenty-two for the other aspects. (There was an optional half-term rundown of what death kyma in Barashi could do that kyma in Elcenia could not. Leekath took it, but Talyn got the sense that this was just for completeness, not because she expected to want to harness the knowledge and powers of spirits in Barashi on a regular basis.)

Leekath's particular advantages led her to accumulate a collection of all the kamai tools

Talyn had ever heard of, bought and made and received as presents from Emryl and Rhysel and other teachers. She had ward stones, wands in gold and rowan and bone and marble and quartz, conduit staffs of similar materials, storage crystals, nuggets and bangles and beads and splinters and snaps and knucklebones and hornwhistles and totems and pebbles and a glass disc. And, somehow, she'd acquired an honest-to-goodness *soulchain*.

"Where," Talyn had asked her when she came home with *that*, "did you get a *soulchain*?"

"From Bryn," said Leekath.

Talyn still didn't want to bother Master Bryn Rhylenn until he knew all the kamai he could learn without her help, for all that she was teaching at Binaaralav. Her institutional students were one thing; a random ex-apprentice of someone she worked with was another, and he didn't want to be brushed off because he seemed like he was using her as a shortcut. "She just gave you a soulchain."

"She wanted to ask me how to use it," Leekath said.

That actually made a lot of sense; the information was lost since the kyma purge, even to Bryn, but Leekath could recover anything one might care to know about a solid object. "Is it *empty*?"

"Of course it's empty. She gave it to me so I can put her in it if she dies while she's here. She's nervous about how little death kamai works here. And then I'm supposed to take her to Barashi in it and break it there."

Talyn nodded slowly, eyeing the tangled loop of black metal chain dotted with red self-sustaining light. Master Bryn *was* very old. And the death kamai thing *would* make one nervous, if one weren't Talyn. "Right."

Leekath started wearing most of her wearable tools - the soulchain looked ominously fetching around her left wrist - and carrying the smaller examples of the others, as half fashion statement and half utility gear. She grew her hair out so she could tangle more bits of wood and metal and bone and crystal and stone into it. It all made her look very complicated.

She still went to work when she didn't have classes; her teachers went easy on written work and she reviewed her textbooks all the time just by keeping them around, so this meant every Lunen and Chenen, plus breaks between terms, she was at Parliament. She spent most of her days out of their house.

But at night, if they felt like staying up late - if Talyn's first class the next day began in the afternoon, and her first class the next day was a review section or something about a kamai object that she could safely skip - they'd go to temple together. (Without her, he'd often go alone. He wanted to show everyone - however many priests came through the local temple - that he took his privileges seriously, that he wasn't going to forget about what he'd agreed to once he had the permissions he'd wanted.)

At first Talyn had a hard time following a lot of the conversations that went on during temple. Everyone arrived at slightly different times of night, and spent an angle or so milling around or soaking in the pool and talking about the topics that couldn't be discussed on the outside, but they kept using names he didn't understand.

Leekath explained that to make it easier to talk about the figures from Scripture, they had nicknames - for instance, the Founder's wife was commonly referred to as Aai, which meant "Moon", although this was not to be understood to be an actual segment of her name the way modern vampires' nicknames were. Leekath gave him a rundown of the nicknames she could remember off the top of her head and thereafter he was able to participate much better, though he

spent more time raptly listening.

The other congregants didn't have mind-shielding pendants, but he didn't catch anyone thinking "by the way, I'm a priest". Maybe they occupied distinctly different mental tracks outside of their clergy garb, maybe off-duty priests were steering clear of his temple specifically because it was his; Talyn wasn't going to go digging in anyone's head looking for clues against God's will. Maybe not even if he got really impatient.

He didn't encounter anyone not in a priestly cloak who was wearing one of the pendants, although on occasion he spotted Leekath using a spare moment to create a new one and deposit it into a black envelope. As far as he knew, she was the only vampire who could create such things, besides him; the other vampire students at Binaaralav weren't that advanced, let alone anyone at the newer Daasen program. And they probably had a point in not asking him to create defenses against himself.

After a while spent in unstructured socialization at temple during each service night, a priest called everyone to order and the service proper began. The priests spoke about ethics and personal fulfillment and learning and privacy and cooperative living and family and obedience to God. They held up the examples of the Most Holy Founder, and his wife, and the First Witnesses. Anonymous requests for prayers could be left in a bowl of black glass in the temple, and would be paraphrased by the priests during services and made the subjects of discussions about similar problems, what God wanted done about them, what the Most Holy Founder would have done, and what resources might be available to help.

And they sang.

Vampire voices were more uniform and naturally musical than those of other species; they had to be, to handle precise pitching and vowel length that carried half the meaning in their languages. Singing beautifully was more about trying hard than about having any natural talent. Talyn started out pretty poorly, but he borrowed Leekath's music crystals - full of secular songs exclusively, of course - and sang to himself while he did homework. Soon enough he could shrill along to each of the Songs from scripture in any of their multiple tunes, and the other hymns that had been added to the canon over the years, and occasional wordless choruses of emotion emitted spontaneously during services.

There was dancing, too, though it was more formalized. Talyn had been envisioning dances done on two feet. Sometimes, that happened. More often, everyone present shifted - except the priest, who could not transform where anyone might see him and recognize his bat form. "Flutterdances" were chaotic group patterns where everyone shared an algorithm for how to react to the approach or retreat of others, resulting in beautiful ripples of motion throughout disorganized flocking. Talyn picked up the handful of most common flutterdances and worked on his maneuverability until he didn't embarrass himself.

The Dance of Night, which he had to learn before turning eighteen, incorporated elements of both forms at different stages. A Witness - who was Red Line, but knew the dance anyway - made appointments with Talyn to teach him the dance so he'd be able to acquit himself without difficulty. Talyn had needed to ask four Witnesses before he found one who knew the relevant dance. Apparently most of the vampires in Esmaar were descended from settlers of the Red or White lines, with only a handful of Black, Blue, and Silver trickling in during more recent years.

After the sermon and prayers and the singing and dancing, there was more milling around, and some people left. Departing then left Talyn with time for about five angles of sleep before he had to be up for a morning class - six if he was willing to sleep in his clothes and was

current on the anti-beard potion that he spread on his chin once a week. Maybe ceasing to age at twenty meant that vampires could tolerate that kind of interference with their sleep on a regular basis. Maybe a lot of vampires had jobs that didn't require them functional at the crack of dawn.

Some didn't leave, though. Some went into side rooms one or two at a time, to ask private questions in private audiences with the priests. Talyn hadn't taken advantage of this yet, but he could imagine doing it, if he had a problem he couldn't figure out or apply brute force kamai to. For the time being, though, his life was running pretty smoothly.

Talyn went and visited his parents during a three-day holiday break from university in mid-Marahel.

Leekath couldn't come, as Parliament didn't let out for the holiday even though Binaaralav did. Instead, she sent him with presents for each parent and the four siblings he was likely to encounter, tokens of her affection in lieu of her presence. Little Cyranna got a stuffed bat with a copper "heart" Leekath tucked inside it, stamped with a mindprint of love. This was a practically valueless implementation of the mindprint working, but one that meant that the bat could be reasonably said to love Cyranna. Erryl got a clever toy - mechanical, imported from Erubia, which wouldn't break in transit - that folded and unfolded and clicked as it twisted under his hands. Abel she didn't know as well, but she sent a generically useful nice wooden box. Coryl got a drake egg, which would, properly incubated according to the instruction packet, hatch into a highly unique sort of pet for the journeyman veterinarian. Talyn's mother got a packet of skeins of raan thread and Talyn's father got a replica of a historical Esmaarlan article of jewelry.

Talyn went, bearing all these gifts, in halfblood form and didn't breathe a word about his conversion. His dad would want to know all about it and no protestation of privacy would put him off - his mom would feel hurt that she hadn't been consulted or warned. His little sister and little brother would make pests of themselves, and any given older sibling would think he was making a stupid and immature decision that was worthy teasing or admonishment material.

The presents were all well-received, even if Talyn had to repair a broken wooden joint in Erryl's toy almost right away and Coryl's egg-hatching instructions had to be translated. As expected, Talyn had to defend his decision to not move home in terms of having already acquired the rooftop cottage with Leekath. Even then, when he mistakenly let slip that she was *paying* for the house, his mother questioned the wisdom of living together before getting married. She suggested that he move back home until the wedding - "Which you're postponing until you finish school, right? At least four or five more years?" his mother asked.

"Yeah," Talyn said. They'd probably have to have duplicate ceremonies, one in temple and one on Barashi; they could figure that out when they weren't juggling school on top of everything. "I think I'll be able to do one tier per term, which has me all done halfway through 11258 - Elcenian years. End of 11258 if I fail a test and have to redo a tier. Leekath's all done with wizardry so she's just wrapping up kamai. That's not done by tests - they're laying down curriculum as her cohort goes along, though. So we don't know exactly when she'll be through but we think the same year is about right."

"I'm glad, dear," said his mother. "I do like Leekath, she's a sweetie, but you're both so young. Really very young to be living by yourselves."

"Well, I couldn't do my homework or practice spells, here," Talyn said. "And it's very inconvenient for Leekath to come to Barashi even when she has the time to spare. Between school and her I'd wind up spending all my time there anyway."

When he went to sleep in his old bed, it took him a long period of tossing and turning

and wishing he was hanging upside-down beside Leekath before he could manage to drift off.

He didn't mention that to his family, either.

The next day, he made a trip with all of them to visit the tree that had been planted where Revenn had been buried.

He toyed with the idea of calling on his grandfather's spirit. And discarded it. Grandfather had known, practiced, and taught death kamai, but he made it clear to all his students in that discipline that the dead formed habits and plans that could be thrown terribly off by answering a summons. Revenn was with his parents, his wife, his friends - he was not expecting to be yanked back into the living world for a chat with his grandson. In a dire emergency he'd put up with it. Since Talyn wasn't planning to die himself, he'd have to wait for a dire emergency.

One was sure to crop up eventually.

Leekath wanted to bite him immediately when he got home; he hadn't bothered changing into vampire shape for the hop from the circle to the house. He let her. He wasn't sure if she'd been going without or dipping into the stockpile that was still preserved in the citadel under wolfrider territory; either way she curled into him with eager languor when she drew blood out of his throat and tranced when he stroked her hair.

"I love you," he told her. "I think I might have to marry you."

"Mmm, good," she said. "You should do that."

He shifted, and snuggled closer. "In a few years," he said.

