Lead me into shadows once again

by Swimmer963

Summary

[This is part 5 of a series. Start at the beginning!]

Valdemar is gaining ground in the war against the Karsites, and for the first time in years, Vanyel, Savil, and Lissa are on leave. Sort of. The Ashkevron family manor isn't exactly a restful place, even leaving aside the rumblings on their border. At least Herald-Spies Mardic and Donni are keeping an eye on the nearest danger spot, the capital of neighbouring kingdom Lineas.

Meanwhile, a Karsite princess in exile rides towards Haven, hoping to negotiate with King Randale for an alliance. And on the streets of a border town, an orphaned child sings for his supper, with no idea of how much his life is about to change.

Covers roughly the timeline of Magic's Promise, with some bonus sideplots.
They rode three abreast down Exile’s Road, occasionally dropping into single file when another party had to pass the other way; the road wasn’t as wide as the main Trade Roads. Which was an oversight, Vanyel thought. It had nearly as much traffic. Western Valdemar might have been next to uninhabited eight hundred years ago, but the Pelagirs were receding, decade by decade, and now the area was densely populated right up to Valdemar’s borders, and past in Lineas and Baires.

It was a beautiful late summer day – closer to autumn now, the warm weather was deceptive. A few fluffy clouds drifted across a deep blue sky, the sun beat down on fields already turned golden, and there was just enough of a breeze to be pleasant.

“You’d never know there was a war,” Lissa said out loud.

Vanyel glanced over. “You can tell. Should be a lot more hands out for the crops.” There were people working in the fields they passed, but mostly women, old men, and children. He had wondered, obscurely, if there was any way he would be able to help with magic. Maybe he could take something from that book on the Eastern Empire logistics, they used mages in everything–

No, making Valdemar more dependent on mages is the opposite of what we need. There were so few Herald-Mages left. Even in Haven, they were having to rethink some of the routine work that had historically been done with magic.

“Right.” Lissa hesitated. “That must be a problem.”

“It is,” Savil said dryly, catching up. “Weather’s been fine – it’d better be, I’ve been working flat-out trying to keep up with it – but it’s not going to be a good harvest.” She sighed. “We can’t sustain a standing army of twenty thousand for too much longer. This is one of the reasons why.”

They rode a while in silence. At a very comfortable pace, for the Companions – Lissa’s mare couldn’t keep up with anything faster.

Savil sighed. “I really hope this isn’t too much of a disaster. Haven’t got the energy for the sort of arguments your father and I used to get into.”

“Oh?” Lissa looked very interested. “Please say more.”

Savil laughed, though without much humour. “The usual rubbish, I’m sure. Kids these days, the woeful state of the kingdom. He never approved of Elspeth, I don’t think. Probably because she was a woman, though he was smart enough not to say it outright.” She shook her head. “Honestly, though? Sometimes he was in the right. Not that I’d ever let him hear that. Gods, he always could goad me. Make me feel fourteen again.”

She was silent a moment. Vanyel didn’t know what to say; somehow he had never imagined Savil would feel this way. She kept her insecurities to herself. Or at least kept them from him.

“Maybe it’ll be easier now,” she said. “I haven’t seen him since, it must not be since seven ninety-four, that time he was in Haven.” After the nearly-successful assassination attempt, Vanyel thought, shivering. “And he didn’t exactly pick a fight then. Hasn’t shouted at me since…hmm, seven eighty-nine?” Her eyes widened a little. “Before that I hadn’t even spoken to him in ten years. I’ve changed a lot since then. Maybe I’ll finally be able to keep my cool.”

I’m not sure I will, Vanyel thought. His last visit home had been only for a day, and he had still felt
scraped raw by the end of it. It must be easier for Liss; she didn’t mind loud and boisterous so much. Hells, maybe she liked it. She had certainly tried to drag him out to the wildest taverns in Haven every time she visited.

“I can’t wait to meet some of the littles,” Lissa said. “You know Meke’s got six now?”

“Six!” Vanyel’s breath hissed out. “They must’ve been busy!”

“And Kaster’s married!” Lissa shook her head. “Hard to believe. He’s still eight years old in my head.”

Vanyel winced. *Did I sent anything for the wedding?* He vaguely remembered hearing the news, in one of Father’s letters, but he hadn’t exactly been staying on top of things like that – it had only been about six or seven months ago, while he was still on the Border.

:Savil took care of it for you: Yfandes sent. :Sent those bed curtains you never had a use for:

He smiled, a little surprised – he hadn’t realized Savil was so on top of these things. It was a better gift than the hideous silver-and-crystal candlesticks he’d sent for Deleran’s wedding-gift – Deleran, who had two children now! He did remember sending something for his younger sister Charis’ betrothal, a horrible tapestry of the Lady of Fertility, yet another gift received out on the road that he had immediately packed away. *Not that our family needs any help with fertility*, he thought with amusement. None of them had any sense of good taste either, so probably Charis had loved it.

“I’ve missed all the weddings,” Lissa said wistfully. “Almost made it out for Deleran’s, but things always come up.”

“You wanted to go?” It sounded like a nightmare to him.

“I like weddings. Music, dancing – gods, the *food*…”

Vanyel shook his head. “Our family’s got terrible taste in music.”

“Yes, well, not everyone’s a snob like you, Van.” Lissa softened it with a smile. “Anyway. Tell me about this new spell-working you mentioned?”

“The Web?” He felt a little knocked sideways by the change of topic. Liss was always like that. “Something I’d wanted to do for years. Do you know much about elemental spirits?”

“What?”

“The details don’t matter too much. I recruited the *vrondi*, a type of air-elemental. They’re quite common in Valdemar – they’re actually involved in the Truth Spell. You’ve seen that before, right?”

“Yes.” She shivered a little. “Gives me the collywobbles.”

Vanyel was surprised. There wasn’t much that bothered Liss. “Anyway, I made a sort of agreement with them. In exchange for letting them use the Web as an energy source, they’re keeping an eye out for the use of mage-energy within Valdemar. Anytime someone does magic, the *vrondi* will flock to watch them – and if they’re not tied into the Web through a Companion, the *vrondi* will raise an alarm and the Web will pass it on to the nearest Herald.” He shook his head. “Unfortunately, they can’t distinguish a foreign mage up to no good from a Valdemaran child with a newly awakened Gift. It was hard enough finding a way for them to tell Herald-Mages apart from the rest. And it’s quite discomfiting, having them watching you. Not an ideal first experience for some poor Border-child who might already think they’re losing their mind. I’ll keep working on it, but I judged that for
now this was better than nothing.”

Lissa’s eyes were wide. “It’s incredible! A way to find foreign mages… Could’ve saved a lot of lives on the Border.”

*I wish I’d done it sooner.* How many Heralds would still be alive if he hadn’t been so overly cautious?

“You’re kidding me,” Randi said quietly. “Are you sure?”

“Sure as we can be, in these circumstances.” Tantras’ hands fidgeted in his lap. “She had the royal family seal. Can’t see why anyone would try to impersonate her.”

Randi looked down at the two halves of the wax seal he’d just broken, the stamp he recognized all too well. Princess Karis. He could recall her face perfectly, for all that they’d met four years ago and not for long. Anyone would have been paying attention in his place, he thought – she was the woman he might have married. Not a happy thought. Though, gods, it might have saved them three years of war.

“She wants an alliance,” he said dully.

Tantras nodded. “It’s hard to be sure how much that would mean – how much she can actually promise. She’s in exile, after all. Almost none of her personal Guard got out alive. She can’t offer us troops.”

No. Only words. *This war is destroying both of our countries, and to no good end*, she had written. *The priesthood are corrupt, and I do not believe that they speak for Vkandis. Perhaps we have lost His favour, in this foolish and wasteful destruction, yet I do believe my Vkandis Sunlord would wish me to bring an end to it if I can.* She had written in the Karsite script – and, below it, the same sentiment expressed in iffy Valdemaran. Randi read Karsite well, and hadn’t needed the translation.

He ran his finger over the paper. Fine, heavy paper – he wondered how far she had carried this missive. It was written in her own hand, which he recognized. Beautiful script. The product of years with strict tutors, like his own skill with the Karsite language.

*What do I do about this?*

Randi stared at the tapestry on his wall. They needed the war to be over. Everyone knew that – but he knew it better than most. It was coming on twelve years since Vanyel had begun having the Foresight dream of an army in the north, and they were already within the time-period he had initially guessed at. Van thought they would have a few more years, now – his hair wasn’t as silvered as in the dream, and the pass was still desolate.

But how many more years? Probably less than ten. Meaning they very, very badly needed not to be at war on two borders at once.

They had the strength for a direct invasion. *We’ve lost so many mages, but Karse lost more.* Their troop losses had been heavier, too, and Karse had been trying to sustain a wartime-size standing army for at least four years. It would be taking a toll on their economy, and the wizard-weather along the Border, without mages of their own to reverse it, had to be cutting their crop yields as well. Randi
knew from the reports of their remaining spies that people were already starving.

And Vanyel had pointed all of this out, in his letters and in conversations before he left. Pointed out that they might end the war sooner, with fewer deaths on both sides, if they could march – or Gate – their people all the way to Sunhame and demand peace.

It hadn’t been an option. *Valdemar does not invade and conquer*. In eight hundred years, that unwritten rule had never been broken.

This offered a way.

*We could declare that we recognize Princess Karis as the legitimate ruler of Karse.* In practice it would be the same – but on paper, and perhaps in the eyes of his people, they wouldn’t be invading at all. They would be providing assistance to an ally in resolving a purely internal civil war.

How likely was it to succeed? It depended a lot on what Karis could offer them. Were there people still loyal to her in positions of power? Who would take her side, if she chose to fight to reclaim her throne?

He had to talk to her, to know.

And he had to know.

Randi took a deep breath. “Tran, draft a message for me.” He would have done it himself, but he was inexplicably tired again today; editing it would be enough. “We’re going to send an armed escort. Hmm, forty should be enough to show our respect – I want her to know we’re taking her seriously, without making her feel threatened. We’ll invite her to the capital to discuss an alliance.” And to verify that she was who she claimed to be. He would remember her face, of course, but she would have changed, and faces could be changed as well. They could discreetly place her under Truth Spell to verify her intentions – if they used the first-stage only, she wouldn’t know.

Though maybe she would consent to the second stage, as a show of good faith…

Plan later, he thought. Tantras nodded uncertainly; he seemed surprised.

Alone in his office, Randi put his head down on the desk for a moment. He was trying not to dwell on it, it was premature – but he remembered the original suggested terms of the alliance.

*Would I really marry her?* Knowing how much it would hurt Shavri, though she would never say a word?

Yes. In a heartbeat, if it gave Valdemar even a slightly better chance.

He would have to tell Shavri. Even if it was nowhere near a certain thing, she deserved to know, and Randi tried never to hide anything from her.

But he couldn’t face it yet.

Riding through Wyrfen Wood, on the far side of Halfway Inn, Vanyel felt the tension pulling at his midsection. He recognized it, now – his long-ago speculations had been right. There was magic here, old magic, lying deep under the ground. Dormant – but restless.
The Tayledas would have cleansed this area centuries ago. Why did the currents feel so uneasy? It reminded him of the disruptions around the Border, the way he could feel echoes in the Web when a Karsite priest-mage used node-energy even outside of Valdemar.

“Savil?” he said cautiously. The woods were too quiet; he almost wanted to whisper. Lissa was riding ahead of them, oblivious.

“I feel it too.” She kept her voice low as well, maybe feeling the same discomfort. “Want me to have a poke around in the Web?”

“I can do it.” Savil was better at investigative magic in general, but he had built the Web. He closed his eyes and reached for the blue.

_Disturbance. Echoes, resonating from a point in the distance—_

“Someone’s been throwing a lot of power around,” he said, opening his eyes. “Not in Valdemar. Somewhere across the Border.” He pushed a lock of hair out of his eyes; he had been keeping it shorter during the war, vanity wasn’t worth much on the Border, but he hadn’t gotten around to having it trimmed in a long time, and right now it was a very awkward length, too short to tie back but long enough to get in the way. Something to take care of here, maybe. Or he could grow it out properly.

“Baires?” Savil said quietly.

“Could be.” It was difficult to tell exactly. “That or Lineas, and Baires makes a lot more sense.” They would have heard, surely, if Mardic and Donni had run into trouble and needed to throw a lot of node-energy around. He hoped they hadn’t – it would ruin their cover.

Besides, he couldn’t tell exactly, but he had a feeling it wasn’t node-power at all. _It feels like blood-magic:_ he sent, not wanting to say the words out loud.

:_I was afraid of that. Felt wrong to me as well:_

Yfandes, picking up on his discomfort, broke into a canter. _Let’s get out of here:_

Vanyel was happy to do just that.

:_Randi needs to know about this:_ he sent. Four years ago, he could have used the Mindspeech-relay, and passed a message right now – but nearly all the strong Mindspeakers were on the southern border. Nearly all the survivors, rather. All the strongly Gifted Heralds had been decimated, not just mages. There was no relay between here and Runeford, and at that point he might as well try directly for Haven, and Tantras. Which meant being deep in trance, to boost his Gift with node-energy, and he would rather not do that in the saddle.

:_I agree. You’ll try for Tran tonight?:_

:_That was my plan:_ As usual, Savil had guessed the direction of his reasoning. And her Kellan had broken into a canter as well.

In moments they had outpaced Lissa. “Hey!” she called after them. “What’re you in such a hurry for?”

“A hot bath!” Vanyel shouted over his shoulder.

“Sybarite!” But she nudged her mare to a faster pace as well.
They weren’t far from Forst Reach, and they rode out into fields barely ten minutes later. Vanyel sighed, feeling the tension in his spine unwind. Farmers and smallholders paused in their work to wave, and he heard people shouting his name. They recognized him, even if it had been years since he had come this way – but there was no fear. Only a sort of possessive pride. It had been like that at Halfway Inn as well. He was local; it was as though they thought he was still theirs, and his current fame reflected well on them.

Five years ago, maybe that would have bothered him. He had been miserable enough growing up here, after all. But it was in the past, and there was no point dwelling on it. Let them have their stories.

Approaching the gates of the Forst Reach estate, he saw a small figure wave, then dash away, sprinting in the direction of the keep. Sure enough, by the time they rode up the well-maintained path, everyone had crowded out to meet them.

Nearly fifty people – no, more than that, the children all pushing and shoving for a first look. This isn’t a family, it’s a clan, Vanyel thought wonderingly. His siblings were all in the front row – gods, Mekeal looked so much like Father. Standing side by side, they resembled brothers more than father and son. Meke was holding onto a boy of perhaps three, who perched on his shoulders.

Lady Treesa wasn’t with Withen; she stood off to the side with her little Court, the ladies-in-waiting and fosterlings, and there were more of them as well.

He played his eyes over them. Meke’s Roshya was as slim as ever, even after six children, and the youngest couldn’t be more than a month old! She held the infant in her arms, and two more toddlers – twins, he guessed – peered out from behind her skirts. Deleran’s wife, he couldn’t remember her name, held a baby as well, and as for Kaster’s rather plump new bride – she looks like she’s ready to pop the child out any minute, he thought, smiling.

He stopped directly in front of Father, nodded to him, and started to dismount. Lissa beat him to it, slipping down and flinging herself into her father’s arms.

“I missed you,” he heard her say, the words heartfelt. He looked away. She was clearly overjoyed to be here – why wasn’t he? What was wrong with him?

Father clasped Vanyel’s arm and slapped him on the shoulder, a little awkwardly, then greeted Savil as well. And then they went through the same rigamarole as the last time – Meke trying to direct a stableboy to take their ‘horses’. This time, Vanyel was minded to insist.

Savil rescued him. “Remember that they’re our Companions. Us Heralds are quite particular about them. We’ll get them settled ourselves. In a moment.” She went to greet Mekeal. “Young Meke! You’ve certainly done some growing up. Roshya, I’ve heard so much about you – and you’ve littles I’ve never even met! May I have an introduction?”

Impressed by her poise, Vanyel watched as she greeted all six of the children, even the newborn, starting with a sturdy red-headed girl of seven or eight – who, aside from the hair and her mother’s green eyes, looked a good deal like Jisa. Maybe it was only obvious to him; Savil said nothing of it.

Vanyel squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, and exchanged greetings with his siblings as well. Deleran’s wife was called Niva, and she was quite shy. He quickly lost track of the children’s names,
except for Meke’s eldest, the redhead, who was called Ariel. As soon as she had discharged her manners adequately, politely greeting all the adults, she was fawning over Yfandes and Kellan. She had come prepared; her pockets were full of apples.

Vanyel endured Treesa’s tearful hug, and pushed down the uncharitable thought that she wasn’t exactly aging gracefully. The girlish, diaphanous gown she wore didn’t suit her physique, already succumbing to the ravages of time, and he could tell that the colouring of her cheeks and hair were false. Poor Mother, he found himself thinking. All she ever had was her looks. On the heels of that thought: and her children, but I barely write to her and haven’t been home in years. He felt a little guilty – he knew he had been Mother’s favourite, and since leaving Forst Reach twelve years ago, he had never even thought about how it would affect her.

The welcome finally complete, Savil forged off towards the stables, and he was relieved to follow in her wake. He reached out a tendril of Mindspeech. :Thank you for doing this:

:They are my family as well:

It wasn’t until nearly two candlemarks later, ensconced in a guest-room with the door locked behind him, that he could finally relax a little. Gods, why can they still put me so off balance? At least half a dozen people wanted to ‘talk to him later’ – inexplicably, one of them was Jervis. The craggy old armsmaster had spoken civilly enough to him, if gruffly, but he still made Vanyel’s stomach churn. As did Father Leren, the priest, with whom he’d exchanged a few barbed pleasantries.

:’Fandes?: he sent. :Comfortable?: He’d set her up in the big loose-box that still had the split door, even though he’d had to move another mare out of it and scrub it down with his own hands. And replace the bit of string, long gone.

:Very: Her mindvoice was sleepy. :I think I’ll go have a good roll in the meadow: A pause. :I’ve got an absolutely awful roommate, though:

:Roommate?: he sent, confused.

:Didn’t Father mention something in his last letter? Meke buying a ’Shin’a’in stud’?:

:Oh, right: Father had been very disparaging about it. :Take it the stallion’s not Shin’a’in, then?:

:I would say not! Hideous beast. Vicious, too. They just brought him in from the field and he kicked a stableboy right over!:

:Oh dear: Vanyel sighed. :That’s probably what Father wants to talk to me about. Maybe Meke too: He lay back on the bed and closed his eyes for a moment. :I’m tired, ’Fandes. More than I realized: He had noticed it on their journey, too – it had taken a great deal of effort to drag himself out of bed for their departures.

:Then rest: He felt her affection, and concern. :You need time to recover. It’s been a hard two years:

:I’ve been off the Border for ages!:

:Not all that long, you spent two weeks of it on the road to the north, and you weren’t exactly on vacation in Haven:
No, not exactly. He had been very busy, in fact, and sometimes it felt like he’d been trying to do the work of five Herald-Mages there as well. Lessons with the trainees, Council meetings, routine and urgent mage-work everywhere in Haven.

:But you are now. Enjoy it. You could call for supper to your room:

:No, I should go down for it. Mother will be sad otherwise: He flopped over onto his stomach. :And I should try to reach Tran, but I don’t know if I’m up for it:

:Tomorrow morning will be fine, I’m sure:

He thought vaguely of contacting Mardic and Donni – but better not to. They were undercover, and far enough away that he would have to boost to reach them. It was possible they could be detected that way, and he ought not to risk it. They had been communicating via message-drops with Herald Lores, the official envoy, and they could receive messages that way as well.

He was glad that he and Savil were here now. It was a secondary advantage of taking their family leave now – he would be able to act as a Mindspeech-relay for the sector if necessary. Though I hope I don’t have to. His reserves hadn’t had much of a chance to recover. Maybe he could ask Randi to add Forst Reach, or Lissa’s camp, as a stop on the nearest courier-circuit, so he could pass non-urgent messages to Mardic and Donni without having to go via the capital.

He missed them a great deal. Maybe if the situation calmed down enough over there, they could come take a few days at Forst Reach before traveling back. Or maybe if he got tired enough of his family, he might go undercover as well and visit…

:You make a terrible spy: Yfandes reminded him. He had a few disguises – most recently he had gone as a minstrel called Valdir, speaking in a hard-learned Hardornen accent and sneaking into Karsite camps that way. It wasn’t ideal; no matter what he wore, his hair and eyes were very distinctive, and he wasn’t good at changing his body language on purpose.

Well, it was worth a thought.

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:Mardic?:

Mardic accepted the fine tendril of Mindspeech; he and Donni were only two streets apart, bedded down in separate doorways, and with good directional shielding their conversation ought to be undetectable even if there were other Thoughtsensors around. Which he hadn’t seen a sign of. A surprising number of the Linean citizens had the Mage-Gift in potential, but it seemed the rumours were true – there were no active mages.

:I’m here, love: He curled more tightly under his cloak – which, though it looked ragged, had a padded wool lining that no real beggar would be able to afford. And a well-disguised weather-barrier spell, one that Vanyel had worked out after studying some artifacts from the late Karsite Adept. He didn’t exactly like sleeping outside on the ground, but he’d had worse during the war.

:Learn anything today?: She was as tired as he was, he thought, and he could sense the edge of her hunger. Both of them were begging for their meals, for verisimilitude, though they had well-hidden caches of coins on their persons, and he had buried some more just outside city limits. He’d gotten a good enough take today, a rind of cheese and half a loaf of stale bread along with quite a pile of
coppers – apparently he made a sufficiently pitiable beggar, a scarred, blind man playing an old gittern badly. Donni didn’t tend to do as well, despite her leg.

:Everyone’s talking about Tashir having been disowned: He hesitated. :Not sure how far to trust it, but gossip says he’s a nice young man. His father, not so much:

:Hmm: He could feel her thinking. :I’ve heard the same. Some Palace servants were buying fruit at the stand next to where I was. I have the feeling they don’t like King Deveran much at all:

Mardic tucked his head deeper under a fold of his cloak; it was starting to get cold at night. :Did you learn anything more about the situation with the servants?:

:It’s like we thought. They’re all blood-relatives of the Remoerdis family. Won’t accept anyone who’s not:

It was very odd, Mardic thought. Donni had initially tried to get a position as a Palace servant, and been turned down. She was considering changing to her disguise as a boy – she could still pass for a lad of thirteen or fourteen, if she had enough dirt on her face and wore a cap to hide the white in her hair – and trying to find a position as a dishwasher at one of the row of inns frequented by the Linean soldiers. The question was one of whether she would hear more there, or in her current begging-area by the small market.

There were quite a lot of soldiers around – an indication as good as any that the King was anticipating war.

:I have noticed something: Donni sent. :All the Palace servants I’ve seen out and about have the Mage-Gift in potential. It’s not rare here, but still. Every single one:

:Huh: Mardic rolled over; the stone was digging into his shoulder. :Wish we could ask Herald Lores to check in the Palace itself: The envoy wasn’t Mage-Gifted. :I’ll put it in with the message-dump. Think I need to sleep now:

:Same:

:Goodnight. I love you:

:Always:

Lady Treesa sipped her wine, and dabbed delicately at her lips with a napkin before setting it down and turning back to Lissa. “You didn’t tell us you wouldn’t be staying in the manor!” she pouted. “We aired out a room for you.”

“I’m sorry.” Lissa flung a half-desperate glance in Van’s direction, but she couldn’t catch his eye; he was talking to Withen, and looked just as trapped as she felt. “Mother, you have to understand,” she said, hating the whine that crept into her voice. “King’s orders. I’m lucky Randale’s letting me have lighter duties near home at all.” She lifted her own wine-goblet and took a deep pull.

There was no sign of understanding in Treesa’s eyes. “But surely you would prefer a room inside?” she simpered. “And better company than your crass fighting-men.” Lips pursed in disapproval
Lissa managed, barely, to bite back an angry retort. *No one gets to say a word against my people.* Every single man and woman she had brought to Forst Reach had seen her through years of service, proved themselves in dozens of battles and skirmishes. But her mother wouldn’t understand, and there was no point in starting a fight. Impossible to win an argument when the other party could end it instantly and ignominiously by breaking into tears. *It’s unfair, that’s what it is.*

Lissa reached for the wine-jug to refill her cup, holding it out for Treesa as well, who nodded and half-giggled. Maybe once she was drunk, she would find her mother’s conversation easier to bear. “I find my men to be excellent company,” she said, keeping her voice light – and only realizing a heartbeat later what that might sound like.

Lady Treesa raised her finely plucked eyebrows. “Oh! Is there a man in particular?” She patted Lissa’s arm, possessively. “Of a good family, perhaps? I have been so worried for your prospects, and at your age…”

*Oh, gods.* “Mother,” Lissa said firmly. “I’m not going to marry. I’m an officer, all right? I have responsibilities. Duties to the kingdom.”

Lady Treesa’s eyes lit. “Oh, but it’s not so rare at all for an officer to be married! Your father said–”

“It’s different.” It was true than many of her colleagues were married; there was an old saying. *Lieutenants mustn’t marry, captains may, majors ought, generals must.* There were men under her command with wives and babies at home – and that was the distinction, wasn’t it? They weren’t the ones pushing out squalling infants. And with their Guard-pay, their wives could afford help at home. A poor recompense for a father missing his daughter’s first steps, she thought, but it was what it was.

“I don’t see why–”

“It. Just. Is.” Lissa forced the words out through gritted teeth. Made herself take a deep breath, lower her shoulders, and soften her expression. *Why can she always get under my skin like this?* “I’m sorry, Mother. It’s just… I’m not looking to marry. Ever.” Which should have been obvious five years ago. It was clear that Treesa thought an unmarried woman of thirty was doomed to be a bitter old maid forever. *Maybe because she was married and pregnant with me by nineteen.* What a strange thought. Treesa had left her familial home at the same age Lissa had, but for such a different reason.

Treesa just stared at her, eyelashes fluttering. Lissa caught a snippet of Withen’s voice, raised.

“–And that’s not even getting into the livestock tax–”

She hid a smirk. *Trust Van to get into an argument about treasury-budgets.* Judging by the way he held his shoulders, he wasn’t exactly comfortable either. Lissa thought it would have been a much better idea for them to switch places. She and Withen got along better with every promotion she was granted, and her brother had always been the apple of Treesa’s eye. Even if *he* wasn’t married either, or likely to be ever.

Treesa sipped her wine again, clearly trying to find her composure. Her voice, when she spoke again, was quiet. “All I want is for you to be happy, Lissa. I could wish…” She trailed off.

“I know, Mother.” Treesa really did mean well; that was the worst part. “Mother, listen… I am happy. Truly.” As happy as anyone could be, given what was going on down south. Or, well… *Be honest with yourself, girl. You might be happier with a war to fight.*

Blank, uncomprehending silver eyes. There was something unnerving about seeing the echoes of Vanyel’s features in her mother’s face. “But the danger,” Treesa breathed. “We’re afraid for you.”
Her nose wrinkled. “Besides which, it grieves me to think of you sleeping in a tent. In squalor. Fleas and rats.” She shuddered, delicately.

“Mother, my camp did not have fleas. Or rats.” Some of the others did, but Horn had always had enough facilities, and enough Gifted, to take preventative measures. Rats and fleas both were a disease-risk. “And officer’s tents are practically houses.” She could have had a room indoors, if she’d wanted; the mayor of Horn had made the offer regularly. She had always turned it down. “Mother, anyway, I’m quite safe, really. They start coddling you once you pass captain.”

Treesa fluttered her eyelashes again. “Don’t mind your old mother, then.” A note of bitterness in her voice, and she couldn’t quite hide the downwards twist of her lips.

Lissa shifted her weight in the chair, unsure what to say. “You’re not old at all,” she mumbled finally. *I mean, she isn’t, is she?* Not quite fifty, a decade younger than Father, though she wore her years with much less grace. All her pregnancies, six living children and several more stillbirths, miscarriages, and siblings dead in early infancy, couldn’t have helped.

Lissa hid a shiver. Thank the gods for the Healers’ tonics. She wasn’t likely ever to end up with child by mistake.

Treesa coloured slightly. “How kind of you.” She was silent for a moment.

*This is so awkward.* Lissa cast about her mind for common topics of interest. “I did manage to visit Haven briefly,” she tried.

“Oh!” Her mother’s eyes flashed again with pleasure. “Now, tell me, is it true that pink gowns are in fashion this year…”

As she tried her best to ramble off something vapid about the gown-styles she had noticed, Lissa had to admit that she had probably asked for this. She looked past Treesa, trying again to get Van’s attention. He would be able to rescue her – even now, somehow, he paid a lot more attention to clothing styles than she ever had – but Withen was keeping him thoroughly distracted. Her brother’s face was taking on the pinched look it always did when he was starting to get overwhelmed. Maybe he needed rescuing more than she did.

“Mother,” she said, “why don’t you ask Van? He was spending a lot more time at Court than I was, and you know he’s always had an eye for colours.”

A delighted, girlish giggle. “Oh! But I shouldn’t interrupt.” Treesa lowered her voice, conspiratorially. “Let them have their man time.”

*Trust me, that’s the last thing Van wants.* Not that she could say so out loud. “Of course, Mother,” she said instead. “Why don’t you tell me what’s in style here in the west?” And hope to god she didn’t fall asleep in her dessert-plate from sheer boredom.

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The boy stood on the street-corner, and he sang.

His name was Stefen, though he went by Stef. He was probably ten years old – he didn’t know, exactly, because he was an orphan. As far back as he could remember he had been with Berte, but he knew she wasn’t his mother. She was too old, for one. Sometimes, looking at her craggy face by
the moonlight, he thought she must be the oldest person in the world. Her wrinkles were like a map to someplace he had never been.

He had never been anywhere, really – no further than the river and the fishmonger’s stall, or the fruit-stand in the other direction. Vaguely he knew that he must live in a city, and elsewhere there were farms and villages and even other cities. Sometimes when Berte wasn’t looking, he would shimmy up the drainpipe by old Tatar’s pawn-shop and see how far he could go, jumping from one roof to the next. If he climbed to the top of the alehouse, the only two-story building he knew of, on clear days he could see all the way to the other side of the river. Sometimes he saw blots that might be cows, and he wondered if there were farms there. He thought he would like to go to a farm, someday. In the songs they sounded like peaceful places, with enough food to go around.

Today there wasn’t enough food, and he could feel his belly cramping, distantly through the music that filled him. It had been a rent-day and he had saved and scrimped and hidden coins when he could, because Berte couldn’t be trusted anymore these last two years. Not since she had started to buy dreamerie again. Lately she cuffed him, sometimes, if there weren’t enough coins in the hat to buy her dose from Tatar, who sold plenty of things that he didn’t show on his counter.

They still had a room, though, with a dry dirt floor and only a few cracks between the boards – in winter Berte sent him down to the river to bring back mud and cattail-fluff and block the drafts. Better than before, when he was small and they slept huddled together in Tatar’s doorway. Better than before he learned to open the door in his head, and sing so that people would listen.

But not so good as they had been for those few glorious months, when there was coin enough to buy good hot food from the street-sellers, and warm blankets and a new tunic that fit him, and for a little while Berte had been almost happy.

Now she was happy only when she drifted in her cloud of blue smoke, eyes looking at somewhere even further away than the other side of the river. On nights that there wasn’t enough for dreamerie, sometimes she bought rotgut liquor from the back door of the alehouse instead. And then she was angry in the morning, because her head ached, and sometimes she wanted to stay in her bedroll all day – and if he wanted to go out in time to claim their good spot, he needed to sing. Sing in the way he only did for her, to open the other door in his head and soothe her pain away into the music.

Sometimes he sang for her anyway, in the quiet chill of their little room, even though it made his head hurt too when he pushed too hard for too long – because she was his Berte, even if she wasn’t his mother. Because her joints hurt and she was tired and there was something wrong inside her head, and maybe-if-he-could-be-enough-somehow, she wouldn’t have to go away inside the blue smoke – and if she didn’t have to buy dreamerie anymore, there would be enough coin for good food again, and maybe a tunic that covered his arms. But it was never enough.

And so Stef sang on a street corner, and people stopped to listen. Tired, dusty people, and he knew half of their names, because when Berte sent him out to buy food he talked to them, and if you knew someone’s name there was a power in that. He could put a bit of their names into the songs, not in the words but in the music itself, and they would stop and maybe they would put a coin in Berte’s hat, or tear off a piece of the loaf they were taking home for their dinner.

He sang a song about a farm, that had a pond and a dog that barked and a dairy-maid with flowers in her hair. He imagined how the grass would be green and tall and the dog would be plump, not starved and bony like the half-wild mongrels in the streets near the fishmonger, and the dairy-made would be plump too – he imagined it, a little picture in his head, and he put that into the music as well.

There was a song about a war – he didn’t know all of the words, he had only half-overheard it from
a minstrel who had come to the alehouse once. He made up new words instead, and sang about a place called Sun’s Hill, imagining a hill that was shining and gold. He had never seen a soldier, but the song said they wore blue, and so he imagined their blue tunics made of velvet and their tall blue boots, and how they marched in rows, because that was what soldiers did. There was a man in white who reached across the world and held out his hand, and made a wall that the other soldiers couldn’t cross. Which was silly, but he sang it anyway, it wasn’t any sillier than the song about the fishmonger’s daughter with the talking dog.

When he stopped singing, his throat was dry, so he went to see if Berte had anything left in her waterskin.

A woman in red was watching him. She looked all prim-and-proper, not like someone who belonged there at all. Her robes were the brightest scarlet he had ever seen, even brighter than the berries by the river that looked so good but were poisonous to eat. Her face was clean and her boots were clean and she looked like someone who went home at night to a Great House with ten rooms and a privy indoors.

He tried to see if she had put any coins in the hat. She looked like someone who would have silvers, not just coppers. He could still feel her eyes watching him, so he looked up and smiled.

“Hi, lady! I’m Stefen.” He smiled. Ladies liked it when he smiled. He didn’t think she would want to shake his hand; her hands were white and clean and his were almost black with dust from climbing Tatar’s drainpipe. “D’you have a fav’rite song? I’d sing it.”

“I heard your last song.” Her voice was a rich voice, all proper and crisp, but there was music in it. There was music in her; he could see it in the way she moved. “Very good rendition of ‘The Ballad of Sun’s Hill’, if a little unique. I don’t remember the part about the tunics made of velvet. Who’s your mother, boy?”

“Don’t got no mama, m’norphan.” People gave more coins when he said he was an orphan, especially ladies. Maybe it would still work with ladies in fine clothes who ought not be here at all, and who might have silver coins in their pockets.

“I see.” She frowned. “Is she your grandmother?” She was pointing at Berte.

Berte straightened up, yawning. “Listen here, lady. Why all the questions?”

The woman in red only stood and looked at her. “Are you the boy’s grandmother?”

“No ma’am. Him’s a foundling. Took him in like me own babe.”

“I see.” The lady’s eyes flashed to Stefen’s ragged tunic, and her mouth made an expression like she had tasted a bad fruit. “How old are you, boy?”

He tried to stand very tall, and speak proper. “Ten, ma’am.”

“You don’t look ten.” She was frowning again. Stef tried not to fidget, even though she was making him nervous, she wasn’t acting normal-like and it was confusing and he didn’t like it.

Then she looked at him, and it was like she was trying to smile but it wasn’t real. She bent down a little on her heels, so her eyes were where his were. “Stefen, how would you feel about having a new home?”

He stared at her, not understanding.
She tried harder to smile. “With a bed of your own, and hot food three times a day, and lots of other children to be your friends. How does that sound?”

“Now wait a minute, lady!” Berte was pulling herself to her feet, wincing, and Stef almost sang for her but he wasn’t sure he wanted the lady in red to see. “You can’t take him! He’s mine.”

“You said yourself you are no relation of his.”

“I’ve cared for him like my own son, all his life!” Berte’s face was turning red, bits of spit flying. Stef tried not to flinch. She was angry at the lady in red, not him.

“Cared for him.” Again, the rich lady’s eyes went from his tunic to his bare feet, then back to his face. “He’s your livelihood, you mean. A voice and a Gift like that, singing on a street corner in the slums. The gods be damned.” She paused, and she seemed to be thinking. “I’ll give you five silvers for him.”

Greed flashed in Berte’s eyes. Then suspicion. “Why’s he worth that to you?”

“It’s not your business – but he’s very special. I’ll take him to a place with other children like him, where we can teach him.”

Stef didn’t move, but inside he was quaking. Don’t, please, don’t sell me. There were rumours, people said Berte had sold her own children, a long time ago. He hadn’t wanted to believe it. When people bought children, none of the things they wanted them for were good but some of them were worse.

Berte nodded, gulping. “And you’ll take good care of him?” Her voice cracked a little.

“Of course. We’ll see to it that he has everything he needs.” The rich lady reached into the pocket of her scarlet robes and pulled out a purse. She counted out five silver coins, and put them into Berte’s hand.

Berte came forwards and hugged Stefen, and even though she had just sold him, even though she had abandoned him to the woman in red for five silvers, he buried his head in her dress. His Berte.

Then the woman in red held out her hand. “Come with me, Stefen.”

He looked at her. “Where’re you taking me?”

“To the capital. You belong to Valdemar now.”

Who’s Valdemar? He didn’t dare ask. Some high lord, maybe, in one of the great houses. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. Maybe the woman in red was telling the truth, and he would have a bed of his own and hot food every day. He could serve any lord for that, he thought. He hoped this Valdemar wouldn’t be cruel.

Squaring his shoulders, Stef took the woman’s hand.

A few minutes later, they walked past the fruit seller’s stand, and crossed the big road. Carriages and people stopped for the woman in red. Then they were on the other side. Bigger houses, fine houses, and the streets were clear of beggars, though not of horse-turds.

He was further from home than he’d ever been before.
Chapter Two

“Princess Karis.” Randi bowed to her, politely, the formal bow of one state head to another. He used the Karsite honorific. “It’s a honour to meet again.”

“Mine is the honour, King Randale.” She spoke Valdemaran fairly well, though with an accent, imperfect vocabulary, and that odd Karsite tendency to leave the verb to the end of her sentences. “You would see us I hoped. Was not sure.”

“We weren’t going to turn you away. Come, sit.” He took her arm, and she followed him to the table that had been set in one of his official dining-rooms. The small one, laid out for six. Tantras, Jayesen, and Keiran were already seated. He wished that Savil and Vanyel were there was well – but they were enjoying their well-earned and badly needed leave, and he had decided against calling them back.

Karis sat, gracefully, and the man whom she’d introduced as her seneschal, called Alrich, sat as well. He was polite, but spoke little, probably because his Valdemaran was poor.

“Please, eat,” Randi said, trying to smile warmly at her. “I know it’s been a long, hard journey for you.” They had put up the rest of her ragtag party in the Palace guest suite set aside for foreign delegations, and he’d ordered a good meal provided for them as well.

“Thank you, King Randale. A prayer to Vkandis I say?”

“Of course.”

She bent her head, and murmured quietly in Karsite. He caught only a few phrases; ‘bless the soil’, ‘your light on the fields’, ‘that you provide’.

He poured wine for her, then waited until she had filled her plate, and took the opportunity to study her more closely. Tantras had already interviewed her, and obtained permission to briefly use a second-stage Truth Spell and confirm her identity. He would have known her anyway, he thought; she hadn’t changed as much as he’d expected in the last four years. A little leaner; a little harder. Savil had called her a sweet girl, once, but he wouldn’t have called this woman ‘sweet’.

There was a weariness in her eyes that he recognized. It was what he saw every day when he looked in the mirror. She wore her dignity like a shield, and he recognized that, too.

“So, Karis,” he said finally, after they had all taken a few bites. He dispensed with the honorific. “We both know that you would like to offer an alliance. I don’t think there’s any point wasting time getting to the point. How feasible is it really, to take back your kingdom? And what can you offer us in terms of resources?”

There was a flash of surprise in her dark eyes, and something like respect. She set down her fork, and politely mopped her lips with a napkin before speaking. “King Randale, speak of Vkandis’ will, but our religion you are not.”

“Call me Randi, please.”

“Randi. Good news I cannot give. No soldiers.” Her eyes met his steadily, without a hint of nerves or fear. “In Sunhame, was loyalty to my father. Within our army also. The priesthood no. And strong they are.” She shook her head slightly, a tendril of hair swaying. “But not as before.”
Because Van killed all their mages, he was tactful enough not to say. “The coup,” he said. “How did it happen, if so many people were loyal to your father?”

“Fear,” Karis said simply. “My father – ready he was not. Unhappy our priests were. With his leadership. Listen he did not. So I–” She stopped herself, lips moving silently, clearly trying to find a word. “Leave,” she finished, before correcting herself. “Left.”

He blinked. “You left Sunhame before the coup?”

“Yes.” She smiled slightly. “Or would not be here.”

I wonder if a tutor could help her with those speech patterns, he found himself thinking. He could understand her perfectly well, but if she had to give any kind of public address–

He caught onto the thought. Was he really thinking of doing this?

“Clever of you,” he said, trying to keep his mind on track. “I can’t imagine they wanted you to leave.”

“No.” Another hint of a smile. “By cover of night.” She took a sip of wine, set down the glass. “Reach you I hoped.”

So that had been her plan all along? A leap of faith – but brave. And she’d done, it, somehow. “How did you get out of Karse?” he said.

“Disguised as, what is word, as peasant,” she said – and for a moment, her whole body language changed – shoulders drooping, head bowed, eyes downcast. Then she looked up, with a real smile this time. “Girl in rags, no one looked.” She frowned. “Saw. No one saw.”

Good gods – she was clever, clearly planned ahead, and he could already tell she drew great loyalty from her people, at least those who had made it out with her. He found himself thinking already that if anyone could make this work, she could. And he could see himself coming to like her a great deal. Could even, in a different world, have imagined coming to love her–

But not this world. Not when he had Shavri, who would always be the center of his universe.

He could offer alliance without a state marriage, but it would be weaker. His own Council might not take it seriously unless they cemented it with that symbolic bond.

Was it fair to her?

He looked at her composed features, those steady eyes. Maybe not, but she would take it, he thought. She wanted her kingdom back, and if it furthered that goal… She would do it in a heartbeat, no matter the cost.

I have to tell her. She didn’t know he was lifebonded – gods, she didn’t know he had a child. Even if he could have kept it a secret from her, which was unlikely, that felt deeply wrong. She had to know what she was consenting to.

She looked back at him, waiting, her mouth still but the hint of a smile in her eyes.

“Let’s wait to talk about serious matters until after the dessert course,” he said, smiling. “In the meantime – tell me about the last four years.”
“The stud’s not the worst of it,” Withen said, slamming his mug of cider against the desk. “It’s the damned sheep!”

Vanyel was with his father in his private study. This promised to be the most stressful of the conversations he had promised people, and so he had elected to fit it in first, just after breakfast.

He tried to think back, wishing he’d read the letter more attentively. “This is in the southern pastures?” he said.

“Yes! I give them over to him, and the thrice-bedamned idiot goes and does something like this! Gods, what am I supposed to do?”

Vanyel sipped his own cider, and tried to choose his words carefully. “Father – you said you wanted to give Mekeal some experience in managing the estate?”

“Yes, damn it!”

“Maybe you ought to let him make some mistakes.”

His father looked blankly at him. “I can’t let him ruin our holdings!”

Vanyel hesitated. “Meke’s not stupid,” he said finally. Just a fathead – he didn’t say that part out loud. “He is stubborn. He just dug in his heels when you brought it up with him, didn’t he?”

“Yes, damn it!”

“Of course.” Withen fumed. “The damned fool doesn’t listen to a word I say anymore.”

And twelve years ago Mother complained he was your little shadow. He almost laughed at the irony of it. “You could let him figure it out,” he said finally. “He’s just trying his hand. If the sheep are as bad a business decision as you think, he’s going to notice in a season or two.”

Withen just blinked at him.

Vanyel took a deep breath. Center and ground. It was a massive effort to keep his posture relaxed and his face steady – he would rather be just about anywhere besides here, stuck in the middle. “He’s not stupid,” he said again. “You trained him. I’m sure you instilled some good sense.” Flattery, maybe that would work. “If you don’t get his back up about it, I think he’ll quietly go in with his tail between his legs and take the sheep out – and he’ll think harder next time he wants to switch things up just because he can.”

Withen seemed to chew on it for a while. “Might be you’re right,” he said finally. “He is stubborn.”

“And you know where he gets it from,” Vanyel risked.

Withen’s eyes widened slightly – and then he roared with laughter, slapping his knee. “I do at that!”

Vanyel laughed as well, and the tension eased a little, if not entirely.

“Listen, son,” his father said, laying both hands on the desk. “There’s another thing I wanted to talk about.”

Vanyel kept his face impassive even as his insides squirmed. If he tells me again not to bring any ‘friends’ home…

“I’m worried about our border,” Withen said quietly. “I realize why, of course, with the war – but
we’re stripped bare. I don’t like what we’ve been hearing out of Lineas and Baires, and right now all that’s standing between us and them is one understrength company at Deercreek, and your sister’s people. Who I’m sure are very good, but she only has sixty men! I’ve got more arsmen than that. And not a Herald in a hundred miles, except for you and your aunt.”

Vanyel frowned. “I thought they had someone at Deercreek.”

“Had. Pulled the boy out six months ago to go south – and he was a boy, nineteen if he was a day, and not one of your mages either.”

One of the cohort rushed into Whites during the war, Vanyel thought – sent out to some safer circuit to get some experience, then down to the Border as soon as he was conceivably ready. Probably before. I hope he’s still alive. The Death Bell had rung more than once in the last six months, though not as often as before, and usually it had been for someone he had never met.

“Son?” Withen said uncertainly.

Vanyel jerked his head up. “Sorry. Woolgathering.” He tried to smile.

“You’re thinking about the war.” It was a statement, not a question. “To tell the truth – you look like hell. Was it bad down there?”

“It was bad.” He didn’t know what else to say.

To his surprise, Withen reached out and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “You did right for us, son. Saved a lot of people.”

And killed even more. He flinched.

His father withdrew his hand. “I know. Never something you want to talk about after, is it?”

There was real sympathy in his voice. Oddly enough, that made it worse; Vanyel felt his throat tightening. Damn it, why can’t I keep ahold of myself here? Father had been an officer in the Guard before he inherited, he remembered. Ten years. In peacetime, of course – but maybe he did understand a little. The one thing he’s ever understood about me, he thought bitterly. How it feels to watch hundreds of my people die.

“You’re a little jumpy,” Withen said. “Noticed it at breakfast. Not so much as I’d expect, with you down there three years. Had some time to find your bearings?”

“Yes.” He hesitated. “I had help.” He wondered if Father had ever been to see a battlefield Mindhealer. Probably not. He’d be too damned proud.

“Ah. Smart. Figure someone like you could do a lot of damage.”

“That is definitely true.” He reached for his cider; for some reason, his throat felt very dry. “It was you who told the servants to stay out of my room?” he said after a moment. “If it was, thank you. I still might send someone through the wall if they had the bad luck to wake me out of a sound sleep.”

“Figured as much.” Withen smiled, and it only looked a little false. “And I’d rather not have to replace any walls. Or any servants.”

Vanyel forced a laugh. “I can agree. Though I see you’ve decided this place could benefit from a little interior redesign.” He had already visited the library, in the hopes of seeing whether his little hideaway was still there – it wasn’t, they had knocked out the back wall to enlarge the space. The
music-books and instruments he’d left there twelve years ago were gone. _I wonder who ended up with them._

Withen waved a hand. “That was Meke. First time I gave him his head – and I can’t say I like all of what he’s done with the place, but you’re right. Have to let him make his own mistakes, before it matters.”

They sat in awkward silence for a moment, while Vanyel tried to think of something to say.

“About the Border,” Withen said finally. “I know your King Randale can’t spare much—”

_His your King too._ “He’s aware of the situation,” Vanyel said quickly. “Listen – this is classified, so please don’t tell anyone, but we’ve got people over there. In Lineas. Heralds, undercover. Redirecting Lissa’s people was the most he could do for now, in terms of reinforcements, but if the situation does start to deteriorate, we’ll know about it. Worst case, Savil can Gate some more people in from Bakerston.” They’d talked briefly about it on the journey; she had been there before and had a Gate-terminus she could use. “And if I do hear anything, I’ll tell you immediately.”

Withen nodded, heavily. “Suppose that’s all I can ask, son.”

The second meeting of the day, with Mekeal, happened out on the grounds. They strolled through grass baked brown, in the direction of the little orchard where he’d once liked to go riding with Star. Vanyel hadn’t thought about his first horse in years. She had, in the end, only been a horse, and the least of the things he had lost that day – but it was still sad. She had been a comfort to him when he had so little else. Her sister, Goldie, was still Shavri’s favourite mount, and Jisa had been learning to ride on her as well.

If Mekeal noticed his subdued mood, he didn’t show it. He moved with energy – Vanyel, with his shorter legs, had to trot to keep up.

“So?” Meke said. “Did you have a look at him?”

The damned stud, he meant. “Yes.”

“And?”

He sighed. “Meke, I’m sorry to disappoint you, but he’s no more Shin’a’in than you are. I’ve _seen_ a Shin’a’in warsteed before, and they look nothing alike.”

“Really?” Meke looked crestfallen. “Are you sure? Could he be a halfbreed?”

“Conceivably.” Not really. “Or a cull, but honestly, I doubt it. For one, the Shin’a’in breed their horses to be very intelligent, and that beast is the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“He is at that.” Meke kicked a stick, sending it flying. “Suppose I was ripped off, then.” He looked downcast for a moment, then brightened. “Still! Even if he’s not really Shin’a’in, I think we’ve got some opportunities with him. Thought I’d breed him to some of the hunter-mares—”

“Why would you do that?” Vanyel said, a little irritably. “He’s stupid and vicious.”

“And he’s got the muscle to carry a man in armour, and all the will-to-fight you could ever want in a
warhorse. Van – we’re at war. And I don’t think the Karsites are all we’ve got to worry about. I don’t like what’s going on on our Border either.”

“You mean the business with Lineas and Baires?” Vanyel was surprised. He’d never known Mekeal to pay any attention to politics outside the holding. *Maybe he has grown up.*

“Not only that. You should come by the trophy-room sometime. Every year we’ve got more of those weird Pelagirs-beasties ending up in our woods. I don’t like it at all, Van. And, whatever’s coming, I’d like if we were a little more prepared.”

*Almost sensible.* Vanyel felt a smile come to his lips, unbidden. “That’s quite a good idea. Hmm. You could try with the hunter-mares, like you said, or even breed him with some of our plow-horse mares. They’ve got muscle as well, and they’re docile enough. Might nudge out some of that viciousness.”

“Hadn’t thought of that! You’re right. Will-to-fight is all good, but I can do without vicious.” He sighed. “Beast won’t let you get a saddle near him. You know how Father feels about that.”

Their father had always insisted that even his studs be broken to the saddle, and often enough rigged to a plow at harvest-time.

Mekeal walked in silence for a few paces, clearly deep in thought. Not an expression Vanyel had seen on his face before.

“How’s Roshya?” he said, casting about for another topic; he didn’t want to talk about the war or, gods help him, the sheep. “She seems to get along well with Mother.”

“She does!” Meke sighed happily. “She’s a good one, Van. A really good one. I’m a lucky man.” He glanced over. “Are you ever going to get married?”

“What?” Vanyel stumbled; it was the last question he had expected. “Heralds don’t get married, Meke.” *Not to mention all the other problems with that.*

“Oh.” His brother kicked a fallen apple, sending it arcing through the air. “Mother’d like to marry you off to Melenna,” he said after a moment. “Figured I should warn you.”

“What?” *I sound like an idiot,* he thought. “Gods! Who does she think she is?”

“Your mother.” Meke sounded a little smug.

There was that. “Melenna,” he said, a little disbelievingly. “Why Mother would ever think – that does explain why she won’t leave me alone.” Melenna’s flirting was even more insistent than he remembered.

“She is awfully pretty,” Meke said. “And she likes you. She probably wouldn’t mind if you were never home, either.”

“Meke, I don’t care. I have no interest in being married off to one of my mother’s maids!” He kicked a rotten apple as well, putting a bit of Fetching into it, and was very satisfied when it flew much higher than Meke’s and then exploded to bits in midair. “Thanks for the warning. Guess I’d better try to talk to her.” He’d been intending to make a visit to Mother’s bower; it would be a good opportunity.

“Why?” Meke said blankly.
“Because, believe it or not, I don’t like women chasing after me like I’m some prize stud.” His brother still looked blank. He sighed. “It’s not fair to her, if Mother’s keeping her hoping.”

Vanyel made his way to Lady Treesa’s solar a candlemark after lunch – he had intended to go sooner, but found that after the back-to-back conversations with Father and Mekeal, he was exhausted and shaken. He had gone to the kitchen early, to take lunch with the servants, and then taken a nap, or tried to – finally, after years, those long months on the Border had taught him how to sleep in the daytime, but he seemed to be losing the hang of it now that he wasn’t bone-tired all the time.

Treesa greeted him happily, and he kissed her hand. “Mother! You look younger every year.” Her eyes sparkled at the compliment, and for a moment it wasn’t quite so much of a lie.

He had brought his lute. “Will you play for us?” she twittered.

One of the fosterlings, a girl of about fourteen, looked at him with adoring eyes. “Could you play a song about the war? It’s all so exciting!”

He shook his head, trying to keep his composure. “My lady, I would rather play of things more suited to this fine company. Perhaps a love song?”

“Oh, would you?” Lady Treesa clasped her hands together. “Would you play ‘My Lady’s Eyes?’”

He hid his internal sigh, and smiled instead, bowing to her a little. “Anything to please you, dear lady.” Pure drivel, but it did have an interesting melody and fingerings.

Mother loved it when he went along with her Courtly graces, clumsy as they were; her eyes were still shining as she sat, waiting.

“My Lady's eyes are like the skies / A soft and sunlit blue / No other fair could half compare / In sweet midsummer hue…”

The roomful of girls and women listened in eager silence. Women – and one boy, a child of twelve or thirteen, craning to see past the other heads. Lanky, brown hair, a familiar jawline, familiar hazel eyes–

Medren. He had to be, he looked so much like Meke at that age, though smaller and thinner, and he had his mother’s eyes.

Vanyel finished the song, and set the lute down in his lap. He caught the boy’s eye, and smiled. “You must be Medren,” he said.

The boy stared at him, frozen like a rabbit under torchlight. Heads turned to face him.

Lady Treesa stood, took his arm, and pulled him gently over. “Medren,” she said, “meet your uncle Vanyel.”

Medren’s cheeks had gone a little pink. “It’s an honour,” he said, very quietly.

“Our Medren’s a delight!” Treesa burbled. “We missed you dearly, Van, but we haven’t needed to live without our minstrel – Medren here sings like an angel!”
The boy fidgeted. “I’m not really that good,” he said, eyes fixed on his shoes. “Not like you.”

“I’d love to hear you,” Vanyel said, quite sincerely. “Would you like to try my lute?” He held it out.

The moment of joy flashing through the child’s eyes was unmistakable, before he cast his eyes downward. “Oh, no, I couldn’t.”

“You could,” Vanyel said firmly, holding out the instrument. “Have you played before?” He suspected so; he had spotted an old lute piled on a cushion at the back of the room. It looked like something out of a pawn shop.

“A little.” Medren took the instrument with trembling fingers. Ran his hands over the strings, eyes closed.

Vanyel stood up, vacating his chair. “Here, sit.” He looked around, and found a cushion on the floor to settle onto.

“What should I play?” Medren said hesitantly, hands moving over the lute as he settled it in his lap.

Vanyel thought about it. Nothing as challenging as ‘My Lady’s Eyes’, he thought, he didn’t want to embarrass the boy – but he didn’t want to insult him either. “How about ‘Windrider Unchained’?”

Medren nodded, and closed his eyes, hands resting on the strings. And played. And sang.

*Windrider, fettered, imprisoned, and pinioned*

*Wing-clipped by magic, his power full drained,*

*Valdemar’s Heir is defeated and captive,*

*With his Companion by Darklord enchained.*

And Vanyel was there.

The boy’s voice wasn’t quite true on a few notes – it didn’t matter. He fumbled a few chords – it didn’t matter either. He sang, and Vanyel was there, eight hundred years ago, living that ancient story.

It took a moment, after Medren finished singing, for Vanyel to regain his senses. The rapt silence faded to whispers – he realized people were waiting for a response. From him. “Medren!” he said, holding up a hand just as the boy started to slip from the stool with disappointment in his face. “Medren, that was incredible.”

The boy’s eyes widened – and then narrowed. *He doesn’t believe me,* Vanyel thought. *Gods, he doesn’t know.*

He pulled himself to his feet. “Medren, you’re going to be a Bard!”

All around him, he heard the hiss of a dozen breaths sucked in. Medren just looked blankly at him.

“You have the Bardic Gift,” he said. *I would have given a leg for that, when I was your age. Both legs.* He pushed down the bitterness, the pointless jealousy.
“That’s impossible,” Medren breathed.

“No. It’s not.” He swallowed. “You have the Gift, and I’m damn well going to make sure you get the training.” He looked around. “Treesa? What schooling has he had?”

She was looking at him with bafflement. “I have him with the same tutors as Meke’s littles.”

So he was received the same education as the trueborn heirs? Not useless, but not what he needed, either. “Melenna?” he said.

She came forwards. He had the distant thought that she probably was very pretty, for a woman, with her soft, curling hair and those enormous hazel eyes, echoed in her son’s face. “Melenna, listen,” he said. “Mother, you listen as well. Medren is Gifted. They’ll give him a place in the Bardic Collegium in a heartbeat. On scholarship, I’m sure, so you don’t need to worry about fees.” And I’ll pay if not. He still had a dozen unopened stipend-packets, hastily shoved into his saddlebags while he packed; there hadn’t been much to spend it on during the war.

Treesa’s cheeks were flushed. She raised a hand. “No need. We would provide for it, of course. Anything for our Medren. He’s part of the family, after all.”

Well, yes and no. Though it seemed like Treesa really had treated the bastard-born boy well.

“Melenna,” he said again. “Is this all right with you? Medren, you’ll have to go away to Haven.”

Melenna’s eyes were glowing. Vanyel hadn’t seen anyone so incandescently happy since Shavri, when she told him she was pregnant with Jisa – and it did bring a lump to his throat. “I must be dreaming,” she said. “My Medren… You’re not kidding with us?”

“Now why would I do that?” Suddenly exhausted, he sat back down on his cushion. “Medren, I’d like to take you to see Father after this, so we can talk about when to send you.” He would need an escort. Maybe with the harvest-taxes? Three weeks more wouldn’t set back his training too much, and it would give him time to get used to the idea – and say goodbye to his mother. “And, Melenna, I’ll want to talk to you as well.” As good an excuse as any to bring up this supposed marriage plot. “In the meantime – Medren, I’d love to hear another song. Do you know anything else from the Windrider Cycle?”

Medren hesitated, then sat again, picking up the lute. He took a deep breath, seeming to steady himself, then launched into the opening chords of ‘Sun and Shadow.’

What has touched me reaching deep?

Piercing my ensorcelled sleep

Darkling lady do you weep?

What is the cause of your grieving

Why do tears of balm and bane

Bathe my heart in bitter rain

What is this longing? Why this pain?
Vanyel let his hair fall across his face, hiding the tears that sprang to his eyes. It was a long time since he’d heard that song sung with the Bardic Gift, and the grief felt too raw, too close. It wasn’t just what Medren was putting into the song, though the depths of feeling surprised him, coming from a twelve-year-old. The echoes in his mind were personal.

Oh, ‘Lendel…

Vanyel spoke to Melenna first, after promising Medren he would meet him after supper. It was already halfway through the afternoon, and his energy was fading.

Taking her arm, he escorted her to the ‘walk’ – a low stone porch, with a balustrade, that ran across the north side of the building. It was another of Grandfather’s inexplicable design choices; it overlooked the gardens, in theory, but the view was mostly screened off by a row of cypresses he’d planted below the railing, and it could only be accessed via the linen storeroom. Hardly anyone used it, unless they wanted to be alone, so it was as good a place for a private conversation as any.

Vanyel’s stomach was in knots – this promised to be as difficult a conversation as any he’d faced today. He hadn’t missed the flare of hope in Melenna’s eyes, both when he said he wanted to speak to her, and when he met her outside the solar.

:You could be less gallant: Yfandes sent. :What’s she supposed to think, when you’re being such a perfect gentleman to her?:

:What, and you want me to be rude?:

A mental sigh. :Just…consider it from her perspective, all right? This isn’t easy for her either:

He closed the door of the linen storeroom behind them, and went to the railing. Melenna joined him, eyes fixed ahead, her colour high.

“Melenna,” he said. He ought to look her in the eye, but he couldn’t manage it. “Melenna, I don’t know how to say this, but… I know my mother would like us to marry. She’s been telling you to… well, get my attention. Hasn’t she?”

If she was surprised as his words, she hid it well. She only nodded, eyes downcast. “Yes,” she said. Then she looked up. “There’s no hope, is there?” she said quietly. “For you and me.”

“I’m afraid not.” He looked away, staring at a clump of cypress needles. “I’m sure you’ve heard what people say about me.”

“That you’re fey.” Oddly, there was no hint of disgust or judgement in her voice. “You prefer men. I… I wouldn’t mind, truly. If you had other lovers.”

“Well, I would.” He forced himself to look at her. “That’s no way to treat a wife. And you would mind, eventually. I’ve met men who did just that.” Slept with one of them, though after that experience he had decided to avoid married men. “It never goes well. Even if both people thought
they could make it work.”

She bit her lip. “It would make your mother so happy,” she said, very softly.

“It would.” He sighed. “You care about her a great deal, don’t you?”

“I do.” Melenna tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear. “She’s been very kind to me. And to Medren.”

He nodded. *I’m sorry, Mother, that I can’t be what you want.* “Heralds don’t tend to marry, anyway,” he said. “Haven’t got time. It’s not about you, all right? You’re a lovely person and you’ll make a very good wife to someone. Who isn’t me.”

He had been half expecting her to cry. A little to his surprise, she only smiled, wanly. “It’s what I expected. Your mother did try to raise my hopes…but it’s not so fair to you either, is it?”

He said nothing.

She took a deep breath. “Could you do one thing for me? When you’re in Haven, can you…can you keep an eye on my Medren? Sort of be his mentor? He’s a good lad, but he acts older than he is. Could end up in a crowd too fast for him.”

“Oh of course.” He tried to smile. Not that he had time, but he would find a way; it was the least he could do. “He’s my nephew. I’ll look out for him.”

“You’re a good man.” She looked down at her feet.

“Thank you for understanding, Melenna.” This could have been so much harder. He could feel a bit of gratitude for her, for that.

Several candlemarks later, he stood outside his father’s study, Medren in tow. He wasn’t especially looking forwards to this, especially not after another loud, exhausting, and stressful family meal – but afterwards, he promised himself, he could hide in his room for the rest of the evening.

:*You need to contact Tran:* Yfandes reminded him. *Shouldn’t put it off much longer:*

He sighed. There was that. And he’d probably have to fill Savil in, after. At least she wasn’t so tiring to be around.

He knocked. “Come in,” he heard his father’s voice.

Opening the door, he nudged Medren through ahead of him. “Father, I need to talk to you.”

Withen’s eyes flashed to him, then to Medren, then back again – and Vanyel didn’t need Thoughtsensing to guess at the assumption he was making. *Damn it, Father, just because I’m shaych doesn’t mean I go after children!* He tried to push down the hurt.

“Father, Medren has the Bardic Gift. You know what that is, right?”

His father looked blank.

“It means that someday, he could play at Court in front of the King. If he gets the training he needs,
now. With his Gift and his talent, he’s guaranteed a place at the Bardic Collegium. I can cover his fees if they don’t offer a scholarship.” Mother might have said she would pay happily, but Father was always tighter with finances. “But I’d like to send him to Haven as soon as you can spare an escort.”

Father just blinked at him for a moment. “Gifted,” he said. “Meke’s boy, Gifted.” He rubbed at his eyes, as though he didn’t quite believe he wasn’t dreaming. “Well. I suppose we’ll have to send him – and don’t worry about the fees.”

Medren’s eyes lit up and he surged forwards. “Thank you, Lord Ashkevron, thank you, thank you–”

Withen waved him off gruffly. “It’s the least we can do for you, lad.”

Medren looked ready to explode with sheer joy. “Why don’t you go tell your mother?” Vanyel suggested gently. With a grin, Medren dashed away.

Vanyel closed the door after him. “Father,” he said. “We have to talk.”

Silence.

He took a deep breath; his stomach was already in knots. “I would like you to please stop making certain assumptions,” he said, and it was an effort to keep his voice level.

Withen just looked at him.

“I know what you were thinking, when I came in here!” Vanyel clasped his hands behind his back, to hide that he was shaking. “Listen – I may be shaych, but that doesn’t mean I go after children! I’m a Herald, damn it. Why do you think I’m some kind of monster?”

Withen’s face was going red. “You could abuse your position–” he started.

“And I wouldn’t! Heralds don’t, all right? Yfandes would kick me from here to Haven, for one thing – and that’s assuming there was even any temptation for me to resist, which there isn’t because he’s a child! Damn it, Father. You’ve got a position of authority, too – would you use that to chase after, oh, Mother’s little chambermaid?”

Father’s nose wrinkled. “Why would I do that?”

“Exactly. Why? You like women,” and I know you’ve had plenty of liaisons outside the marriage bed, he thought but didn’t say, “but that doesn’t mean you want to bed little girls! Why would you think I’m any different?”

There was a vein pulsing in Withen’s forehead now. He would be angry, Vanyel thought, if he’d had space for anything other than embarrassment.

“What did I do?” he said finally, eyes lowered. “What did I do wrong?”

Like a knife through the heart. “Nothing! Everything! I don’t know!” Vanyel flung up his hands. “I don’t know why, but I can’t help it, all right? I’ve given up asking. You know – if I could change it I probably would because it’s damned inconvenient!” He lowered his hands, trembling. “Father…why do you have to make it harder than it already is?”

There was nothing but confusion in Withen’s face. He opened his mouth, then closed it.

Vanyel folded his arms over his stomach, which was churning. “Father – if it makes you feel any
better, I swear to you on my honour as a Herald that I – that I won’t do anything with anyone while I’m here. Ever. All right? I promise.”

Father’s uncomprehending eyes were the only answer.

Vanyel turned away before he lost control of his face. He yanked the door open, not quite slamming it behind him, and marched down the hall as fast as he could.

On his way back to his rooms, he ran into Father Leren. Almost literally – the man had clearly been waiting for him, in the corridor just outside his room.

He pulled himself up short just in time to avoid colliding with him. “Father Leren,” he said, forcing his voice to stay level.

The priest nodded to him, a sly smile playing about his lips. “Herald Vanyel. So…good, to have you home.” The pause was pointed.

This isn't home. He kept those words to himself. “It’s very good to be back,” he said politely. Damn it, why did he have to find me now?

It felt like the worst time. His throat was tight and aching with the effort of holding back tears, but he wasn’t about to give Leren the satisfaction of losing his composure.

“I’m sure.” Leren frowned. “You were not at the morning service.”

Vanyel shrugged, trying to keep the gesture casual even though his shoulders felt knotted with tension. “I was sleeping. I have a lot of sleep to catch up on.” To tell the truth, he had forgotten there even was a morning service. Treesa probably insisted on it; she had always liked the trappings of religion, even though she disliked Leren himself.

“He was sleeping…alone?”

Actually, yes. This was the last conversation he wanted to have right now. But it didn’t seem he was going to be able to avoid it – and maybe he could throw a little of the awkwardness back onto the man himself.

“Of course,” he said, an edge in his voice. “Since, after all, I did promise my father I wouldn’t engage in any, well, activities. That might make him uncomfortable. I am sure you approve, Leren.” He deliberately omitted the honorific.

The priest took a half-step back, confusion in his eyes.

“And, besides,” Vanyel went on icily, “I am here for some badly needed rest. Company would hardly be restful, would it?” He paused, then nodded, dismissive. “A good day to you, Father,” he said, and brushed past.

Finally, in the safety of his room, he gave in and let himself weep. Just for a moment. :’Fandes, why do I let him get under my skin like that?: He wasn’t sure if he meant Father, or Leren. Mostly Father.

:I’m sorry, love:
He curled up on top of the covers, hugging himself, trying to calm his racing heart. *Damn it, and I still have to contact Tran.* He just wanted the day to be over.

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Savil, at Vanyel’s summons, had gone out to the east pasture where Lissa’s troops were camped and retrieved her niece. They both stood in the doorway to Vanyel’s guest-room.

He was sitting on the bed, looking pale and shaken. “Come in,” he said. “Shut the door, please.”

Lissa did, and Savil reached for him with a Mindtouch. *Ke’chara, are you all right?:*

*:I look as pole-axed as I feel, then?:* Overtones of weariness, and pain, but he was keeping her mostly shielded out. *I’m fine:* “Sit down,” he said out loud.

Lissa gestured for Savil to take the only chair, then joined Vanyel on the side of the bed.

“I reached Tran,” her nephew said. “Told him about the disturbance in the forest – and he passed on some news of his own.” She saw him take a deep breath, swallowing. “Princess Karis of Karse survived the purges, and a week or so ago she arrived at the South Hardorn border-post. She’s in Haven now. They’re discussing an alliance-marriage. She thinks there are enough people in Karse still loyal to her family, and she wants to take her kingdom back from the priesthood. With our help.”

Savil felt the breath leave her in a gust. Like a punch to the stomach. Her first, pointless thought was: *why now?*

“Gods,” Lissa hissed.

“I know,” Vanyel said quietly. “This is the last thing I was expecting, too.”

Savil tried to find her balance. *Steady.* She remembered meeting the princess three years ago – and never would have thought she was tough enough to get out. Or gutsy enough to go right for Valdemar.

Poor Randi. Gods – poor Shavri. She didn’t see that they had any choice but to try for an alliance.

“I asked if we should go back,” Vanyel said. “Tran said to stay here. He’s worried about the situation in Lineas, too. Said that we should still consider ourselves on leave, we’ve earned it, but that keeping an eye on it would be appreciated.”

It made sense, and Savil had been intending to anyway.

“What does this mean for the war?” Lissa asked.

Vanyel shook his head. “It means, possibly, that we plan an invasion. In which case they are going to want me for it, and probably you as well. But not for a few months.” He sighed, heavily. “So let’s rest while we can.”
Stef sat on the side of the cot and tried not to fidget while the lady in green robes looked him over. She looked rich, too – plump, like she had meat and butter to eat every day.

“May I?” she said, holding out one of her soft white hands. He nodded, and she rested her fingers on his forehead. He felt something, a sort of tickle in his head.

She drew back. “Lynnell, I wouldn’t take him anywhere in this state. Certainly not a journey as far as Haven. The boy’s quite malnourished. Best give it a week or two of regular meals.”

Stef tried to follow the words. A long journey, then? They had already traveled further than he’d thought possible – the lady in red had retrieved a horse from a stable near some of the big, fine houses, and hefted him up to sit in front of her. He’d never seen a horse up close before, and he was frightened of the beast, but he’d tried not to show it. *Never show weakness.*

The rich lady, whose name was Lynnell, nodded. “Inconvenient, but I understand.”

“You’ve been giving him plain food?” the lady in green said. “Anything rich will make him ill, right now. I’d start with soup and bread, not too much meat at first. Small frequent meals. Let his stomach get used to it.”

The food had been nothing like plain, Stef thought. Bread still hot from the oven, with butter – he’d only tasted butter once or twice in his whole life, and it had been rancid. Soft, creamy cheese without a bit of mold it in, and an apple that didn’t even have worms. His stomach had hurt him afterwards, but it was worth it for food that tasted so good.

“Lots of milk will do him good,” the lady in green went on. “I dare say he was weaned too early – his bones are weak. And I reckon he is about ten, like he says, but his growth was stunted. He’ll always be small, but he should have a bit of a growth spurt once he’s got enough to eat. Large family?”

“He’s an orphan,” the rich lady said. “Found him begging on the street for some old woman who’d taken him in.”

She hadn’t been ‘some old woman’ – she’d been his Berte. Stef said nothing, though. He didn’t want to make the lady angry with him. So far she hadn’t seemed cruel, she hadn’t even hit him once, but then again he’d been trying very, very hard to please her.

Lynnell stood up. “Come with me, Stef. Let’s get you some supper, like the nice Healer says.”

He let her take his hand, and he followed her out of the big house into the sunlight. They crossed the garden, and he looked longingly at the big chestnut tree – he thought if he climbed it, he might be able to see a very long way.

They went back to the inn. Stef had never been to an inn before, and it wasn’t at all like what he’d pictured from songs, though it was hard to tell exactly what was different. They went into their room, and the rich lady pushed him down gently onto his bed. His own bed! It was like sleeping on a cloud. He wondered if Lord Valdemar’s manor-house would be as fine as this – maybe it would be finer, though it was hard to imagine, this was just an inn and he knew the houses of lords were like palaces. Maybe there would be carpets you sank into and gold leaf on the stairway-banisters, like in one song. Stef wondered what a banister was.

There was a tapestry on the wall; he looked curiously at it.

“So, boy,” the lady said. “Are you tired, or would you like another lesson?”
'Nother lesson, ma’am, please?” he said politely. Last night she had let him touch her lute! He didn’t know why she was teaching him. Maybe Lord Valdemar liked music. That wouldn’t be so bad, he thought, if all the lord wanted was for him to sing.

“You’re certainly eager to learn.” And she put her lute into his arms. It was too big for him, he had to struggle to get his arm around the neck so that his fingers could reach the frets.

For a few minutes she showed him where to put his fingers, and then how to pluck the strings so they rang clear as bells in the air. Sometimes it sounded good, pretty chords, and sometimes it was ugly and discordant – but even that was interesting, the way it tugged at his insides, a tension begging to be relieved.

After a little while, the lady took back her lute. “I’ll play a song now,” she said. “This one is about the war. It’s called ‘Demonsbane.’”

Stef wanted to ask more about the war, and if she had ever met a real soldier, but he wanted to hear the song too, so he folded his legs under him and listened.

*Along the road in Hardorn,*

*A place called Stony Tor*

*A fearful band of farmers*

*Flees Karsite border war*

*A frightened band of farmers,*

*Their children and their wives*

*Seek refuge from a tyrant who*

*Wants more than just their lives*

Her voice was like honey and it pulled on the inside of his head – and there were pictures in his mind! She could do what he did, he thought, she could open a door and push and show him things. Only glimpses, hazy, like a dream – there was a man dressed in white, with silver in his black hair even though his face was young, and somehow he looked familiar, though surely someone in such fine white clothes and boots would never have come near the tanner’s district between the fishmonger and the fruit-stand.

When the lady had finished, he leaned forwards. “Was it real?” he breathed.

She chucked. “It’s based on something that really happened, anyway. Bards do take their artistic license – but I’ve met Herald Vanyel, and he’s definitely real.”

Somehow that made Stef feel very strange. He’d never known someone who’d met a person out of a song! He thought about asking if Lord Valdemar knew this Herald Vanyel, but decided better of it. Berte had never liked it when he asked too many questions; he thought maybe the rich lady wouldn’t like it either.

“Stef,” the lady said, “why don’t you sing me a song now? Anything you know.”
He thought about it for a moment, he didn’t want to sing her something rude and offend her, and he chose the song about the fishmonger’s daughter and the dog that talked.

And he opened the door in his head, and *pushed*, and he put into the music everything he wanted the lady in red to think of him. She still confused him, but he thought she would like it if he was obedient and polite, like a properly-raised boy, and maybe she would also feel sorry for him that he was an orphan, so he slipped that into the music as well. He hoped she would keep being kind to him.
Chapter Three

“So what’s it like, being a Herald?” Medren said, diffidently.

They were riding side by side; Vanyel on Yfandes, Medren on his own horse, an aged bay gelding called Apple, apparently a gift from Treesa.

Vanyel glanced at him. “It’s complicated.” Where to even start?

They were about halfway to Forst Reach Village, and he still hadn’t told Medren where they were going. He wanted it to be a surprise. Melenna had given her permission instantly for him to take her son for an outing; she, at least, trusted him. *Father’s probably assuming the worst of me again,* he thought bitterly.

“We play a lot of roles,” he said finally. “Messengers, spies, information-gatherers, judges, peacekeepers… Most Heralds spend most of their time on circuit, and their job is to ride around their section, resolving legal disputes, supporting the Guard, and acting as representatives of the Crown. If there’s a war, we fight.” His voice sounded a little rote; this could have come straight out of one of Savil’s lessons back in k’Teva.

“I know that,” Medren said, a little impatiently. “I want to know what it’s like. What it feels like.” He chewed his lip for a moment. “It says in the stories that Heralds are good people – that you have to be good people, or else Companions won’t choose you. That you always do the right thing, even when it’s hard.”

*You don’t know the least of it.* Vanyel took a deep breath, pushing back thoughts of a frozen pass. It had been a while since his last dream with Leareth, and oddly he found he missed it. “It’s hard to describe what it’s like,” he said. “It’s… Well, I didn’t always care. I was a right arrogant little…prig, when I was your age.” He had almost said ‘bastard’, but given Medren’s parentage that was probably tactless. “It’s something… It comes with having Gifts, with having power. I’m the only one who can do certain things, and so – so I have to, because there are people who need me.”

“Oh,” Medren breathed. He was quiet for a moment. “I have a Gift too, right?” he said finally. “With the music. Does that mean I’ve got a duty to use it to help, too?”

Vanyel just blinked at him for a moment, surprised and impressed. “It is similar,” he said. “Bardic has a code of ethics, which you’ll learn all about. Bards do a lot of good for Valdemar.”

Medren nodded, solemnly, and looked thoughtful.

“Uncle Vanyel?” he said, a few minutes later.

“Yes, Medren?”

Medren looked down at his hands, loose on the reins. “They told me to stay away from you,” he said.

Vanyel managed not to sigh. “Because I’m shaych?” he said.

“Don’t know that word.” Medren picked at his thumbnail, not meeting Vanyel’s eyes. “Grandfather said you’re a pervert. But Mother said I could trust you, ‘cause you’re a Herald.”

*It shouldn’t still hurt. I shouldn’t care.* But he did. “Your mother’s right,” Vanyel said stiffly.
Medren nodded. “I… I’m sorry. That Grandfather’s like that. And I told him what Mother said, too. I…” He hesitated. “He says nice things about you too. Think he cares a lot. He was real worried, when you were down fighting the war—”

Vanyel held up a hand. “Stop.” Medren flinched a little. “Medren – don’t try to help with this, all right?” It’s my problem, not yours.

“All right.” Medren fidgeted with the reins. “I’m sorry.”

They rode on in silence.

Forst Reach Village was packed, bustling. A number of people called out to Vanyel, waving – he recognized the mayor, and the innkeeper.

He offered Medren a hand to dismount. The boy slid down easily enough – but then winced, rubbing at his shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” Vanyel said, concerned.

“Nothing.”

“That didn’t look like nothing to me.”

Medren shook her head. “Just weapons practice. It was Medren-as-pells again.”

It was Vanyel’s turn to wince, as his own arm suddenly ached in sympathy. Gods, he’s so like me. Medren wasn’t as small for his age as Vanyel had been, but he wasn’t as beefy as the trueborn cousins either. If Jervis was abusing him – Anger flared in his chest. He could ruin his chances for music, so easily.

“Does it happen often?” he said, forcing his voice to stay level.

A shrug. “Often enough. I don’t think Jervis likes me.” Medren pulled down the neckline of his shirt, showing an ugly, hand-sized bruise. Then he saw Vanyel’s expression. “Uncle Van – are you angry with me?”

Vanyel took a deep breath. “No, not at all.” Not with you. “I just wish old Jervis would pick on someone his own size.”

Medren smiled wanly. “It’s not as bad as all that. I bruise easy. Radeval took a hit just as hard and there’s barely a mark on him.”

Still. I don’t know what to do about this, Vanyel thought bitterly. He longed to march off and confront Jervis, but the man might just take out his injured pride on Medren. At least the lad would only be here for a few more weeks… “Can you avoid weapons practice?”

“Once or twice. Not forever, they’ll catch me.”

Vanyel sighed. “Well… Do what you can to stay out of his sight. It’s only a few more weeks. And I’ll think on whether there’s anything else we can do.”

They tied up Medren’s horse at the edge of the fair, by a water-trough, and Vanyel gave the boy
watching it a copper, then tightened his shields against the onslaught of surface thoughts and led the way through the crowd. He wished he could shield out the cacophony of noise as well; people were talking loudly, and a minstrel was singing very badly. He saw Medren grimace as well.

He had asked around earlier, and he knew their destination. Looking around, he saw the name emblazoned on a wagon, and forged through the crowd, pulling Medren in his wake; he’d worn Whites today, and people moved out of the way for him.

An elderly man in a leather apron sat on a rickety three-legged stool outside the wagon, carving something. When he saw the two of them, he set down the knife and stood.

“I’m looking for Master Dawson,” Vanyel said politely.

“You’re looking at him. Welcome, Herald.” The man brushed wood-shavings from his apron. He looked friendly, in a preoccupied way – round-faced, with squinting grey-green eyes, he reminded Vanyel of an older, plumper Andrel.

“I understand you sell musical instruments?” he said – and hid a smile as Medren’s face lit up.

“I do, I do. Come in, please.” And he ushered them up the ramp of planks into the dim-lit interior, lined with shelves. Master Dawson took down an instrument. “Why don’t you try this lady here?”

Vanyel held it for a moment, testing the action on the neck, then passed it to Medren, who held it like a newborn baby. After a moment just staring in awe, he perched on the bench provided and got it settled, playing a few chords, humming under his breath.

It was certainly better than his pawnshop lute, Vanyel thought, but nothing special. “Let’s try another,” he said eventually.

Medren tried several different lutes, his smile ready to split his face the entire time. Vanyel shook his head.

“These are all very nice, Master Dawson, but they’re student lutes. No voice of their own. I was hoping for something a little less ordinary.”

He expected disappointment, or argument – but Master Dawson only nodded. “Thought you had the ear,” he said, looking satisfied. “There’s a few more I don’t leave out. A minute.”

He opened a cupboard-door and fished around, emerging with two more lutes. “I’d try this one first,” he said. “Easy action, and harmonics all up and down. It’ll grow with the lad. Other one’s lower on the harmonics, he’d have to grow into it. Though he’s welcome to try.”

Medren took the new lute with trembling hands. “Uncle Van, you didn’t have to–”

“Medren, you’ll be playing this the next twenty years. It’s worth it.”

Medren played a few chords – and his eyes widened. The sound rang clear and true, echoing. He fiddled around a little more, and then launched into the opening measures of ‘Demonsbane.’

“Medren, can you not?” Vanyel snapped before he could stop himself. He felt his cheeks growing warm. “I’m sorry, just – not that song, please.”

“Sorry. Forgot.” Medren flashed a small smile. “Think it’s good though. Not like that awful drivel about Sun’s Hill that Lady Treesa always wants to hear.”
Vanyel tried very hard to push the image of Mother raptly listening to the very inaccurate tale of that battle out of his head, while Medren started to play ‘Windrider Unchained.’ It was a good instrument. Very good. It made him feel a little better that Medren had been languishing here, without the training he needed, for years while he put off visiting.

“Looking for an instrument of your own?” Master Dawson said. “You’re welcome to try this lady. Reckon she’d do real fine with your voice.”

“I’ve got a lute of my own, thank you.”

“Then mayhaps I could show you something else.” The old man returned the second lute to the cupboard, then bent to reach a lower shelf. He brought out two larger instruments, carefully. They looked like gitterns, to Vanyel, but – odd.

“Been trying some things,” the man said. “Take this lady here. Metal strings, like a harp, ’stead of gut.”

“Metal strings?” Vanyel took the offered instrument. “And – oh. This one has twelve. Must be a bitch to tune.”

“She is at that. Here, have a go.” And he passed Vanyel the instrument.

Vanyel waited until Medren had finished the song, and looked up expectantly, then plucked a string. It seemed to hang in the air forever – like a bell, like an angel in flight, pulsing with his heart. Medren’s mouth had dropped into a round O.

“You,” Vanyel said, “are an evil man, Master Dawson.” He held the instrument by the neck, and fished in his pocket, pulling out a few coppers. “Medren! Hand that back, and go find us something to drink, would you? I’m parched.”

Medren nodded and hopped up, offering the lute shyly to Master Dawson.

Once he had gone, Vanyel turned back to the man. “I hope you’re prepared to work your fingers to the bone, because I intend to take this thing back to Haven, and when Bard Breda hears…”

Master Dawson smirked. “Why’d you think I brought her out for you to try, Herald? Figured you’d do half my work for me.”

“I will at that. Now, tell me the bad news. How much do I owe you?” He had wanted an excuse to send Medren out before the came to prices – he had no intention of telling his nephew how much a good instrument really cost.

“Well, let’s see.” The man bustled around, folding down a tiny counter and pulling down a book of accounts. “What did you say your name was?”

He hesitated. “Vanyel.”


“–Stalker, Demonsbane, and Hero of Stony Tor,” Vanyel finished wearily, resisting the urge to cover his face with his hands.

“Imagine you get real tired of that,” Master Dawson said – with real sympathy, to his surprise. “I’m sorry. I, just – not every day a man meets someone he’s sung about, strolling up to his little wagon at
They’d been at Forst Reach a week, now, and Vanyel had managed to avoid Jervis the whole time. He couldn’t put it off forever, though, and it was childish to skulk around the corridors trying not to be seen – so one evening, after a restful enough day and a nap, he made his way to the salle.

He waited politely at the side until the armsmaster was done with the lesson, training some of the cousins around Vanyel’s age – Radeval caught his eye and smiled. As they trooped away, Jervis paced over to him. He nodded to the man, keeping his face impassive even though his stomach was in knots again.

“Vanyel,” the old mercenary said, nodding back. He didn’t look much different than he had twelve years ago, though he was older than Father and had to be pushing seventy; craggy-faced, powerfully built, the streaks of grey barely visible against his ash-blond hair. He was clearly still in excellent physical condition, and could keep up just fine with the cousins. *Hells, he can still flatten most of them.*

“Jervis. You wanted to see me?”

“Wanted to spar,” the man said gruffly. “See if you’re as good as they say you are.”

It was what he’d expected. And he was looking forwards to this too much. He wouldn’t have dared risk it before when he was still hair-triggered – with so much deep-buried anger and bitterness, he could easily have hurt the old man badly. Maybe killed him. He thought it would be safe now, though he’d have to watch his temper.

It would be so satisfying, he thought, to see the look in Jervis’ eyes when he couldn’t land a touch on him. Vanyel knew his skill; he had sparred regularly with Tantras for years, and drawn his sword more than once out on the Border. *I’m not a helpless child anymore.*

So why was there still fear, sitting heavy in his stomach, mixing with the anger?

“It would be my pleasure,” he said politely, drawing his sword. Jervis still wore full armour, from the lesson, and Vanyel had already put on the light armour he intended to wear. He hadn’t used any magical shielding – that would be cheating. Of course he could flatten Jervis with a thought. That wasn’t the point.

They crossed to the middle of the room. He found his stance and waited, expecting a head-on charge. But Jervis only watched, his eyes reminiscent of the mountain-lions Vanyel had seen in the hills near Terilee Crossing.

Finally, running out of patience, he attacked. Jervis moved quickly, parrying, but Vanyel had been expecting it – he spun, flicking his sword the other way, and landed a touch on the other man’s armour.

Jervis just stepped back, lowering his sword.

The pattern repeated. Every time he landed a hit – and some of them were hard – the man would drop entirely out of fighting-stance, shuffle his feet, and seem to think for a moment before he resumed. It was infuriating. Vanyel was landing a lot more strikes, though Jervis got the occasional
touch as well.

After what felt like half a candlemark of that, with sweat dripping into his eyes, Vanyel dropped the sword to his side. “What are you playing at?” he snarled. He wanted to shout a lot more things, but held back.

Jervis just bowed to him a little, with the hint of a smile. “I’ve seen what I wanted, boy.”

_I’m not a boy anymore._ He glared at him. “So we’re done?”

“For now. I’d like to spar again tomorrow.”

“Why? So you can taunt me me?” It felt hard to breathe, and not just because he was winded; the rage sat like a weight in his chest.

Jervis’ eyes flashed surprise. “No.”

“Then why, damn it?”

“Thought you’d be able to guess. You’re no fool.” Jervis pulled off his helm, shaking out his damp hair. “Join me for a drink?”

“What?” _You’re the last person I want to have a drink with, _he thought.

“You heard what I said.” Jervis crossed the room to the weapons-rack and started shedding his armour. “Reckon there’s some things we’ve got to say to each other. Don’t know about you, but there’s pain between us, and I for one need a bit of wine in me to face that.”

_I’ve got some things to say to you, that’s for sure._ Vanyel had been doing some lessons with Medren, hoping to give him a head start in the few weeks before he left with the harvest-tax convoy, and several more times now the boy had come in with large bruises, wincing when he moved. It made Vanyel sick to his stomach, and his own arm ached in sympathy every time he thought about it.

He let the anger simmer in his chest as he followed Jervis, not bothering to fight it down. The old armsmaster led him to his room, behind the salle, and took a moment to shove some clothing off his bed onto the floor before pointing Vanyel at the room’s only chair. He took a bottle of wine from a chest, and poured generous portions into two heavy-bottomed mugs, one of which he passed to Vanyel.

Who looked at it uncertainly. _I shouldn’t be drinking unwatered wine on an empty stomach._ He wasn’t used to it anymore.

It seemed Jervis had thought of that. He opened another box, and took out half a loaf of bread and a hunk of cheese. “Eat, boy,” he said gruffly. He took a knife from his belt and hacked off a chunk of the bread, then the cheese, and passed both to Vanyel.

They sat in awkward silence for a few minutes, while Jervis made good progress on his food and drink and Vanyel carefully sipped the wine. He did his best to eat, but it felt like there were snakes busy mating in his stomach. The light through the high window was starting to fade; Jervis stood up and lit a candle.

“So some things I should say,” the old mercenary said finally. “When you was a boy, back then…” His voice was quiet, level. “I weren’t real fair to you.” The reddening of his neck, and a tic in his jaw, were the only signs of how much the words cost him.
Thrown off balance, it took Vanyel a long moment to find any words. “No,” he said finally. “You weren’t.”

Jervis’ shoulders tightened. “Boy, did you ever think of it from my side?” he snapped out, his voice rising.

“Why should I do that?” Vanyel said mildly. “Is there something that makes it forgivable, that you broke my arm?”

He regretted the words a moment later, as Jervis surged to his feet, scowling. He was trying to apologize, and I just had to egg him on.

Jervis’ nostrils flared, but he said nothing, only took a slow breath and forced himself back to the stool.

The silence could have been cut with a knife.

“Your father was damn generous,” Jervis started finally, “giving me a place here. Reckon I did good by him, got him out of a tight spot or two in his Guard days, but – damn generous. Ain’t much work around for washed-up old mercenaries. So I owed him. Wasn’t easy, training them useless lumps to hold a sword by the right end, but I tried damn hard – and then you came along.”

Vanyel looked uncertainly at him.

“Your father figured you for fey from when you come out of the nursery. Told me to make a man of you, wouldn’t let up. Like he blamed me that you was a small’un. How fair d’you think that felt?”

Vanyel didn’t dignify that with a response; it was all he could do to keep his mouth shut and not shout back something that would make it worse.

How fair do you think it felt from my side, Jervis?

Jervis sighed, heavily. “I tried, boy. You the firstborn and all, n’us being on the Border, reckoned you’d end up in front of an attack – and with no more sense to defend yourself than a baby duckling. I do not send children to die!”

There was pain in his voice – and Vanyel had the thought that, once upon a time, this old man must have lost someone. Must have sent underprepared students into battle, out of necessity, knowing they were likely to die.

Arina… It brought a violent ache to his chest – and, oddly, a little more sympathy.

“Could see you weren’t suited to the fighting style,” Jervis went on, after a long pull from his wine. “Might as well teach a fish t’stand on its tail n’dance! But I tried, damn it – and then you went all stubborn on me, wouldn’t even try, and yer father wouldn’t stop pushing, and I – you made me so mad. Don’t tell me you wasn’t doing it on purpose.”

“You told Father I was cheating,” Vanyel said, forcing the words out past the tightness in his throat. “After I learned Lissa’s style and landed a touch on you. Why?”

A weary shrug. “Pride. Couldn’t see how you’d done it, so I went and convinced myself you’d cheated. Can’t deny you was impertinent, boy.”

“You broke my arm!”

Jervis lowered his eyes to the floor. “I lost my temper. Not proud of that, boy.” A long, strained pause, and Jervis avoided Vanyel’s eyes. “Did some thinking later. You turnin’ out a Herald and all
– n’I realized, never caught you in a lie. Figure I owe you an apology.”

*Twelve years too late.* Vanyel shook his head. Rubbed his arm, which was aching again. “I never got all the feeling back in my fingers.”

Jervis’ face clenched. “What more do you want, boy? Can’t take back the past.”

“No. You can’t.” Vanyel took a shuddered breath. *He’s trying to apologize* – and he knew he wasn’t exactly being graceful about accepting it.

“You can change the present,” he said finally, heavily. “Jervis… You’re training Medren – and you’re not gentle with him, I’ve seen the bruises. You ever heard him play? Ever thought you could ruin his chances just as easily?”

Jervis shifted his weight. “S’another thing I wanted to talk about. Boy’s not suited to my style any more n’you were. Figured, he’s bastard-born, and we got eight trueborn heirs n’counting. No place for him except as someone’s squire, n’he’s smart as a whip. Don’t see him being real satisfied with that. Brains like that, he’d do right well in the Guard. Make officer quick as that. So I been trying to figure out a style for him, but didn’t see no choice but to try it out on him.”

It made more sense than Vanyel had expected, but— “What about the music?” he said.

Jervis shook his head. “Got a tin ear, myself. Can’t tell if he’s any good at the plunking. Just in case, I been real careful o’ his hands. Real careful.” He glanced up at Vanyel. “Is he? Any good, I mean?”

Vanyel sighed. “He’s very talented, and he’s Bardic-Gifted. We’re sponsoring him to study at the Bardic Collegium in Haven.”

“Oh.” Jervis stared into the distance for a moment. “I’m glad.” And he really did look it, Vanyel thought. It was hard to hold onto the dregs of anger simmering in his chest. Remembering the tension in Jervis’ voice, when he spoke of sending children out to die.

*He’s playing me too.*

Maybe he ought to discuss Bardic ethics with the boy in a little more detail.

Moving on. “So that’s what you were playing at,” Vanyel said. The wine was starting to go to his head. “Trying to learn my style, weren’t you?”

“Yes.” Jervis scratched the back of his neck, face still red, but a small smile twitched at his lips. “Even if the boy’s off to Haven, reckon I’ll get another puny ‘un sometime. Could do better by ‘em. Old dog can’t learn too many tricks, but maybe I still got time for one.”

Vanyel, to his surprise, found himself smiling back. “Well, how about this? I’ll give you a proper lesson. Show you some of the moves properly. Ought to go faster than you figuring it out just from
“Appreciate it, lad.” Jervis drained the remainder of his wine, and reached for the bottle. Vanyel hesitated, then held out his cup as well.

“I told your father,” Jervis said, pouring. “That’d I’d been in the wrong, and that — that he was damned lucky to have you for a son. That I’d trust you with my life and my firstborn, and he’d be a fool not to.” He shook his head. “He’s proud of you, boy. Worried himself sick while you were out on the Border. Shoulda seen his face anytime he opened a letter from Haven – every time, he was terrified the news would be you was headed home in a box. Gave us more than a few scares, you did.”

Vanyel nodded. “Thank you.” Thinking about Father made his stomach roil again. He took another long drink.

“Too little too late, I know. Can’t take back the past, and I am sorry.” There was real sympathy in Jervis’ face. “Bad out there, weren’t it?”

“It was.” There was something obscurely painful about Jervis’ sympathy — but there was a relief in it, as well.

“Never worked with mages much,” Jervis said. “Must be odd, being what you are. You being the only Herald-Mage out there.”

“For over a year.” Vanyel shook his head. “I didn’t camp with the troops, mostly. Too much of a target if the Karsites knew where I was.”

“You was alone.” Jervis’ forehead creased. “Can’t hardly imagine it.”

“It wasn’t easy.” Vanyel took another drink. You’ve fought on a battlefield too, he thought. Jervis might really and truly understand — and, oddly, it felt good to talk about it. Maybe because he had drunk just enough to numb the raw edges of those memories. “I could tell you about the time…”

Vanyel had managed to avoid Father Leren ever since that first, awkward conversation — but, halfway from the guest wing to the stables, his head still aching a little from last night’s wine, he heard a silky, very unwelcome voice.

“Good afternoon, Herald Vanyel.”

“Good afternoon, Father.”

The priest stepped out from under the recessed doorway of the miniature temple — actually a perfect replica of the Great Temple to Astera of the Stars, in Haven. Leren had persuaded Withen to have it built shortly after he had taken over from the previous priest, when Vanyel was four. The justification was that their old chapel, buried in the heart of the keep, was now too small to fit all of the cousins on holy days. Though they had always managed before.

Vanyel hated it, and had ever since he first set foot inside — once, when he was five, and he had stubbornly refused to enter it again. It had driven Mother to distraction, he remembered. The temple had frightened him, and Leren had frightened him, and he hadn’t been sure why in either case. Built
from slabs of granite, the edifice somehow seemed confining, even though it was four times the size of the simple wood-panelled chapel.

“I have seen very little of you, Herald Vanyel,” the priest said. There was a sly, cold look in his eyes.

*That’s deliberate.* Vanyel kept his face impassive. “As I said, I have been resting.”

“Indeed.” Leren paused. “And yet – I am told you spend a great deal of time with young Medren. Alone. In your rooms.” His tone made it very clear what he was insinuating.

Vanyel, instead of scowling like he wanted to, or throwing something at the man, only stared coolly at him. “Medren. I’m not sure what you think you’re implying, but he’s a child. I’m just teaching him music.” His voice came out tighter than he’d meant. *Damn it, don’t let him see that he’s getting to you.* He forced himself to smile, thinly. “Even if I hadn’t promised my lord father, I do prefer adults.”

Leren’s eyes widened and he backed up a step.

Vanyel barely managed to restrain his bitter snort of laughter. *That isn’t what I meant to imply at all, but I’ll take it.* Maybe he could even ride it a little further. “Now, someone like you–”

The priest let out an alarmed squawk and backed away, mumbling something about incense to be mixed, then fled back into the dimness of the temple. Vanyel turned his back before he lost control of his face.

He felt mental laughter from Yfandes, like popping chestnuts. She knew he was on his way over, and she had evidently been listening in. *I won’t say you handled that perfectly, but it was rather entertaining:*

That brought a smile to his face. *I’m glad I could amuse you, love:* Though he probably hadn’t helped his case, overall. No advantage in reminding the priest he was a pervert. He sighed, letting his smile fade to a grimace. Damn it – he had barely thought about Father Leren in twelve years. Why could the man still get under his skin?

*I don’t like him.* Some part of him had distantly hoped that, now that he was an adult, he would be able to patch over his past enmity with the man, like he had with Jervis – but apparently not.

:*I don’t like him either:* Yfandes sent. *Can’t figure why, aside from the obvious that he’s an obnoxious ass – but your mother doesn’t like him either. Could be she’s on to something:*

He sent only a wordless acknowledgement. No point dwelling on it now.

“Don’t know what your King Randale’s up to,” Withen said, somewhat stiffly, his hand resting on the harvest-tax letter with Randi’s seal at the bottom. “Nearly double last year!”

Savil shifted her weight. She was in her brother’s study, and despite the rather good brandy he had offered her, she was still tense. *I never know how to handle him.* “Withen, you know taxes are a percentage,” she said. “You’ve just done very well this year.” She leaned over the paper. “And…are you sure you’re looking at the right line?”
He glared at her, a tic jumping in his jaw. *Damn, I put my foot in it,* she thought. He had always been sensitive about his difficulties with reading.

Nothing for it but to forge ahead, though. She reached for the paper, slid her finger down the list. “Look. We owe one-fifth of the grain yield. That’s the same as last year. Your wheat and barley harvest for this year was – wow, that’s not bad. Almost a hundred thousand bushels.” He must have increased how much farmland was devoted to those crops, she thought, or else found some truly spectacular way to increase the yield-per-acre. “So, twenty thousand bushels for the tax. Reasonable, right?”

He just peered suspiciously at her. “What about the livestock? What’s he doing asking for forty of my yearling cattle?”

“The livestock tax is up, that’s fair. Soldiers need to eat meat once in a while to stay healthy, you know.” She sighed. “Look there. You can pay in coin, if you’d prefer.”

He squinted at the neat text, copied by one of Randi’s ranks of scribes. “Fifty silvers per animal! That’s thievery!”

It did seem awfully high to her – but there had been some inflation of the Valdemaran currency. Unavoidable, during a war, and Randale had gone ahead with a re-minting and debasement of the currency as well, trying to give the treasury the resources they needed. With prices even higher close to the Border, goods were worth more to the Guard than coin. “It’s what one is worth to Randale,” she said.

“Well, it’s ridiculous.” He looked thoughtful, though, and paused to sip his drink. “Though, with what we’ll collect in dues for the fair...” He started.

“You’re thinking.” She smiled. “Either way, you can’t pretend this is a burden. Forst Reach is doing fine.” Certainly compared to the Border holdings. Half of them were abandoned, sending refugees fleeing northward. The rest were – well, even if the war were to end today, it would take years for southern Valdemar to recover.

“Pfah.” Withen flung down the papers. “Doesn’t mean it’s fair.”

“You want us to win the war, don’t you?” To her surprise, she was starting to relax a little. Even enjoy herself. *He’s as obnoxious as ever but I can stay even,* she thought.

Withen glared at her, a vein pulsing in his forehead. “Maybe your Randale could win the war without doubling my taxes if he’d lay off these foolish boondoggles!”

Savil smiled. She could guess exactly what he was referring to. “I think the new education laws are a very good thing – and you would too, if you’d think a moment. What’s the biggest problem with an uneducated population?”

“Don’t see what forcing farmer’s children to read and write’s going to help with anything!”

“Seriously, Withen. Think about it. I know that’s not easy for you, but try.” *Don’t be snide,* she reminded herself; it had slipped out before she could catch herself, and the flare of irritation in Withen’s eyes showed it wouldn’t help her case any. “Remember how bad it was when Elspeth died?” she went on. “Panic, rumours flying left and right – and that’s because, when people can’t read the official news for themselves, all they’ve got is rumour. Same with the war. An educated population means people who’ll think for themselves, and react proportionately to bad news. Not to mention better soldiers, when we do have to increase the Guard on short notice. Lot easier to train
recruits if you can hand them a textbook for the basics.”

“Are you addled, sister? Book-learning’s not what a soldier needs!”

*I’m enjoying this far too much*, she thought. “Not by itself, of course, but it’s a waste of time for an officer to lecture a room on basic tactics they could learn from a book. And we’ve always had a shortage of good potential officers. You know that from your days in the Guard – and you had to study tactics plenty, didn’t you?”

“He could have picked a better time!” Withen snorted, disgusted. “Did he fail to notice we’re at war?”

“I assure you, he considered it in depth – and I think it’s as good a time as any. This will strengthen our economy in the long run, and we need that.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it!”

“I’m sure you will.” Savil sipped her drink; it really was excellent. Let him stew on it, she thought. Change the subject, come back to it later. Withen never could back down in conversation, but he might quietly change his mind later. “How’s Meke training up?”

Withen snorted. “Drives me up the wall. Reckon I’d better let him make his mistakes now, though, while I can still tidy up after him.”

“Speaking as someone who’s taught a few dozen students – you’re right about that.” It was more sensible than she’d expected of him.

Withen tilted his glass from side to side, watching the golden liquor slosh. His expression was thoughtful. “He is learning to think ahead. Even if his plans aren’t worth shit, he does plan. Plenty worried about where Valdemar’s headed, with the war down south, and Lineas and Baires getting restive.” He looked up at her. “We both think there could be worse coming. What’s your view, from the capital?”

Savil looked down, trying to find the right words. *I wish I could warn you about Leareth*. Gods – it wasn’t fair to him, not to know what was coming. But she had her orders, and even if it had been up to her own judgement, she didn’t think she could trust him to react proportionally, or keep his mouth shut. “We’re worried,” was all she said.

“At least we’ve got Vanyel.” Gruff pride in his voice. “Would’ve lost the war without him, wouldn’t we?”

“Yes. Probably.”

Withen shifted in the chair, clearly uncomfortable, his cheeks reddening. “Never thought my son’d be the biggest hero in the kingdom. Done us proud, he has.”

What was she supposed to say?

Withen stared past her, and she didn’t think he was seeing the tapestry on the wall. “I did wrong by him,” he said, very quietly. “I know that. Don’t know what I could’ve done differently – but, gods, he’s been home twice in a decade, and I know that’s my fault.”

Savil felt her lips twisting, and forced them into repose. *I can think of a thing or two you could’ve done differently*. But the anger rising in her wasn’t going to help.
His eyes turned to her, almost plaintive. “Never meant to. I just – I wanted the best for him. And he’s still my son. Savil, d’you – do you think I can fix it, somehow?”

_I did not expect to be having this conversation._ She forced herself to meet her brother’s eyes. “I don’t know,” she said. “You made his life a lot more difficult than it had to be, gods, I’m not sure you even know how much.” She shook her head. “You could start by apologizing.”

Wide, uncomprehending eyes.

She shrugged, looking away. “Some things you can’t undo.” And she knew a thing or two about that, didn’t she? “You can’t go back in time, Withen. Treat him like the adult he is, and be civil to him, and maybe he’ll do the same back. Reckon that’s the best you can hope for.”

“Hey!” Lissa waved her hand, trying to get the barkeep’s attention. “Over here!”

Beside her, Vanyel winced. “Don’t need to shout, Liss,” he said in her ear.

“I kind of do!” The tavern, just outside of Forst Reach Village proper, was packed, and loud. Clearly no one had recognized them yet, which, right now, was exactly as she preferred it. Another day, she might prefer to go out in uniform, let the people of her hometown fawn, let it go to her head a little. Right now, the anonymity was like a balm. _Even I have to admit that too much of our family is exhausting._

Vanyel sidled closer to her. “Not exactly a nice crowd.”

It seemed fine to her. Certainly no rougher than a war-camp celebrating victory. And he had even less excuse to feel unsafe anywhere than she did.

Finally, the woman behind the bar sauntered over. She was a full head taller than Lissa, and twice as broad, curves over muscle. She smiled. “Miss Ashkevron.”

Lissa leaned in. “Didn’t realize you’d remember me, Taura. Keep it low, would you?”

“’Course, miss. You haven’t changed much.” The giantess smiled. “Ale?”

“And wine for my brother, please.” Vanyel was standing half behind her, clearly trying to keep his face out of sight.

“My pleasure.” Taura reached out and clapped her on the shoulder, hard enough that Lissa might have lost her balance if she hadn’t been ready. “You done real good by us, girl. Give the signal if you gotta start anything, right?”

“Of course.” Taura knew about her habits on leave; Lissa had come here nearly every visit home. She much preferred it over the main village tavern, where going unrecognized was impossible.

She smiled to herself. _Face it, girl, you like the rougher crowd._ Though, oddly, she didn’t feel so desperately in need of a good fight, not right now. Maybe because she’d found time to spar with Van for nearly a whole candlemark that morning, and then Jervis after. Maybe because she was settling down in her old age – the thought brought a smile to her face.

The barkeep passed over their mugs, and she brought her lips to the brimming ale and sipped the
foam from the top until it was no longer in danger of spilling over. Van took his wine, and rested one elbow on the bar.

Lissa leaned back, sipping her ale, enjoying just watching the crowd. Nearly all men, and enough of them young and attractive. A group was playing some kind of dice-game on one of the central tables, loudly and raucously. No one was eating; this wasn’t the kind of tavern where many people dared try the food.

“Liss?” Van almost had to shout in her ear. “Can we sit?” He was pointing at a just-vacated corner table.

“I suppose so.” She forged through the crowd, earning a few affronted looks as she bumped people out of the way, to which she responded with conspiratorial smiles and waggled eyebrows.

Vanyel sagged down with evident relief onto one of the stools, and Lissa perched on the other. It was a little quieter here, enough for conversation to be possible.

“What did Father want to talk to you about?” she said. She’d seen him leaving Withen’s study earlier that day.

“Border security again.” Vanyel shook his head. “Finally managed to ram through his head that it’s not that Randi doesn’t think it’s important, it’s that we really and truly can’t spare anyone from the south. Nudged him to start thinking creatively.”

“Oh?” She crossed her legs and took another pull from her ale.

“Well, he’s already doubled the number of armsmen at Forst Reach, in the last ten years. Got quite a good system for training up farmboys in weaponry and basic tactics – apparently Kaster and Deleran are teaching the recruits as well. Anyone who joins does see action sooner or later – bandits on the road, or Pelagirs-beasties coming in from the northwest. Hadn’t realized how bad it was.” A pause, and she saw the worry-line that appeared between his brows. “Gods. In any case, he’s got a problem, not enough men. And Randi has a different problem, not enough places to send green recruits for initial experience. Father’s idea – and I wish I could say it was my idea, but it really was his – anyway, his idea was that those problems could solve each other. He offered to take new Guard-recruits from all over and train them up, and to send experienced armsmen south in return. Reckons he can get more than enough volunteers. I already reached Tran, and he got Randi to agree to a tax-credit if Father really can make this work. So everyone’s happy. And Randi’s going to see if he can suggest the same thing to other Border landholdings.”

“Wow. That’s not a bad idea.” And Father had come up with it? “Sounds like he’s getting almost sensible. Must be the end times.”

Vanyel shivered, something dark crossing his face. Clearly a joke that had hit too close to home. “Father’s not stupid,” he said out loud. “He’s just… Gods, it’d be easier. If I could just think he was an idiot, and – and not care what he thought of me.”

Even through all the noise, Lissa could hear the bitterness in his voice. She had no idea what to say.

“How about you?” Vanyel said after the silence had stretched out. “Saw you with Mother. How did that go?”

She felt her shoulders tense, and forced them down, sipping from her mug while she thought about what to say. “About how you’d expect. She spent a candlemark nagging me relentlessly about everything under the sun. It’s like she thinks I’m still fourteen.”
“I’m sorry.” Vanyel hesitated, then reached out and patted her shoulder. “I know it’s hard when they disapprove.”

**It is hard.** She hadn’t put it in exactly those words, before, but that was it, wasn’t it? “It’s like she can’t see the real me,” she said, surprised by the harshness in her voice. “Can’t see that this is exactly the life I want – she just assumes I must be desperately unhappy, because I haven’t got a rich husband, or two dozen gowns, or a fine manor to live in. And – gods, I wish she wouldn’t keep trying to reassure me that I’ve ‘grown into my face’, or constantly tell me how to hide my ‘flaws’ with makeup. I know I’ll never be pretty, damn it. No point trying to make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear.” And she had thought it didn’t bother her anymore. Apparently she had been wrong. Gods, Van couldn’t possibly understand. **He’s always been ridiculously handsome.**

Vanyel looked at her, then away. “I’m sorry,” he said again. His voice was quiet and serious. “Ironic, isn’t it? Here we are, all grown up, and we still just wish they’d be proud of us.”

The words seemed to hang in the air between them. It was like he’d taken a nail and pinned down the wordless ache in her stomach.

“He is proud of you,” she said quietly. “Father, I mean.”

Vanyel said nothing.

Lissa drained her mug and stood up. “Van, finish your drink so I can get you another. And let’s not talk about family anymore.”

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**A frozen pass–**

“**Herald Vanyel.**”

“**Leareth.**” Vanyel nodded to him.

(It wasn’t the worst time for it, he thought. He was well rested enough, and only a little drunk.)

“I have heard news of your kingdom’s new education policy,” Leareth said. “Your doing, I imagine. I am pleased that you have the ear and the trust of your King, and I am interested to see where this will lead. A fascinating experiment.”

(It had been more Tantras and Randale’s plan than his, in the end, he thought but didn’t say. But it was true he had given Randi the idea.)

“Your Valdemar has always been an interesting experiment,” Leareth said. “Your Companions, and your Heralds.”

“Right. You told Taver eight hundred years ago that you were curious to see what would come of it.”

“I did.” Leareth nodded, a slight motion. “It has not been so transformative as I hoped. Your Companions are quite conservative – it seems that, mostly, they wish your Valdemar to remain the same. Stable, but very limiting. It seems they wish to keep the number of Heralds below one in five thousand of the total population.”
(He had to think about it a moment – but it was true, that was about the ratio. Surely the limiting factor was potential Heralds with Gifts – was it? Valdemar had a very low rate of Gifts compared to, say, Baires. But wasn’t that just chance? Leareth seemed to think it could somehow be deliberate. Was it something that could be changed?)

“They do not attempt to increase the pool of Gifted from which to choose,” Leareth went on. “In the Eastern Empire, one in a hundred are Mage-Gifted, though your odd Mind-Gifts are much rarer. In Valdemar, the rate is less than one in ten thousand. A hundredfold difference. Have you asked yourself why?”

(It was the logical next question. The rates were even higher in k’Treva, Vanyel thought – one in three, maybe even one in two. Though he doubted there were more than five or ten thousand Tayledras total, across all of their Vales. If Valdemar had an equal prevalence – gods, there could be hundreds of thousands of mages. It would change everything.)

Leareth smiled, and Vanyel thought he had guessed the direction of his thoughts. “The Eastern Empire has maintained a breeding-program for their mages for the last thousand years,” he said. “At the beginning, their population base was not so different from your Valdemar.”

Vanyel stared at him. “A breeding-program? How does that even work?”

A thin smile. “It is not as coercive as you might imagine. For the most part it has been implemented with tax-credits and other encouragements, for those families where one or both parents are Gifted.” He paused. “It seems that Valdemar does the opposite. Your Heralds do not often have children – which is understandable, your lives are busy and dangerous, but nonetheless those traits will be decreased in the population. Your Companions do nothing to discourage this, which leads me to believe that they wish it to be this way.”

(Vanyel had never thought of it that way. Breeding humans for particular traits, like horses! But why not? It was very apparent that Gifts ran in families – his own was an example. How many of his un-Gifted siblings and nephews carried the potential? He’d never thought to check. Certainly the Ashkevrons were doing their part in having a lot of children, and he’d even done his bit. I’ve probably fathered more children than any other Herald except in the royal family, he thought. It was certainly food for thought – and something he intended to ask Yfandes about.)

“I see you are thinking,” Leareth said. “I do not know why your Companions act in this way – but they are god-touched beings, and I do not trust the agenda of any god. You might do well to ask yourself what goals they work for, and why.”
Chapter Four

:Van!:
The faint, distant mental cry reached him through uneasy dreams. It took Vanyel a moment to realize that it was real, and not just another nightmare.

:Van!: Overtones of alarm, even fear.

Still only half awake, he tried to reach for that tenuous link, pouring in a little of his own strength to steady it. :Mardic?:

:Van, thank the gods. We've got an emergency over here:

:What?: He rolled over onto his back, rubbed at his eyes. The room was pitch-dark – it had to be the middle of the night.

:Too long to explain. You're at Forst Reach? How soon can you be here? We'd Gate you, but we don't have a terminus-location there:

Which was, he had to admit, a relief. This was well past Mardic’s usual Mindspeech range – he wouldn’t be able to sustain the contact for long. :Six candlemarks: he sent. :Stay safe:

:Thank you: Mardic dropped the link.

It was the first time he’d spoken to Mardic since Deerford – the first time, as far as he knew, that the other Herald had Mindtouched anyone but Donni. It hadn’t been too bad, at this distance, but he had felt the emptiness behind Mardic’s mindvoice, and the echoing ache it called in his chest.

Vanyel sat up, and on the third try was able to focus enough to send a mage-light to the ceiling. Squinting against the brightness, he swung his legs over the side of the bed. :'Fandes!: he sent.

:'Fandes, wake up: He felt her sleeping mind trying to push him away.

:'Fandes, it's an emergency:

:What?: She came awake, groggy. :Chosen, it’s the middle of the night!:

:I’d noticed: His head ached; he couldn’t have been asleep more than two candlemarks. :Mardic contacted me. Something’s wrong in Highjorune. Need to get there as soon as we can: This was just like another Border-alert. He wished it could have waited another few weeks.

:Anything more specific?:

:He couldn’t hold the link long enough. I’ll wake Savil:

:I’ll be ready:

Vanyel was already shedding his sleeping-robe. Clean Whites, did he have any… There, folded away in the cupboard. He dressed as fast as he could, fumbling with the ties. :Savil: he sent.

She woke more easily than he had – he knew that she slept lightly, in recent years. :Ke’chara?:

:Emergency. Highjorune. Riding in with ‘Fandes as fast as I can:

:Damn: He could feel her thinking, fast. :Should I come?: 
No. Stay here, you can be my relay-point. I’ll try to reach Tantras once I’m underway: His reserves were in better shape, enough that maybe he could pull it off from the saddle now. Though the King’s Own wouldn’t be open and receptive, not in the middle of the night – that would make it a lot harder.

I’ll alert Lissa and her people. Should I have them move as far as the Border?:

He tried to think. Not yet. Don’t have any idea what’s going on yet: Hesitated. If we need them, I’ll raise a Gate from there to the temple: Gods, and he hoped he wouldn’t have to.

Yfandes had somehow managed to find and wake the stableboy; she was already half tacked up when he reached her at a run. The sky was clear, and it was quite cold; frost crunched under his boots. The boy looked at him with confusion.

“Thank you,” he said, fishing in his pocket for a copper. “I’ll take it from here.”

A couple of minutes later, they were in motion. He had to dismount briefly to unlock and open the gates, and then Yfandes broke into a gallop.

I’m going to try for Tran: Vanyel had belted himself into the saddle. Which didn’t make it totally safe, going into trance while riding at this speed, but he had to risk it. Center and ground. Find a node – they weren’t strong, around here, but that one would do – and Reach…

Haven seemed even further away than it had the last time, and he could already feel the distant throb of a reaction-headache as he filtered through the cluster of Gifted minds at the heart of the Palace. Tran: No response; he wasn’t sure he’d even made contact with the man’s shields, it felt like reaching for something just past his fingertips. Tran! TRAN!:

…Van?: Sleepy confusion. What?:

Emergency in Highjorune. Riding there as fast as I can. Don’t know much, I’ll try to reach you once I’m there:

Oh: Confusion, shock. I’ll pass it on:

Thank you: He dropped it – and slumped over the pommel. Ow.

Yfandes gave him a few moments to recover. Feed me some node-energy?: she sent.

Need a minute: He massaged his temples, wincing, then took a moment to fasten his cloak properly around himself; the night air rushing past already had him half-frozen. All right:

They rode.

Vanyel saw the Border-post in the distance just before midnight, a candlemark sooner than he’d expected. Yfandes must have been pulling out all the stops, he thought. She slowed a little, and he gathered his strength and reached out with Thoughtsensing, checking for those minds near enough that they might see him. Not many. Center and ground. He built a simple Seeming, set to break the moment they were out of sight – not a true illusion, it wouldn’t hold up to close inspection and certainly not a counterspell, but the men at the post would see nothing but shadows, hear nothing that couldn’t be explained by the usual night sounds.
They passed within ten yards of a sentry, the pale blur of his face rushing past in the dark, and then the Border was behind them. Ahead there was only the road, empty, white in the moonlight.

Candlemarks later, they reached the city limits.

It was almost as dark as the small villages and towns they had passed on the way, but no city slept through the night. And I'm probably breaking their laws right now. Reluctantly, he asked Yfandes to stop.

:We’ll need a real illusion: Vanyel sent. Unfortunately. It still wasn’t one of his best skills. He extended his mage-sight, searching for a ley-line or node – and stopped.

The area was crawling with energy. Gods, the city lay at the intersection of five, no, seven lines of force, humming with the random, turbulent notes of power, flowing to meet a node at the center – a node that had to be stronger than anything outside a Tayledras Vale. He’d known, from Mardic and Donni’s reports, but it still shocked him. No wonder Baires wants this place.

He reached for one of the ley-lines; they had plenty of power to offer. Drawing the energy into himself – it was a shock against his mind, like leaping into an icy mountain stream, like eating sunlight and breathing rainbows – filtering it through his focus-stone, keying it to himself… Then he spun out the threads, weaving a true illusion, one layer after a time. Slowly, carefully, though he itched with impatience – illusions required the utmost concentration, and if he rushed the spell he would lose it.

When he was sure it was solid, he searched for Mardic’s mind again. And found him. :I'm almost here:

:We're at the Palace: Relief, and then Mardic dropped the connection. For which Vanyel was glad. At close range, the echoes of bleak, bottomless emptiness in his mindvoice were a lot clearer. Gods, Mardic… I'm sorry… He pushed down the echoing ache in his own chest. No time for grief now.

:I've reached Donni’s Rasha: Yfandes sent. Then a hint of confusion. :Jenna is with him – she’s Herald Lores'. And another Companion:

What? There shouldn’t have been any other Heralds in Lineas.

:He’s bonded. I can’t reach him – he’s locked into his Chosen’s mind: Her mindvoice felt a little frantic. :They’re terrified, both of them. Something’s wrong, Van, something’s terribly wrong–:

:Let’s just go:

They rode through the open city gates. Past those people still afoot even in the dead of night – street cleaners, beggars, whores, drunks, random others. The illusion held; none of them so much as glanced up. They rode cautiously; the streets were a random maze, buildings two and three storeys high, leaning on each other like tired sentries.

As they approached the heart of the city, the roads grew wider, lined with larger mansions. The air was bright with the light of torches and lanterns – and then they turned a corner into a huge square, and Yfandes picked up her pace to a canter. At the end of a broad avenue, with huge ornamental trees on either side, bearing lanterns from their branches, there was the Palace. Half fortress, half something out of a dream – a shape that reminded him of wings, like an enormous, charcoal-black
eagle guarding the main courtyard. Which was lit near as bright as day; there must have been a hundred lanterns, a profligate waste of fuel.

And below them, the strangest diorama he had seen in a long time.

Two dozen armed men stood to one side – uncertain, fidgeting. A figure in white; Herald Lores, he thought; and his Companion stood at his back. Hands on his hips, the man glared at another Companion – Rasha? – and a small, slight figure in a ragged cloak. It took Vanyel a moment to recognize Donni; he would have passed her on the streets without looking twice, taking her for one of the many beggars wandering the night.

Behind him, there was the third Companion, a stallion he didn’t recognize, curled up on the cobbles. Against him, two forms, one holding the other draped under his cloak. Vanyel saw Mardic’s face, pale in the lamplight, but of the second figure – the stallion’s Chosen, it had to be – he saw only a tangle of wavy blond hair. The boy, he thought it was a boy, had his head buried in Mardic’s chest.

Yfandes slowed to a halt, and Vanyel dropped the illusion. The Herald jumped back two paces, yelping.

“Herald Lores?” Vanyel said. He dismounted, hiding the wince at his aching thighs. “I would appreciate if you could explain to me what in all hells is going on.”

The Herald bristled at him. He was in middle age, with a pink, square face and pale hair receding from his shiny forehead. “And who are you, exactly?” he barked.

Vanyel drew himself up. “Herald Vanyel. Who they call Demonsbane, and Shadow Stalker.” He hated to abuse his ridiculous titles, but now seemed like the right time. “Second ranked Herald-Mage in the Circle.” Randi had tried to promote him past Savil, but he hadn’t let him. “Now explain.”

The man puffed out his chest. “The boy’s a murderer! And now this beggar-whore’s claiming she’s a Herald, and says he’s Chosen!”

Vanyel sighed. “I can tell you with full authority that Donni is most definitely a Herald, and so is Mardic.” :Yfandes? The blond boy – he’s definitely that Companion’s Chosen?:

:Most definitely: Her mindvoice was still strident, leaking distress. :Gods…they’re both so afraid…:

No wonder, if they had spent the last four or five candlemarks in this tense standoff. “And the boy is Chosen,” he said, “which you’d know if you had the brains to check with your own Companion!”

:Yfandes, why hasn’t he?:

A pause. :He’s not a strong Mindspeaker. Needs to be in trance to talk to her, I figure, and he’s been very distracted. She’s quite miffed:

Vanyel wasn’t sure where to go with that. He folded his arms. “Explain, please. Start at the beginning.”

Donni took a step forward. “Van, I think I’d best explain. Mardic and I were asleep – a big discharge of power in the Palace woke us. We got here as fast as we could.” Her eyes dropped to her feet. “Too late. Everyone’s dead in there. Tashir was the only survivor.”

Vanyel just blinked at her for a moment; it was too much at once. “Tashir,” he said blankly. “That’s Tashir? King Deveran’s son?”

“Yes.” Donni clasped her hands together. “So far as we can tell, the only surviving member of the
royal family. The only person alive in the Palace.” He felt her mind brush his. \textit{:He’s in a bad way. Shock, and – well, we don’t know what happened, but it’s awful in there:}

Vanyel folded his arms. “Lores, you think he killed everyone else? Hundreds of people? \textit{How?”}

The other Herald glared back at him. “He’s Gifted. Fetching. And that’s my Gift, I know what it can do—”

“It’s one of my Gifts too.” Vanyel stared him down. “You’re telling me an untrained boy killed his own family and several hundred servants with \textit{Fetching?”}

“Well, I can’t think what else would’ve done it!”

\textit{:Van: Donni’s mindvoice again. :Van, we can’t rule it out. Inside the Palace…well, everything’s torn to bits. It does look like Fetching gone out of control:}

Damn. Just when he thought things couldn’t get any more complicated. “We could just \textit{ask} him,” he pointed out. “Have you put him under Truth Spell?”

“Don’t know if he’s up for it,” Donni said quietly. “But worth a try.”

With Herald Lores’ eyes burning into his back, Vanyel walked past her, and knelt on the icy cobbles by Mardic’s side. “Tashir,” he said gently, resting a hand on the boy’s shoulder. Even under Mardic’s cloak, which he knew was warmer than its ragged appearance suggested, he was shivering hard. “Tashir, can you look at me a moment?”

\textit{:Van: Again, that indefinable emptiness as Mardic’s mind brushed his. :Should warn you:}

\textit{:Warn me of what?:}

\textit{:He looks disconcertingly like ‘Lendel: No emotion in his mindvoice. Then Mardic shifted, taking the boy’s shoulder. “Tashir, hey, my friend Van needs to ask you some questions. You can trust him, all right?”}

Unresisting, the boy let Mardic turn his face into the light.

Even forewarned, Vanyel flinched. \textit{You’re not Tylendel. I know you’re not.} After a few moments, the differences were apparent. Chin rounded rather than square, nose a little more snubbed, eyes a much darker brown, and he looked even younger than his sixteen years. ‘Lendel had always looked older than his age.

Still, it was hard to keep the memories back. Even through the distance of the block, it ached.

“Tashir,” he said, and it took every scrap of hard-won composure to keep his voice from shaking. The boy’s eyes were dazed, his lips bluish; he seemed hardly aware of his surroundings. \textit{What were they thinking, leaving him out here in the cold?} Vanyel spun a Tayledras weather-barrier around them – he could do it in seconds now, after all the practice on the Border – and summoned a little heat-spell to warm the air even faster. He laid his hand on the boy’s shoulder again, and worked his weak Healing, trying to clear out the shock. Tashir’s eyes grew a little clearer; he blinked, focusing on Vanyel’s face.

\textit{Gods.} His Empathy was picking up a lot more than he’d wanted. Sheer, sick terror.

He imagined a little cloud with eyes, and recited the rhyme nine times in his head, pushing a little of his power into it. The blue halo settled against the boy’s hair. Behind him, he heard Herald Lores
gasp, then his footsteps as he drew closer.

“Tashir,” he said. “Please tell us what happened, earlier tonight.”

The boy licked his lips, nervously, though his eyes stayed focused on Vanyel’s face. “I d-don’t remember.” His voice was toneless, through chattering teeth.

“What’s the last thing that you remember?” Vanyel said patiently.

“I – I was going to d-dinner.” Tashir’s voice trembled. “F-Father called me up, h-he said he h-had something to t-tell me… I d-don’t remember!” And he started to sob, turning to bury his face in Mardic’s side again.

“It’s all right,” Mardic said gently, squeezing his shoulder. “Tashir, no one’s going to hurt you. You’re safe.”

Vanyel nodded. “Tashir, we’re not blaming you. We’re just trying to understand what’s happening here.” It could just be shock, that he couldn’t remember – but it was possible in theory for magic, of the type used for compulsions, to block memories. :

:Don’t!: Alarm in Mardic’s mindvoice. :He reacts badly:

:What do you mean?:

:Something’s made him very sensitive to it. He panicked and things started flying around, when Donni tried. Took me half a candlemark to get him calmed down:

That was very odd. Tashir didn’t have the ‘feel’ of an active Mindspeaker; he shouldn’t even have been able to detect the Mindtouch.

Herald Lores spoke behind him. “I was there. Didn’t hear what the King said, but next thing I knew, they were both screaming at each other – and Deveran backhanded the lad to the floor.”

Vanyel turned to look at him. “Did that happen often?”

A hesitation. “Not in public.”

“What happened next?”

The Herald shook his head. “I got out of there fast. Deveran ordered us to leave, and I figured it wasn’t my business. Came out here, to Jenna. Heard them shouting, then it went quiet – and next thing I knew, there was the most awful sound. Tearing, and screaming. Once it quieted down I went in, and...” He swallowed, throat bobbing. “Everything shredded. Furniture, people. Blood everywhere. No one alive but him – found him curled up under a bench.”

Gods. I’ll have to go in there, Vanyel thought. He very, very much didn’t want to. “I see,” he said, trying to give his brain time to catch up.

Herald Lores drew himself up. “Then these two louts got here. I wanted to put him in gaol – they wouldn’t let me. Few candlemarks later the damned Companion arrived. If that’s really what it is at all. Could be a demon in disguise.”

Vanyel turned to look into the stallion’s blue eyes, and reached out hesitantly with his mind. Nothing but the usual clean, blue glow. “He’s a Companion,” he said shortly. “Demons don’t look anything like this – and do you think your own Companion, and Donni’s Rasha, would be standing here so
calm if it was a demon?"

Herald Lores beetled his brows, but said nothing.

Vanyel sighed. “So we don’t know what happened. I need to go in there, have a quick look, and then I ought to go into trance and pass this up-chain.” He straightened up. “Donni, Lores, come with me. Mardic, stay with him.” He crossed the weather-barrier, wincing as the cold air struck him again.

:Van: Donni sent as they walked towards the massive oak doors, currently shut. :Van, I think you need to get him out of here. Word’s gotten out, and the guards still think he killed everyone. Come morning there’s bound to be an angry mob coming after us:

Damn. He tried to think. The boy didn’t look in any shape to ride, and the entire city lay between them and the gates – would the population of Highjorune let them cross? He couldn’t risk it. He could try another illusion, but given how much magic he’d done in a short time, a true illusion might be more than he could manage. Even if he could pull it off, it wouldn’t be at all good for Tashir to ride for many candlemarks in the cold.

There was only one other option coming to mind. :I’ll Gate him back to Forst Reach: he sent. :After:

:Are you sure?: Overtones of concern.

:Don’t see I’ve got a choice: And he reached to open the heavy doors.

The stink of blood hit him first – coppery, familiar. He sent a mage-light flying through the gap, and winced, swallowing against the rising nausea. Tapestries had been torn from the walls, chairs smashed to kindling, and he didn’t see any people. Only bits of them.

He closed the door again. I’m by no means qualified to investigate this. “Herald Lores,” he said. “By my authority, I am sealing the Palace as a crime scene for later investigation. I’d like you to step to the other side of that archway, please, and take those guards with you.” It was high-handed, maybe – this wasn’t Valdemar, and wasn’t really under his jurisdiction – but if Mardic and Donni were right, there was no one left alive here to lead an investigation of their own.

The man stared blankly at him.

Vanyel swallowed a curse. “Herald Lores. I outrank you, and I am ordering you to leave the courtyard now.” He turned to Donni. “Cover me, I’m going to try to reach Tran.”

Closing his eyes, he sank to his knees and, this time, took a few moments to drop fully into trance. Reach for one of the ley-lines, to boost his Mindspeech again. Channels aching, he stretched out and out–

Sixty miles further from Haven, it was even harder than before, but Tran was ready, his mind open and easy to find.

:Van?:

:In Highjorune. Everyone in the Palace is dead. Place’s torn to shreds, don’t know what happened. Deveran’s son Tashir is the only survivor. Herald Lores thinks he did it with Fetching. Counterevidence, he was just Chosen. I’m sealing the area off with a mage-barrier and I’m going to Gate him out:

Tantras kept his shock well controlled, though it leaked along their tenuous link. :To Haven?:
A hesitation. :Leave Mardic and Donni on scene if you can. Godspeed, Van:

His head was throbbing as he released the connection and, with effort, stood up. “Alerted Tran,” he said wearily. “Herald Lores – I said out!”

As the man cleared the outer archway to the courtyard, Vanyel centered and grounded, then reached for the roiling node that, it appeared, lay right under the Palace itself.

–It was like diving into the sun. He lost himself for a moment, caught up in the eddies of power, before Yfandes reached out and grounded him. Looping the energy through mage-channels that already felt scorched and tender, he drew it into himself – and then flung it outwards.

When he opened his eyes, a shimmering mage-barrier stood between him and Lores. It would block anyone but him from crossing, as well as keeping out any magical probes or Mindspeech. With the full power of the node behind it, it ought to last a good long time.

He replenished the power he had used, filling his reserves to the brink, then broke his connection to the node.

“Donni,” he said, catching himself on the pommel of Yfandes’ saddle as he started to sway. “Find me something I can build a Gate on.” He could use the Palace doors, he supposed, but he badly wanted not to open them again. :Mardic, tell Tashir I’m taking him somewhere safe:

“Will this do?” Donni said, pointing at another ornamental archway, festooned with vines.

“Ought to.” Center and ground. He walked over to the arch and studied it. Good, solid stone. Plenty big enough; it would fit the Companions.

Behind him, Mardic was pulling Tashir gently to his feet. “Come this way,” he heard him say, voice soft. “It’ll be all right. My friend Van is bringing you to a safe place, and you can trust him…”

“Van?” Donni said. “If you hold it long enough, I can dart through and have a look. In case we need a Gate-terminus to Forst Reach.”

It was risky to Gate anywhere a person didn’t know well – if they spell failed, it usually killed the mage in question – but he nodded. “Before I cross,” he said. “Can’t promise I can hold it at all once I do.” He had never managed to cross one of his own Gates and stay conscious.

:Contact Savil: Yfandes prompted. :Have her meet us at the temple:

That was a good idea. He barely needed the energy of the ley-line to boost that far, though he tapped it anyway – he would need all of his reserves for the Gate.

:Savil?:

:Ke’chara?: She had been waiting for him, he thought.

:I’m Gating to the temple. Meet me there. I’ll explain after:

He felt her worry. :You’ll be unconscious after. Give me the highlights?:

Holding the link was starting to hurt. He gave her the same quick summary he had for Tran.

:Gods. I’ll be there. Be careful, please:
And then Mardic was at his shoulder, half-supporting Tashir, who had his other arm around his Companion’s neck.

“Donni,” he heard himself say. “You take Tashir through, and have your look around. I’ll come after you.”

Donni nodded. Tashir flinched away a little as she tried to take his arm, but then gave in, his face going blank and passive. Vanyel blinked. He’s scared of Donni. It made no sense. A lot more people ought to be scared of Donni, she was vicious with her daggers, but she didn’t exactly look intimidating. Mardic, with his scarred face and blind, milky eyes, was a far more frightening sight, but Tashir had seemed so much more comfortable with him.

He made himself look away from Tashir’s face. ‘Lendel… No time to think about it now. No time to think about blue-white fire pressed up against a Gate, the howling void torn out of his mind– Focus. “Mardic.” Vanyel turned to his friend. Started to bow – and then, throwing decorum aside, took a step forwards and hugged him. :I missed you:

Mardic stiffened for a moment, then put his own arms around Vanyel’s back and squeezed. He unshielded just a little, and a hundred thoughts and feelings moved between them, all the things there were no words for. I’m sorry, Vanyel thought – not quite putting it into Mindspeech. I’m so sorry that you had to go through this. If he’d chosen differently at Deerford –

No point ruminating on it now. It was in the past.

:Stay safe: he sent. :Let me key the mage-barrier to you two, so you can get in and out. Try not to cross too many times, it’ll weaken it:

He meshed shields with Mardic – another brush with that bottomless pain. Reached for the barrier with his mind, and matched it to Mardic’s shields as well, then released him. He went to Donni, shared a one-armed hug with her as well, and ‘added’ her.

Herald Lores was watching them through the barrier. He was pale, wide-eyed – clearly intimidated by the working of magic, and he had probably never seen a Gate before either.

“All right,” Vanyel said out loud. “Let’s do this.” He reached into his reserves, and began spinning threads of it into the doorway.

The Gate-energy was already burning at his sensitized channels. He ignored the pain. Focus. Build it up, slow, careful, one layer at a time… The doorway began to glow. He saw Tashir’s eyes widen.

Little tendrils of light flared out from the doorway, searching aimlessly. Vanyel gave them an image – the doorway of the little Temple to Astera on the Forst Reach grounds, the sights and sounds and smells. It had been used to build Gates before, which ought to make things easier.

He was no longer feeding the Gate – it was pulling from him, threatening to consume everything that he was made of, everything he had left–

A flare of light, and he sagged to his knees, overcome by the pain. I’m more drained than I realized…if I knew it would be this bad… As his vision halfway-cleared, he saw the blaze fade, the haze of the doorway clearing to reveal – not the small fountain that had been behind it, but the gardens, and Savil standing on the path.

Donni, unprompted, crossed the threshold, half-carrying Tashir, the Companion following them – he felt the Gate sucking at him as they crossed, draining his energy further, and the agony made his
vision go red for a moment. Through watering eyes, Vanyel saw Savil’s shocked expression; she had noticed the uncanny resemblance as well.

He saw Donni look around, memorizing the surroundings. *Hold it,* he thought, *hold it hold it…*

She came back across – another wave of pain – and nodded to him.

He tried to stand. It took three attempts, and a fistful of Yfandes’ mane, to pull himself up.

One step. Another. Weaving like a drunk, he reached the threshold – and, gritting his teeth, half-fell across.

Falling into red-black torment, and then nothing.

Savil watched Vanyel approach the Gate-threshold, swaying on his feet as though the ground was moving under him, his face white and drawn.

“Stay there,” she told the boy – *not Tylendel,* she reminded herself – and headed for the Gate.

Van stepped across – and collapsed, his eyes rolling back in his head. She reached him just in time to catch him before he hit the ground face-first, and lowered him gently, wincing at the strain in her back. The Gate roiled, its outline going uneven; it was unstable, no longer under his control.

She rolled him over, cradling his head in her lap.

“Van,” she said urgently, slapping his cheek. “Van, wake up.” *Wake up, ke’chara:*

He didn’t stir. His shields were down, mind a haze of agony, and she could feel the Gate still pulling at his reserves. He didn’t have much left.

She looked up. “Yfandes, can you rouse him long enough to take the bloody Gate down?” Van would be a lot better off if he could reclaim some of the Gate-energy.

Blue eyes fixed on her, the Companion shook her ponderous head.

“Damn it.” She would have to do this the hard way. “I’m sorry, Van.” She had gotten the hang of taking down his Gates for him, over time. Reaching out with mental fingers, she *pinched* the cord of flowing power that connected it to him.

The Gate wavered and then came down with a crash and a blaze of light, the energies dumping into the earth. Vanyel convulsed in her arms for a moment, then was still. It was suddenly very dark. She summoned a tiny mage-light and sent it just above her head.

*Kellan, love, can you roust up some help for me?:* Lissa and her two lieutenants were somewhere nearby; she had spent the last six or seven candlemarks with them, waiting.

*Of course, Chosen:*

She rested her hand on Van’s forehead. *Ke’chara?:* Still nothing. There was a frightening transparency to him, like half his substance had been drained away, and his breath came shallow and unevenly.
He needed a Healer. She didn’t think his life was in danger – he’d looked worse than this, before – but since she wasn’t a Healer, she couldn’t be sure. He would be out for the next two days if he was lucky. *Damn it, Van, you dump this mess on me and expect me to clean up after you.* She could understand why he’d taken the actions he had, but that didn’t mean she was happy about it. Or that the Lineans would be. Randi was going to be very displeased with her nephew if he ended up starting a war.

“Savil?”

Lissa’s voice. She lifted her head as the young woman rushed over, kneeling at her side. “Gods! What happened? Is he alright?”


“Can do.” Lissa snapped her fingers, and one of her lieutenants came forwards. “Dasha, please go wake Esban.” Esban was her camp Healer, and had set up a small, so far unused infirmary in the guest wing.

That was a good idea. She ought to ask the man to look at Tashir as well, Savil thought; he was hovering at the edge of the courtyard, clutching his Companion’s mane, shaking. Vanyel hadn’t said he was hurt, but he had the dazed look of a person in shock.

Lissa lifted Vanyel from her arms and stood, forging in the direction of the path. Savil levered herself to her feet as well, and crossed the yard. “Tashir?” she said.

He looked up, eyes not quite focusing on her.

She tried to make her voice gentle; it didn’t come naturally to her. “Tashir, my name is Savil. You’re at Forst Reach right now, in Valdemar. About twenty miles east of the Lineas border. You’re safe here, all right? If you come with me, I’ll take you inside.” He looked like he ought to be in bed.

He hesitated for a long moment before following her. Skittish as anything. No wonder, with what he must have witnessed. *And it’s possible he did it.* As hard to believe as it seemed.

Carefully avoiding touching him or getting too close, she led the boy out of the temple courtyard, down the path, to the side door of the guest wing, which stood open. “Your Companion will be right here,” she said. “I’ll get him settled in the stables after. You can go to see him whenever you want, but it’s a cold night, and I think you’d be better off indoors.”

Tashir stared at her for a moment, wide-eyed, then nodded. She urged him through ahead of her, and followed.

The guest-room next to Vanyel’s was empty, and had been aired out recently, probably when they expected Lissa to be staying in the keep. It was very dark. Savil reached out a tendril of power and lit all of the candles; she heard Tashir gasp.

“Sit,” she said, pointing to the bed. She knelt by the fireplace, wincing at the pain in her knees, and piled in a few logs before using her power to light them as well, then stood and went to dig in the cupboard for a robe and extra blankets.

“Here.” She thrust a pile at him. “I’ll get you something hot to drink. When did you last eat?”

He just stared blankly at her.
“I’ll bring you some food. And we’ll have our Healer look at you. Are you hurting anywhere?”


“He’ll be fine.” Surprisingly considerate of him, to ask – and it made it seem even less likely that this frightened, diffident child could have killed his entire family. “Van’s sensitive to Gates is all. Rest, all right? I’ll be back soon.”
“This,” Randi said, “is extremely irritating.”

They were in the Senior Circle meeting room. Outside, Tantras knew the sky would be lightening. They had all been awake for the last eight candlemarks, and spent most of it waiting for news that never came.

Tantras looked down at the note he’d scribbled again. It wasn’t a lot to go on, and they were unlikely to get more anytime soon – Van was out for days whenever he had to Gate, and he might not be up for relaying as far as Haven for a week. They had already sent a courier, of course, as soon as he had scribbled down Vanyel’s second message, but even at a Companion’s fastest pace, Forst Reach was three days away and Highjorune was further.

Assuming the Border would even allow a Herald past. It was friendly in name only, neutral in reality, and it might be worse than that by now. Van, you’d better not have just started a war. During their brief contact, he hadn’t had time to ask Vanyel about his reasoning behind basically kidnapping Tashir, much less check anything with Randi. The citizens of Highjorune weren’t likely to be happy about it. It was done, though, and there was no undoing it now. All they could do was move forwards.

From Vanyel’s fragmentary report, it sounded like Herald Lores was still on site; maybe he could keep things calm.

Tantras had no idea what was going to happen. The entire royal family dead, except for a disowned, supposedly bastard-born son who was now both a murder suspect and a presumptive Herald. It was unprecedented. And deeply weird. And a mess.

The courier, Herald Sera, wouldn’t be able to act as a Mindspeech-relay, they’d had no strong Mindspeakers to spare, so a return message would take another three days.

“In short, we’re completely out of touch until Van recovers,” Randi said, echoing his thoughts. “We can’t spare anyone except the troops at Deercreek, and there’s already a message headed their way.” He massaged his forehead for a moment. “Tran, please get a message to the Runefold relay, what’s-her-name, and ask her to move west.”

Tantras nodded. “I’ll contact Herald Nina.” She was only seventeen, and her range wasn’t more than a hundred miles. Maybe he could send her to Sleepy Hollow, about halfway between Haven and Forst Reach – there, she ought to be able to reach him on the one side, and Vanyel on the other. Had she ever relayed with Van before? He couldn’t remember.

“Good.” Randi went on. “We might as well go back to bed, because we can’t do anything to affect the outcome, and we’ve still got that Council meeting in a few candlemarks.” Tran groaned; he had forgotten about it. They would be discussion the prospective alliance yet again. “Questions before we wrap up?” Randi went on.

Silence.

“Katha, please do write up your analysis of the situation – I know you haven’t got much to go on, but do your best – and any suggestions you can give them, in case we do make contact.”

Randi looked very tired, Tantras thought with a twinge of worry. They’d been up most of the night, ever since Vanyel’s initial contact had wrenched them out of their beds – but it wasn’t just tonight.
The King had been looking more and more worn down in recent months, even though Tantras thought if anything his schedule was lighter. The skin under his eyes was loose, his hair dull in the candlelight, and he stopped for a moment to steady himself against the doorframe.

*I’ll talk to Shavri,* he decided. “Get some sleep,” was all he said out loud.

“Boots on the covers?” Lissa said, standing in the doorway with her eyebrows raised. “Mother will have a cat.”

Savil, too weary to be startled, raised her head. “Heya, Liss. Any news?”

“Don’t know how you expect me to know anything more than you do.” Lissa crossed the room and pulled over a chair, reaching for her brother’s limp hand. “How is he? Has he woken up?”

“Not really.” Vanyel lay still, calm for the moment, blankets pulled up to his chin and his face nearly as pale as the sheets. He was lightly sedated; Lissa’s Healer had given him a quarter-dose of argonel a candlemark ago, when he’d been starting to rouse a little, confused, in pain, and very agitated. “He’ll be wit-wandering for another day or two before he’s really back with us. That’s generally how it goes.”

“Wish he hadn’t had to Gate. Oh, Van.” Lissa looked up. “How’s the boy?”

“Tashir? Sleeping, finally. Think the Healer gave him something.”

“Have you slept?”

“A little.” Late afternoon sunlight was slanting through the window. She’d napped in the chair while Van was still deeply unconscious. “You?”

“Caught a nap.” Lissa leaned back in the chair. “Want me to sit with him for a bit, and you can get some more rest?”

“I’d rather stay here for now.” Better for her to be there when he was disoriented like this, so she could soothe him – and hold shields if she had to, which Lissa couldn’t.

There was a quiet knock on the door. Savil extended a tendril of Thoughtsensing. “Come in.”

Esban, the Healer assigned to Lissa’s crew, came in and closed the door behind him, setting a tray down on the table. A rangy young man with brown hair and a reddish beard, he couldn’t have gotten any more sleep than they had, but he looked plenty energetic. *Damned young people.*

“Giving you any trouble?” he said.

Savil shook her head. “Calmed down since you dosed him. Thank you.”

“Glad to help. Wish I could do more for him. Never much we can do about backlash, and he’s got a bad case.” The Healer shrugged. “Thought I’d see if I could get a bit of hot milk into him, now he’s not fighting us so hard.”

Savil nodded and stood up, biting back a groan; every part of her ached. “I’ll help you.” Even semiconscious, maybe especially then, Vanyel reacted badly to strangers touching him. “Van, it’s
me,” she said, before reaching to gently shake his shoulder; she didn’t Mindtouch at all. “Wake up a little?”

His eyes flickered half-open, blank and unseeing, and he mumbled something incomprehensible.

“Good. We’re going to get you sitting up a moment – thank you, Lissa. Van, shh, it’s okay, you’re safe.” She didn’t think he was hearing any of the words, but he seemed to know she was there; he relaxed a little against her shoulder.

“I hate seeing him like this,” Lissa murmured. “Remember I had to ask him to raise a Gate about six months back, to send out some troops to reinforce Sun’s Hill. Didn’t need him to cross it, and he stayed conscious the whole time, but he wasn’t himself, after. It was like he wasn’t there.” She shuddered. “It scares me.”

Savil nodded. “I know what you mean – Van, please drink that.” He was trying to turn his head away from the cup as the Healer held it to his lips. “Here, I’ll try to hold him still.” It frightened her as well, even though she knew this was normal for him. She remembered how he had looked when he was ill with pneumonia, a few years back, in and out of delirium – the glazed-eyed restlessness, how awful it had been when he hadn’t recognized her.

“Good,” Esban said, pulling the cup away. “The shock is clearing up a little. Do try to get more fluids into him, if you can. He’s burning off the drugs at a respectable rate; I’ll leave a half-dose you can give him if he gets combative again later, though you should wait at least eight candlemarks. I’ll be here in the morning.”

Lissa stood up. “I’d better come with you.”

“Thank you,” Savil said wearily.

A few minutes after they had left, there was a tentative knock on the door.

“Medren?” Savil called out, recognizing the flavour of his mind – the bright glow of the Gifted, but not a Thoughtsenser. “Come in.”

Her grand-nephew closed the door behind him, and stood nervously at the threshold. “Came to see if Uncle Van was all right. He said we’d have a lesson today–” His eyes settled on the bed, and his mouth dropped open. “Gods! Is he hurt?”

Savil hadn’t been sure to what extent word had gotten out about last night’s happenings. Certainly she hadn’t told anyone else in the household; from the perspective of avoiding a messy fight that she didn’t have the energy for, it had seemed like a good idea to keep things quiet. Withen had ridden out this morning, for his annual harvest-tour of his lands, and she’d managed to keep the news from him, though she would have to tell him something, when he got back.

“Can you keep a secret?” she said.

Medren nodded solemnly, his eyes widening.

“Good. We had a bit of excitement last night.” How much could she tell him? Well, her nephew seemed to think he was trustworthy enough. “Van had to go to Highjorune,” she said. “You know where that is?”


“Something unpleasant happened. We don’t know that much yet – but he ended up having to get
someone out of a bad situation, and use a Gate to come back here. He’ll be fine, but he’s going to need a few days to recover.”

Medren nodded. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

It was hard to push words out coherently when she was this tired. “Hmm. If you could… We have a guest. His name is Tashir, and he’s not had an easy time of it. I’ll introduce you once he’s awake, and…well, try to befriend him, if you can, he needs a friend here badly. He’s nervy, but you seem like you can put people at ease.” Better than I can. “I know you’re leaving for Haven in a few weeks, but in the meantime…”

To tell the truth, she found it hard being around Tashir, with his unnerving resemblance to ‘Lendel. She couldn’t imagine what it must have been like for Van.

“I can do that.” Medren fidgeted. “If you tell me when Uncle Van’s awake, I can come read to him. Or something. Mother likes it when I read to her, when she’s ill.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you.” She tried to stifle a yawn. “He probably won’t be lucid for a few days, but I’d like someone with him as much as possible.”

Medren nodded, seriously. “Do you want me to bring you dinner?”

“Whoever gets you as a protege will bless your soul, child. That would be lovely.”

He darted out, and Savil was staring vaguely at the window when she heard the door open. “Could you please—” she started. Knock, she had been about to say.

“Herald Savil.” Father Leren, Withen’s priest, inclined his head, his smile silky. “I heard that your nephew was unwell.”

“He’s fine,” she said tightly. “What are you doing here?” She didn’t know why, but Leren gave her the collywobbles.

“The role of a priest includes ministering to the sick, does it not?”

Savil folded her arms. “I told you, he’s fine.” How do I get him to go away? “How do I get him to go away? “Honestly, he’s been quite delirious. And he is a mage. It’s not safe for anyone who can’t shield to be in here with him.”

Leren’s eyes widened, and he took a step back.

She smiled thinly. “Consider your well-wishings made, and I will tell him you were here. You might consider coming back tomorrow once he’s a little less…confused.”

Leren bobbed his head, clearly trying to regain his composure, and backed towards the door. “Of course, milady Herald, of course.”

She let her smile fade as the door closed behind him. Now why do I have the feeling he wasn’t here for well-wishings at all?

Shavri clasped her hands together in her lap, fighting the urge to fidget, and forcing herself to meet the Karsite princess’s impassive dark eyes. Her stomach was in knots; she hadn’t been able to eat
anything all afternoon.

Randi had invited Karis back to his personal quarters, and he had just introduced Shavri. Jisa was with Beri; Shavri hadn’t wanted to try to explain that part to her. Not yet.

She blinked hard. *I won’t cry. I won’t.*

“Karis,” Randi said gently – and for a moment anger bubbled in the pit of Shavri’s stomach. She wanted to *hit* him, that he could look so serene, speak so calmly, to this woman who was about to ruin their lives.

*Get ahold of yourself.* She took a deep breath, let it out. The jealousy made no sense, she reminded herself. Randi didn’t love Karis, and wouldn’t; that was the whole point. That was why she was here, an ordinary Healer being formally introduced to the heir of a kingdom.

“Karis, I said earlier there was something you had to know,” he went on – and he glanced at Shavri, eyes softening for a moment, before he drew that cold, still composure around himself like a cloak. “Do you know what a lifebond is?”

“Spoken of I–” She stopped herself. “Have heard it spoken of.” In the scant week the princess had been in Haven, she had been practicing her Valdemaran relentlessly, and her syntax was already improving. She was quick-witted, Shavri had to admit. *At least I’m prettier* – and she caught at that snide thought and pushed it away, it wasn’t helpful or charitable.

“Well. They’re rare, but real. And Shavri and I are lifebonded to each other.”

To her credit, Karis showed little sign of shock. Shavri’s stereotype of a princess would have gasped, paled, maybe fainted – but Karis only nodded, slowly, her eyes flickering briefly to rest on Shavri before returning to Randi’s face.

“Told me I am glad,” she said slowly, her face and voice very controlled. “It must not be easy.”

“It is what it is.” Randi shook his head. “I wish it were different, Karis. We’ve been frank with each other, and you’re an incredible woman. I’m coming to respect you a great deal, and what you’re trying to do, and I think we’ll be able to work well together. But that’s all I can offer you. Not love, because my heart is taken and nothing’s ever going to change that.”

Shavri looked away, her eyes burning; she couldn’t bear to watch his earnest, serious expression. Her Randi. He would do what was best for Valdemar, always. Who was she to ask for anything different? *I love him for who he is,* she reminded herself. A good person; someone who took his duty seriously, who cared deeply. No matter the cost.

“Rumours I have heard,” Karis said. “Of a child. A–” And she paused, frowned, and said a Karsite word that Shavri didn’t recognize.

“A bastard, yes. With Shavri. Not in the line of succession, because we judged it best that we not marry. For exactly this contingency, really.” There was a hint of tightness in his voice. He bowed his head. “Karis, I… I’m going to tell you something, because I trust you, and – and if we’re going to do this thing, we have to start from a position of trust. It’s not something that the Council or the Heraldic Circle knows. Not even my King’s Own.” He paused, waiting.

“Yes,” Karis said quietly. “A secret I can keep.”

Shavri looked up; through a sheen of tears, she saw Randi swallow, eyes downcast. “Jisa isn’t mine,” he said. His voice faltered. *It still bothers him,* she thought. “I can’t father children. But we –
Shavri and I wanted to have a family."

There was a silence.

“And you do,” Karis said. "Family is who raises us.” Shavri’s breath caught; damn it, but she hadn’t expected Karis to be so thoughtful, and it hurt. “Do not mind. If I may – the father is?”

Shavri saw Randi’s shoulders rise and fall as he took a deep breath. “Herald-Mage Vanyel.”

Karis recoiled – the first visible show of emotion Shavri had seen from her, ever. She spat a phrase in Karsite – one that Shavri did recognize. The Butcher in White.

*I could have predicted this reaction.* Shavri hadn’t expected Randi to tell her about Vanyel. Hadn’t expected him to reveal that he was sterile. It seemed like a terrible risk to take.

“He’s a good man,” Randi said softly. “And one of our closest friends.”

Karis closed her eyes. She breathed in and out, calm returning to her face. “I am sorry,” she said after a moment, her voice level again. “Inappropriate that was.”

“Understandable. I forgive you.” Randi shrugged. “A powerful enemy is a frightening thing – but, if we do this, he won’t be your enemy, Karis. He’ll fight as hard for Karse as he does for Valdemar, and he – he’ll be relieved. Happy. You don’t know how much it’s cost him, when I had to order him out there to kill your people. And I’m sorry.” He closed his eyes. “I want it to end. For you. For him. For all of us.”

This time, the silence stretched out. Uneasy confusion tickled in Shavri’s chest; it felt like the ground was shifting under her. Nowhere solid to stand. Nothing left that she understood…

Start from a place of trust. *You’re ill, Randi, and we can’t hide that forever.* Her partner didn’t know, yet, though Tantras did; the King’s Own had come to her, worried about Randi’s fatigue, he had already noticed something was wrong and she hadn’t seen a choice but to tell him. It was still minor – she doubted anyone who didn’t see him every day would notice – but it was getting worse, gradually and inexorably.

If she told Randi, he would tell Karis; he would have to. If Shavri had trusted Karis, she would have told the princess herself, it wasn’t fair for her to walk into that unawares either…but she didn’t. *I’m sorry. You’re both going to find out later, once this is a done deal.* And maybe she could still find a way to cure him and make it moot.

“You know,” Karis said finally, “marry for love I did not think. But a good man… Respect we have for one another. Strong a foundation as any.”

Did she mean it? Shavri watched her carefully, listening, trying to catch what she could with her weak Empathy. She was tempted to read the woman with her Thoughtsensing, but that would be deeply unethical, and unfair.

In everything she could pick up, there was only sincerity in Karis’ words. *I wonder if she’s ever been in love,* Shavri thought – and, oddly, found herself suspecting not. She didn’t have any real evidence, of course, but she tended to trust her hunches. If Karis had been raised her whole life expecting to be traded away in a state marriage… Maybe she had learned early on to guard her heart.

“Be frank I will,” Karis said after a moment. “Your heir I am not to bear. We need not try.”

Shavri blinked. *That was certainly very frank.* She didn’t like the idea of Randi bedding someone
else at all, and oddly, Karis seemed relieved as well. Certainly not disappointed.

There was a brief, tense silence.

“Karis,” Randi said. “I can’t do this formally yet, because I do want to get the Council entirely on my side. But, informally – will you accept my hand in marriage, and the aid of Valdemar in reclaiming your land and bringing an end to this war?”

There was nothing informal in his tone, Shavri thought. He spoke quietly, but with that odd, ringing authority he could sometimes summon. The voice of a King.

“Yes,” Karis said, with the faintest of smiles. “Accept I will.”

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:Mardic:

He paused on the landing to the small tenement-house, and held up a hand to the young girl he was following; he couldn’t see her with his eyes, of course, but he had his Thoughtsensing open just enough to sense the bundle of eager energy that was her, and his mage-sight showed, faintly, the trails of energy left by the passage of a thousand feet on these stairs. The stairwell was echoey, and he smelled only mildew and damp. :Can it wait? I’m busy:

:I’ll be quick: Donni promised. :Just found out that our Herald Lores is gone. Stormed off to Haven to protest Van’s ‘high-handed’ way of handling things: A pause. :Don’t think he’ll make good time. Seems his Companion is very annoyed with him:

Mardic suppressed a snort. :He wasn’t acting much a Herald. Thanks for telling me. I need to go:

:What is it?:

:I might’ve found one of the Palace servants. Who’s still alive, I mean:

:Oh: A breath of hope in Donni’s mindvoice. :Good luck:

He dropped the connection, and turned to force a smile at the child. “I’m Sorry. Go ahead.” He reached to take her hand again.

She led him up the stairs, with exaggerated caution. He had, with Donni’s encouragement, retrieved their stash of coins and purchased some better clothes, and he wore a pair of thick tinted spectacles held in place by a chain. Still a blind man, but with his hair clean and tied back, he looked different enough never to be linked to the broken beggar who had haunted the streets of the tanners’ district a few days ago.

His gittern was slung over his back. I’m a minstrel. Following a tale. Minstrels were supposed to be curious, after all, and perhaps this cousin, the Palace-servant, would take pity on a blind man.

Gods, he was tired. It had already been a very long day, and he hadn’t slept well the night before. Coming on two days since the incident, and they still knew next to nothing – Van had passed a message on to Haven, but without him there, there was no quick way for them to receive messages. They were completely out of touch. It felt like tightrope-walking over an abyss.

The candlemarks he’d spent trying to keep Tashir calm, two nights ago, had been among the most
draining he had ever experienced. Mardic wasn’t an Empath, but he hadn’t needed to be – the boy’s sheer terror had been unmistakable. It was like he had barely known Mardic was there, like he was locked inside his own head, reliving some unimaginable horrors – and he didn’t even remember what had happened.

I miss you, Fortin. A lance of pain through his chest, echoing into the bottomless void, the scar that Fortin had ripped out of his mind. It was easier, now, most of the time, but he was raw with exhaustion, and Donni wasn’t there. She wasn’t far away, he reminded himself. He would see her soon. It would be all right.

It’s never all right.

He let the thought pass, not trying to fight it, and a moment later realized that the girl had stopped moving. “Here,” he heard her say, then the sound of knuckles rapping on wood. “Reta?”


“Minstrel wants to talk to you, aunty.” He doubted this Reta was actually the girl’s aunt; it seemed to be the common honorific for an older female relative, here. “Name’s Marti.”

It was close enough to his real name to remember easily, and it sounded normal enough for the region.

“And what do you wish to ask an old woman, lad?”

He wished he could see her face. It was harder to read people, without eyes. And he couldn’t seem to catch any of her surface thoughts; he didn’t think she was Gifted, but she was somehow shielded. Even the un-Gifted could develop shields if they were probed, and some people seemed to be born with them, but this felt different.

“Lookin’ to tell a story, ma’am,” he said – simply, letting his country accent slip in. “Find out what really happened, in the Palace.”

This woman was, like all the servants, a blood relation of the Remoerdis family. She had only survived, according to the child, because she had been staying here to care for her aged mother, who had fallen and couldn’t be left alone.

“Why?” Not hostile; a simple question.

“Cause stories matter, ma’am.” He shrugged. “And folk listen t’songs. If there’s somethin’ needs to be told…”

“I don’t know.” Her voice was thoughtful. He sensed, rather than saw, her look down – and something caught his mage-sight. Power flared. It seemed to be coming from the area of her hands – a ring? A talisman of some kind, he thought. Vanyel might have been able to See more detail; all he could sense was that there was something.

Her voice changed. There was something toneless in it, something rote. She sounds like someone half in trance. Or under a coercive Truth spell. It was very odd. “There is a story, and perhaps it ought be told. Come, lad. Sit.”

The girl took his hand, and guided it forward until it rested on a thin arm, clad in soft, finely-woven wool. Not ordinary servant clothes, he thought, and this woman didn’t speak like a servant either
He heard the girl scamper away, and he let himself be guided inside, and pushed down into a chair. It was uncushioned and hard.

“Lady Ylyna,” the woman said. “It all comes back to Ylyna.”

He paused, waiting to see if she would say more. “Tashir’s mother?” he said, hesitantly.

“She was hardly more than a child when she came here,” Reta went on, her voice still abstracted. “But I’ve never seen a more terrified girl in my life. She’d been ignored her whole life, you see, until Deveran refused to take any wife with mage-powers. It was the first time the Mavelans saw any value in her, and you had better believe they kept the strings on her. She was so afraid of them.”

Reta stopped again. Mardic waited. “And then what happened?” he said finally.

“She was pregnant, and Deveran made much of her. She was happy, for a time. But then Tashir came early, and there was no telling him it was chance that he looked so like his Uncle Vedric.” He heard her shift, cloth moving. “Though of course those resemblances happen. So Deveran ignored her, except to get her with child, and then ignored her again until the children were born. Ignored the boy, too. Poor Ylyna, still a child herself, scarce old enough to have left off with dolls – she didn’t know the first thing to do with a child of her own.” Another silence, but this time she went on unprompted. “And then then letters started to come. From Baires – from The Mavelan.” She said it like a title, with a capital letter. “She never showed a soul, but they frightened her, and she took it all out on young Tashir. The other children, they had nursemaids, but never him. Poor child.”

Mardic caught himself picking at a thumbnail, and forced his hands down into her lap. “Why? Did she treat him badly?”

A sigh. “Half the time she cosseted him like a lapdog. When the news in her letters was good, I think. The rest of the time, when the letters were bad – she beat him, till he was black and blue all over. She was terrified of everyone. He was the only one who was ever afraid of her.”

Mardic shuddered. Gods, no wonder the boy had seemed so battle-shy; maybe it wasn’t just whatever he’d witnessed, inside the Palace. Maybe it was his whole life.

“Then the boy started showing wizard-power,” the woman said. “And it was worse. I saw her watching him, once. Never saw such jealousy in my life.”

Mardic waited to see if she would go on. She didn’t. “Why?” he said finally. “Ma’am, why was she jealous? If, if her not being mage-gifted was the reason…” Then again, maybe she hadn’t been happy about her marriage, by then. It sounded like it had been miserable enough.

Tashir wasn’t mage-gifted – at least, Mardic hadn’t noticed anything, and neither had Vanyel, though he hadn’t tried to probe for it. His Gift was Fetching. Then again, to people who let no mages work in their country, maybe the two seemed similar enough.

The old woman’s voice was suddenly normal, and a little stiff. “I’ve said too much.”

“It all comes back to Ylyna,” she had said. She thought it was related. Why? An un-Gifted, beaten-down child bride, taking out her frustration and helplessness on her even more helpless son. Sad, horrifying – and not an answer at all.

Unless Tashir had snapped, finally, and really had killed his entire family.
No. I don’t believe it. But could be really be so sure…

“Please, ma’am.” Mardic let a hint of the desperation he felt creep into his voice.

“Come back in two days’ time.” Her voice was firm, and brooked no argument. “I might decide to tell you more, then.” She reached out to take his hand and guide him to his feet, and he had no choice but to obey.

:Donni: he reached.

She was there immediately, eager and impatient. :Did you learn anything?:

:Maybe. We need to get a message out: Damn Herald Lores for leaving! He was the one who’d had access to the courier message-drops. Vanyel was probably within his Mindspeech range, but Mardic doubted he would even be conscious yet. Could they reach Savil? In the past he’d been able to boost his Mindspeech a little further with node-energy, if he he and Donni worked in concert, but he hadn’t tried it since losing Fortin, and Donni’s Mindspeech was much weaker. They were outside the Web, which he couldn’t use anyway, and a full day’s ride from the Border. Van had made it there in a night, but he must have been feeding Yfandes node-energy, and pushing it hard. Could Donni go with Rasha? She would have to go alone; Mardic’s additional weight would slow them, and one of them had to stay in the city. Not to mention, it was already late in the evening; the city gates would be closed for the night.

I don’t want to be alone, he thought, desperation creeping in. But they had to pass word. If there was even a chance that Tashir, traumatized and broken, had lost his head and torn up the entire Palace – then Forst Reach was in danger.

:I know: Donni sent. :I have other news:

:Bad?: The overtones certainly indicated it.

:Don’t know yet. Vedric Mavelan just arrived in the city:

Damn it. That sealed it – they couldn’t risk trying to reach Savil with long-range Mindspeech. Vedric Mavelan was a mage. They had no particular evidence he was a Thoughtsenser, but he might well detect it, especially if they had to tap a node for energy. Mardic had a bad feeling that they very much ought to stay out of his sight. There had been rumours of other Heralds in Highjorune – Herald Lores wasn’t the only one who had seen their tense standoff – but it seemed their disguises and the frantic nature of that night had kept things confused. Rasha, thankfully, was outside of the city, returned to lurking in the nearby farmland after her brief trip in to support them.

:What do you think he’s up to?: he sent. Short-range Mindspeech with Donni ought to be safe, anyway.

:Trying to sort out what the hells happened, I imagine. It’s his nephew who’s missing and accused of murder, after all. Maybe even his son, if the rumours are true:

Now at the bottom of the staircase, Mardic bid farewell to the old woman, bowing and kissing her hand, and retrieved his stick from against the wall. :Do you think they are? The servant I just spoke to thought not:

:I don’t know:

:Where are you?: He stood out on the street, trying to get his bearings. The sounds of feet on cobbles that way – the smell of the cheesemonger’s stall the other…
She sent a brief mental ‘picture’. The only way he saw any kind of image, now.

:I’m coming. We need to plan:

Medren tapped cautiously on the door before gently pushing it open. “Uncle Van, I’m coming in.”

He hadn’t expected anyone else to be in the room – and he jumped, nearly dropping the tray he carried, when he saw Tashir hovering in the corner.

Tashir twitched as well, and Medren didn’t fail to notice when the two chairs on either side of the bed rattled against the floor. *He’s a Fetcher,* he reminded himself. *Mustn’t startle him.*

He tried to smile, reassuringly. “Sorry, Tashir. Didn’t know you were here. Have you had supper? I brought extra.”

It was evening, the second day that Vanyel had been back. Tashir was up and about, but he’d been like a ghost. He didn’t come to meals with the family, and Medren hadn’t been sure if he was eating at all until he asked around at the kitchens – apparently the boy went down at the crack of dawn, snatching some food from the servants’ breakfast before disappearing again. Medren wasn’t sure where he spent the rest of his time. Maybe he had already discovered one of the hidden nooks of the house to hide in.

Word of his presence had gotten out among the servants, and Lady Treesa was terribly curious. Medren had been trying to persuade her not to drag Tashir out to her bower for an introduction. Savil had asked him to keep an eye on Tashir, to look out for him, and he didn’t think the older boy was up to formal introductions yet.

“Thank you.” Tashir nodded to him.

Medren set the tray down and approached the bed, cautiously. “Heya, Uncle Van.”

Cuddled up on his side under the blankets, Vanyel stirred and murmured something, a jumble of fluid syllables. He looked better than the day before, Medren thought, but not much; he was feverish, flushed and sticky with it, his silver-streaked hair a damp, tangled mat.

“You’re speaking another language,” Medren said. “I can’t understand you.”

To his surprise, he heard Tashir’s soft gasp. “That’s Tayledras,” he said. “I know a few words.”

Medren raised his eyebrows. *And how does he know the Hawkbrother tongue?* “Did you catch what he said?”

“Only a little. Something about…shields?”

Medren tried to remember what Savil had told him. “Uncle Van, it’s all right. We’ve got you behind shields. You’re safe here. I’ve brought you something to eat, if you can manage it.” He glanced up. “Tashir, do you want to help me?”

Together, they got Vanyel half-sitting up against a stack of pillows. Medren took the cover off the tray. “Tashir, I got some pies for us, too.” He’d brought four of the hand-sized pastries, as well as some broth the cook had made specially for Vanyel. The servants seemed to take a proprietary
interest in their resident Herald-Mage – though they avoided coming into the room. Medren though he knew why. *They’re proud of him and scared of him at the same time.*

“Where’s the other lady?” Tashir said, shyly. “The Herald-Mage.”

“My great-aunt Savil, you mean?” Medren shook his head. “With Major Lissa, I think.”

Tashir frowned, and his shoulders rose a little, his neck stiffening. “Lissa. She’s Herald Vanyel’s sister?”

“Yes. My aunt.” Medren smiled. “She’s not that scary. I mean, she is, she held off the Karsites at Horn for years, but she’s nice – Uncle Van, come on, it can’t taste *that* bad.” He looked back at Tashir. “What’s your Companion’s name?”

Tashir’s jaw twitched. “I…don’t know.” He fidgeted with the pie in his hand. “Herald-Mage Savil says I should be able to talk to him, but I don’t know how.”

Medren tried to remember what Savil had told him. “It’ll help if you go be in the stables with him, my aunt said. And the more you can relax, the easier it’ll be.”

Tashir nodded uncertainly. “I’ll try after.”

They sat in silence for a few moments, interrupted only by Vanyel mumbling something incoherent and trying to swat at the empty air.

“Hey, Uncle Van, it’s alright. There’s nothing there.” Medren set down the bowl of broth; it seemed like a losing battle to get Vanyel to drink any more of it. “Tashir, I…” He had been trying to think of a good way to say it. In the end, he wasn’t sure there was a good way. “I’m really sorry about what happened to your family.”

Tashir’s head jerked up. He blinked a few times, his eyes suddenly damp.

“Want to tell me about them?” Medren said quietly. “I mean…only if it helps. To talk about it.”

The older boy nodded. He swiped at his eyes. Took a deep breath, and visibly forced a smile. “I…They were good people. My mother and father loved each other so much…”

They rode through golden fields.

Stef couldn’t figure out where to look. Everything was *so big, so strange.* So beautiful. He’d known, vaguely, that there was more to the world than the narrow streets where he’d sung with Berte, but he hadn’t really been able to imagine it. There was so much. At the top of each hill, he kept expecting them to come to the edge of the world, but they never did – there was always more, fields and forests and lakes and farms, and more people than he had ever seen before.

Lynnell didn’t speak much to him, only to ask every so often if he was hungry or tired. It was tiring, riding on her horse behind her – he was sore at the end of every day. He didn’t like to tell her so, though. Didn’t want to be trouble.

They had stayed at the inn for a week, until Lynnell took him to see the lady in green again, and she put her hands on his head and said he was stronger and well enough to travel if they kept the pace.
easy.

They had stayed at a real farm, one night, when it started to rain before they could reach an inn, and Lynnell said she didn’t want him to catch cold. Lynnell had tried to give a silver coin to the farmer, but he’d shook his head and said her songs would be enough, and she had played in front of their hearth for a whole candlemark, for the old man and his plump wife and his sturdy, quiet sons. And they’d eaten a chicken roasted with herbs, and thick slices of bread fresh out of the oven, with butter melted on top, and there had been a pie with apples inside!

Stef didn’t understand why the farmers had been so kind to a stranger, even a rich stranger in fine clothes, and certainly not why they had been kind to him as well. The farm-wife had smiled at him and ruffled his hair, and brought him a special sweet made out of honey, and she had even made up a bath just for him. Stef had been frightened of the baths at the inn, at first, but he had discovered he liked to be clean. Lynnell was a rich lady with fine clothes, she was always clean, and he had seen her distaste when he was dirty. He wanted her to like him, even if he couldn’t ever belong with her.

When everyone was asleep, Stef had crawled out of his half of the bed, without waking Lynnell, and crept out of the window of their guest-room to go look for the barn. He had wanted to see the animals, and maybe see a real dairy-maid, so he knew what she would look like and could sing the song better and please Lynnell. The chickens had awakened in their coop, frightening him, and he had fled back to the farmhouse. And then felt ashamed of his fear and weakness. Tyrell the baker had kept chickens, in his yard, and Stef knew they wouldn’t hurt him.

But everything was so strange, and even if it was beautiful, it was frightening as well.

He had thought about running away. Lynnell watched him closely when she was awake, but not when she was sleeping. He could have gone out the window and kept running, and there were so many fields and forests and farms, he could hide where she would never find him and never be able to take him to serve Lord Valdemar. He could even have taken the silver candlesticks from the farmers’ mantle, and found a town to sell them.

If he had been braver, maybe he would have run. He missed Berte. But it was too far to go back, he didn’t know the way, and what if she didn’t want him back? What if she was happier with her silver coins?

Besides, with Lynnell he had food to eat whenever he wanted, and she wasn’t cruel to him. In truth, she was kinder than Berte had been, and it confused him, but he didn’t want to leave.
“You look like hell.”

Savil’s dry voice pulled him out of the haze where Vanyel had been drifting. He lay without opening his eyes, taking inventory of his body, and trying to remember where he was. Maybe he should have been more worried, that he couldn’t.

“Don’t try to pretend you’re not awake.”

“Heya, aunt.” His voice came out as a croak, and he cracked his right eye open. *Ow.* As he’d expected, the pale light sent a stabbing pain through his forehead. Savil was sitting in a chair she’d pulled up, feet resting on the bed. A slow, careful sideways glance, without moving his head, showed that he was in the guest room at Forst Reach. Judging by the light, it was midmorning.

Memory was catching up in fragments. The frantic nighttime ride to Highjorune…Herald Lores…the Gate–

A sliver of alarm pushed through the fog. “What day is it? How long was I out this time?” *And did I do anything embarrassing I don’t remember,* he thought but didn’t add.

“Three days. How are you feeling?”

“Coincidentally, like hell.” He tried to suck up some saliva to moisten his lips, and started inching into a sitting position. Every joint ached. “What’s been happening?”

“Do you want it in order? I took the liberties of deep-scanning you while you were out of it, by the way, so I’m mostly up to date on everything that happened before you Gated in. Probably didn’t get everything, you know how hard it is.”

With anyone in the world except Savil, that would have been incredibly invasive and he would have been furious – but he trusted her. *I didn’t give her many other options.* His brief, confused summary couldn’t have given her everything she needed to make decisions in the last three days, and…well, he was grateful someone had been taking care of things in his absence, but while he was unable to. She inevitably wouldn’t have gotten everything; interpreting someone else’s memories was always tricky, especially when that person wasn’t conscious.

“Here.” She poured a cup of cider from the pitcher on the bedside table, and passed it to him. “First off, I’ve been able to get in touch with a couple of our merchant-contacts in Highjorune. Your father’s messenger pigeons, very useful. Especially when I can tell their little minds exactly where to go.” She shook her head. “Unfortunately they don’t know about Mardic and Donni, and I’d like not to break what’s left of their cover story. They know Herald Lores, but it sounds like that fathead – yes, I know him and he’s always been a fathead – up and left for Haven. Not sure why, but knowing him, quite possibly he’s intending to making a formal protest to Randi about how you overrode him.”

“Fortunately, I do outrank him.” Vanyel groaned. “Have we heard anything from Haven?”

“No, but it hasn’t been long enough for a courier to reach us, and I haven’t got the range to reach that Mindspeech-relay in Runeford. Hopefully they’ve got instructions for us on the way.”

“Nothing from Mardic and Donni?”

“Not yet. So far there’ve been a few riots, but the city guard is holding things together well enough.
Their setup is very odd; the noble Great Houses are all outside the city itself. They’re squabbling over who’s in charge, along with the merchants, it seems. Another little gem I learned – our dear Vedric Mavelan is in the city. Arrived sometime yesterday. I don’t dare try to reach Mardic and Donni with Mindspeech, while he’s there, I’d much prefer he doesn’t find out about them. Hopefully if he does hear rumours that there were other Heralds around, he’ll assume they left with Lores.”

“I hate being out of touch like this.” Even on the Border, Vanyel had nearly always been within range of a Mindspeech-relay. *I doubt I can Reach past the stables right now.*

“Trust me, so do I.” Savil sighed heavily.

“What about Tashir?”

There was a pause. “I’m not sure what to think of him,” Savil said finally. “He just about won’t come near me. I’ve left it be – don’t want to scare him any more. Asked Medren to keep a lookout for him, and they seem to get along.” She stroked the tip of her nose, thoughtfully. “Oddly, he’s been in here with you enough times. Seems to be able to tell when someone’s coming, and ducks back to his own room, or goes and hides gods-know-where.”

“Sounds like an awkward houseguest,” Vanyel said ruefully. “Well, he’s been through a lot. Maybe more than just what happened at the Palace. Lores admitted his father beat him.”

“Yes. I saw that conversation in your memories.” Savil shook her head. “And that Mardic said not to Mindtouch him. He’s a very troubled young man, that’s for certain.” She closed her eyes, and he didn’t miss the crease of pain that appeared between her brows. “And looks too much like…” She trailed off.

Vanyel shuddered. *I suppose it’s just coincidence. Resemblances happen.* But it didn’t make it any easier.

“I’ll have to try to talk to him,” he said. “See if I can jog his memory. Have there been any, um, incidents? With his Fetching?”

“Nothing serious. I’ve been trying very hard not to startle him.”

Vanyel nodded – and then thought of something. “Does my father know he’s here?”

“No, thank the gods. I managed to keep his presence quiet until after your father left on his tour of the smallholdings. At which point I had to tell your mother at least, before she got ahold of some rumour that’s even worse than the truth.”

“Oh? How did she react?” Vanyel set down the empty cup, and started trying to ease his legs over to the side of the bed.

“Sympathetically. Poor orphaned child and all that. She’s cursed curious about him, and he won’t go near her any more than he’ll come near me.”

Vanyel winced and bent over his knees as a wave of dizziness hit.

“Easy, ke’chara.” He felt Savil’s hand rubbing his back, and a cool inflow of her energy. Which he was grateful for; he was just as drained as he had been the day he came home from the Border. *I hate Gating.*

“What about his Companion?” he said when he had lifted his head. “How’s their bond?”
“Not strong, yet, and the Companion’s as nervy as the boy. Won’t stay in the stable. Been frightening all the servants, creeping around the edge of the grounds. I don’t even know his name; Kellan’s taken to calling him Ghost, since he acts like one.”

_This keeps getting more complicated._ Vanyel thought about standing up, and decided better of it. He gestured vaguely at the wardrobe. “Savil, can you…”

She stood and retrieved one of the Tayledras robes he had brought. “I’ll ring to get you something to eat. Stay here. You don’t look like you ought to be out of bed, yet.”

“Yes, Ma.” He rolled his eyes. “Can you find Medren for me? I’d like to ask him about Tashir. I hate to ask him to betray his confidences, if the boy has confided in him, but we badly need to know more.”

“I quite agree. It’s very serious, what he was accused of.”

Vanyel hesitated. “Do you…”

“Do I think I did it?” Savil’s eyes stared into the distance. “My gut says no. But we can’t rule it out, can we?”

She left the room, and Vanyel carefully slipped into the robe and belted, moving slowly; even that exertion left him light-headed again. He badly wanted to lie right back down, but he knew he would fall asleep if he did, and he had already wasted days recovering.

_:Yfandes?: he reached. Mindspeech hurt, but not unbearably. He must have interrupted her at something; he felt her surprise, then joy. _:You’re awake! Feeling better, love?:_

He didn’t bother to reply, since there was no answer that would be both truthful and reassuring. 
_:Have you been able to speak to Tashir’s Companion?:_

_:I’ve been trying. He’s very caught up in his Chosen’s mind:_ She hesitated. _:Tashir can’t Mindspeak with him – he’s blocked. Leshya can only sometimes ride along in his mind and watch:_

_:Leshya – that’s his name?: Odd. It meant ‘spirit’ in Tayledras, or something roughly like that. _Tashir reacts badly to Mindtouch – though if he’s a Thoughtsenser, I can’t see it_: Not without going into his mind, the very thing he couldn’t do. _I wonder if someone’s tried to probe him before?:_ Even the un-Gifted would eventually develop unconscious shields, if they were Mindtouched enough.

_:Could be:_

There was a tentative knock on the door. “Uncle Van?”

_:Just a minute, love, I’m going to talk to Medren:_ Vanyel eased himself out of the bed, carefully, and into one of the chairs. “Come in.”

Medren nudged his way into the room, shutting the door behind him. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better.” Definitely a lie, but Medren wasn’t a Thoughtsenser.

“I’m glad. Um, do you remember anything from yesterday?”

“No.” He grimaced. “Gods. Did I do anything awful?”
Medren smirked. “Just, you thought there were Karsite soldiers in the room and tried to attack them, and fell on your face on the floor. Took me and Tashir ages to get you back in bed – you’re heavier than you look.”

He covered his face with both hands. “I am so sorry about that.” Then his brain caught up with the second half. “You’re spending time with Tashir, then?”

“Some.” A shrug. “He’s not the easiest to talk to.”

“I believe it. Savil told you to try to make friends?”

Medren nodded.

“Good. I’d like you to keep doing that.” He hesitated. *Not the best time to bring this up, but I don’t know when will be better.* “Medren, do you remember the conversation we had on the way to the fair? About your Gift, and ethics.”

Medren nodded uncertainly.

“Well, I didn’t get into it at the time – maybe I should have. In short, there are only three times and places in which the use of your Gift is allowed. In a performance, at the orders of the King, and when you’re helping someone who needs help.”

Medren just looked blank.

*I hate to chastise him,* Vanyel thought, *he didn’t mean any harm.* “When you were telling me about your weapons lessons with Jervis,” he said. “You weren’t just talking – you were using your Gift, weren’t you?” He met Medren’s eyes steadily, unflinching. “Did you think at all about whether that was a good idea?”

Medren’s eyes widened, and then he looked down at his hands. “No. I – it wasn’t, was it?” His voice was very small.

“No. And if you abuse your Gift at Bardic, they will burn it out, and turn you out of the Collegium.”

Medren’s shoulders were rising to around his ears. “They will?” he choked. His eyes were suddenly glistening.

“Yes.”

Medren stared at him for a long moment, pleading, desperate – then took a deep breath, and nodded. “I…think I understand. My Gift… It’s not something most people can do, right? It’s like being a bully just ‘cause you’re bigger, isn’t it?”

Vanyel suppressed a sigh of relief. *He’s a good child. He just didn’t know any better, and now he does.* “Yes, exactly like that. You won’t do it again, right?”


“You’re welcome. Now, that brings me to one of the times when you can, and should, use your Gift. A Bard can make people feel a certain way. Rile them up, or calm them down. And Tashir is badly in need of soothing. Does he like music?”

“Seems to.” Medren managed a watery smile. “I…was doing that already, a little. While we were in here with you, mostly. Trying to help him relax.”
“Very good. I’d like you to keep doing that.” He hesitated. “Has he told you anything? About what happened, I mean?”

“No. I tried to ask and he started crying and ran away. So I let it be. I’ve mostly been sort of guarding him, I guess. Trying to keep other people from bothering him. He was telling me about his family—”

:Van!:

Vanyel yelped and clapped both hands to his head. :Savil, be gentle, please:

:Sorry, ke’chara. Donni just Mindtouched me. She’s on the road ten minutes out. Has a message for us, says it’s urgent. Can you come down to the stables?:

Donni? Vanyel blinked. :She’s alone?:

:Yes. Came in a hurry, says she rode half the night. Meet me there:

She pulled back from the link, and Vanyel massaged his forehead. Medren was watching him with wide-eyed concern. “Sorry, Medren. Can you help me get downstairs? Savil needs me at the stables.”

“Of course, Uncle Van!” Medren offered his arm.

They made their slow way down the hallway. Medren was being very solicitous, and Vanyel couldn’t bring himself to mind; it was sweet, and he appreciated the help. I don’t think I could make it down there on my own.

They were halfway down the stairs when–

:FearfearfearTRAPPED! Away! DON’T TOUCH ME!:

It wasn’t quite Mindspeech, and it wasn’t, really, in words – more a wildly projected mental cry of anguish. Vanyel nearly fell; Medren caught him, eyes widening.

“Tashir,” he gasped. “Think he’s in the bower…he’s scared…”

“Gods!” Medren yelped. “I left him in the gardens when Savil came to get me… Treesa must’ve cornered him! She was perishing curious to meet him. I was trying to put her off, didn’t seem like he wanted to.”

“Let’s go.” Alarm giving him renewed strength, Vanyel forged ahead down the stairs with one hand on the banister. Arriving at the landing, he broke into a staggering run.

Savil caught up with them halfway down the hall to Treesa’s little Court. “Van! Did you—”

“I did,” he panted. “Mother must’ve frightened him–” In the distance, he heard a high, feminine shriek, and tried to run faster.

They arrived all together at the door, and stumbled into a bizarre and horrifying scene.

Treesa and her ladies and fosterlings were cowering at one end of the room, shrieking. Tashir was huddled against the opposite wall, arms over his head. In between them, every item of furniture and decoration was hovering in midair, moving in a slow dance; every few seconds, one would fling itself into the wall. Vanyel could see the shattered remains of some ornament on the floor – but no blood. His mother and her ladies-in-waiting were clearly uninjured.
Vanyel slumped against the doorframe, holding his side, and gritted his teeth. *Center and ground.* He reached for his power, channels aching, and clamped an external shield over Tashir, shutting down his rampant Gift.

The flying furniture stopped moving, and drifted slowly to the floor. At the same time, Savil laid a sound-barrier over the huddled group of women. The screams cut off.

*Well, this is a mess.* It was a strain to hold the shield, as drained as he was, and Tashir was clearly still panicking. He tried to project reassurance as hard as he could, but Empathy wasn’t one of his strong Gifts at the best of times.

He turned to Medren. “Can you go try to settle him down?”

Medren approached the youngster calmly, with no sign of fear. “Tashir?” he said. “It’s all right. You’re not in danger–”

Running footsteps. *Damn it, who now?* Jervis, it turned out, with Lissa on his heels. The two of them had clearly been sparring; they were both sweaty and still half-clad in their leather armour and padding.

The armsmaster slowed to a halt in the doorway, and his eyes widened. “What in the name of–”

“Shh,” Vanyel hissed. *The last thing we need is one more person to scare him.*

But, to his surprise, Tashir lowered his arms. *Not Tylendel,* Vanyel had to remind himself again, trying to ignore the sudden ache in his chest. Tashir’s eyes moved to Lissa – showing more alarm – but then he focused on Jervis’ face, and Vanyel’s Empathy picked up a flicker of…trust, and something like hope.

Which made as little sense as the rest of it, but he wasn’t going to turn down a gift like that. “Tashir,” he said. “It’s all right. No one’s angry with you. Mother, ladies – I’m very sorry about this. Tashir is a new-Chosen Herald-trainee. He’s Gifted, and very jumpy. You scared him, when you started screaming, but he won’t hurt you, and it looks like not much was even damaged. Now, can I please get everyone to calm down?”

He met Treesa’s eyes, wide in her white, strained face, and she nodded. “Savil?” he said, and felt his aunt drop the sound-barrier.

Treesa seemed to be trying to smile. “He only b-broke those h-horrible cherubs,” she stammered. “I sh-shan’t miss them.”

Vanyel turned to Jervis, and lowered his voice. “Listen, I don’t know if you’ve met Tashir yet, but he’s been through some bad times, and he’s very frightened. He seems to find you trustworthy. Can I have you and Medren take charge of him, and bring him back to his room?”


“Tashir,” Vanyel said, keeping his voice very level and still projecting serenity as hard as he could. “I’m going to take the shield off you now.” *Because I’m not sure I can hold it another thirty seconds.* “I want you to go with Medren and Jervis. Jervis is our weaponsmaster, and you can trust him.”

Tashir nodded shakily. Vanyel released the shields. The furniture stayed where it was. Tashir glanced around, wild-eyed, then slumped back against the wall.
“Good,” Vanyel said. “Now I’d like you to go back to your rooms, and try to relax a little.” He forced himself to keep his eyes on Tashir’s face, even though, gods, it hurt. Not Tylendel, he reminded himself for the fiftieth time. “Listen – these strange things will stop happening once you calm yourself down. Nothing’s wrong with you; you have a Gift, and it’s no more unnatural than, oh, being able to sing or fight well. I expect you’re feeling exhausted, like you’ve been fighting – well, you have, only with your mind. Does that make sense?” He held Tashir’s eyes until the boy nodded weakly.

:Van: Savil sent. :Donni’s here. We should go:

He closed his eyes for a moment. Too many things happening at once. :I’m coming:

Donni was in the barn, wearily rubbing down Rasha, who was lathered and panting. Clad in boys’ clothes, her face and hair filthy, she was barely recognizable. She glanced up when she saw the two of them, Vanyel leaning heavily on Savil’s arm, and managed a tired smile.

“Heard a commotion,” she said. “What happened?”

“Tashir had an incident,” Savil said. As Donni’s eyes widened with alarm– “Don’t worry, no one was hurt.”

She looked a little relieved. “Something I wanted to warn you about,” she said quietly, and then switched to Mindspeech. :It sounds like he was badly mistreated at home. By both parents. He fought with his father, that night, and Deveran hit him – could be he snapped. And really did what they accused him of:

It felt like a punch to the chest. No, Vanyel wanted to protest, he can’t have, he’s not a murderer– But did he know that? And how much was he biased towards sympathy, because Tashir looked so horrifyingly like ‘Lendel?

Savil shook her head. :I wish I could say that was impossible. He didn’t hurt anyone, just now. Even though he was badly frightened. But his Gift is certainly very strong:

“Well, I’ve warned you,” Donni stroked Rasha’s nose, and reached for the curry-comb hanging on the side of the stall. “I can’t stay long. Don’t want to leave Mardic alone. But there’s a few more things I should tell you.”

“Vedric Mavelan is in town, isn’t he?” Savil said.

Donni’s shoulders twitched. “How do you know?”

“Messenger pigeon to a merchant-contact I have over there. Unfortunately I couldn’t get a message through to you, since they don’t know about you and Mardic. Did your cover survive, by the way? I would’ve tried to reach with Mindspeech, but didn’t want to give you away to Vedric.”

Donni groaned. “You mean I wouldn’t’ve had to ride all this way? Our cover’s intact, we think. Vedric must suspect there was at least one other Herald around, since the guards saw Rasha, but we snuck off under illusion and changed our disguises. We’ve been very careful. Helps that I don’t think Lores ever believed we were really Heralds, and that’s the story he told all his contacts – that some ruffians were impersonating Heralds and he’s going to make an official complaint about it to Randale
and get us hunted down and imprisoned for it.”

Vanyel almost laughed. Silver linings.

“He’s as immune to reason as he ever was.” Savil sighed. “It’s a pity. He’s quite good at those things in his very narrow range of competence.”

Donni raised an eyebrow, but didn’t protest. “I waited a bit to leave, so we could see what he’d get up to. Seems like he’s trying to cozy up to the locals. Offering his help to the city Guard and the nobles who’re left. I wouldn’t’ve expected it to work, given how much they hate Baires, but…well, people are very shaken, there’s no one really in charge, and he’s come in promising answers. He’s sent off an official diplomatic notice to Haven, requesting that we give Tashir into his custody.”

“Damn,” Savil said mildly. “Randi will have to respond to this.” She glanced at Vanyel. “What do you think he’ll do?”

Vanyel tried to think. “He’ll stall. He trusts me. But he can’t keep them off us forever.” He shook his head. “Not when it’s volatile enough over there that Lineas or Baires could decide to declare war on us for it.” Not that either kingdom was large enough to present a real threat, but it would be a distraction they couldn’t afford – and, tiny or not, Baires had enough mages to cause a great deal of damage.

“We need answers,” Savil said. “Donni? Did you and Mardic have any luck investigating the, er, crime scene?”

She shook her head. “No. Hate to admit it, but we’re over our heads. We need your skills.” She scratched at her dirt-crusted hair. “Oh, another thing. Vedric Mavelan was trying to get through Van’s barrier on the Palace. Didn’t succeed this time, but he’s Adept-strength at least.” She hesitated. “And I got close enough to him to get a bit of a passive read on his aura. He’s used blood-magic before. Not recently, but still.”

Savil glanced over at Vanyel. “How long will the shield hold up?”

He frowned. “I put a lot of power into it. The node under the Palace is incredible. But it won’t hold forever against a determined attack. And you know blood-magic is very good for getting through shields.”

Savil was silent for a moment. “What do you think his endgame is?” she said finally. “There’s a leadership vacuum – figure he thinks he can take over?”

“It’s possible.” Donni hung up the curry-comb and slumped against the side of the stall. “I should go. Need to get back.”

Savil took her shoulder. “Stay and rest a minute. Surely you can spare the time for some food and a bath–”

“Don’t want a bath.” Donni grimaced. “You’ve got no idea how long it took me to get this much verisimilitude for my orphan street thief disguise.”

“Well, rest a little anyway.” Savil pulled her over to a bale of hay and pushed her down onto it. “We’re not done planning. Van and I need to figure out what we’re doing next.” She glanced at Vanyel again. “Ke’chara, are you up for trying the Mindspeech-relay?”

:No: Yfandes interrupted before he could even check his reserves. :I won’t let you try it. Not for another day or two:
He sighed. “Yfandes says I’d better not.”

“So we’re still out of touch, unless they’ve sent a courier. Donni, it sounds like I need to be there. I’d like to take Van with me, if there’s any possibility we’re going to have to fight Vedric. Meaning I’d like to wait until he’s over the Gate-backlash, and ideally until we have some instructions from Randale. In particular, whether he wants us going in officially, or undercover. There are advantages and disadvantages to both.” She rubbed the tip of her nose. “We’d best have a way to stay in touch. Why don’t I introduce you to some of Withen’s pigeons? They’re clever birds, they’ll be able to find–”

Heavy footsteps at the door. Vanyel spun around.

“What in hell’s name is the meaning of this?” his father demanded, saddlebags falling onto the straw with a thud.

He must think Donni’s some homeless stray. Vanyel grimaced.

Savil rescued him. “I’m afraid we’ve had a bit of a situation in the last few days, Withen. Things are heating up in Lineas. Not sure if you’ve heard…?”

He blinked at her. “Heard what?”

“We need to talk.” She caught Vanyel’s eye, then turned back to Withen. “Why don’t you get cleaned up and I’ll meet you in your study in a half-candlemark? This is Herald-Mage Donni, by the way. One of my former students; you must’ve met her briefly back in seven eighty-nine. She’s been undercover over there. Rode out to give us an update.”

Withen peered dubiously at her. Donni just smiled brightly and stuck out a grimy hand. “Very pleased to meet you, Lord Ashkevron.”

He shook his head, like he was trying to clear it, and then gripped her arm for a moment – with an expression of distaste that he couldn’t quite hide. “Herald-Mage.”

“We need to finish debriefing,” Savil said, “and then I’ll fill you in.” She turned back to Donni. “Come with me.”

Karis snapped awake, and lay perfectly still, assessing her surroundings. It was dark, and quiet. The softness of a feather bed was under her, and she felt fine silk sheets against her fingertips. Her internal sense of time told her it was sometime in the early hours of the morning.

She relaxed, slowly. She was safe, at least safer than she had been in months. It wouldn’t be the first time a servant’s footsteps in the hall or the cry of a nightbird had woken her; after their long, dangerous journey, she was still hair-triggered.

Go back to sleep, she told herself. She would need her wits about her in the morning, when she sat down with several of the senior Councillors and Heralds to negotiate a few more clauses of their prospective treaty.

–She twitched as she heard the bedclothes rustle, and felt the mattress bow slightly near her feet. Eyes flying open, she snatched the dagger from under her pillow and sat up–
The enormous cat at the foot of her bed meowed and sat back on its heels, licking one paw. Pale fur shone in the moonlight. Its –

“Oh.” She felt a little foolish. Then the confusion registered. “What– How did you get in here?”

Hello, Karis: The voice was deep, rich, female – and definitely in her head.

She yelped, and clamped a hand over her mouth.

Are you frightened of me? Please, don’t be: The cat set down its paw and began licking one shoulder.

“What are you?” she breathed.

Surely you recognize me:

Her breath caught. “You’re a Suncat. I, I thought you were a legend…” The Suncats were said to be wise spirits, representatives of Vkandis.

Sometimes legends are based in truth: The cat lifted its head, luminous eyes fixed on her. My name is Sola. I am here to advise and help you. You have been very brave, Karis – but you need not be alone any longer:

To her surprise, her eyes burned, and there was an ache in her throat. “Sunlord,” she breathed, closing her eyes. “My Vkandis. Do you – do you approve of what I am trying to do?”

Of course our Lord approves. It’s a bloody mess, what’s been happening:

She almost laughed; the cat sounded so irritated, reminding her of her maiden-aunt Ulricha, a scholar – gods, she was probably dead now. Along with her entire family. It had never seemed like there was time to grieve.

You will have to be strong: the cat said in her head. I know it’s a great deal that He asks of you:

She swiped at her eyes. “This servant of Vkandis is honoured,” she breathed.

But you needn’t be strong always. You have lost much, little one, and you could not say goodbye to those you loved: The cat slunk closer, and curled her long body over Karis’ pillow.

Her sympathy didn’t help. It was even harder to hold back tears, Karis thought – and then she gave in and sobbed, silently, reaching to hug the creature to her chest. Sola let her, which was most un-cat like.

Oh, don’t expect me to let you cry all over me just anytime: Dry amusement in the mental voice. This is an exception. But you need it, don’t you?:

Oh, she needed it, more than she had realized. So long that she had tried to be a pillar of strength for everyone, even when she was terrified. She had felt so alone. I want to go home, she thought – brokenly, pointlessly.

And you will. You will have a home again. But you must earn it:
“I need to talk to you,” Vanyel said.

Jervis glanced up from where he had been sitting on his bed in his tiny room, cleaning a leather jerkin. “What? Oh, s’you. What is it?”

It was the next morning. Donni had ridden out as soon as they finished speaking, not even waiting to finish eating the hamper of food Savil had pushed on her. Vanyel couldn’t blame her; he wouldn’t have wanted to leave Mardic alone and out of Mindspeech range in a strange city any longer than necessary, either.

He and Savil had sat down with Withen, afterwards, and she had explained the whole mess to him – somewhat to his surprise, she had been almost completely honest, telling him not only who Tashir was, but what he’d been accused of doing. And further to his surprise, Father hadn’t reacted badly to the thought of Tashir, possibly a murderer, staying in his guest-room.

After that, Savil had packed him off to bed, despite his protests – and, to tell the truth, he had been utterly worn out and had needed her help just to get back to his guest-room. At which point he had slept another fourteen candlemarks. Wasted time, that they couldn’t afford…

When he had finally dragged himself out of bed and down to the kitchen, he found Savil there in conference with Withen and Lissa. She alerted him that a courier had finally arrived, a young Herald called Sera, and given them some rather vague instructions, which amounted mostly to ‘you have permission to cross the Border’, ‘please find out what happened’, and ‘for the gods’ sake don’t start a war’ – but she hadn’t been able to say whether Randi would prefer they go in officially or undercover. At least she had informed them that they were moving the Mindspeech-relay, Herald Nina, which was good to know; Vanyel would be able to try contacting her sooner, if the range wasn’t so long.

By the time he woke up, Savil had already sent her off again with a sealed package containing a detailed write-up of everything they had learned so far.

“Can we come in?” Vanyel said, taking a step to the side so that Jervis could see Medren trailing on his heels.

Jervis seemed embarrassed; his craggy face reddened. “Jus’a moment, lemme clean up.” He stood up and started tossing clothes and armour from his bed into the open chest in the corner, then reached behind the table and pulled out a canvas folding stool.

Vanyel carefully closed the door behind them, then gestured for Medren to take the chair, and claimed the stool. “First of all, thank you both for keeping an eye on Tashir,” he said. He’d been a little alarmed when he woke up, realizing that he’d handed Tashir over to the man who had abused him for half his childhood – but, halfway out of bed to run downstairs and confront Jervis, he had made himself stop and think about it.

I made a decision to trust him.

Jervis had no reason at all to abuse Tashir, and plenty of reasons not to.

The two of them nodded.

“I need to ask if he’s said anything, to either of you, that could shine some clarity on this situation. For one, we’ve learned that his parents mistreated him rather badly—”

“What?” Medren interrupted. “No! His parents were kind and wonderful!”

What? Vanyel stared at him. “No. Herald Lores admitted himself that Deveran had hit him before, just not in public. And Mardic found out from a Palace servant that his mother beat him, when she
was afraid of her relatives.”

Jervis glowered at him. “What are you on about? S’not what he told us at all–”

Vanyel held up a hand. “Stop.” He took a deep breath and let it out. Anger wouldn’t help. “It seems we’ve heard different stories, and we’re going to have to find a way to square them. Either Tashir’s lying, or Lores and the Palace servant were both lying, and I can’t think why they would.”

Silence.

“Maybe Lores wanted to make himself look–” Medren started.

“Make himself look better? It only made him look like a fool. A callous one – he didn’t intervene at all, said it wasn’t his business.”

“But why would Tashir–” Jervis interjected. His ears were going red, and a vein pulsed in his forehead.

“Why would Tashir lie?” Vanyel fought to keep his voice light. “I’m not sure, but…well, I’ve seen this sort of thing before. Parents abusing their children.” It had come up more than a few times on circuit. “The parents often tell their children that no one will believe them, and that if they do try to tell anyone, people will be able to tell how awful they are and how they deserve it. If Tashir’s family did treat him badly, he might well be ashamed of it. Might think that neither of you would want to be his friend if you knew.”

“But…” Medren stammered. “How could he think that?”

“Because it’s all he’s ever known.” Vanyel shrugged. “Children in that kind of situation can grow up with a very warped sense of the world.” Poor boy. “Anyway. Can you tell me exactly what he has said to you?”

The story that emerged, between the two of them, couldn’t have been more different from the fragmented version Vanyel had heard from Donni. Tashir’s parents, though their marriage had not originally been a love-match, had fallen deeply in love – but had needed to hide it from the outside world, to avoid giving the Mavelans a handle on Deveran through Ylyna. But according to what Tashir had told them, his father had been deeply proud of him, and had only disowned him under intense political pressure from his advisors. His mother had supported her husband behind the scenes, while maintaining a facade that she didn’t care for him, and had doted on Tashir as well as his siblings.

Vanyel frowned, and rubbed his forehead. “Well. I don’t know which story is true, but someone’s lying here.”

“Tashir’s a good lad,” Jervis said stubbornly. “He trusts us. Wouldn’t lie to us!”

Maybe he trusts you less than you think. What would trust even mean, to a child who had been through that? “Maybe you’re right,” he allowed. “I’m going to find out, either way.”

“How?” Medren said.

He sighed. I would rather not do this today, but I don’t see a choice. “I’m going to ask Tashir. Under Truth spell.”

Jervis leaned forward, scowling. “You’d put him through that? An interrogation?”
“It probably will upset him, and I wish I didn’t have to. I’d like both of you around, afterwards, because he will need comforting.”

Jervis made a disgusted noise.

Vanyel stood up. “I don’t want to do this either, but this is a very serious situation. He’s accused of murdering several hundred people. Medren, can you go find Tashir for me, and, hmm, bring him out to that little sitting-area in the orchard?” Better to do it away from people. He felt stronger today, and he thought he could hold a shield on Tashir no matter how out of control he got, but if his Gift really was strong enough to have torn apart every living being in the Palace–

Don’t borrow trouble, he told himself firmly. :’Fandes?: he sent. :Can you meet me there as well, and try to get Leshya to hover somewhere nearby?: He wasn’t sure he wanted the boy’s Companion there for the conversation itself; to some extent, he wanted Tashir to be frightened, to see if it would trigger his Gift. As much as he hated doing that to anyone.

:Are you sure about this, love?: Concern in Yfandes’ mindvoice.

:No: he admitted. :But I can’t see I’ve got a choice:

Ten minutes later, Vanyel waited on one of the benches by the ornamental pond. It was a sunny day, and the air was pleasantly warm. Willow leaves trailed into the water. He looked away, breathing through the sudden ache in his chest; it was too reminiscent of another orchard, another pond, hundreds of miles and over a decade away.

‘Lendel.

He wasn’t looking forwards to spending any length of time talking to Tashir. Put away your ghosts, he told himself firmly. It was no time to be distracted by ancient history and pointless grief.

“Uncle Van?” Medren’s voice. He looked up. Tashir was trailing behind his nephew, head bowed.

“Thank you, Medren. Can you go wait inside?” He took a deep breath. “Tashir, come here, please.”

“Herald Vanyel?” The boy looked uncertainly at him, a lock of dark golden hair falling across one eye. Not ‘Lendel, he reminded himself again, trying to remember to breathe. “You wanted to talk to me?”

“Yes.” It took a great deal of effort to keep his voice from shaking. He unshielded a little, reaching out as hard as he could with his unreliable Empathy; he needed every detail he could pick up. “I need to ask you some things.” He took another deep breath. “You know that you’re accused of murdering your entire family.”

Tashir shook his head helplessly, tears sprouting in his eyes. Vanyel forced himself not to look away.

“You don’t remember,” he said. “Which means I can’t be sure that you didn’t do it, and block out the memory of it because it was so awful. So we need to talk, and I need to see if I can get you to remember a little more.”

Tashir’s shoulders had risen up around his ears. He was breathing hard. “I d-don’t remember! I
swear!”

“I know. Let’s start with something else.” Center and ground. He recited the rhyme in his head, nine times, summoning the *vrondi* to hover over the boy’s head. Just the first-level version of the spell, for now; he would see if Tashir told the truth on his own. “Tell me about your father,” Vanyel said. “How did he treat you?”

Tashir stared at him, wide-eyed. “H-he loved me…he was g-good to us…”

The blue halo of light winked out.

“You’re lying,” Vanyel said flatly. “I’m a Herald. I can tell whether or not you’re telling the truth, so you had better not lie to me.”

Tashir seemed to curl in on himself. Around him, the fallen leaves began to stir, then dance, whipping into a whirlwind. They hammered at Vanyel’s Whites, but leaves weren’t enough to hurt him.

“Enough,” he said coldly, and clamped down an external shield. His reserves were still low; he reached for a node. “Now, tell me again. This time, I want the truth.” *Gods forgive me, I hate playing the interrogator.* “If you don’t tell me, Tashir, I can *make* you. But I’d rather you make the right choice on your own. Can you do that?”

Tashir swallowed, his chest heaving. Slowly, haltingly, he forced out a story that, this time, matched the bits and pieces Vanyel and the others had learned from Donni. Deveran had always ignored him, from the time he left the nursery. He had been terrified of his father – and of Ylyna, who had alternated between suffocating affection and furious beatings. His siblings had closed him out. Only a few of the servants had ever been kind to him.

Tashir’s feelings about it were conflicted. Vanyel thought he must have had some other Mind-Gift, even if it was blocked, given the strength of his projected emotions. In any case, it was clear that he had loved his parents, in spite of everything. Had desperately craved his father’s approval and his mother’s crumbs of kindness. *I know something about that,* Vanyel thought dully. Gods, it hurt to listen – and to push back the memories that crowded forwards in his head. Withen, ashamed of him. Jervis, looming over him with sword raised. *It’s in the past,* he had to keep reminding himself.

Several times Tashir broke down in tears, and Vanyel only waited for him to calm himself, keeping his expression icy even though it was all he could do not to cry as well. Several times the boy’s Gift manifested again, straining against Vanyel’s shield, but never near strong enough to break through. Tashir froze whenever it happened – but it was clear that, even if he wasn’t in control, he was entirely conscious and aware of what was happening.

Finally, having extracted as much of the history as he could, Vanyel waited for Tashir to catch his breath after another fit of sobbing.

“I want you to try to remember what your father said to you, that night,” he said, very calmly. “Before you started fighting. What was it that upset you?”

Tashir stared at him, despondent, tearstained cheeks and swollen eyes. Vanyel ached to go to him, offer what comfort he could. *Not yet,* he told himself firmly. Answers first, no matter how much he hated doing this.

After a long moment, Tashir shook his head, eyes fixed on the ground. “I’m s-sorry, Herald. I can’t remember.”
Vanyel invoked the rhyme again, this time *pushing* a little, and the halo settled deeper into Tashir’s golden curls. “Try,” he insisted. “Imagine you’re standing there, in front of the high table, your father’s just called you up and he has something to tell you. What’s he saying?”

Shoulders trembling with concentration, Tashir pressed both hands to his face. He was silent for a long moment. “Don’t remember,” he mumbled finally. “Don’t. I don’t.” His Gift flared again, pulsing at Vanyel’s shield.

Vanyel stood up. *I can’t keep up this act much longer.* “Listen, boy. Vedric Mavelan is in Highjorune, and he would like us to hand you over, so he can investigate what happened. You’re not Valdemaran, and it’s quite possible that insisting on holding onto you could get us into a war with Baires. Which we can’t afford. I’m going to stall as long as I can, but I’m afraid that my King may order me to do what your uncle asks.”

It was a lie, of course. He was quite sure that Randi wouldn’t order anything of the sort, and he was *certain* he would disobey such an order anyway. Heralds protected their own, and whatever else might have happened, the boy was a prospective Herald.

But Tashir didn’t know that. The blood drained out of his face; he made a quiet whimpering sound, eyes staring into nothing.

Vanyel poured more energy into the shield, waiting for the boy’s Gift to rise, at a level that could tear several hundred people to bits–

Instead, a moment later he found himself sprinting forwards, catching Tashir under the arms as his eyes rolled back and he collapsed in a dead faint.

:'Fandes!: he sent, frantically. :Get help, and bring his Companion here NOW: Trembling, he carried Tashir to the bench and laid him across it, legs propped up, supporting the boy’s head in his lap. “Tashir,” he said, half desperately, pushing the boy’s hair aside, resting his fingertips on his clammy forehead. “Tashir, wake up.” He reached out with his weak Healing Gift. “Tashir, please.”

Yfandes arrived first, Leshya on her heels. The young stallion pranced nervously, looking at Vanyel with large blue eyes that he thought were disapproving.

“I’m sorry!” he said. “Can you help him?”

Yfandes nosed at the stallion’s shoulder, and he settled a little, then came up to the bench and rested his nose on Tashir’s stomach.

A few seconds later, Tashir stirred, coughing.

Vanyel squeezed his shoulder. “Hey, it’s all right. I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

Tashir’s eyes flew open, his pupils dilated and unfocused. He tried to sit up. Vanyel’s Empathy was picking up diffuse, incredible terror.

“Shh,” Vanyel murmured, gently holding him down and trying to project calm. “Just relax. You’re all right.”

Tashir blinked, sense coming back into his eyes. “W-what?”

Vanyel took a deep breath. “Tashir, we’re *not* going to send you to Vedric. We’re going to keep you safe. I promise. Really and truly.”
Tashir stared at him for a moment – and then struggled up and buried his face in Vanyel’s chest, wrapping his arms around him, sobbing.

Gods. Vanyel cautiously patted his back. It ached, having him so close, warm and solid and almost like ‘Lendel. Almost but not quite.

Running footsteps “What’s going on?” Jervis’ angry voice. “Gods, what did you do to him?”

“Scared him rather more than I intended to,” Vanyel admitted. It felt hard to breathe. So easy to imagine he was holding ‘Lendel, alive and real and there. He tried to gently dislodge the boy. “Um, Tashir, Jervis is here, do you want to…”

Tashir only clung to him harder.

He looked up at Jervis again. “He admitted Donni’s story was true. But I don’t think he killed them. Tashir? I really and truly believe you’re innocent of this, all right?” I pushed him to his limits, and he didn’t go berserk, he collapsed. He felt incredibly guilty, now. “I’m sorry,” he added. “We had to know. But we will keep you safe, all right? You’re Chosen, you’re going to be a Herald – you might as well be Valdemaran, and I don’t care what Vedric Mavelan says, we’re not going to let him hurt you.”

“Uncle Van?” Medren, running up. “Are you all right? Is Tashir?”

“We’re both fine,” Vanyel said heavily. “Tashir’s a bit shaken up, though.” And so am I. The warm smell of Tashir’s hair was incredibly distracting. He couldn’t believe himself; it was so incredibly inappropriate to be attracted to the boy. But he couldn’t stop it, any more than he could stop his heart from beating.

He peeled Tashir’s arms away. “Why don’t you go with Medren and Jervis,” he said, firmly. A statement, not a question. “Maybe go sit with your Companion in the stables for a bit; he can help you feel better. I imagine you’ve got a headache coming – Medren, could you get him some willowbark? No, Tashir, take your time – sit for a bit before you try to stand, all right?”

Jervis was giving him a very cold, disapproving look. Damn, Vanyel thought dully. Just when they had been starting to, maybe, be friends. Damn Tashir for lying… Not that he could really blame him.

:He needs a Mindhealer: he sent to Yfandes. :I think I just made things worse. I shouldn’t have tried to question him when he was already this traumatized:

:I know. Though I doubt you made things all that much worse. We might have to send him to Haven, for that – though it seems his Companion is a bit of a Mindhealer. He may be able to help:

:What?: He had never heard of that before. :That happens?:

:Sometimes. When it’s needed: The caginess in her mindvoice was clear.

It was certainly needed now. Vanyel leaned over and rested his elbows on his knees as he watched Jervis carefully helping Tashir to his feet and start slowly making their way back to the keep, still glaring daggers back over his shoulder.

:There’s another thing I meant to tell you: she sent. :I’ve been able to speak to Leshya, a little. He doesn’t fear Mindtouch the way Tashir does. And I’ve been able to see a few things, through him. Like this: She Sent an image. An older man, in practice armour, with a marked resemblance to Jervis – and a feeling of profound trust.
:Deveran’s armsmaster, maybe?:

:That’s my guess. Might explain why Tashir was so quick to trust Jervis:

It made sense. It was one piece of luck, that there was someone here at Forst Reach who Tashir was inclined to be comfortable around. :I need to talk to Savil: he sent. He was exhausted, physically, magically and emotionally, but the day was far from over.
Chapter Seven

Tantras passed Randi the pages of notes he had prepared, and laid a hand on his shoulder. “You’re sure about this?”

“As sure as I’ve ever been of anything.” Randi’s brown eyes were steady, his mouth a firm line. “You know we need this.”

“I know.” And I hate it as much as you do, and I’m sorry.

“It could be worse, Tran.” Randi smiled crookedly. “She’s very sensible, and I’ve been able to be frank with her.”

Tantras nodded. Shavri had filled him in on their conversation – and what she hadn’t said. Randi didn’t look ill, especially. Certainly Karis, who had only been in Haven a few weeks, wouldn’t notice anything. And they were keeping it from her. From both of them. He still wasn’t sure if it was the right choice.

“Wish Savil was here,” he said. “Or Van.” Either of them could intimidate some of the more hidebound members of the Council.

“Same. But I’m glad they’re out west, given what’s going on in Lineas.” Randi shook his head. “Wish we knew more. Or could be confident that we’d at least have some warning if things do explode. We do not need this.” He ran a hand over his hair, the one gesture of nervousness Tantras ever saw from him. “No help for it. Let’s deal with the problem we can do something about, and worry about the ones we can’t later. Ready?” He jerked his chin at the door.

“If you are.”

“Then let’s go.”

The Council meeting room was entirely packed, buzzing with side conversations. Tantras wasn’t sure he had ever seen such perfect attendance.

Karis was already seated, in the place next to where Randi would sit, accompanied by her seneschal. Jaysen and Keiran sat on the other side.

Randi made his way to the chair, and nodded to Karis. He laid his notes on the table, but remained standing. Tantras settled in next to him. Heads turned, the hum of chatter fading to silence.

“Thank you for coming,” Randi’s voice was calm, but that strange ringing-steel authority was in it. “We have a major announcement to make, and a vote to run. Herald Tantras will present the major points of our prospective treaty and alliance. First, however, I would like to hand the floor over to Princess Karis, heir-presumptive to Karse.” He used the Valdemaran titles deliberately and strategically, Tantras thought. When had every word Randi said become so carefully considered?

He saw Karis bow her head, lips moving silently. Then Randi held out his arm to her, and she pushed her chair back and stood, holding her back erect and her chin high. She was dressed simply and modestly, in a gown that mostly resembled the conservative end of Valdemaran court fashion –
save for the high embroidered collar, which was entirely Karsite in design, and a fine shawl that bore the Sun-in-Glory. Her dark hair was pulled back and piled on top of her head, pinned in place by a jewel clip that bore the same stylized sun’s rays. Again, Tantras knew that every part of this display had been designed with care.

“Thank you, King Randale.” Her accent was less noticeable than it had been two weeks ago; she had been practicing with a tutor. “I am honoured to speak before the Council of Valdemar, of this proposal that I believe will benefit both of our countries.” She must have planned and memorized this speech, for the syntax to be so smooth. “This war that my father began is a shameful thing, and I hope that we might be united in bringing it to an end. I do believe that together, our two countries will be stronger, and our people will flourish…”

Tantras’ mind drifted to the treaty, which he had been up reviewing through the early hours of the morning. The most contentious clauses, unsurprisingly, had to do with the role of the divine in their agreement. Karse had a mandated state religion; their priesthood of Vkandis was and always had been an important part of their administration. Valdemar had, encoded in law, that there would never be an official government position on matters of worship – their citizens could participate any order they chose, or with none, and there were a few dozen competing temples in Haven alone. It had been as incomprehensible to Karis as the mandatory veneration of Vkandis Sunlord was to Tantras. She had suggested that Vkandis’ priests were the equivalent of Heralds, which Tantras felt very dubious about; it didn’t seem the same at all.

In the end, there had been only one compromise she would accept, and Tantras expected it to be a hard pill for the Council to swallow. Written into the text of the treaty itself, their alliance was not merely with Karis’ person, nor with the land of Karse. Valdemar would be declaring a formal alliance with a god. He wasn’t even sure what that meant, if it meant anything more than empty words.

*By my own authority I will not rule,* Karis had said. *By the indulgence of Vkandis only, caretaker of His land and people I will be. Recognized this we must.*

They were so different. And Karis was more open-minded than most Karsites, or so he suspected. She recognized the fallibility of the priesthood – or, at least, she wanted to purge the corrupt leadership, while insisting that the structure of the order was to remain.

She met the Valdemaran attitudes with bafflement, but not hostility, and he thought she was genuinely curious. She spoke a prayer before every meal, but never insisted on anyone else joining her. He didn’t doubt that a number of her allies in Sunhame would be considerably more hidebound, and perhaps resistant to the alliance. She seemed fairly certain that she could win them over anyway, and oddly, he trusted her. For all her unassuming appearance, she seemed like the sort to inspire deep loyalty.

*Like Randi,* he thought. *I would follow him anywhere.* He wasn’t sure when that had become true. Not that he had ever doubted Randi’s worthiness as King, exactly – but he hadn’t always trusted him so absolutely, either. If not for his unfaltering support for the alliance, Tantras thought he would have been a lot more dubious.

But if anyone could make this work, it was the two of them.

It was going to be a very interesting next few months.
Wind howling through a frozen pass—

“Herald Vanyel.”

“Leareth.”

(It was unexpected, though Vanyel wasn’t sure why; it had been several weeks since the last dream-conversation, and they were probably due for another. Not the best time for it, but not the worst either. He’d had a few days to recover from the challenging conversation with Tashir, and get his head together.)

“I have been hearing some very interesting rumours,” Leareth said. “That your kingdom might ally with Karse to the south.”

“Of course you have.” Vanyel half-bowed, ironically. “You’re very good at piecing together rumours. It’s quite impressive.” He didn’t think there was any reason not to confirm it.

Leareth returned the bow. “I will be very impressed, if your King can succeed in this. Karse is a strange place, and they are not easy to work with.”

Vanyel smirked. “You’ve tried to operate there before, then? Not surprised you found them difficult. They’re very religious, and I know how you feel about gods.”

“Their Vkandis is quite meddlesome. It is irritating.”

Vanyel almost laughed. “He didn’t seem to have any opinion on the war.”

(The Karsites seemed to believe that their priest-mages’ power came from Vkandis. They’d had acolytes carrying the Sun-in-Glory into every battle. It didn’t make much sense to Vanyel, to attribute Gifts to the divine, and he was pretty sure he would have noticed the actual intervention of a god – and that he couldn’t have held it off.)

“No. It is interesting, that. Where and when the gods choose to intervene, to play their games with our lives. They work from a distance, I think, pulling the puppet-strings of mortals who may not even know that they serve a force beyond themselves.” Leareth paused, his expression thoughtful across the expanse of blowing snow. “I suspect you are the result of a meddling god. Your power is so improbable. I wonder why.”

(To stop you, Vanyel thought. Something was tugging at his memory, but he couldn’t draw it out. It was uncomfortable, hearing Leareth talk about it so openly. Inhuman forces working behind the scenes…walking unawares through the machinations of distant gods… It made him deeply uneasy.)

“You seem pleased about the alliance,” he said. “I would’ve thought it was a bad thing, for your plans. In fact, I’d expect you to be working as hard as you can to prevent this. If it does fall apart, I’ll suspect your hand in it.”

There was a brief silence, as they watched each other.

“I cannot be displeased by the competence of others,” Leareth said slowly. “It is so difficult to coordinate, to build trust and truly work together. It is precious, when it happens. Why would I wish to destroy such a thing?”

(Because you don’t trust anyone, Vanyel thought, because you think you’re the only one who can do
this – and, sometimes, he couldn’t blame the man. From Leareth’s perspective, everyone else must seem like inexperienced children.)

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised anymore, when you say things like that,” he said quietly. “Anyway. You said before that you’re pleased I have the ear of the King. If you’d like to make any suggestions, on how to manage this alliance – well, I certainly won’t take anything you say at face value, and I can’t promise we’ll put any of it into action. But I would listen.”

(It might flatter Leareth’s pride, he thought. The man seemed pleased, even proud, whenever something that he’d ultimately taught Vanyel ended up put to use. And seemed genuinely curious about how those policies would work out. All information was worth having, even coming from an enemy. Do I even think of him as an enemy now, he wondered. It was complicated.)

Leareth smiled. “Perhaps I do have some suggestions.”

“Well, we’ve got to make a decision,” Savil said.

They were in Vanyel’s guest-room again. Vanyel sat cross-legged on the bed, and Lissa was sprawled on her stomach beside him, chin propped on her elbows. Savil had taken the chair.

It had been a week since Vanyel had Gated in, and not until yesterday had he felt sufficiently recovered to try reaching Herald Nina in Sleepy Hollow. To tell the truth, he’d pushed himself too hard, trying to interrogate Tashir when he was still so drained – he had been sick with backlash for the rest of the day, and Yfandes had been very firm about waiting until his channels were healed and his reserves replenished.

They were in intermittent contact with Mardic and Donni, via the messenger-pigeons. Vedric Mavelan was still in the city, and had apparently helped restore a semblance of order. Had been cozying up to the locals, with some success. Mardic and Donni’s cover had held; it seemed that Lores hadn’t even remembered their names, and his vehement protests to the guard officials before he left had only mentioned Vanyel.

Lores’ protests might have helped Valdemar’s case, overall. It seemed that the Lineans weren’t quite ready to declare a Border-war over the matter, but according to Mardic and Donni, the tension was rising. Not the least because Vedric was publicly taking a dim view of Valdemar’s handling of the situation.

Vanyel had finally contacted Nina without difficulty, and passed on everything they knew up-chain. In return, she had passed on a message that the alliance with Karse, or rather with Karis, had been formally approved by the Council, and they were in talks to finalize the rather long treaty. Vanyel had passed on a few abridged suggestions; his conversation with Leareth had been quite enlightening. Yet again, Randi will think I’m some genius, when I only stand on the shoulders of one.

They’d had a couple more exchanges, with Nina contacting Tran and then relaying; it had made for a considerable delay, but was still much easier for Vanyel than Reaching all the way to Haven.

In short, Herald Lores had just arrived in Haven, a day after the courier, who had passed him en route – it seemed that Lores’ Companion was still miffed with him, and had been conspiring to slow their progress. Lores had apparently been quite shocked that Vanyel, and Tashir, weren’t in Haven – and that Randi had stood by Vanyel fully. I’m not sure if he should have, Vanyel thought. Given
everything else, it might have been better, politically speaking, for Randi to disavow his actions in removing Tashir from the scene.

Randi had been forced to take official notice of the complaint, though, as well as the diplomatic note from Vedric Mavelan, to which he had apparently sent a noncommittal ‘we don’t know anything about this yet and we’ll definitely look into it’ reply. Unsurprisingly, he didn’t have much time to spend on the situation. He had informed them via Tantras and Nina that he was giving Vanyel and Savil full authority to investigate however they saw fit and come to a resolution, and would send formal paperwork for this with the courier. He had also given them command of Lissa’s two platoons, and Lissa the authority to request additional troops from Deercreek.

Informally, he had warned them that he couldn’t stall Vedric’s protests indefinitely. *Don’t start a war,* was the subtext, and he didn’t need to remind them that this was the worst possible time for *any* of this to be happening.

All of that was spinning around in Vanyel’s head.

“We have to go in,” he said out loud. “The only question is whether we do it openly. And if we do – some of us, or all of us?”

Silence for a moment.

“Doesn’t sound like Heralds are very popular over there, right now,” Lissa offered.

“No, it doesn’t, does it?” Lores might have read the tide before it turned, and decided to get out before he got himself lynched. A coward, but maybe a sensible one.

“One argument to go in openly,” Savil pointed out. “They could really use some official peacekeeping in Highjorune. We *are* their ally, and there’s a great deal of confusion – it sounds like a lot of their regular logistics fell apart when the leadership did, and Vedric hasn’t gotten everything running again. It would be entirely justified for us to ride in with support, and it might buy us some goodwill.” She paused. “On the other hand, they’re already moving troops to fortify the Border, so I don’t know how likely they are to let us across at all.”

“I have an idea,” Vanyel offered. “If we have Lissa move her people to just across the Border, they could travel from there to Highjorune in a day.” A long, hard day’s march on foot, but possible, and maybe Withen could lend them horses. “We can have the courier come meet you, with all the official paperwork – and meanwhile Savil and I will go in undercover and start examining the Palace. If we find anything, especially that clears Tashir’s name, we’ll go public. At that point, if we needed your support, one of us could ride out as a courier, or we could send a pigeon.”

Lissa’s head jerked up. “You’re suggesting I camp my people next a hostile Border?”

Savil smiled thinly. “Technically, we have the authority to *order* you to. I think it’s a good idea. Van and I do have to go in.”

Mardic and Donni had been doing excellent work keeping a finger on the pulse of the city itself, Vanyel thought, but ultimately, no one in Highjorune *knew* the answers that they needed. All the witnesses to the event were dead. Except Tashir. The only answers left would be inside the ruins of the Palace.

He sighed. “We’re pretty sure he didn’t do it. Right? We’re all on the same page, there? But that means we have *no idea* what did happen. Gods – if there’s someone or something else in the city that did this, they could do it again. And I don’t think we’ll get anything else out of Tashir, at least not
for a long time.” He had attempted another, more gentle questioning session, trying to jog the boy’s memory, without success. Since then, he had been spending a few candlemarks a day with him, trying to teach him some of the basics of controlling his Gift, and encouraged him to go riding with Leshya as much as possible. If they could un-block his Mindspeech, and let him speak to his Companion, maybe Leshya could help him access those memories, but he wasn’t hopeful.

“He needs more help than we can give him,” Savil said quietly. “Poor boy. That brings us to another problem – I don’t exactly feel comfortable about leaving him alone here. Not when he’s still so nervy.”

Vanyel hadn’t thought of that. He shivered. If Tashir was startled again and his Gift got out of control, without himself or Savil there to shield him until he calmed down… “I agree. But we can’t exactly take him with us.”

“Couldn’t you?” Lissa interjected. “Seems maybe being in the place where it happened could help him remember—”

“Absolutely not,” Vanyel said firmly. I’m not subjecting him to that. He felt awful enough about how far they had already needed to push him. “First off, I’m not letting him anywhere near Vedric Mavelan.” He tried to think. “Ideally we’d send him to Haven, and get him seeing a Mindhealer. But I don’t think we can do that. Randi needs plausible deniability, to keep stalling with Vedric – and I can’t rule out that Vedric will take some more drastic action. Haven’s the first place he’ll look for the boy.” He closed his eyes. “I’ve got two ideas. Both of them have serious problems.”

“Go on,” Savil said impatiently. “I’ve got zero ideas, so you’re ahead of me.”

“One. We send him to Dog Inn. Ideally by Gate, because we haven’t got time to escort him. I would suggest we have Jervis accompany him, since they get along and he’d be able to look out for him. It’s clearly not ideal, but they do have a Mindhealer stationed there, and they’ve got Kilchas and Sandra as well – both of them are powerful enough to hold down his Gift if that’s needed. Probably they’ve got a few strong Fetchers as well, so he might even be able to start some real lessons. Also, it’s the last place Vedric Mavelan would think to look.”

Savil frowned. “And it’s twenty miles from an active combat zone. It might be safer than leaving him here – but I hope you other idea is better than that, ke’chara.”

He took a deep breath. “My other idea is that we Gate him to k’Treva.”

Dead silence.

“That’s… I would not have thought of that,” Savil said finally.

He pushed a lock of hair out of his eyes. “It’s a lot to ask of Starwind and Moondance. Since neither of us would be able to stay. Most likely I’d want to send him alone, or with Jervis.” He would have considered Medren, who seemed to have earned a measure of Tashir’s trust and who seemed more likely to get along with the Tayledras – but the youngster was supposed to leave for Haven, and his confirmed place at the Bardic Collegium, with the harvest-tax convoy in a few days. I’ve got no idea how long we’ll have to leave them there. “And legally it’s gnarly. We’d be handing him outside our jurisdiction, and Valdemar doesn’t have any kind of written alliance with the Tayledras. But it’s safe, Moondance might be able to help him a great deal, and Vedric certainly couldn’t get his hands on him there.”

Savil was nodding slowly. “I…have to say, I think that’s the better option. Assuming we can persuade them to agree to it.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Also, when you said we would Gate
him there, I assume you mean me. In which case I won’t be good for much for a day or two afterwards.”

“Could you sleep in the saddle?”

She groaned. “If you’re ready to handle me at my most cranky. And if Starwind and Moondance refuse, I won’t be able to raise another Gate for at least a day.”

“In which case we’re stuck either waiting a few days, sending him to travel there overland with Jervis, or leaving him here and hoping for the best.” He sighed. “Probably the former is the best option, but we’ll deal with it if it happens. How soon could you be ready to Gate?”

Savil closed her eyes for a moment, her expression going blank as she presumably checked her reserves. “Tonight. I’m actually quite well rested, even though this hasn’t been the vacation I hoped for.”

A real vacation would have been awfully nice. Vanyel knew that his own reserves still weren’t in the best shape. He had more than enough to use nodes, though, and if it came to a fight, Highjorune had plenty of node-energy to offer. Certainly he’d gone into battle before while more drained than this.

“All right,” he said. “We’ve got a plan. Gate Tashir out tonight, leave first thing tomorrow. We can reach Highjorune in a day if we push it, or two days if we take it slow. Maybe better to take it slow, given that you’ll need the time to recover anyway, Savil. We can send Mardic and Donni a pigeon tonight and let them know we’re on our way. I’d feel a lot better having Lissa’s people able to be there within a day.” He stifled a yawn; he felt tired just thinking about it. “I’d better speak to Tashir. And Jervis.” The old weaponsmaster was still angry with him for upsetting Tashir, he thought; their recent interactions hadn’t been exactly hostile, but definitely cool. He wasn’t looking forwards to having that conversation.

“Wait,” Lissa said. “If you’re undercover, don’t you need to figure out your disguises?”

Vanyel glanced at Savil. “I was going to be Valdir the minstrel again. Do you have one?”

Lissa groaned. “Van, I’ve seen your Valdir costume. Vedric knows you were in the city; he’s bound to have people looking for you.”

“Looking for a Herald, not a scruffy minstrel.”

“You’re terrible at looking scruffy. Even in rags. You’ve got too much dignity. And you’re very distinctive-looking. Silver eyes and silver in your hair. Van, there are multiple songs that describe you.”

Vanyel tugged at a lock of his hair. “It’s not that distinctive.”

“It really is,” Savil said dryly. “I’m minded to agree with Liss. Valdir’s fine for places where no one’s ever seen your face, but at least a few people did see your face, when you were there last.”

“All of five guards, maybe, and not up close. I wasn’t there long.” He scowled at Lissa. “Do you have a better suggestion?”

She smirked. “…Well, you could go as a woman.”

“What? No!”

“You’d be a lot less recognizable. Dye your hair, maybe a wig, paint your face and wear one of your
mother’s dresses. You must be about her size—"

Vanyel glared at her. “No.”

“I think it’s a good idea,” Savil said calmly, only the sparkle in her eyes giving away her amusement. “I can be your senile old mother.”

“I said no.”

“It wouldn’t have to be for long. Just for anything we need to do in the city itself. Once we go inside your barrier to look at the Palace, you can wear whatever you like.”

He made a face. They were probably right. “Fine. But neither of you is going to say one word about how ridiculous I look.”

“I wasn’t sure you would come again,” Reta said, as the young girl guided Mardic’s arm to rest on hers. “No, I wasn’t sure I would come.”

_I wasn’t sure you would ever talk to me again_, Mardic thought irritably. He had come back two days after their first conversation – and been turned away, and come again every day after, until now, a week later, she had finally agreed to see him again. “I still want to know yer tale,” he said out loud. “Some stories gotta be told.”

Gods, he was tired. He didn’t have much stamina at the best of times – it had been like that ever since he lost Fortin – and the long days and nights were wearing on him. He was sleeping indoors now, at least. The minstrel who called himself Marti wasn’t rich, but he wasn’t as desperately poor as the beggar from the streets, and he had enough coin for a shared room in the city’s cheapest inn. Not that he slept well, exactly, surrounded by snoring drunks and the occasional fight.

“This story isn’t good song fodder,” she said, quietly and seriously. “No glamour in it, no adventure. Nothing to amuse. It’s not interesting, and it is sad.” She tugged at his arm. “But if you must hear it, come in.”

Seated once again in the hard, uncomfortable chair, he leaned forward, unshielding as much as he dared. Again, his mage-sight picked up a nexus of power, somewhere around where her hands were.

“Yes,” she said slowly. “Sad. Ylynna, that poor child… She never really had a chance to grow up. They kept her a frightened child, that they could manipulate.” She paused. “Perhaps I should have done something. I might have, if I’d thought anyone would listen. I was Her Highness’ personal maid, like I was to Deveran’s mother before her. Deveran never thought much of women in the first place, no more than his own father.”

Mardic, to his surprise, felt his eyes burn. They’re strangers, he told himself. _I never even met Ylynna._

Reta’s voice changed, drifting back into those same abstracted tones, and Mardic felt the power flare in the talisman she wore. Whatever it was – spell, geas – it was happening again.

“No, it would never have occurred to Deveran that Ylynna deserved better. His own mother betrayed him by dying, or so he saw it. And then they gave him Ylynna – possibly mad, certainly simple, and not a virgin. And so he was cruel to her, because it was all he knew.”
“And she took it out on Tashir,” Mardic murmured. “Why? If she knew what it was like to be abused—” How could anyone treat an innocent, helpless child so badly?

“It was all she knew as well. Likely how her own mother treated her. It’s how the world goes. Sometimes I wonder if it isn’t what Holy Lerence meant when he said ‘the sins of the fathers shall be taken up by the sons.’” Her voice was distant. The power thrummed again – and something under it, deeper, broader, like the vibrations of a note too low to hear. What’s happening, he thought. He didn’t dare probe for it, or do anything more than passively observe.

Her voice grew a little sharper. “Worse happened, when he grew older. Handsomer. He looked more and more like his uncle ever year. Deveran hadn’t come to her bed in years, and by then he wouldn’t allow any male servants near her. I don’t think Ylyna ever had any pleasure except in bed. It was the only thing she knew she could do well.” Her voice was very quiet; Mardic strained forwards, listening. “Tashir was still terrified of her, Ylyna, who couldn’t even command respect from her servants. I suppose it was too seductive to resist. That fear, and that handsome young face and body—”

No, Mardic thought, a little desperately.

“–And so she set out to seduce her own son.”

“No,” he breathed out loud.

He wasn’t sure if Reta had noticed his reaction at all. “It frightened him even more, of course. I didn’t realize what was happening at first, and then I scarcely believed it. She’d use any excuse to get her hands on him.”

Mardic shuddered. No wonder Tashir panicked when Van’s mother started in on him. Vanyel had told him plenty about Lady Treesa and her flirtatious Court games.

Did Vanyel know? He had questioned Tashir, they knew that much from the brief pigeon-messages, but Mardic doubted he would have thought to ask about that in particular, and it didn’t seem likely Tashir would have volunteered the information. Gods.

“Deveran either didn’t know or care,” the woman went on. “He had three other sons, healthy, likely to reach maturity, and indisputably his. By this time, what happened to Tashir didn’t matter to him at all.” He heard her sigh, the fabric of her dress crackling. “The only person who ever cared was Deveran’s retired armamster. Offered all the protection he could, which wasn’t much. But he was someone to look up to – one person in that whole den of snakes who was reliable and kind to him.”

Mardic didn’t want to interrupt – not when he could feel that strange power moving in the background, and the woman was saying so much more than she had before. “Is he…” he started finally.

“A good man,” Reta went on, seeming not to have heard him. “A tragedy, that he was in the Palace with all the rest when this happened.”

Damn. Mardic’s breath left him in a gust.

“Tashir evaded it as long as he could,” the woman said, “but finally, he couldn’t. She cornered him in her bower, and that wizard-power of his intervened. He had a kind of fit. Smashed everything in the room. That’s when Deveran decided.”

“Decided what?”
Abruptly, the room snapped back to normal. “What?” Reta said, and her voice was ordinary again.

_The spell’s broken._ If she refused to tell him any more… “Ma’am, you was ‘bout to tell me what Deveran decided,” he prompted. “That night, before…this all happened.”

“Oh.” Her voice sounded flat, uninterested. “Thought everyone knew.”

“No one’s talkin’ ‘bout it,” he pointed out.

“I suppose not. Well, he decided that if Vedric was making such a fuss over it, he’d let him deal with the mess. He was going to send Tashir to live with his Mavelan relatives. Told Ylyna once they’d cleaned up the mess; that’s when I overheard. Figure he was going to tell Tashir at dinner.” He heard the crackle of cloth again as she shifted her weight. “Figure that’s exactly what happened. And the boy was even more afraid of them than he was of his mother and father.” There was a deep sadness in her voice. “Could be that’s what led to…well, everything.”

“No.” Mardic surged forwards in his chair. “Tashir didn’t do it.” A moment later he remembered who he was supposed to be. He couldn’t tell Reta about any of it – not that he knew where Tashir was, or that Vanyel had questioned Tashir and, even faced with the threat of being handed over to Vedric, he had fainted rather than lashing out. “I don’t think he could’ve done it,” he finished weakly.

“Doesn’t make for a happy song, does it, lad?” A sigh. “Perhaps not. He was a decent enough young man. But even good people can break.”

He shivered. _Gods, I hope it isn’t what happened._ For Tashir’s sake, if nothing else. “Heard he was Chosen,” he said dully. “By a Companion from Valdemar.” That at least he could say – other people had witnessed it, and there were rumours about the city. Not that most of the Lineans knew what a Companion was.

“Like I said. Don’t think he was a bad kid at all. But sometimes good people do bad things.”

_Trust me, I know._ He flinched from the memory of a horizon whited out by fire, a terrible wind battering at a fragile shield.

“Thanks for tellin’ me, ma’am,” he said seriously. “I’ll…do my best, t’see the truth’s remembered.”

“That’s all the dead can ever ask, isn’t it? For a story that outlives them.” He heard her rise, cloth rustling, and a moment later he felt the warm, loose skin of her hand against his. The cool metal of a ring pressed against the back of his fingers; it tingled where it touched.

_Strange_, he thought. What did it mean?

—

“Sure this here’s a good idea, boy?” Jervis said stiffly.

They were sitting in his small room behind the salle again, and the conversation had been just as awkward as Vanyel had expected. It had taken every ounce of his diplomatic skill to manage it – but at least they were speaking to one another, and civilly.

“No,” he said, wearily. “I’m not sure – but all the other ideas are worse.”
“Gotta say I agree.” The old weaponsmaster shook his head. “N’if he’s going, I’m going.”

“Thank you.” Vanyel bowed his head. “He needs a friend, and seems you’re someone he feels he can trust.” Maybe because Jervis reminded Tashir of that other man, the one Yfandes had glimpsed in his memories?

“Seems so.” Jervis shook his head. “I… I’m sorry, boy.” His ears reddened, and his voice was tight. “That I said when I did, before. You were right, n’I shouldn’t’ve thought you’d lie. Been over that before, we have.”

“Apology accepted,” Vanyel said quietly. “Tashir’s been talking to you more about his family, then?”

“That he has.” Jervis scratched behind his ear. “He’s a troubled lad. But he’s trying real hard. Practicing his Gift n’all.”

“That’s good.” Vanyel fought the urge to fidget. “Listen, about where you’re going… The Tayledras are very, very different from us. You’ll find their customs strange, maybe uncomfortable. I know it’s a lot to ask, but if you can go along with it…”

Jervis, to his surprise, smiled. “Won’t offend them, boy. I know better. I’ll be real careful.”

“Thank you.” Vanyel closed his eyes. _Gods, I hope this doesn’t burn any goodwill I have left with Starwind and Moondance._ He had already asked so much of them, over the years. “Jervis… It means a lot to me, to have you as a friend now.”

“I wish that wasn’t true. The old resentment flared, like it hadn’t in years. He was so tired, and he felt scraped raw. Everyone needed him, all the time, needed more than he ever had to give – and often that seemed like a privilege, but now it felt bitterly unfair. A burden he’d never asked for.

_But you get sappy on me, boy._ Jervis ducked his head. “Stay safe out there, you hear me? Don’t get yourself killed. Valdemar needs you.”

Pull yourself together, Herald. No one ever promised the world would be fair.

Bard Breda tried to soften her expression into a smile, as she faced the small boy sitting in the chair with his legs dangling, Lynnell’s hands on his shoulders.

“Stefen,” she said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, lad. Welcome to Bardic.” She leaned forward in her chair, trying to keep her head at the level of his. She knew the students at Bardic often found her intimidating.

He looked at her with uncomprehending eyes, dark red hair falling into his face. At least he wasn’t a complete surprise. Lynnell had sent a letter ahead, and she’d had a chance to consider what she was going to do with an illiterate and powerfully Gifted orphan boy plucked from the streets of Three Rivers.

Supposedly he was ten – already young for admission to Bardic – but she’d seen seven-year-olds who were taller and sturdier. They had few enough lowborn students, and he was more than just lowborn. Bardic students weren’t bad kids, for the most part, but they were cliquish and could be
very cruel. They’re going to eat him alive, damn it. If not for the strength of his Gift, she would have considered trying to find him an adoptive family, and admitted him to Bardic in a couple of years once he’d had time to adapt to Haven – but he needed training now.

Well, she would think of something. “Stefen,” she said, “do you have any questions?”

He blinked at her. Bottomless hazel eyes in that small, triangular face. He certainly knows how to look adorable. “Ma’am,” he said, “when’s I meetin’ Lord Valdemar?”

She stared at him. “What?” Then she brought a hand to her forehead. “Gods, lad, you – you thought we brought you here to serve some lord?” And she had a bit of Empathy; based on the feelings she was picking up from him, she had a very good idea of what he feared he had been purchased for. Lynnell had mentioned the five silvers in her letter, and Breda intended to give her a serious talking-to about it; Bards couldn’t just go about buying children off the streets, or doing anything that resembled it! We’ve got a reputation to worry about.

The child stared back at her, clearly baffled by her reaction.

She took a deep breath. “No. Stefen, you’re Bardic-Gifted. Do you know what that means?”

He looked uncertainly at her. “Means I can sing good?”

“No just that. You can make people feel the music, can’t you? It probably feels like sort of pushing something, with the inside of your head. That’s the Bardic Gift, and it’s a precious thing. You’re going to be a student. We’ll train you to play every instrument there is, and to use that Gift in service of the kingdom.” Hadn’t Lynnell tried to explain anything? “You’re in the city of Haven right now. Capital of the kingdom of Valdemar. And someday, lad, I don’t doubt you’ll sing in front of our King.”

Something closed in his face. He stared down at his dangling feet. “Don’ mock me, ma’am.”

“I’m not mocking you, I swear. I know it’s a lot to take in, Stefen. You will have time to get used to things.” Might as well start him with some remedial tutoring now, and put him in regular classes when the next session started after Midwinter. But who was she going to room him with in the meantime? The trainees’ wing was packed; she couldn’t give him a room alone, and she didn’t want to anyway. He was so young, and all this would be so new to him; he would need supervision, more than she had time for. Maybe one of the older students – but she couldn’t think of anyone she trusted to be kind and accepting.

Hmm. Van’s young nephew was going to be starting mid-session as well. She was expecting him in the next week. He wouldn’t need the remedial tutoring, but he would need time to adjust to Haven. Maybe she could put them together. From Vanyel’s description of the boy, he was a sensible child, and had a good heart. Bastard-born as he was, and from a remote Border holding, he might not be so likely to judge Stefen for his birthplace.

“Lynnell, you can go,” she said. “Come talk to me later, please. Stefen, I’d like to do a little assessment. Do you–” She stopped. Do you compose, she had meant to say, but she doubted he would even know what that meant. “Do you ever make up songs?” she finished instead.

He bobbed his head. “Sometimes, ma’am.”

“Would you sing one for me?”

He swallowed, clearly nervous. “S’no good. Not fer’a place like this.”
“That’s all right. We all have to start somewhere.”

The boy took a deep breath, closed his eyes – and sang.

His voice was clear as water, and she felt the raw energy of his Gift moving under the notes – clumsy, untrained, but powerful, and surprisingly deft. *I suppose he’s had a lot of practice singing for his supper.* The song seemed to be about a river and a stormy night, but she didn’t listen much to the words. The melody was simple, but interesting. Catchy. *He’s talented, that’s for sure.*

“Very good,” she said when he had finished. “Now – you don’t read music, do you?”

He shook his head. “Sorry ma’am.” At least he knew what reading music was, she thought; Lynnell had clearly explained that much.

“That’s all right. I’d like to see how quickly you can pick something up by ear. Why don’t I sing you a song, and then we try to sing it together?” She tried to think. Something not too difficult… “Do you know ‘Shadow Stalker’?”

“No ma’am.”

It was almost painful, how hard he was trying to be polite, and she could tell he was attempting to hide his street-cant accent as well. Maybe best to set him up with a speech-tutor, before he had to make his way among the other students; it would be one more thing making him a target for mockery.

“Well, it’s quite a new song. It’s about something that happened a couple of years ago, during the war.” She reached to pull down her lute, already tuned, and forged right into the opening measures.

Stefen’s eyes widened. No wonder, she thought; she was throwing the full power of her Gift into it, and she was considerably stronger than Lynnell.

*It was just a week till Sovvan, and the nights were turning chill*

*And the battle turned to stalemate, double-bluff, and feint and drill*

*When a shadow drifted northward, just a shadow, nothing more.*

*No one noticed that the shadows grew all darker that before.*

Stefen listened with rapt attention. She could put quite a lot into this song; she hadn’t been there, of course, but she had seen battles before, in her younger, wilder days, and she knew Vanyel. Remembered turning him down for Bardic – how crushed he had looked, for all that he tried to hide it. And then teaching him, later, once he was a Herald, watching him throw all of his weak Bardic Gift with abandon into a song that brought tears to her eyes.

Twelve years ago. So much had changed. *What a weird world we live in.*

"So now what is there to strive for?” was the song she sang to him.

*And the shadow came upon his heart, the world grew gray and dim.*
But the Singer of The Shadow did not know the foe she fought,
Now how dear he held his duty, nor by what pain power was bought.

Stefen whimpered. He hadn’t shown much emotion at all until now, but she didn’t miss the tears that shone in his eyes, that he tried to blink away. Clearly this particular song hit a nerve for him. Maybe not surprising; a child of the streets might have seen a great deal, and felt that bitter hopelessness and despair that no boy of ten ought to have experienced.

Herald Vanyel raised his golden voice and sang of life and light,
Of the first cry of a baby, of the silver stars of night.
Herald Vanyel sang of wisdom, sang of courage, sang of love,
Of the earth’s sweet soil beneath him, of the vaulting sky above.

There was a naked, baffled look in Stef’s eyes. Clearly, this part – the joy in simply living, the precious things in the world that all Heralds fought to protect – was new to him, as the hopelessness wasn’t. It made her chest ache. All children should know joy, she thought.

She sang all the way to the end, and set down the lute in her lap, but it took Stefen a long moment before he looked up, dazed. Maybe I shouldn’t’ve picked that song. She gave him a moment to collect himself. “Stefen?” she said finally. “Are you all right?”

“S’the same man from the demon song?” he said, a tremor in his voice.

“Yes. Herald Vanyel lives here in the Palace, usually. Though he’s been away most of the last three years, with the war, and I think he’s on leave now.” Savil too; she had tried to visit the older Herald-Mage and found her rooms empty. It would have been damned useful to have her around for the treaty negotiations. She thought about mentioning that Vanyel was his prospective roommate’s uncle – but no, he looked overawed enough. Later, she thought. Ease him into it.
Moondance regarded the boy who sat opposite him, on the mat in their spare room-below, shivering a little despite the warm air. His mind is wounded, and I cannot help. Not until I earn his trust. The craggy old fighter who had come with him was bathing in one of the pools currently. Somehow he had already attracted the attention of several scouts, who seemed to find him very exotic.

“Tashir,” he said. “My name is Moondance.” He was glad of the practice he had gotten speaking Valdemaran with Vanyel, and later with Mardic and Donni. “This is k’Treva Vale, and you are to be safe here. Vanyel is Wingbrother to k’Treva, and anyone who is friend to Vanyel is friend to us.” Though I do not know what my shay’kreth’ashke will have to say about it. Starwind was away from the Vale for the next several days. Moondance didn’t think they could possibly have done otherwise than accept Tashir and care for him, but not of all the elders had been happy about it, and Starwind would have a lot of ruffled feathers to smooth when he returned home.

The young man nodded, watching Moondance with wary curiosity in his eyes.

“Please, if you have questions, ask,” Moondance said.

Tashir licked his lips. “Herald Vanyel told me about you,” he said. “That you’re…shaych?”

“I am shay’a’chern, that is true.” Moondance ran a lock of hair between his fingers.

“I…” Tashir looked down at his hands, clamped together in his lap. Then he raised his head, eyes naked and open. “Would you be my lover?” he blurted out.

It was the last thing Moondance had expected. The young man didn’t have the feel of shay’a’chern, not at all. For a moment he just stared back, caught off guard.

“Surely my Wingbrother told you that I am partnered,” he said finally.

“Yes, but… He said your customs are different.” Tashir’s cheeks were flushed. “That people might have more than one partner, and – and that I ought not to let it make me uncomfortable, that it’s just your way.”

The Goddess help me. He could understand why Vanyel had tried to warn the youngster, and why he would never have guessed that it would lead to this. “That is true,” he said slowly. “Though I have not lain with another since I bonded to my shay’kreth’ashke. Why is it that you wish this?” He paid careful attention to the boy’s expression. Didn’t dare Mindtouch him, even though he wanted to, to get a better sense of what he was thinking and feeling.

Tashir looked down, face flaming red. “I… I don’t like women,” he said. “They – Herald Vanyel’s mother tried to flirt with me, and I – I p-panicked.” His voice faltered, dropping to a whisper. “And, and then some of her ladies, and I know they were pretty and I, I should’ve been happy… But they scare me. I th-thought, maybe…”

Moondance nodded. “You thought that since you do not enjoy the attentions of women, perhaps it is a man you want. I will not deny that sometimes the way to find out is to try it, though I do not think I am the one to help you with this. Yet I do think that you ought to search your feelings, first. It is not fair to go to a partner when you do not yet know what it is you want – that is how people hurt one another. I would be glad to help you with this.”

Moondance wasn’t a true Empath, but he liked to think he was quite good at reading people’s
feelings, even without the use of those Gifts he did have. And he hadn’t picked up anything like attraction from the young man. Only unhappiness, fear, and a deep loneliness and confusion. He wishes to be loved, he thought, and to love in return. But this lies close to his heart-wounds. He didn’t know why Tashir was so afraid – and wouldn’t, unless the youngster was willing to speak of it.

Silence.

“If it would help to hear,” Moondance said, lightly, “perhaps I might speak of my own life, and of how I came to meet my shay’kreth’ashke. He is called Starwind, and you are to meet him soon.” He waited; Tashir said nothing, but watched with rapt eyes. “I am not born of k’Treva,” he went on. “And so it was not easy, when I came to realize I was different. At first I knew only that my parents wished me to marry, and spoke of girls they might choose for me – and I did not know at first why I flinched from this as I did. Until one day my eyes were on a young man from a neighbouring farm…”

He told Tashir all of it, though he elided over the events between meeting his first lover and coming to k’Treva – he didn’t think it was what Tashir needed to hear, and even more than that, he didn’t feel able to speak of it.

“And so,” he finished, “it is now twenty-and-some years that I have known my shay’kreth’ashke, and he is still the sun in my sky and the wind in my wings.” He tied off the end of a braid that he had absently been plaiting. “If you had come to ask me, when I was sixteen summers old and had known him only a little time, if I thought this would come to pass – I do not know what I would say, but I do think that I wanted to be his from the day my eyes first saw him.”

Tashir’s eyes were wide. “You – you love him that much,” he said. “Really and truly. I, I read ballads, where people loved each other like that, but I d-didn’t think it could ever be real.”

Moondance nodded. He has never known two people truly in love, who were good to one another, he found himself thinking. “Your parents,” he said quietly. “Did they not love one another?”

Tashir’s shoulders stiffened.

“You do not have to speak of it,” Moondance said. “Only if you wish. Yet I find that it is from our parents that we learn what love means, and it is good sometimes to question that, if we find we are confused about how we feel.”

Tashir nodded. “My parents, they…” He paused, swallowing. “My father didn’t think my mother was good for anything. He barely spoke to her, once she was done having children for him. Used to call her a whore…”

Just out of side of the Highjorune city gates, Savil and Vanyel ducked off the main road into a copse of trees, the leaves blazing red and gold after the first frost, and dismounted. Companions’ coats didn’t take dye, so Savil had laid an illusion over them, disguising Yfandes and Kellan as a matching chestnut mare and gelding pair. It wouldn’t be safe in the city, though – even Savil’s best work, low-powered and skillfully done as it was, could be detected by an observant mage. Like Vedric.

Vanyel resisted the urge to rub his eyelids, which itched; Savil had painted them with kohl that morning, and rouged his cheeks and lips. He wondered where she had learned how; certainly he had
never seen her with her face made up before.

“This is humiliating,” he told Yfandes, grumpily. “I look like a trollop.”

:That is the idea, love:

He had surreptitiously borrowed one of Treesa’s dresses, a lacy concoction in incredibly bad taste, though Savil had teased him that it suited him much better than it did his mother. I look like a wedding-cake. Savil wore one of her own gowns – he wasn’t sure he had ever seen her in a dress, only Whites or Tayledras garb, but apparently she owned a few – and just as much makeup; he would never have recognized her. They were supposedly the wife and daughter of a merchant fallen on hard times. Savil would be touching base with her merchant-contacts in the city under the guise of looking for a trade-deal. It wasn’t an entirely plausible cover story, he thought – but certainly it was nothing Vedric Mavelan would suspect.

He leaned his forehead against Yfandes’. :Be careful, love:

:You too, Chosen. I’m going to miss you:

:Same: It would be too hard for the Companions to stay out of sight in the city; they would be joining Rasha, skulking around the outlying farms. At least they wouldn’t be far, if the two of them needed help.

Savil concealed the saddles and saddlebags under a simple illusion, with enough power to last a week, and handed him the smallish travel-case he would be bringing into the city. “Let’s go.”

By the time they reached the city gates, it looked like they had been afoot all day; the road was dusty, and surprisingly well-populated, with farmers and merchants bringing their goods into the city. Vedric was keeping some degree of order, clearly, for the markets to be open, and Vanyel had to be grateful for that. Without his intervention, it wouldn’t have taken long for the people of Highjorune to be starving.

:You’ve got to walk like a woman: Savil reminded him. :Sway your hips more:

He shot her a disgusted look. :This was not my idea: He had already gotten his share of wolf-whistles from passing travellers, and it was making him very uncomfortable. The gate-guard paid rather more attention to them than he’d hoped, as well, mostly in order to flirt with Vanyel. He had no idea how to respond, and he probably came off looking somewhat simple – but maybe that was all to the good.

The city was too quiet. There were some people in the streets, going about their business – but with heads lowered and fear in their eyes. The shutters were barred on most of the residential windows, and half the ground-level shops were closed up as well. Again, the maze-like spiral of streets slowed their progress towards the Palace; Highjorune was like Haven, in that way, designed to be difficult for an enemy to infiltrate.

Not that it had helped the royal family in the least. The enemy had come from within.

Vanyel wasn’t looking forwards to entering the Palace again, not at all. And once they were in, they would be sleeping in there; he had judged it best to avoid passing through his shield any more than necessary, since each crossing would weaken it, and risk detection. At least if they entered on the opposite side of the Palace from wherever Vedric was, he ought not to see exactly what happened, though likely he would know something had.

They had to go in, though, as soon as he and Savil had learned all they could outside. Ten days had
already passed since the incident. Randale’s diplomatic reply might already have reached Vedric, and certainly would in the next few days – when he received it, Vedric was likely to send a much more strongly-worded note, and then it was only a matter of time before Randi couldn’t stall any longer.

Lissa’s people were already camped near the border, waiting for two additional platoons from Deer Creek. Withen had a note for the Herald-courier, when she arrived, explaining where they had gone. Tashir had been dispatched to k’Treva with Jervis; Savil had been able to explain it to the elders sufficiently, though it had taken a quarter-candlemark of holding the Gate and she had been exhausted afterwards. Vanyel had stayed in the stables with Yfandes, and been able to shield enough that it had only taken a few hours for the pain to pass, though he had still felt ill enough to skip supper. They hadn’t been able to leave until midway through the next day.

I hope Starwind and Moondance forgive me for putting this on them. It was a great deal to ask.

Vanyel had dreamed about ‘Lendel, and then lain awake for candlemarks, trying not to move so as to avoid waking Savil in the bed they had shared. :Hasn’t been much of a vacation:

“While can we move?” Keiran said. “We have to announce the treaty formally, meaning the Ka– the priesthood is going to find out about it. And start preparing.” The Karsites, she had started to say, but they had all been trying not to use that language. As Randi kept reminding them, they were officially allied with Karse now. Better to avoid us-versus-them.

Shavri fought back the urge to fidget. They were in the smaller Heraldic Circle meeting room; Karis sat at Randi’s left, and Shavri on his other side. She wasn’t sure why he had asked her to come, and she had gotten a very odd look from Jaysen – well, no wonder, she had no formal role and there wasn’t really a good reason for her to be there. Maybe Randi didn’t want her to feel shut out; maybe he just needed her implicit support. This was as difficult for him as it was for her.
Three years ago, she would probably have fled the room screaming. Now she actually felt gratitude, mixing with the buried resentment. *I want to be in the room where they decide,* she found herself thinking, wonderingly. *Gods, I’ve changed.*

There was another advantage; she could discreetly send Randi a little Healing-energy when she noticed his attention flagging. He’d had another dizzy spell this morning, though he had brushed it off.

At the moment, though, he looked entirely alert, eyes clear and focused. “Our troops aren’t the issue,” he said. “Heralds and Herald-Mages are what we need to worry about. Tran, what’s our status there?”

The King’s Own Herald scooted his chair forward, not even glancing at his notes. “We’ve got twenty-two Heralds scattered across the Border right now, including two Herald-Mages, Sandra and Kilchas. With the support of the Web, they’re both borderline Adept-level. The issue is, we don’t have many others we can spare. We’ve got exactly eleven full Herald-Mages left in the entire kingdom, and four of those – Heralds Tina, Elaina, Dakar, and Luvas – aren’t even Master-level. Other than that, we’ve got Mardic and Donni, who aren’t exactly action-ready, and who’re in Highjorune anyway. Savil and Vanyel are down there as well. Jaysen’s the only other who’s even Master-class, and I’m assuming we’d prefer not to send him into battle.”

Randi nodded slowly. “I would strongly prefer not to risk my Seneschal’s Herald, but we may have to. Savil as well. And certainly I want to wait until we’ve got Van.”

Tantras smiled crookedly. “He is a rather large chunk of our total firepower.”

More than half of it, Shavri thought. So much to put on one man. *What were the gods thinking?*

“So we have to wait on resolving the Lineas situation, then,” Keiran said.

“It’s unfortunate, but I think so. We can start to plan now. Again, I wish I could have Van here for his input, but we’ll have to do without. Karis?” Randi turned to her. “What do you think is the best way to approach this?”

She looked thoughtful. “Difficult is the terrain. Poor roads.” She paused. “Spoke of Gates you have. Possible?”

“To Gate our troops straight to the capital?” Tantras looked startled, and a little impressed. “Wouldn’t have occurred to me. I mean, the issue is having a secure terminus. Or a terminus at all. None of us have ever been there.”

Karis leaned forwards. “A journey hard for many, easy for few may be. Small party to travel, a Gate to raise – possible?”

“Oh.” Randi looked and sounded as impressed as Shavri felt. “That might actually work. If we sent someone to Gate, and a group to protect their end of the terminus while we brought our people through… We would need a local guide, though, or there’s no way our people could make it all that way undetected.”

“Go with them I will,” Karis said, calmly but firmly.

There was a collective gasp.

“No,” Randi said, just as firmly. “We can’t risk you.”
“You must.” She laid both hands on the table, palms down. “Come so far I have. Go back I can. Loyal to my father, they know me. Danger, yes, but our best chance.”

*She’s right,* Shavri thought. *And I never knew anyone could be so brave.* Karis had, somehow, survived a months-long flight from the regime that wanted to kill her – and she was ready to go back, without a moment’s hesitation. Because it was the best chance she had to take back her kingdom.

There was a long silence.

“You’re right,” Randi said finally. “I don’t like it, but it’s true. We’ll have to look at other options, find the one that… Tantras, how is it that Van always puts it? He has that way of using numbers. The odds of success divided by the estimated cost, and use the figures you get to compare different plans. Sending you in has a high cost, in expectation, Karis – what do you think are the odds that you die out there? One in ten? Higher?”

“Perhaps.” Her face was impassive. “Risk only what I must.” She smiled a little, thinly. “Convince me I must not? Relieved will be.”

Randi nodded. “I’ll certainly try, but you’re right that we need to go with the best plan, not just the safest one. Thank you for pointing that out.” He fidgeted with his pen, twirling it between his fingers – and then caught himself and stopped, laying it down. Shavri knew that he tried never to fidget; he said it made him look less authoritative. “Let’s think about this plan, though. We can try to make a version that’s as safe as possible. Keiran, what do you think?”

The Lord Marshal’s Herald had been scratching out some notes; she raised her head. “Two strategies we could use. A larger party, with more guards – means better protection, but also more conspicuous. Or we could send in the smallest group we can, which means only the people who can best protect themselves and others.” She smiled faintly. “So, Vanyel. Maybe Kilchas. I honestly don’t think Sandra’s up for a journey like that, and we still need someone watching the actual Border.” She hesitated. “To tell the truth, I almost want to suggest we leave Kilchas and Lissandra at Horn, since they seem to work well together, and send Savil with Vanyel. She’s a good bit more powerful than Kilchas, and she’s certainly got better control; I think she’s better placed to manage a difficult Gate and hold it for a long time. I know we really shouldn’t be risking her in action…”

“But we’ve got so few mages to work with,” Tantras finished. “Something else I want to suggest. This is going to call for some very close coordination with the Border post where we consolidate our troops – probably Horn or Dog Inn. And we haven’t got that many strong Mindspeakers. I don’t know that we can afford the delay in our communication loop of relaying from here to Horn and back, or how much it will tire our people out. Hells, we’ll need every Mindspeaker we can spare in Sunhame, to coordinate a battle that size.” His shoulders rose and fell in a deep breath. “I know we haven’t done this in centuries, but – I want to propose that when we’re ready to move, all of us go down south.”

No, Shavri thought – helplessly, pointlessly. Randi was already nodding.

“I agree that it’s a major risk, but I see the merits. For one, if we do take Sunhame, *I’m* going to need to go in as soon as it’s safe to declare our alliance. And Tran is right about communications.”

Shavri closed her eyes. *Please don’t do this. Don’t.*

“Randi,” she heard Jaysen say, “you don’t have an heir. Nothing even close to one. We *can’t* risk you.”

“That’s stupid.” The force in Randi’s voice surprised her; she twitched a little in her seat, opening her
eyes to see his stern face staring down the rest of the room. “No one’s indispensable. I could be run
down by a cart tomorrow, and you’d find a way to manage. We have to be able to take considered
risks, sometimes.” His eyes softened, looking into the distance. “We do need a backup plan. I
suppose the usual method is to go with the collateral lines, and we ought to have officially picked
someone years ago. Oh well. I’m going to put some thought into this, but for now – Jaysen. You’re
staying behind. You can hold things together without us for a bit. And if anything happens to me,
you’re in charge.”

The blood had drained from Jaysen’s face. “Of Valdemar?” he breathed.

“Of figuring out what to do next, anyway. Pick some cousin of mine if you want and crown them –
there’s bound to be a Herald among them somewhere. I’m sure the Companions would have plenty
of opinions.” He closed his eyes. “If I don’t make it out, but Van or Savil do, I’d recommend you
form a committee and run the kingdom together until you figure something else out.”

It was all Shavri could do to hold back tears. You can’t just talk about it, she thought desperately. Not
like this. Calmly, his voice as casual as though he was describing where he planned to go for supper.

Vanyel had sounded like that when he spoke about fighting Leareth, and it had horrified her just as
much.

Randi shrugged. “I will come back safe,” he said lightly. “Nothing’s going to happen to me – if we
do this, we’re going to take every possible precaution. This is just contingency planning. Any
ideas?”

Jaysen tentatively raised a hand. “Keep it absolutely secret,” he suggested. “The plan doesn’t leave
this room. As far as the Council knows, you’ll be leading at a distance from Haven, just like usual.
When they’re ready to move down there, someone can Gate you down to Dog Inn. Sandra, maybe.
I’ll tell the Council after the fact. Or… Hmm. We’ll want to be able to Gate you out again just as
quickly, if things go badly. So maybe I’d better handle the first Gate – should be able to manage the
distance, if I’m rested, and I’ve been to Dog Inn before – and Sandra will be fresh and on hand to get
you out if necessary. And we’ll send your entire personal Guard.”

Randi’s fingers tapped against the table for a moment before he stilled them. “I’m not sure how I feel
about you handling the Gate, Jaysen. You’ll have to wrangle the Council afterwards, and if, god
forbid, anything happens in Haven, you’ll be the only Herald-Mage left in the city. Is there anyone
else we can ask?”

Tantras was counting on his fingers. “Kilchas,” he said finally. “That’s if we don’t send him in with
the party traveling to Sunhame. Or possibly Mardic and Donni. Not sure they’ve tried a Gate since…
well, since what happened to Mardic.”

Shavri winced. She had treated Mardic a few times, during his long stay at Healers’, and she still
didn’t like to think about it.

Karis made a soft sound. “What happened?” she said after a moment.

Randi glanced around the room, then down at the table. “His Companion was killed in a battle.”

By the expression on her face, Karis knew exactly what that meant. “Surprised that he survived it I
am.”

“Us too,” Tantras said. “He and Donni are lifebonded; that’s all that held him together, and he never
really recovered from it. I don’t want to send either of them anywhere near combat, but I suppose if
they could raise the Gate from Haven… Worth considering. Otherwise, we’ll either keep Kilchas back, or Jay will have to do it.”

“I suppose that’ll have to do,” Randi said. “Now, why don’t we try to brainstorm some alternative plans to compare?”

The shield locked down behind them, as Vanyel poured in energy from his reserves. He didn’t want to tap the node in the Palace; even though it was behind shields and Vedric wouldn’t be able to detect it directly, there would still be echoes in the ley-lines.

Midnight had come and passed candlemarks ago. He and Savil had spent the evening visiting three different merchants in their homes; she had twittered very convincingly about her imaginary husband and his interest in buying trade-goods until she was able to get them alone, and then revealed her identity. Vanyel hadn’t dared any shields against eavesdropping, raising them was ‘noisy’ enough that a skilled mage might detect it, so they had spoken as obliquely as possible.

They hadn’t learned much. Vedric was making himself quite popular, an impressive feat given how the Mavelans were regarded here; he was strongly supporting the Lineans’ protests to Valdemar and Randale. Logistically, things were something of a mess, but not nearly as bad as they could have been.

Then they had met with Mardic and Donni, a huddled conference in the shadows of an alleyway near the Palace, and he had learned what Reta had told them. Vanyel was still trying to avoid thinking about it.

Next to him, Donni shuddered. “Don’t like it here. Full of ghosts.”

“Ghosts aren’t real,” Savil said dryly. “Come on, let’s find somewhere to get some sleep.” She summoned a tiny mage-light, keeping it cupped in her palm; someone might see from outside, and the Palace was supposed to be deserted.

Vanyel shuddered. As creepy as the darkness was, what the light would reveal was surely worse.

The first door they found, a side-door most likely for the servants, was barred from the inside. Vanyel glanced at Mardic. “Can you get it?” he whispered. Mardic was a Fetcher, much stronger than Vanyel.

“Can’t see what I’m doing.”

That was a fair point. Vanyel closed his eyes. Center and ground. He opened his Farsight first, slipping his viewpoint through to the other side of the door, and then had to summon a mage-light to see what he was doing. His Fetching wasn’t the most reliable, but after three tries he was able to slide the bolt aside.

Savil pushed the heavy oak door open, and they slipped inside.

Ugh. The smell was considerably worse than it had been the last time. Unsurprisingly. The city Guard had started cleaning up, the night it had happened, but they hadn’t had time to finish, and it had been plenty long enough for the shredded remains to start decomposing in earnest. Vanyel clamped a hand to his mouth, his gorge rising.
“That is gross,” Donni whispered, holding her nose. “Let’s go somewhere else.”

Savil fed more power into her mage-light, and sent it to float above their heads. They picked their way through the narrow hall, through another door, into a larger space that proved to be the pantry, and from there into the kitchen.

“All right,” she said quietly. “This isn’t bad. Must not’ve been anyone in here when it happened. Let’s spread out and explore a little, see if we can find some clean bedding.”

Vanyel would have preferred to lie down on the floor as he was. It was hard to keep his eyes open. But it wasn’t exactly warm, and he knew he would be grateful for blankets later. He trailed after Savil, while Mardic and Donni split off.

“Wait,” she said suddenly. “Van…what do you Sense?”

He stopped walking and opened his mage-sight. The node under the Palace blazed like a miniature sun, pulsing, blotting out everything else.

“I know, the damned node is washing everything out,” she said. “Try to ignore it out and Look up close.”

He focused – and gasped. “Oh. There’s spell-residue everywhere.” In fact, under the pervasive dusting of fresh magic, he thought he saw hints of two set-spells, overlaid on each other – one ancient, one less so. But this was Savil’s strong suit, not his.

“That’s what I’m seeing. Need to poke around a little more, get a closer look, but I’ve a strong suspicion there’s some variety of trap-spell laid here – and that it’s what caused this mess.”

Vanyel sucked in his breath. “It wasn’t Tashir.”

“Can’t have been, if I’m right. He’s not mage-gifted.” Under the baleful mage-light, he could see the relief in her face, matching his. “I didn’t expect to find anything at all so quickly, but it’s quite obvious once you’re looking for it. What’s not going to be easy is finding the source.”

Vanyel nodded. “More your specialty than mine.” He rubbed his eyes. “Think we’d best start tomorrow, anyway.”

“ Entirely agreed. This looks to be rather tricky. Certainly beyond Mardic and Donni’s skills, bless them – and, honestly, even I could wish I had Starwind here to help me. He taught me most of what I know about trap-spells.”

“I wish we dared contact them,” Vanyel agreed, following her on legs that felt weighted down. They couldn’t risk the communication-spell with Vedric so nearby – not only would the mage surely detect it, but it wasn’t secure against listening-in. That was assuming Vanyel could even manage it through the shield. His own thoughts and magic could pass through, since it was keyed to his energies, but it offered resistance, and the communication-spell over such a distance was challenging enough to begin with.

“I know.” Savil squeezed his shoulder for a moment. “We can do this.”

I hope so. Vanyel wasn’t sure why he felt so drained, or why the task ahead of them seemed quite so insurmountable. Maybe it would feel easier after a night’s sleep. He wanted, desperately, to Mindtouch Yfandes. But he didn’t dare even that; he would have to put considerably power into it, to reach through his own shields, and the risk was too high that Vedric would detect it.
Why am I so off-balance? It felt like there had been one blow after another, ever since arriving at Forst Reach, gods, ever since the start of the war, never quite enough time to recover. Never time to relax, to think, to remember who and what he was, and why he was doing any of this.

I don’t know why I’m doing this anymore. Not really – not in his heart. For Valdemar, but right now that only felt like words. There had been a solidness there, once, a certainty, but it was lost in grey fog, and he couldn’t push through it to find the ground beneath.

All he could do was put one foot in front of the other, keep moving, and hope that someday, somehow, all of this would be worth it.

Karis sat on her bed, legs folded under her, silently mouthing the words, written on the piece of paper that she held in both hands.

Sola coiled around her, fluffy tail raised. In daylight, the Suncat was beautiful – far larger than an ordinary cat, striped tawny and gold, her eyes a brilliant amber.

:You will do fine: the cat said. Karis had gotten used to the voice in her head, a little, but it was still unnerving. :You’re ready for this:

“I do not feel ready.” She fiddled nervously with a lock of hair. “I am to be married. To a man I do not love.” She shook her head. “Why does that feel so wrong? I never expected otherwise.” Unlike her sisters, she had never been one to daydream of handsome suitors. She had never seen the point; she had always been her father’s game piece, to be offered where and when it would be of strategic value.

:But it’s different when it’s suddenly real. Isn’t it?:

“I suppose it is.” She forced her eyes to focus on the text of the ceremony. There would actually be two ceremonies, one of them presided by the high priest of Vkandis here in Haven. She hadn’t even known that they had a Temple dedicated to the Sunlord – but apparently there were quite a few Valdemarans who practiced there.

That part of the ceremony would take place in Karsite – which, somewhat to her surprise, Randale spoke fluently. The other ceremony, presided over by the priests of the Temple of Kernos, would be in Valdemaran.

“I feel sorry for his lifebonded,” she said. “Shavri. I – I like her, Sola. She does not like me, and I cannot blame her.”

:She is in a difficult position. But she is generous of spirit. I don’t think she will hold this against you, not forever:

“And perhaps we might be friends, someday.” Karis set aside the paper and reached for her comb, drawing it through her long, unbound hair. “I would like to be her friend. I do not know why I feel as though we have so much in common.” They weren’t that alike, in position or in personality, but she felt some kind of connection. Enough that it pained her, to see the mistrust and hurt in Shavri’s eyes every time they fell on her.

:You are both women, in a man’s world – it is less so, here in Valdemar, but nonetheless:
Karis had noticed. Back home, her father and brothers had often ignored her, or responded with the equivalent of patronizing head-pats, because she was ‘only a girl.’ She had always hated it. There were women among the priesthood, but they were few, and never rose to the highest ranks. It was a long time since Karse had last had a Queen.

Valdemar’s Queen Elspeth had ruled for forty-eight years, all of them peaceful and prosperous, and people still spoke of her memory with respect and awe. Attitudes seemed to vary; she had no doubt that most highborn girls were given few options other than marriage; but about half of their Heralds were women, and only the most conservative and hidebound of the Councillors treated them any differently than the men.

Randale had started bringing Shavri to many of the smaller Heralds’ meetings, though not when then met with Council. A time or two, the Healer had even contributed some quite insightful points, earning surprised looks. Karis had tried to smile encouragingly at her, but the other woman always avoided her eyes.

“She is very intelligent,” Karis said. “I can respect that.” She had been asking around about Shavri’s Healing research, which was apparently quite groundbreaking.

:"Of course. She is worthy of respect:

“And she is beautiful.” Karis looked down at her lap. “I suppose I am jealous. Not that it matters. That is not why Randale loves her in any case.”

:"No. He loves her because they are two spirits the gods intended to be together:

She looked up. “Sola, why does this have to be so complicated? Why must I feel that I am disrespecting their gods, to come between them?”

:"It is complicated, but you will find a way to thread this needle, Karis. It will be worth it:

“Calmly, young one,” Moondance said gently. “Breathe. You are with us in k’Treva still, and your Companion is near. You are safe.” He blinked, trying to wake up fully; Tashir’s screams had yanked him from a sound sleep. It wasn’t the first nightmare the youngster had suffered, but this time seemed worse.

The boy’s face shone white in the moonlight. His breath came in ragged gasps. After a moment, he brought both hands to his temples, making a visible effort to control his breathing.

Finally, he looked up. “I – Moondance, I remember…I remember it now.” He was trembling all over, shivering. Moondance forced himself to stay back – to wait for Tashir to ask for comfort.

“What do you remember?” he asked.

The youngster closed his eyes. “I – after my f-father hit me, I ran – I couldn’t get out! Like there w-was an invisible wall… Then they came – creatures. All, all teeth and claws, thousands of them. Everywhere.” He bit his lip, eyes clenched shut, and shuddered before going on. “I was, I was pushing them away. With my head. Like this.” His shoulders tensed, and Moondance, to his surprise, felt himself shoved physically back across the floor. When he raised his hand, it was liking touching a wall – but not one made of mage-energies.
Then it vanished, and Tashir slumped. “Hurts to do that,” he said. “But I, I was so scared – it’s easier when I’m scared.”

Moondance nodded. “Your Mind-Gift is very powerful, and we are all capable of greater strength when we are afraid. It saved your life.” He held Tashir’s eyes. “I know that your family was not best pleased, by what they saw as wizard-powers. You had no one to teach you control, and so it seemed a burden and a curse to you – but that is not the case. What you bear is truly a Gift. In time, you may use it to save others as well as yourself.”

Tashir looked up, hugging himself. “I…I think I can already control it a little more. I’ve been p-practicing…” His teeth were chattering. “Moondance, I’m c-cold. Can you…”

“Of course, youngling. You need only ask.” Moondance slid himself across the floor, and wrapped his arm around Tashir’s shoulders. “Better, now?”

Tashir said nothing, just huddled against him, and Moondance held him in silence as he slowly relaxed.

“I wish I didn’t remember,” the boy said finally. “I, I can’t get it out of my head now…”

What to tell him? Moondance squeezed his shoulders, gently. “Your mind protected you, by shutting it out. Yet we cannot wall off our mind-hurts forever. You will need to face it – and in time, those memories will be easier to bear. I know it is hard, but try if you can not to struggle against it. Accept your feelings, and let them pass.” He paused. “Would you like to go through the trance-exercises again? Perhaps that will help you to sleep again.”

“I’d like that.” Tashir lifted his head, pushing a tangle of hair out of his eyes. “I, I think I heard Leshya yesterday! In my head, when I was brushing him.”

“That is very good. And what did your Companion say to you?”

“That he loved me.” His brown eyes held almost a pleading expression. “Why? I don’t understand… Don’t know what I’ve done to deserve it.”

“Only being the person that you are. Companions do not Choose wrong, Tashir. Leshya Chose you because you are capable of doing a great good, in the world. Because you are needed.” He chuckled. “My Wingbrother Vanyel asked the same question, once. Many times, in fact.”

Tashir shifted his weight. “But – but he’s a hero. Of course he’s earned it!”

“That came later.” Moondance looked out at the moonlight. “They are strange beings, your Companions of Valdemar.” Half in the spirit world, he thought. There are so many things they do not tell their Heralds. “I believe that they see beyond what mere mortals can. Your Leshya has Chosen you for who you are now, and also for what you will become. He will help you to grow, to become stronger – to be a braver and kinder man, and to stand up to what the world will ask of you.” Moondance closed his eyes, searching for the right words. “This is the promise that power makes on our behalf. It is a privilege, to be able to help others. Yes, it is a heavy thing to carry, and yet from what I have seen, most Heralds bear it with joy.”

Though not Vanyel.
“So, what do we know so far?” Savil said.

Vanyel rubbed his eyes, trying to focus on her. It was morning, after their second night in the Palace. They had been sleeping piled together in the kitchen, for warmth, under blankets taken from winter storage and still smelling of lavender and sendle – they didn’t dare light a fire in the grate and risk revealing smoke, though the first night Savil had set a small heat-spell, which ought not to be detectable at all through the shield. The second night, after a full day spent searching the Palace, none of them had had anything to spare, and they had been too tired for discussion; they had bolted an odd meal of scrounged foodstuffs and practically fallen into their makeshift beds.

After the parade of horrors, more grisly relics than he’d hoped to see in a lifetime, Vanyel hadn’t especially wanted to close his eyes, tired as he had been; he thought none of them had. They had found a stash of candles in the cellar, though, and left a number of them burning all night. A profligate waste of fuel, but he thought they were all grateful for it. Heralds, scared of the dark. What a mess we are. The kitchen was windowless, but with two dozen candles lit on every surface, it felt like an oasis of safety.

Despite that comfort, and Savil beside him, his sleep had been uneasy, broken by formless nightmares. And he had woken twice to Vedric attempting to probe the shields. Not with enough power to break through, but if he found the place weakened by their entry, he would get in. Only a matter of time.

He clutched his mug of tea, trying to shake off the bleariness.

Donni reached for one of the cheese-wheels they had found in the pantry, and cut off a piece with her belt knife. “Van, Mardic…?”

“I’ll go first,” Savil said. “I’ve been investigating the second spell Van and I noticed on this place, the newer one. Think I’ve got the origin narrowed down to the second floor, and I’m not totally sure, but would bet a silver that I’m right on how it was set. Someone brought in a catalyst – a physical item, to use as a focus – and then worked through it to enlarge the area-of-affect over a very long time. No shields on this place; it would’ve been easy.” She accepted a plate of cheese, salted-ham, and dried cherries from Donni, without even glancing at it.

“What is it?” Vanyel said, stifling a yawn.

“Can’t be sure yet, until I find the focus, but it’s very nasty. Reeks of blood-magic, as you might suspect, but I’ve got a feeling blood is involved in a subtler way as well. Gods! It makes my skin crawl. I was having to force myself to probe it at all. Like some kind of web, with something incredibly evil at the heart of it.” She sighed. “And it’s incredibly well-camouflaged. Adept-level work – Mardic, Donni, it’s not your fault you didn’t see it. I don’t think I would have, if not for that little bit of residue left from when the trap was triggered. Another thing – the traces have been cleaned up, quite skillfully. I can’t tell what the trap unleashed at all. Whoever did this is a very talented mage.”

Vanyel nodded his agreement. He’d started searching from the cellars up, and what he’d found matched Savil’s impression, though he hadn’t been able to See as much detail. He had mainly been
trying to look at the other, older spell.

“A Mavelan?” Donni murmured through a mouthful of cheese. Mardic hadn’t been speaking much at all.

“Certainly an outsider, given that the Lineans didn’t have any mages,” Savil said. “Very likely someone from Baires.” She made a face. “Seems this was the opening move in a bid to take over, after all. For all that Vedric’s been going on about the self-determination of the Linean people. Makes sense – they must want this place. The node in here is incredible.” Wonder in her eyes, and worry. “And we never caught a whisper that it was here.”

“About that,” Donni said. “Mardic and I found something, yesterday, and we’ve got a theory.”

“Do go on.”

“There’s a room in the center of the Palace,” Donni went on. “The funny thing is, it’s shielded. Just as well as the communal Work Room in the Palace. It’s not much bigger than a closet, and there’s only one thing in it – an odd pillar, floor to ceiling. Thrumming with power, and it feels very familiar.

If I didn’t know better, I’d say it was a Tayledras Heartstone.”

Vanya nearly spilled his tea all over his lap. “What? That’s impossible?” But, now that he thought about it, the node had the familiar, pulsating feel of a Tayledras valley-node, the power source for a Heartstone. And he was fairly sure that the second spell was tied directly to it, and had been for a very long time. Centuries, maybe. Which shouldn’t have been possible for an ordinary node.

“Van, want to have a look?” Savil said. “You’re the expert here. I’m not at all sure how it could relate to what happened here, but, well, anything we can learn might help.”

Vanya nodded. A Heartstone had a sort of primitive intelligence; he might be able to ask it, directly, what had happened. I’m not looking forwards to it. He still couldn’t remember exactly what had happened that time in k’Treva, and even now the thought of it shook him.

“I’m still not sure what the second spell is,” he said. “Never seen anything like it. If this pillar is a Heartstone, and the spell is tied to it, I might be able to pin it down.” He rubbed his eyes. “I did notice something odd. Every room that has – that had – people in it, the furniture’s shredded. But the rooms that were empty are just about untouched.” It reminded him of something that he couldn’t quite put his finger on. “Mardic, Donni, did you notice that?”

“I did,” Donni answered. “It’s weird. And there’s another thing. Given how tiny the bits were, we found more hands intact than I’d have expected. And they’re all wearing the same rings. Even the servants, or, gods, the servants’ children.” She fished in her pocket. “I brought one to show you.”

It was very plain for jewelry, Vanya thought. Hammered steel, set with a dull white stone that resembled nothing more than an ordinary water-smoothed quartz pebble.

“She wore a ring. Only it was – alive. Or something like. I’d feel power flowing in it, and then she’d speak like she was in trance. Like a second-stage Truth spell.”

Vanya shivered. That’s disconcerting. He couldn’t understand what it meant. Reaching for the ring with his Othersenses – he didn’t especially want to touch it with his hands, not when Donni had presumably taken it from a dead finger – he felt nothing at all.

“A badge of the household?” Savil guessed. “But I don’t see why everyone would be wearing it, even the servants.”
“Maybe it’s related to the other odd thing,” Donni offered. “All the servants were blood-relatives of the Remoerdis line. And from what we could tell, before this happened, they were all carrying the mage-gift in potential. But not a single one of them active.”

“It’s bizarre.” Savil reached to take the ring, examining it. “This entire affair is bizarre. Anyway. I’d like to spend today tracking down the focus for the trap-spell. Mardic, Donni, do you think you could help? I’m looking for any object that seems out of place, and feels magical.”

Donni nodded. “We can help with that.”

“And I’ll look at the pillar,” Vanyel said wearily. *I’m not up for this, but I haven’t got a choice, have I?*

The room was exactly as Donni had described it. Round, the walls plain sandstone rubbed smooth, the floor and ceiling panelled in pale, unvarnished birch. Clearly the pillar, which filled nearly the whole room and left barely enough space to walk around, went on straight through the ceiling, and down through the floor. It was a deep charcoal grey, polished to a glossy finish; resting his eyes on it was oddly like staring into deep water.

If Vanyel had to guess, the shields were as old as the Palace itself, and built well enough not to have needed any maintenance in the interim. In fact, they had some of the feel of a Tayledras set-spell. The pillar, when he touched it, was warm, and hummed with life.

He glanced over his shoulder at Mardic, who had showed him the way; he seemed to get around well enough, with his mage-sight and walking-stick to feel for obstacles, and must have already memorized the layout of the whole Palace.

“Should I stay?” Mardic said tonelessly.

“No, go on and help Savil. She needs it.” He gave in and rubbed at his burning, watering eyes. *I haven’t been this tired since I was on the Border.* “Just, if you could stick your head in here every so often and make sure I’m all right, I’d appreciate that.”

“Of course.” Mardic stood blankly for a moment, as though he had forgotten how to move – it was a look he wore fairly often, even now – and then reached to squeeze Vanyel’s arm before turning away.

Vanyel shut the door. Utter silence fell; even his own footsteps, as he traced a path around the pillar, were muted.

Finally, he summoned his courage and knelt, resting his forehead and palms against the warm stone. He Reached–

And the Heartstone swallowed him into itself.

For a long time he was aware of nothing but the seething maelstrom of the node. He drifted and swam in its currents, pulled out of time, a bit of flotsam carried on a storm. It wasn’t like touching a node at all; he could never have had a hope of controlling this much energy, and he wasn’t trying. He was a part of it, and it took him where it chose. Turned him over, curiously, examining
everything that he was.

–A glimpse of a void full of stars–

Somewhere in the pattern that was Vanyel, he remembered a question. Who left this here, it would have been in words – but in thought, he had to break it down, find concepts that the Heartstone could recognize. To specify what he meant by ‘this’, by ‘here’, and by ‘who’…

…And he caught a very clear image of several Tayledras Adepts, power flowing off them like heat-shimmer, one radiating the blue-green aura of a Healing-Adept. That face was sharper, and held forward; the implication was that this Healing-Adept had been responsible for leaving the node undrained and the Heartstone active, when usually the Tayledras leaving a Vale would shut down both.

It made no sense. Tayledras Healing-Adepts, like Moondance, concerned themselves primarily with Healing, not people, but environments – at restoring the damage done by magic, the fallout of the long-ago mage-wars as well as more recent scourges left by the work of bloodpath mages, and returning the land to a healthy balance that could support human habitation. It went against everything that they were, to leave this much energy here and untended. And yet it seemed they had thought it was necessary.

When, he thought.

The stone didn’t understand the question. Time was almost a foreign concept to it, but he caught a glimpse of a succession of faces, the crown of Lineas sparkling on each forehead. Many kings. Hundreds of years, he guessed.

Why?

The stone took him and drew him downwards, deeper, to the bedrock where it was rooted, then below. There was a vast pressure, and even though he was incorporeal, it squeezed him until he could scarcely breathe. And there was a tension, growing ever greater as the stone took him deeper, to where the rock itself began to grow hot.

–And then Vanyel saw it. A crack, a fault-line, invisible from the surface, running from north to south through the deepest layer of rock. It followed the river-bottom – and the stone told him it was natural enough, this zone of slippage, but there was something else. Something decidedly not natural. A hole, punched directly through the fault, clear down to the molten rock that lay far, far below.

It had to be a relic of the Mage Wars, thousands of years ago, and Vanyel could scarcely imagine the weapon that had caused it. He couldn’t fathom, either, why the zone of instability hadn’t already slipped and destroyed the city – and the rest of Lineas, and half of Baires and a significant chunk of western Valdemar – in a cataclysm of earthquake and fire.

Until the stone showed him where its energy was going.

It fed into a spell so complex he could never have laid it himself, not even in a lifetime. It would have been a lifetime’s work, for a Healing-Adept more powerful and skilled than he had ever seen. It held that gaping wound closed, and in time, given centuries more, it would finish the work it had begun and Heal the fault, spreading and redistributing the strain, until the land beneath was as stable as anywhere else.

It would take time. Any significant use of the node-energy would deprive the spell of what it needed, and it would fail, leading to exactly that cataclysm the Healing-Adept had feared. Vanyel, if he had
been capable of feeling surprise, would have been surprised that his tapping the node to raise the
shield over the Palace hadn’t already set off an earthquake.

Then again, the node held so much, poured in every instant by those seven roaring ley-lines that had
been redirected to feed it. He had barely touched the surface of it.

An incredible feat of magic. What did it have to do with the Remoerdis family?

The answer came, drawn from the Heartstone: they were the Guardians. That first Healing-Adept
had chosen their distant ancestor, starting a bloodline that all bore the mage-gift in potential and could
thus be linked to the Heartstone at birth – but no active mages, and thus no temptation to use the
energy. Perhaps the Heartstone was subtly suppressing those dormant mage-gifts.

The Heartstone could observe and act through those who bore the rings, a little; Reta’s odd
behaviour, the way she had spoken as though under geas, must be an example.

It was so much to absorb. Vanyel felt half-drowned by the flood of information; it was hard to cling
to his faltering sense of self.

What happened that night, he asked, again specifying the question as much as possible.

Disaster. A dozen brief, confused flashes, that must have been seen through the eyes of the Palace
inhabitants. A swarm, creatures out of a nightmare, all mouths and teeth and horror–

Gretshke. They were demi-demonic creatures out of the Abyssal Plane, and in the last year of the
war, he had fought and killed a hired Adept who had been using them to capture strategically
important keeps and fortresses that Valdemar couldn’t afford to guard heavily. The tactic was simple:
the mage made no attempt to control the Swarm, only shielded an area, to keep the Swarm contained,
and opened a Portal to let them through. Once they were finished devouring everything within the
area – and it didn’t usually take long – the mage would re-open the Portal, and they would depart,
sated, back to their home.

These creatures in the Heartstone’s memory looked and felt a little different, somehow less hungry
and more evil, but he had no doubt they were demonic and Abyssal in origin. That must be what the
trap-spell does, he thought vaguely. The mage in question could have shielded the Palace from the
outside, perhaps even casting at a distance, and summoned a Swarm via the focus they had left in
place, then called it away once the destruction was complete. It would explain exactly the pattern of
damage they had seen – especially since the Heartstone would have tried to keep them off its
Guardians, frustrating the creatures enough to tear the rooms apart before they could reach the
people.

Tashir? He wasn’t exactly sure what question he was asking.

No, the stone said. It didn’t know how the young man and survived, hadn’t seen it, because Tashir
had never worn the ring. Deveran, maybe suspicious of his parentage ever since the boy was born a
month early, had never brought him in for the ceremony of binding.

And yet the stone recognized Tashir. He was of the blood. Should have been one of the Guardians.

Danger threatens, the stone said – not in words, but in everything else. There are no Guardians left.
You must guard what we protect.

…And Vanyel drifted up, dazed, tossed out of the swirling current and lying bedraggled on its shore.
He found himself still kneeling in front of the Heartstone, drenched in cold sweat, every muscle
aching and trembling as though he had been holding himself rigid for candlemarks.
It took three tries just to stand. As he closed the door of the room behind him, he thought about Mindspeaking Savil or one of the others for help, but decided against; his head was a solid bar of agony. Desperately longing to lie down, he made his slow, unsteady way to the kitchen, and collapsed facedown on his pile of blankets.

…He awoke to someone rolling him onto his back, shaking his shoulder. “Van. Wake up.”

It felt like swimming up through molasses. He coughed. “W-wha…?”

“Thank the gods.” He felt Savil’s hand stroking his hair. “You scared us. I couldn’t wake you.”

His eyelids felt as heavy as rocks, but he managed to peel them open. Savil was kneeling over him, peering into his face; he had an excellent view of her nostrils, flared in worry. “How are you feeling?”

Vanyel tried to lift his head. “Been better.” To tell the truth, he felt very odd – like his body didn’t belong to him, like the cheery candlelit room was a painting on canvas he might lift aside with a fingertip. Nothing seemed real. He coughed again; his throat was incredibly dry.

“Sit up and I’ll get you something to drink. Gods, I hope what you learned was worth it.”

“It was.” Vanyel let Savil help him into a sitting position, leaning against one of the kitchen cabinets, and drape a blanket over his shoulders. It took more effort than usual to find words, as he struggled to explain what the Heartstone had showed him.

Savil listened, occasionally responding with “hmm”s and “mmm”s, while she bustled around the kitchen making tea. As he finished, she knelt again, shoving a mug into his hands, and then rested the back of her hand on his forehead. “Are you sure you’ll all right, ke’chara? You’re not sounding that coherent.”

“I’m just disoriented,” he admitted. “You know what it’s like, querying a Heartstone. They’ve got a very odd sense of time. And priorities.”

“Well, you ought to rest a little, but I do need your help this afternoon. We found the catalyst for the spell.”

Vanyel sipped the hot tea. It helped; the room seemed to come a little more into focus. “That’s good. Where was it?”

“Guest suite. I must’ve walked past it a hundred times, gods, I was looking for something hidden. It’s set in an ornamental dagger, of all things, just sitting there in plain sight! Donni’s the one who found it. She’s excellent at noticing things.”

Probably from her training as a thief. It had certainly come in handy many times over the years.

He tried to force his wandering mind back to the matter at hand. “The Mavelans would’ve stayed there,” he said. “During the treaty-negotiations and the wedding.”

“Exactly what I was thinking. And I would say that’s about how old the spell is.” Savil shuddered. “It’s evil. The worst part is, it’s a trap that resets itself. Takes in the energy released by the deaths it
causes, when someone triggers it, and stores it for the next use. Someone could trigger it again, and exactly the same thing would happen. And I can’t get ‘in’ and see exactly how it works without waking it. Not on my own.”

“So you need my help.” Vanyel clung to the warmth of the tea. Why am I so cold? Savil seemed comfortable enough. “Um. Give me a candlemark to wake up properly, and I’ll do it.”

“That sounds fine. I think we’re almost to the bottom of this.”

He heard footsteps; it took a moment to find the will to look up.

“Van, are you all right?” Mardic’s face was grey with exhaustion, and concerned. “I checked on you twice, you were in trance – then I went back and you weren’t there anymore.”

“I found answers,” he said shakily. “Savil…?” He didn’t want to try to explain a second time.

She went through it, laying it out much more clearly than he had. Halfway through, Donni arrived, slipping an arm around Mardic’s waist. He kissed the top of her head, a flicker of fondness crossing his face before fading back to his usual flat expression.

Vanyel looked away. 'Lendel, I miss you. Why had it been so hard, these past few days? Despite the block, which he thought wasn’t working as well lately, he found himself thinking of ‘Lendel often, and every time it scraped the old wound raw.

You’re just tired, he told himself. Hold it together.

Two candlemarks later, they all stood in the reception chamber of the guest suite. Vanyel thought whoever in charge of decorating it must have been drunk, mad, or both. The walls were panelled in pale linen, completely at odds with the wall-decorations – weaponry, dress-armour pieces, and the mounted heads of numerous dead animals. It was furnished with elaborate, mismatched and impractical chairs in different sizes and styles, all unpadded and uncomfortable-looking.

And the wrongness in the air felt thick enough to cut. Sensitized by the Heartstone to the magic that should have been there, and barely three yards away from the jewelled dagger hanging above the hearth, he was already nauseated.

The dagger had been there at least seventeen years, since the signing of the treaty. Giving the spell plenty of time to expand and grow, seeping through the bones of the Palace, permeating every corner.

“Ready?” Savil said.

Not really. Vanyel found a chair and sat, wincing as the hard wood dug into his spine; he ached all over. “Go ahead,” he said out loud. Center and ground. “I'll link to you, and you can slip me inside. Don’t drain yourself anymore than you have to.” Savil looked almost as tired as he felt. Neither of them could draw on the Web, here, and she had been doing complicated and involved magic all day.

He closed his eyes and counted his breaths, slipping into a light trance, then flung out a mental ‘hand’ to Savil. She pulled him in, linking on a deeper level than they did with Mindspeech, and he made himself as small as he could and followed her – blindly, through a maze of twisting, torturous
shapes, fire and shadow and confusion. One misstep, and the spell would backfire on him, possibly killing him. But he trusted Savil. She knew what she was doing.

And then he was at the heart of the spell, and he released the link and leapt–

–And struggled towards consciousness, gasping, coughing, drenched in cold sweat with his heart trying to pound out of his chest. His stomach was in knots, and he desperately craved a bath; he felt filthy, inside and out, like every part of him had touched something slimy and wrong.

“Van?” Savil was saying. He opened his eyes; she was kneeling in front of him, eyes wide, and he could barely feel her hands wrapped around his. “Van, are you back?”

He tried and failed to speak, bile rising in his throat. Savil released his hands and pushed his head down between his knees, scooping his hair back from his face. “Deep breaths, ke’chara. You’re all right. Just breathe.” A moment later he sensed Mardic’s presence, felt his hands rubbing his back.

His stomach heaved, but there wasn’t much to bring up; he’d had hardly any appetite the last few days. After a minute or two, he was able to lift his head, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. He realized that he was shaking. Mardic, Donni, and Savil were all around him, watching with concern.

“You’re not going to like it,” he said.

“I don’t like it already.”

Vanyel closed his eyes, still dizzy. “You were right. Blood is involved in another way. It makes a sickening amount of sense, too, given what I found out about the stone and the guardianship. Whenever this spell is triggered on a target, it goes after everyone with a living blood relation to them, who is also a mage or carries the potential. Down to the infants. Hells, down to the babes in wombs.”

Savil’s face paled.

“Vedric Mavelan was the last person to trigger it,” Vanyel went on, fighting back another wave of nausea. “His target was Tashir.”

Savil made a soft sound.

“So he knew Tashir wasn’t his!” Donni blurted, her voice cracking with anger. “The cold-hearted monster!”

“I fully agree.” Vanyel tried to sit up straighter, even though his own weight seemed to drag him down. “He must’ve known all along – and he made no attempt to clear it up.” He lifted both hands to his temples, trying to massage away the pain. “A few other things don’t make sense. Why did Reta survive? And why weren’t the Mavelan side affected? They’re related to Tashir through Ylyna. My guess is that Vedric did the same as that Adept from Karse, the one who called the gretshke-Swarms. Raised a shield around the Palace, triggered the spell, then lowered it afterwards. Otherwise a lot more people would’ve died, since Highjorune is full of people related to the Remoerdis family by blood who aren’t servants in the Palace. And the city guard would’ve started looking for another culprit right away. Why would Tashir kill people he’d never met? This way made it much easier to pin the blame on him.”
“How did Tashir survive, then?” Savil said.

“His Fetching, I imagine. You remember what he did in Mother’s bower. He’s untrained, but he’s very strong, and he certainly would’ve been terrified.” Vanyel shook his head. “I wonder if Vedric expected that. Certainly looked suspicious, him being the only survivor. Maybe he planned for the boy to survive, and that they’d try him for murder and have him executed.”

Savil made a face. “The gods know, that’s exactly what would’ve happened if he hadn’t been Chosen. Or if Mardic and Donni hadn’t been nearby. You can bet Lores wouldn’t have intervened in his favour.” Donni held out a hand, and she took it and levered herself to her feet, groaning. Mardic was standing blankly again, milky eyes fixed on nothing.

“Come on,” Savil said. “Let’s go rest and eat something. And then we’ll figure out what in hells to do.” She shuddered. “Wish I could destroy that thing, but it’s beyond my skill. Maybe Starwind could do it.”

Vanyel let her pull him upright, staggering a little before finding his balance. There was more he wasn’t telling them, and maybe he should have, but he couldn’t think of a way to explain how he knew. I would bet fifty silvers that the dagger is Leareth’s work. It had his signature – not magically, but in the concept and design, the cold, merciless logic of it.

It hurt to think about. Yet again, it felt like a betrayal – and that was stupid, it made no sense. He’d always known Leareth was his enemy.

And yet.

A candlemark later, they sat around a pot of bean stew on the floor of the stairs-landing, which Mardic and Donni had cleaned up, and which had a high window that let in some of the fading light. The windowless dimness of the kitchen had been too depressing.

“We need to get word out,” Savil said. “But Vedric has to suspect we’re in here, and that sooner or later we’ll find out what he did.” She closed her eyes for a moment, exhaustion clear in every line of her face. “I would Gate out, but I’m so tired, I’m not sure I can manage even as far as Forst Reach.”

“Me neither.” Vanyel stirred his bowl of stew listlessly. Mardic had managed to put it together from bits and pieces in the kitchen, cooked over a mage-fire; somehow he had never known that his friend knew how to cook. It made perfect sense, of course, Mardic had grown up lowborn, a farmer’s son; he wouldn’t have had servants to cook for him. The dish was quite good, flavoured with onions and carrot, but Vanyel still had no appetite. “He’ll know if I lower the shield to let one of us out,” he said. “We’ll need a diversion, to stop him going after whoever we send out.”

Donni scooted forwards. “Why don’t we just go after him directly? Kill him, or take him captive?”

Savil tapped the rim of her bowl, thoughtfully. “Because this needs to be handled delicately, or we’re likely to end up with Baires at war with us.” She grimaced. “Besides, I’m not sure I could take him on, right now.”

Donni glanced over. “Van could.”

“Probably,” he said. I don’t feel up for it, but since when has that ever mattered? “But I think Savil is
right. We need to tread cautiously.” Taking Vedric Mavelan prisoner would be even more challenging than killing him outright. It was very difficult to keep an Adept-class mage captive, especially a bloodpath mage.

“Mardic and I could go,” Donni suggested. “If we leave in the middle of the night, when Vedric’s sleeping, it’ll take some time for him to start looking. By then we’ll be well away from the Palace, and we’ll look like beggars.”

It would make more sense to send one of them alone, Vanyel thought, it would be less obvious and would leave more people here in the Palace to fight, but he knew why Donni didn’t want to be separated from Mardic. He was worried about Mardic too; the other man seemed even more distant than usual. I think the atmosphere in here is getting to him. Not to mention that he and Donni had been away from Haven for – what, over a month now? It was the first time Mardic had been on any long mission since losing Fortin. Of course it was hard for him.

Vanyel knew he ought to try to help, but it was difficult to talk to Mardic and they’d been so busy. Some friend I am, he thought bitterly. Mardic was always there for me.

“I don’t know about tonight,” he heard Savil say. “We’ll need to be ready to hold the shield, and I’m worn out. Though if I can grab a few candlemarks of sleep, I might be up for it.”

Vanyel couldn’t face the thought of fighting either. Exhaustion weighed him down, he still felt soiled from touching the trap-spell, and at the same time, that distant, confused strangeness the Heartstone had left him with was still there. Mingled together, he felt, more than anything, off balance. Like trying to stand on a hillside as it crumbled. I feel like any minute I might forget my own name.

He wanted to go home. Wasn’t sure he had ever wanted anything so much. He missed Shavri and Jisa. Everything would feel a little more all right if they were there.

“What’s going on out there?” he heard Donni say, craning her neck to look at the window. For the first time, Vanyel noticed the sounds that had been drifting in, muffled, through the Palace walls. Voices in the distance. Music.

Savil was counting on her fingers. “…Gods, I think it’s Harvestfest. What a time for it. Not much for the Lineans to celebrate.”

Sovvan. Like a punch to the stomach he hadn’t seen coming, it knocked the breath out of him; he bent over his knees, hugging himself, as the grief rose in a tide. ‘Lendel. How had he lost track of the days like this?

“Van?” Savil’s voice was soft. “Ke’chara, are you all right?”

He lifted his head, blinking back tears. “I’m fine.” Her eyes on him felt like a weight pressing into his skin. “I…have to be alone.”

She reached for his arm. “Van, please, I don’t think you should be. Not tonight.”

“Stop.” He shook off her grip, almost angrily, and dragged himself to his feet, trailing the blanket after him. “Savil, I – I can’t right now – I just can’t – just leave me alone. Please.” His voice was choked, it was nearly impossible to force out words past the lump in his throat, and he was a heartbeat away from tears.

He stumbled out of the kitchen, not even bothering to bring a candle – well, the darkness was fitting. It matched how he felt inside. There might as well be no light in a world that doesn’t have you in it, ashke.
With no particular destination, he staggered through the dark, echoing Palace. The place where several hundred people had died, terrified, the Heartstone’s protections holding off the demon-creatures just long enough for them to scream.

Sovvan. I can’t do this right now. But it didn’t matter, did it? It had never mattered.

His footsteps had carried him to the shielded room, that held the Heartstone. Somehow it felt right. And Savil wouldn’t be able to check up on him with a Mindtouch, which she was sure to do otherwise, and which he couldn’t face right now. He couldn’t face their sympathy. It was stupid, it didn’t help, didn’t make anything better. Ever.

Closing and bolting the door behind him, he slumped against the wall. Hugging himself. He was cold, in a way that went beyond the physical.

I can’t do this anymore. It’s too hard. I can’t.

He tried to catch at the thought, to step back and examine it, but he was so tired, and he couldn’t find anything solid. There was only pain, and the worn remains of Melody’s block almost made it worse. He couldn’t hang on to the memory of ‘Lendel’s face; when he tried, it drifted away, leaving only a deep confusion and the bitterly cold void lurking in the back of his mind, that he couldn’t quite look at.

This was the worst it had ever been, the worst Sovvan since ‘Lendel’s death. I can’t bear it, and I have no choice. Vanyel dug his nails into his palms, trying to anchor himself with that physical pain – but it was distant, irrelevant, his body still didn’t feel like his. There was only the emptiness, half his heart and soul streaming out into the void, like a one-sided Gate that would never find its destination.

I didn’t know it was possible to hurt this much.

His chest ached; he could barely breathe through the weight of grief. I don’t know how to cope anymore. Twelve years. Twelve years that he had somehow kept going, walling off the emptiness, one step at a time, one day at a time, alone… How can I be this lonely and still be sane? Maybe I’m not. To know that it was going to go on like this, on and on and on, year after year, for who knew how long, until, someday, he would die fighting a man he respected – who had murdered thousands – who might understand him better than anyone else.

A puppet of the gods, he would stand in a frozen pass and turn the horizon to fire–

–And for what? What was the point of any of it? I don’t know what matters anymore. For so long he had ridden on the weight of that future, the destiny he had never wanted, the silver cord tying him to the world. Because it was the right thing.

But was it, really? What did that even mean?

They had made him into a weapon, aimed at a distance at Valdemar’s enemies. Blotting lives out of the world, without ever seeing their faces. A blight on the world – a dirty, shameful thing.

What if I choose wrong? What if I’m the one who’s going to destroy everything? Compared to this, the most important choice he would ever make, killing a thousand Karsites was nothing. Failing to save a thousand of his own people, because he hadn’t had the courage to stain his honour, was nothing. And how could he possibly choose right, when nothing had ever made sense and he couldn’t even trust himself?

The gods had chosen the wrong person.
I shouldn’t exist. I don’t want to exist.

Again, Vanyel tried to catch at the thought, a small part of him raising a flag that he wasn’t thinking clearly, but he couldn’t hold onto it. The pain blotted out everything, a rising sea, and he was a piece of flotsam tossed in the waves. Less than nothing. Pointless. Worthless.

By the faint silvery light that the Heartstone gave off, he found himself staring at his belt-knife, somehow in his hand. Imagining how it would feel to slide the edge against his wrist—

Stop. The quiet voice at the back of his mind surged forwards. It sounded like Lancir. You’re not alone. Ask for help.

On instinct, he started to reach for Yfandes – and twitched back, the room-shields blocking him. Even if he stepped outside, he still couldn’t Mindspeak her. Not without alerting Vedric to their presence.

He was on his own.

Savil was out there, and Mardic and Donni. But the door seemed a long way away, and he couldn’t find the impetus to move. Wasn’t sure he remembered how. He was lost, a broken ugly thing in a broken ugly world, and surely nothing could be worth this much pain.

—A flash: the Heralds’ temple, Tylendel’s body laid out on the bier. Dressed in Whites, hair fanned out around his face, he might have been sleeping except for how he lay, with his arms folded over his chest, ‘Lendel had never slept in anything but a sprawl that took up three-quarters of the bed. And Vanyel knelt by him, and took the dagger from his belt—

He found himself staring at the knife in his hands, as blood spilled down his arm into his lap, soaking through his Whites, warm, black in the strange light. Did I do that, he thought vaguely. The pain was a sharp accent, it was real, suddenly his body felt like his again – but it numbed as well. He could find the edges of the void now.

It was still so big. So much emptiness, and so little of him left to hold it together.

It would be so easy to slide the knife a little deeper…

No. This time, that small voice drove him to move. He was too dizzy to stand, but he crawled to the door, managed to reach the bolt, shoved it open.

:Savil?:

She was asleep, her shields locked down tight. He didn’t blame her for shielding so hard, the tang of blood-magic was everywhere in the Palace, but he couldn’t break through. :Donni?: Nothing.

:Mardic?:

:...Van?: Confusion, then alarm. :Van, where are you?:

:The room: He knew it wasn’t an especially useful answer. It was hard to find words.

Mardic must have guessed where he meant from the overtones – and guessed that something was wrong. :I’m coming:

He slumped against the doorframe and watched the blood pool without much interest. The numbness was deepening, and he was very light-headed now, spots dancing against his vision.
Running footsteps, irregular, the sound of a walking-stick skittering on the floor – Mardic must have been using his mage-sight to navigate the hallway. “Van?” And Mardic was there, dimly visible by the moonlight that came through the high row of windows, wearing a blanket over his shoulders like a cloak. He flung down his stick, dropping to his knees in front of the doorway, felt around – and made a soft noise as his hands met the spreading pool of blood – fumbled forwards until his hands found Vanyel’s knee, then his arm.

There was more blood than he had realized. It was all over his Whites, black in the starlight.

“Gods, Van, was going to ask if you’re all right but that’s clearly a stupid question.” Mardic’s voice was calm, though, as he ripped off a section of his blanket, probably assisted by Fetching; he wadded it up, then took hold of Vanyel’s limp arm and pressed the cloth to it. “Hold pressure on that, please.”

Vanyel pressed the offending arm to his chest. “I’m sorry…”

Mardic said nothing, just shrugged off the blanket and felt around until he found Vanyel’s shoulders, draping it over him.

“Don’t,” he mumbled, “you’ll get blood all over.”

“Not my biggest concern right now.” Mardic’s voice was still very matter-of-fact, but there was more life in it than he had heard in a long time. He knelt in front of Vanyel, touching his forehead, then pressing warm fingers to his neck, checking his pulse. He seemed relieved. “I can spare some energy for you. Go into trance and do some self-Healing until you stop bleeding.”

“Please don’t tell Savil,” he heard himself say.

“We’ll talk about that later. Here.” Mardic rested a hand on his shoulder, and he felt the mental link he offered – and accepted it with a sigh, a flow of energy that was barely a trickle compared to the node, but didn’t scorch him either. It felt good. He hadn’t realized how drained he was.

It was a closer connection than he had shared with Mardic since before the war. He could feel the edges of the void Mardic carried in the back of his own mind, the part of him forever streaming into nothing. Oddly, it made him feel a little less lonely.


Vanyel closed his eyes. Center and ground. His arm was hurting quite a lot now; it was very distracting. Counting his breaths, he managed to slip into a light trance, and from there to focus on his paltry Healing-Gift, pushing it to the limits. He nudged it towards the stinging line on his wrist, and fed in Mardic’s energy, slowly clotting the blood, knitting the tissues.

–Some indefinite amount of time later, he opened his eyes.

Mardic was watching him. “Better?” he said.

He glanced down at his forearm. At some point, Mardic had bandaged it with strips of linen torn from his sleeve, quite competently. Impressive, given that he couldn’t see. “Still hurts,” he admitted.

“Not surprised. That was a pretty deep cut.” Mardic slid back onto his heels. “Can you stand? Let’s go somewhere that’s not blood all over. Think I know a place.”

Mardic retrieved his stick, helped Vanyel up – dizziness washed over him for a moment, but he kept his footing – and they made their way a short distance down the hall. Mardic stopped at a small door, found the knob, and opened it.
It was a linen closet. Clearly no one had been inside when the trap-spell had fired; the shelves with their folded sheets and blankets were intact. Mardic, with surprisingly deft fingers, found and with a flare of magic lit the two candles in their sconces just inside – presumably for Vanyel’s benefit rather than his own – then started pulling down bedding, while Vanyel slid down against the wall, shivering.

Mardic tossed another blanket over him. “Sorry, know it’s cold. Can’t spare anything for a heat-spell. We can huddle up.” He folded another blanket into a sort of cushion, sat on it, then started draping the pile of quilted and knitted wool blankets over them. A minute or two later, he had assembled a nest of sorts. “May I?” He held out his arm.

Vanyel nodded and let Mardic slip his arm around him, leaning against his chest.

“There, we’ll be warm enough.” Mardic was silent a moment. “Van, I don’t know how to… I have to tell Savil about this. You know that. You can’t ask me to hide it from her.” He fiddled with the edge of the blanket. “Still, if it’s all the same to you, I won’t tell her right this second. She’s worn out. Needs sleep. Plan was to wake up two candlemarks before dawn. We can talk about whether you’re up for this or whether we need to wait another night, at that point. Besides, she’ll just panic and get upset. Reckon that won’t help, right now.”

Vanyel nodded. “Thank you.”

Mardic turned his head. “Let’s talk about it. How are you feeling?”

“Like an idiot.” He looked down. “I’m sorry. It was stupid and I – I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“What were you thinking?” But Mardic’s voice was gentle, not angry. “Don’t figure you were actually trying to kill yourself, or you’d have done a more thorough job.”

That forced a painful snort of laughter out of him.

“I know Sovvan’s hard,” Mardic went on. “It caught you by surprise, didn’t it? We’re in a creepy Palace surrounded by dead people. Can’t imagine that helped. You looked at the trap-spell for Savil. I know touching blood-magic always makes me feel sick inside. Dirty. You’re tired, and that makes it hard to keep your feelings straight. Right?”

Vanyel nodded. His eyes were burning again. “It’s – just – one thing after another. Haven’t had time to find my balance. Not just this mess. Tashir looks so much like, like him…” Even now, he couldn’t say ‘Lendel’s name out loud. “My family’s always exhausting, I can’t ever relax with them. Touching the Heartstone did something strange. I didn’t feel like myself. Then the trap-spell,” and recognizing it as Leareth’s work, but he didn’t say that either, “and then…recognizing it was Sovvan, out of the blue. Usually I’ve got time to prepare for it. And not even having Yfandes to talk to.” He shook his head. “I shouldn’t’ve gone off alone.”

“Van, I know how hard it is to be around anyone, when you’re feeling like that.” Mardic squeezed his shoulders. “We were worried, but Savil said you would manage. I should’ve checked on you. Didn’t think about how you’d be cut off from ‘Fandes.”

Vanyel shook his head. “You didn’t do anything wrong. You’re not my keeper.”

“But I am your friend.” Mardic was silent for a long moment; the only sound in the room was their breathing. Vanyel was finally warm. And starting to feel sleepy, of all things.

“Van, can you talk about it a little?” Mardic said finally. “Think I might understand. I’ve wanted to –
to hurt myself, before. When everything’s so hard, and you’re so tired, and it feels pointless, but you have to keep going and there’s this pressure that builds up…” He looked down. “Don’t want to push. I can just be here with you, if that’s easier.”

Vanyel felt his throat tighten again. Damn it, why can I cope fine when people are trying to kill me, but someone’s kind to me and I come undone? “I…don’t really remember,” he admitted. “I was – I missed him so much, there wasn’t room for anything else, I couldn’t remember why it was worth it to keep going, why any of it mattered. Then I, I saw something, like a dream… His body in the temple.” Impossible, because there hadn’t even been a body left, and he had missed the funeral anyway. “Guess I blanked out for a moment. All of a sudden there was blood everywhere.”

“And then you called for help,” Mardic said. “Thank you for doing that. Could’ve gone a lot worse.” He hesitated. “Has that ever happened to you before? Doing something, and not remembering it?”

“Only once. I tried to Mindtouch the Heartstone in k’Treva.” After having the dream about ‘Lendel, the one that had been real. He didn’t feel like trying to explain it. “Stupid idea. I woke up on the floor and didn’t remember anything, and I – I was a mess. Like there was something I should’ve remembered, that was important – I was angry for no reason.” He still was, sometimes – that odd itchy, restless anger directed at nothing.

“You touched the Heartstone today,” Mardic pointed out. “Seems maybe doing it knocks you off balance, and you get muddled.”

“You’re probably right. Don’t see we had a choice this time, but it’s very disorienting.” If he had known how it would affect him, and that it was Sovvan, he would have tried to wait a day.

“How do you feel now?” Mardic asked quietly.

He closed his eyes. “I miss him. Gods, Mardic… I’m so lonely. I’m so tired of trying to do this without him.” He took a deep breath, let it out. “But I know why I’m doing it.”

“Because Valdemar needs you.” Sympathy in Mardic’s voice. “I know it’s not very fair.”

Vanyel took a deep breath. “What happened to you wasn’t very fair either. I’m sorry, Mardic. I – I’m sorry I wasn’t able to stop it.”

Mardic was silent for a moment, just breathing in and out. Finally, he squeezed Vanyel’s shoulders. “Not your fault,” he said, very quietly. “Sometimes stuff happens and it’s no one’s fault, right? Doesn’t change anything, but – it’s still not fair. No one should have to go through what you did, and not have a choice but to keep going.”

“I have a choice.” The ache rose in his chest. “Everyone always has a choice. But I – I know which way I’ll choose.” Over and over, a thousand times, a million crossroads, he might hate it, rail against it, but he wouldn’t walk away, not ever.

For Valdemar. It wasn’t just words. It was Randale and Shavri and Jisa and Savil and Tantras, and his parents, and half a million people living their ordinary lives.

“I know,” Mardic said. “Because you’re… No, it’s not even because you’re a Herald. Just because there’s still work that needs done, and we’re the people who can do it. Even though it’s hard. We can’t just stop.”

I look at the stars, Leareth had said, and I remember that there are so many lights in the world, who are worth saving, and we cannot save all of them – from the very beginning, it was too late to save all of them – but we can still save some.
They were still worth protecting.

Snow carried on the wind, blasting down a frozen passage–

(Damn it, Vanyel thought. He wasn’t up for this right now. It was the worst time for it that he could imagine.)

He had sent ‘Lendel away. Could remember it perfectly, his lover looking back over his shoulder, riding away with Yfandes, seeking help that would come too late–

(No, he thought. Not that, never that. ‘Lendel was dead, damn it, and that part of the dream was a lie.)

“Herald Vanyel,” Leareth said.

Vanyel faced him across the expanse of ice between them. “I’ve got some questions for you. Something I’d like you to explain to me.”

“Oh?” Leareth said, politely. “You are angry. I think I am missing some context, again.”

(Vanyel was angry, but he wasn’t even sure if the anger was aimed at Leareth. There was a writhing confusion in him – and behind it, the emptiness, tugging at his attention. Even the cold false-peace of the ice dream wasn’t enough to ease it.)

“You built an artifact,” he said. “For a man called Vedric Mavelan. Or else you made it for someone else, I guess, and he got ahold of it later. A trap-spell deliberately designed to murder everyone in a entire family. Fueled by blood-magic, which is vile enough, though I know you think it’s justifiable.” He shook his head. “I know it was you. I can recognize your work, and it – it’s very skillfully made.”

Leareth was silent for a long moment. Finally, he nodded.

“Vedric Mavelan,” he said slowly. “I do know that name, though I have never met the man who bears it. Twenty years ago he contacted one of my agents and offered a trade. An alliance, in exchange for my assistance in enlarging his territory. He seemed a very intelligent man, and a patient one. Ambitious, and not to be entirely trusted, but I judged it worthwhile in expectation to ally with him.” He regarded Vanyel thoughtfully. “I suppose he has carried out his plan, then. I did not think it would affect Valdemar – I would have taken measures to halt his work, if so, but I have made no promises to you regarding those lands outside of your own.”

Vanyel glared at him. “It does affect Valdemar. And he hasn’t carried out his plan, not fully. I don’t intend to let him either. There’s some information you’re missing, and if he does succeed, it won’t be worth much. Something very bad will happen.”

(Was he saying too much? It was hard to focus; he still felt half out of control, like he was sliding down a cliff as it dissolved into fragments, struggling to find footing. But one thing was certain: Vedric didn’t know about the Heartstone and the ancient spell it fuelled. He wasn’t likely to take the time to look, either. He would drain the node, and the city would disappear in a conflagration of flames, taking out Lineas and Baires and a chunk of Valdemar with it. He would die, and take tens of thousands of lives with him, and for nothing at all.)
Leareth met his eyes, calmly. “There is always uncertainty, in any plan. Twenty years ago, we had not met, and my only path forwards was by force. I will not apologize for my past choice, as I still think that it was reasonable at the time, but it seems the situation has changed.” He bowed his head, briefly. “You say it will bring disaster, if Vedric Mavelan succeeds at seizing the territory he covets. I am not sure that I believe you – it would be in your interest to say this thing in all worlds – and you do not offer me much information to work with, but of course I cannot blame you for your distrust.”

(Leareth had always wanted to see a live Heartstone, Vanyel thought. He couldn’t explain what would happen if Vedric succeeded without revealing that, and giving Leareth an opportunity to travel here and study it. Which seemed ill-advised.)

“I have no wish to see harm befall your neighbours,” Leareth said. “Perhaps I must take a leap, and trust you, Herald Vanyel. If this thing is true, I would be quite obliged if you could stop him.”

“You want me to do your dirty work for you?” Vanyel spat.

A slow, deliberate shrug. “I cannot act in time. You know that I am far away.”

(And thank the gods, Vanyel thought. He hadn’t realized until after he spoke that his words could be taken as an invitation for Leareth to come in and help. Which would have been an even bigger disaster.)

“I’ll try,” he said. “You know, I’m pretty unimpressed with you right now. I’m not sure how giving Vedric Mavelan the tools to murder an entire family was ever something you thought would make the world a better place.”

(It was so hard to keep his face controlled and his voice level. It hurt, gods, he couldn’t think about ‘Lendel, but at the same time he couldn’t not, he kept coming back to it, the frayed remains of the block forcing his thoughts in circles.)

Leareth inclined his head. “I work with those tools I have, Herald Vanyel, and sometimes even those with slimy handles are worth using. I could predict you would feel differently.” He paused. “You seem troubled. You are hurting.”

(Damn it, Vanyel thought dully, why could he always tell? It was the last thing he wanted to talk about. He felt tears pricking his eyes, the ache in his chest surging.)

“It is your Valdemaran festival of autumn,” Leareth said. “It cannot be easy, to face this crisis on the day that you grieve your dead.” The wind blew his hair across his face, and Vanyel saw real sympathy in his eyes.

Vanyel blinked away the betraying tears. “It’s not like the timing is your fault,” he managed to say, forcing the words out, his voice choked.

“I do not claim that it is. Only that I see you are suffering, and I wish it were different.”

(His pity was too much. Vanyel curled into himself, falling to his knees on the snow, sobs shaking his body, tears spilling over and freezing on his cheeks. He wanted to be anywhere but here. Wanted it to stop.)

A shadow fell across his feet, and he looked up, into Leareth’s black eyes, fractured and shimmering through a haze of tears. The mage knelt beside him in the snow.

“You may not want my comfort,” Leareth said. “Yet I thought I might offer. You miss him, do you not? Your Tylendel.”
Vanyel glared at him. “You have…no right… to say his name,” he snarled. “You killed him.”

“I do bear some of the blame, for that,” Leareth said, his voice nearly a whisper. “I wish that I might undo the past. That I could return him to you.” He closed his eyes. “I accepted the price, when I chose this path many centuries ago. I knew that in trying to do the impossible, I would make mistakes, and that some will not be repairable. Yet I wish the burden did not fall so heavily on you, Herald Vanyel. You are a light in the world, that burns brighter than most, and I have hurt you. I regret that, and I am sorry.”

Vanyel bowed his head and let his hair fall across his face, unable to speak.

Through his closed eyelids, he saw a flare of light, flickering. A false candle-flame, summoned by the false magic of this strange dreamland.

“For Herald-Mage Tylendel,” he heard Leareth say. “You were loved, and you will never be forgotten.”

It was too much to bear. He felt Leareth’s touch on his shoulder – it was solid, real – and he couldn’t bring himself to push it away.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I should apologize for this chapter – although I think I've already been punished for it, because now my go-to work stress dream is the thing Vanyel does in the Heartstone room somehow happening while I'm supposed to be running EA Global.
Chapter Ten

Chapter Notes

Um, I should probably apologize for this chapter as well.

It was the attack on his shields that woke him. Bleary-eyed, Vanyel pawed at the tangle of blankets, trying to free himself.

“Did you feel that?” Mardic’s voice was blurred with sleep. “Course you did, it’s your shield. Damn it!”

Another attack. No mere probe, this time, but a strike at full power.

“Vedric,” he managed.

“He’s trying to break through–?”

“Will break through. Matter of time.” He could feel the sickly taint of blood-magic behind the attack.

:Van!: Savil’s mindvoice was strident. :Where are you?:

:Coming: He was already struggling to his feet, shedding blankets, ignoring the dizziness that washed over him. The air felt very cold, and he was stiff and sore all over. Shoving the door open, he summoned a mage-light and made his way down the corridor at a staggering run, Mardic’s arm over his.

Savil and Donni were in the kitchen – on their feet, clearly awakened from a sound sleep as well. They both stared at him, and Savil’s jaw went slack, her face paling.

Vanyel looked down at himself. The front of his Whites were crusted with dried blood. Oh, right.

“Ke’chara, what–” Savil stopped, her face going blank. Mardic must have been Mindspeaking her, he thought. “Right,” she said after a moment. “We’ll talk about this later. Can you hold him off?”

“Not for much longer.” Still lightheaded, he swayed and caught himself against the counter as another bolt of force hammered the shields.

“Damn.” Savil’s voice was deceptively mild. “Well, we need to get word out.”

“Can you Gate?” Donni said.

She closed her eyes. “Maybe. But it’s risky, and I think I’d better stay. Van, you’re in no condition to fight him off alone. Listen – if you key me to your shield, I can aim some attacks through it. Distract him long enough for Mardic and Donni to get out the other side.”

“And we’ll ride for Lissa’s people as fast as we can,” Donni finished.

Vanyel nodded. “Worth a try.” He felt steadier now. Sleep had helped, and so did the urgency – there was a clear, straightforward problem in front of him, that could be solved by making things explode. Always my forte. He bit back a bitter laugh.
Laying a hand on Savil’s arm, he centered and grounded, then reached to mesh his personal shields with hers, drawing her in to the shield-spell. *There, aunt:*  

*Thank you:* She pulled away from the link, and a moment later he felt her Reaching for – not the node, it was too strong even for her, but for one of the flowing ley-lines.  

*Careful:* he warned her. *If we drain it too far—:*  

*I know. Only going to use a little:*  

He sent a silent acknowledgement, and then focused on holding the shield. Another attack. He stumbled, nearly falling. “Mardic, Donni,” he managed. “Go!”  

–And the idea came to him. He recoiled from it, horrified by himself. But it would work, wouldn’t it? At least, it might. And they had so few options.  

*The trap-spell:* he sent to Savil.  

She guessed what he meant, immediately, and he felt her shock and disgust. *No:*  

*But we don’t—:*  

*Ke’chara, NO:* She pulled slightly back from the link, focusing enough to throw an attack, then was back. *We’re not using a blood-magic spell. Besides, it’d take out his whole family, not just him. Do you want to kill children?:*  

*No, but—:*  

*No buts. Heralds don’t kill innocents:* A pause, and he could feel her thinking. *Vedric set it. He might be shielded against it:*  

A valid point, though not a certainty. And Savil was right – Vedric might be their enemy, but that didn’t give them the right to go after his family. That wasn’t an option.  

Even if Leareth would have done it, and Vanyel couldn’t be sure he was wrong.  

His world shrank to the node, as he reached for it, and the faltering barrier. He poured energy in, replacing the layers as they were shredded away, wracked by nausea as his mind brushed the slimy residue of blood-magic attacks. An indefinite time later, he barely felt the jarring sensation as Mardic and Donni, already keyed to the energies of the shield, ‘opened’ a small section and slipped out into the night. As soon as they were through, he pushed more node-energy into that section, patching it as best he could – but it was a weak spot, and Vedric would find it sooner or later.  

–But as long as he could hold it, Vedric would be focused on taking it down, and he might not notice two people fleeing into the night, towards the city walls.  

*Hold it hold it hold it…*  

He felt the touch of Savil’s mind, and pulled her in, eagerly accepting the support she offered. In concert, they reinforced the weakest places, holding the shield together by bare force of will–  

Suddenly, the attacks ceased. He found himself slumped against the wall, gasping, his heart racing. Savil sagged next to him. “Why did he stop…?”  

Vanyel was too busy trying to catch his breath to answer. *I don’t know, but I’ll take any reprieve I*
Side by side, they sprinted through the streets. Mardic’s breath came in pants, and there was already a stabbing pain between his ribs. He was ‘borrowing’ Donni’s eyes; it was disorienting, and he didn’t like how deeply he had to open to her – how much of the void he was leaking – but it was the only way he could avoid tripping.

:Rasha’s waiting outside the gates: Donni sent. 

Which were closed for the night. They would have to climb, or blast their way out – either way, it would draw attention. But once they were on Companion-back, no one could catch up. Unless Vedric could cast at a distance.

He tried to run faster, but it was no good.

:Is Van all right?:

He had no idea how Donni had the energy to spare for Mindspeech. :Not really: he sent. But there was no time to worry about his friend.

:What are they going to do?:

:Dunno: He had to trust Savil to look after Van, and to figure out some way of dealing with Vedric. Their part was simple. Get out of the city, get word to Lissa and her people…

:!: The wordless, frantic Mindtouch nearly knocked him sprawling. He stumbled, trying to catch his balance. :Savil?:

:Look out! Think Vedric saw!:

He lost the link as a fireball struck them head-on, sending both of them flying. For a long moment he lay with his cheek pressed against the gravel, his rough shirt smoking – even now, he refused to wear Whites. Everything was spinning. His shields had barely caught the blow.

Have to move. Slowly, painfully, he lifted his head, then levered himself up from the ground. :Donni. Come on. Donni: She was close; he felt around, and his hand brushed her shoulder.

She rolled over, moaning :What—:

Hoofbeats. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

The man’s voice, a deep baritone, sent fear shooting through Mardic’s chest. On hands and knees, he turned. Donni was stirring as well, and he felt her reaching again, offering the link. Offering her sight.
He saw Tylendel.

No. Not Tylendel – but Vedric looked as the dead trainee would have, if he had survived to adulthood. It was deeply disturbing. Waves of power radiated from him like heat-shimmer, the slippery, vile feel of a freshly ‘fed’ bloodpath mage. He slid down from the saddle of his chestnut stallion, and bowed to them, ironically.

“Heralds of Valdemar,” he said. “It’s not that I want to kill you. It’s nothing personal, but I can’t allow you to leave.”

*Like a villain out of a ballad for children,* Mardic thought, pointlessly.

:*

And he felt Donni reaching to mesh her shields with his, slipping into full rapport. He knew what she was doing, and he let her. For the first time since he had lost Fortin, she was there in his mind, all of her merged with all of him, and he felt her flinch from the frozen, howling emptiness of his mind – and then relax, and lean in. *You’re mine,* she said – not with Mindspeech, they were close enough not to need Mindspeech, but with everything else.

*Always,* he thought.

Moving like one body, they raised a shield together, just before Vedric struck.

The mage’s first blow nearly shattered their barrier. *He’s too strong,* Mardic thought desperately, as they poured their shared reserves into replenishing it. He could feel Rasha reaching for Donni, trying to share her energy, but it wasn’t, it wasn’t enough–

The second blow sent them both sprawling to the ground, torn out of rapport, the shield shredded. Mardic reached for his reserves, trying to reinforce at least his personal shields, but he had nothing left.

He heard Vedric’s footsteps approaching. Measured, patient.

Everything seemed to slow, crystallizing down, a single moment hanging in place.

*We can’t get out.*

Donni stirred, feebly, half-stunned.

No.

*We can’t both get out.*

He had no reserved energy left – but he did have something. Power came from life itself. That was how blood-magic worked.

How a Final Strike worked.

He could Fetch her to safety, burning his own life-force, and maybe he wouldn’t have enough left after that to kill Vedric, but he could weaken him –

No. She was his Donni and he couldn’t leave her, never ever ever.

And yet. *We can’t leave Van to face this alone.* Savil was there – but someone still had to get out, to pass word, as soon as possible. Van couldn’t Gate in his current condition. Someone had to get out, and someone had to stay and fight, hold Vedric off the Palace, or else he would already have won.
And Van was in no shape to face that battle alone. Any additional help they could offer –

There had never been a choice.

:Donni: he sent, reaching, trying to put into it everything that lay between them. Nearly fifteen years of love and trials, duty and honour, the way the whole world fell into alignment when she smiled. She was the most beautiful thing in the world, she was his everything, his Donni, and, and, and–

She pulled him into full rapport again, for only an instant, but it was enough.

:Mardic, I–:

:Keep Van safe: He wouldn’t ask anything more, and he hated to ask even that much. :Until it’s over: After that – well, he wasn’t going to think about what she would do, not right now, but he knew in his bones.

He felt her resistance, all of her rising up in denial, fiery and bright, no no no no no – and then subsiding, settling under the weight. As he had watched her do a hundred thousand times. His Donni. She always had been so much more than a Herald, but at the core of her, she would bear that duty no matter the cost.

:I love you: he sent.

:Always:

Their conversation had passed at the speed of thought, but there was no more time, seconds were slipping by. Too late.

:Say goodbye to Van and Savil for me: he sent, and he Reached.

For the newly-familiar oasis of the kitchen, the rough cold flagstone, the smell of dried beans, the softness of the blankets under his hands. He Reached with everything he was and had ever been – every breath he had ever taken, every song he had ever sung, desperation and anger and joy and love –

– And Donni was gone. He couldn’t see or hear or feel his body anymore but he could still feel her, distantly, she was scrabbling for him through the bond that lay between them, her mind screaming–

I love you, he thought, one last time, and blocked the link, shielding her out as thoroughly as he could. He couldn’t shelter her from what his death would do to her – gods, after last night, with Van, he knew exactly what he was about to put her through – but at least he didn’t have to make her feel it.

He could feel himself fading, losing hold of everything – he had spent too much of himself, Fetching Donni to safety. It was too late for anything but one last, desperate burst.

He wasn’t afraid. What would have been the point?

Fortin, he thought, and let go.

And then there was nothing.
Vanyel cried out, startled, as Donni tumbled out of nowhere, falling onto the pile of blankets in front of where he knelt. Her clothing was scorched, her face half-coated in blood.

He dropped the cup he had been holding, water spilling onto the floor.

“What–” Savil started to say, then reeled back as a flash of brilliant light shone through the open doorway to the pantry, illuminating the whole room, for a fraction of a second, as bright as the noon sun.

Donni screamed, a shrill sound that shouldn’t have been able to come from a human throat.

What?

“Mardic,” Savil breathed. “Oh, gods…”

Vanyel, instinctively, reached out with his Thoughtsensing, his mind passing through the barrier with difficulty, searching – and there was nothing.

He hadn’t felt it in the Web, but they were far from the Valdemaran border, and Mardic hadn’t been in the Web. Not anymore.

“Donni,” he gasped. She was rising to her knees, her face twisted into a rictus mask, mouth open in a scream, but only a raw whimper came from her. He flung himself at her, knocking her on top of the pile of blankets, pinning her wrists to the floor before she could reach for her daggers.

She let him, not struggling at all. He reached for her mind, a howling void of agony and emptiness – but at the center of it was a tiny island of sanity, a single flame of determination, a semi-coherent litany. Protect Van protect Savil have to fight keep them safe have to win kill Vedric safe until it’s over–

:Donni: He pulled her even closer, offering as much rapport as she would accept, and felt Rasha through her, distantly, somewhere on the edges of it all, trying to reach her Chosen, but the shield over the Palace lay between them, and Donni was blocking her out. She didn’t see what Rasha could do to help.

:Donni: he sent. :Donni, gods, I'm sorry–:

:Mardic says to tell you goodbye: she sent.

Like a knife between his ribs. Oh, Mardic…

Grieve later. No time now. :Vedric Mavelan’s a filthy bastard and we’re going to kill him: Vanyel sent. :You can do this, Donni:

He released her wrists. She scrambled up and flung herself into his arms. He held her as gently as he could. Felt Savil’s mind tapping his shields, and pulled her into the link as well.

:Samil, you have to go: he sent. He had pick up the fringes of Mardic’s last thoughts, in Donni’s chaotic memories, and he had to agree. :Gate to Haven, before Vedric brings down the shield. Donni and I will handle him:

He felt her hesitation, concern. :Come with me: she sent. :I’m not leaving you:

:You have to. Savil, we need to finish this. If we leave him here – this is his endgame. He’ll have all of Lineas under his control before Randi can act, and he might not wait to use the node: At all costs,
they had to keep him away from the Heartstone, and the power that he coveted, or else there might not be a kingdom left here tomorrow.

Wordless, reluctant agreement, and then he felt Savil reaching for a private link. He released Donni’s mind, still holding her in his arms, and tightened his directional shielding.

:You’re not up for this: Savil sent. :Mardic told me what happened, last night. I’m not leaving you here alone:

:You have to. I’ll manage: Somehow.

He felt the complex overtones of her reaction. :Fine: she sent finally. She didn’t like it at all, but she knew he was right, and she knew that he knew that, all of it laid bare between them.

:Mardic hurt him: she went on. :Vedric. He didn’t kill him, but somehow he managed a two-step Final Strike. Burned half his life-force Fetching her here, through your shield, then threw the rest at Vedric. Wouldn’t have thought it was possible: Her mindvoice was flat; he could tell that she felt as numb as he did. The grief would hit both of them later, he thought, but there wasn’t time for it now. :He’ll be weakened. But he’s still coming:

:Just go: he sent. :Tell Randi everything. We’ll get out on our own:

Sudden alarm, echoing down their link. :The trap-spell: she sent. :If he triggers it on one of you--:

A thought came to him. :Can you take it with you? The dagger, I mean? If the focus is gone--:

A pause. :No. I can’t risk it: There was very little emotion in her mindvoice. :It’s warded to resist tampering. Moving it would set it off. I’m not skilled enough to take the wards apart:

Damn. Well, focus on what they could do. :Nothing we can do about Donni’s family: Even she didn’t know who her parents had been. Though he suspected, if Vedric used the spell on either of them, it would be on him. :I – Father, Mother, my siblings…: Lissa had no potential Gifts, she would be safe, but he had never bothered to check the others--

:Safe. I put shields on Forst Reach a long time ago:

Small mercies. Then he remembered. Brightstar and Featherfire were safe behind k’Treva’s impenetrable shields, but-- :Oh, gods. Jisa:


:She’s my daughter. No time to explain. And Shavri’s got mage-gift in potential, so she’s in danger. Warn them!: Savil would be too drained to fight, after Gating. Who else in the Palace could protect them? :Tell Jaysen: He was the only other mage left in Haven.

Savil would have a lot of questions later, he knew. If there was a later. But he felt her closing them away, focusing on the moment. :I promise: she sent.

–And Vanyel lost his end of the link, nearly falling over, as another attack hammered at his shields.

“Go,” he panted.

Her hand touched his shoulder, and then he heard her stand, her footsteps growing more distant.

The trap-spell. I could trigger it on Vedric, he thought. Savil wouldn’t be there to stop him, and if it could stop Vedric from trying it on him… But he couldn’t. Even if it was the right thing, even if it
was the only way, he couldn’t make himself reach into that blood-magic construct – that Leareth had made, and the thought hurt like a blade of ice – and knowingly kill innocents. Down to the babes in wombs. Never.

:Yfandes: he sent. It was like swimming in molasses, reaching through his own shields.

:Chosen!: Her love and worry washed down the faltering link. :What’s going on? Rasha says–:

:That Mardic’s dead. I know. I’ve got Donni: He tried to send reassurance. :We’re going to fight Vedric. You have to run for it.

A pause. :Rasha won’t go. She won’t leave Donni:

:Then go without her. Please, love. Get word to Lissa and her people. To Forst Reach. My father:

:All right: He could feel how every part of her longed to batter down the gate with her hooves and come to him – but this wasn’t a fight where she would be able to help him much, and she knew it. :Be careful, love:

Eyes closed, every part of him focused on holding the shield, he felt the Gate-energies begin to build. It burned, and the usual dizziness and disorientation flooded him, but he clung to the moment. To the barrier. Hold it, hold it–

A flare of pain, like acid eating at his skull, and light shining through his eyelids. The Gate was complete. Savil stepped through, and a moment later the energies faded.

“Come on,” he told Donni, releasing her, then taking her shoulders and looking into her eyes. “Let’s finish this.”

Her eyes stared past him, not quite focusing. Blood and tears mingled on her cheeks.

He shook her. “Donni,” he said, coldly, harshly, hating himself for it. “Are you with me?”

Finally, she nodded, and scrubbed at her face with a sleeve. “Let’s finish this,” she repeated, her voice empty of all expression.

He pulled her to her feet, and she let him. Feeding a little more node-energy into the shield, through raw, stinging channels, he dragged her towards the door, down the hall. It only had to hold a little longer.

Oh, gods, Mardic… Donni, I’m so sorry…

He swiped at his eyes, irritably. No time to grieve now. Focus on the mission. Donni let herself be pulled along, though her eyes were a thousand miles away.

They reached the main doors. He could feel Vedric on the other side, power pulsing from him in waves of wrongness.

Vanyel pushed the door open and stepped outside, into the warm night air, and then he let the shield crumble. Like forcing cramped fingers away from an object he’d forgotten how not to hold; it almost hurt more, afterwards.

A starry sky looked down on them. Several torches burned just outside the courtyard, mixing with the silver moonlight into a flickering maze of light and shadow.

“Herald Vanyel.” A deep, rich baritone. “We meet at last. I have heard a great deal about you.”
He raised his head – and froze.

_Tylendel._

Or, rather, what Tylendel would have looked like, if he had ever had a chance to grow up. Luxuriant curls, that he thought would be dark golden in daylight, tumbled to his shoulders. Cheekbones that could have been carved from marble, full, sensuous lips, a strong, square jaw… One cheek was burned, shiny, and he held his left arm at an awkward angle, but he was clearly still in fighting form.

_Oh, gods, ‘Lendel…_

But Tylendel’s eyes would never have held that look of naked greed. Tylendel’s lip would never have curled in that condescending sneer. Tylendel’s aura would never have held that corrosive wrongness that came of blood and pain and taking innocent lives.

“The songs say you are very handsome,” Vedric Mavelan said. “Yet I must confess, in the flesh you are even more beautiful than I expected. I regret that I have to kill you.”

*I can’t believe he actually used that line._ The man sounded like a story-book villain. Vanyel almost laughed. *I’ll have to tell Leareth about it._ He would appreciate the irony of it.

_If I survive._ But he had to. Failure wasn’t an option.

He gathered his power and flung a levinbolt – and felt it rebound, deflected perfectly from Adept-strength shields.

Reaching for the node again – he didn’t want to use it more than he had to, but he had so little else left – he deflected a paralysis-dagger that the mage flung in return, and sent a whirlwind of ice-knives back at him. Vedric knocked it aside just as easily.

_Where’s he getting this energy?_ It wasn’t from the node, but he was certainly being fed from somewhere outside himself. _How?_ Vanyel hammered at his shields with wave after wave of raw force, and made no headway. Then were evenly matched, or close enough to it.

—And then Vedric smiled, and triggered the trap-spell.

Vanyel pulled Donni close to him, holding his shields over her as well, as the Swarm appeared from nowhere. They weren’t, quite, the _gretshke_-creatures he remembered from the Border – similar, but somehow worse. They weren’t here to feed, only to tear and rend, to revel in pain…

_You’ll have none of me and mine._ He felt a thin smile coming to his own lips, as the creatures shrieked in frustration – and then rose away, slipping into the sky, seeking other targets.

Vedric laughed. “Herald Vanyel, will you not go to rescue your loved ones?”

Vanyel only looked back at him, still, keeping his face impassive. Copying Leareth’s manner, he thought wryly. To his surprise, it wasn’t hard – he was feeling very little. Only numbness, over a quiet, cold anger. If there hadn’t been an enemy right there, in front of him, he might have been entirely unmoored – but there _was_ an enemy. A mission, a path that was clear enough.

He saw the man’s smile fade, felt Vedric’s surprise as the spell tried to seek another target, and failed, again and again.

_The backlash should have flattened him by now._ Vanyel thought, with dull curiosity. Failed spells rebounded on the caster. Somehow, Vedric must have been redirecting that energy, absorbing it
without harm – but to where…?

*Oh, gods, I know what he’s done.* Vanyel made the connection in a single flash – it was something he had read about, but never seen practiced. Somehow, Vedric must have united his entire family, the Mavelan clan of mages; they were all in rapport with him, from a distance, feeding him power beyond measure, making him night-invincible.

Not innocents after all. Maybe he should have triggered the trap-spell. Too late now – he didn’t think it had reset properly, and even if it had, there was no way Vedric would give him enough time to focus and figure out how to set it off. If he had been thinking, maybe he could have tried to sort that out in advance, but of course he hadn’t, because he was an idiot.

*He’s more powerful than I am.* It was the first time Vanyel had ever been faced with that.

He couldn’t stop Vedric.

That was unacceptable.

If he he could get close enough to touch the man, and flood him and his meld with enough node-power all at once, before Vedric had time to prepare – but taking that much would disrupt the spell that the Heartstone was holding. He could kill Vedric, maybe, at the cost of destroying half of Highjorune, and that was the best case.

Gods, the man looked so much like ‘Lendel. It was hard to force his eyes to focus on the man’s face – his thoughts kept sliding away from the block, caught in a loop, he couldn’t look at him but he couldn’t look away and it hurt, so much.

--Blue-white fire, like the inside of a sun, pressed against the membrane of a Gate--

With great effort, Vanyel pulled his thoughts back to the present, and raised a shield just before Vedric attacked him again, this time with a a storm of darts shaped from the road-gravel. :Donni, help me:

He felt her struggling to focus on the present, to remember where she was – to remember that there was anything at all left besides the howling emptiness where Mardic had been. *I’m sorry*, he thought, half-desperately. It wasn’t fair to ask this of her, and not just because without Mardic she was barely a Master-class mage. Outpowered, outmatched. Nowhere near in Vedric’s league. And yet. *I’m sorry, Donni, but I have to.*

Finally, he felt something click into place in her mind. A tide of rage – a relentless, implacable song. Everything that she had left, focused on a single goal. She snarled and flung a spinning wheel of flame.

--And it glanced off without harming Vedric. No amount of determination would give Donni the power she needed to face an Adept head-on.

He would have to risk draining the node. It would be bad – but it would be worse if they lost this battle.

:*Donni: he sent. :Donni, he’s got us out-powered. I think he’s in a concert-meld with all the other Mavelans, they’re giving him their energy. But we could kill him – maybe all of them – if I can get close enough to touch him, and pour enough power in too quickly for him to absorb it:*

:*Node-energy?: she guessed.*
Yes. Trouble is, it’ll drain the Heartstone enough to destabilize the spell:

He could feel her thinking – even through the haze of grief and anger, her mind was quick, calculating.

There’s another way: she sent, and the overtones in her mindvoice were clear.

Oh, no no no. He flinched away from the link.

The quiet voice in the back of his mind whispered. She wants to. She’ll be relieved.

It wasn’t right. Why was he even considering it?

The cold, ruthless logic in the back of his mind churned. Donni was one of only ten remaining Valdemaran mages, and that made her precious, desperately needed – but on her own, without Mardic, she wasn’t all that powerful. She was replaceable. There was no destiny that only she could fulfill.

And she wasn’t ever going to recover from losing her lifebonded. Any more than I’ll ever get over ‘Lendel, he thought, bitterly.

All that was holding her together was rage. She wanted Vedric’s life, wanted to kill him herself, and if she could go out in a final blaze, taking him with her, avenging Mardic and joining him at the same time – gods, that was the only thing she had left. She would go to the Shadow-Lover’s arms with a smile.

She chose this, he reminded himself. Donni had known the risks of being a Herald, just as Mardic had. And Mardic had burned himself out moving her to safety, without hesitating for a second, because at most one of them could get out and he knew they still needed her–

–‘Lendel had moved his lover to safety and now he stood with his back to the Gate, like he had already forgotten it, no, he had deliberately blotted it out from his awareness, and the cold swirling emptiness of his mind was filling with rage like molten steel–

Vanyel yanked himself out of the memory. Focus. No time for it now.

He did something that he never had before. :Rasha: he reached out.

:Vanyel?: It was bizarre, mindtouching someone else’s Companion. She had a completely different feel from Yfandes. The overtones of that single word held desperation, fear, anger, grief – and he knew that she was pacing in front of the city gate, closed and too high to jump, and all she wanted was to be with her Chosen.

No words for it but the most blunt. :Donni wants to call Final Strike on Vedric:

Surprise, horror – and then, a rising, bloodthirsty determination, even pleasure. :It’s worth it: Rasha sent. :Tell her to stop blocking me. Tell her I’m coming:

What was it that Yfandes had said to him, once, twelve years ago?

All I’m asking is that whatever we do, we do it together.

:I’ll blast the gate open for you: he sent, and broke the connection, reaching for another. :Donni. You’re right:

He felt the flare of hope, relief, gratitude. :You’ll let me?:
The conversation was happening in seconds, at the speed of thought, but he took a moment to fling a wind-tornado in Vedric’s general direction.  Just need to hold him off until Rasha reaches us:

Donna’s mindvoice was a breath on the wind.  She’ll do it?  With me?:

Rasha would be with her Chosen until the end. She wanted Vedric dead just as badly. And with her additional life-energies, they would have that much of a better chance of success.

Hopefully Rasha arriving will distract him for a moment: he sent.  You’ll have to get close enough to touch him. And then…do it. You should be able to aim a little: There would be a lot of energy released, and he wanted as much of it as possible to go into Vedric, and not into light and heat.  I think you’ll want to be Mindtouching him – I know it’ll be vile, you’ll only have to do it for a moment:

Donni nodded. She was grinning ear to ear, a wild, frightening expression.  Bastard’s got no idea what’s coming: Fierce pride, bittersweet, rage and joy mixed, nearly blotting out the grief.

Vanyel sent.  I’ll get the gate: He opened his Farsight, moving his viewpoint high above the maze of streets. It had to be only a few candlemarks to dawn, but there were still Harvestfest celebrations going on, near the edge of the city, far enough that the partygoers likely hadn’t heard the fight going on outside the Palace. Vanyel couldn’t hear them, of course, but he could see people’s mouths moving in song as they danced.

He buckled the steel of the gate with a moment’s thought, and saw a flash of white as Rasha bolted through the gap.

How long would it take her to reach them? Two minutes, maybe three, he thought, falling back into his own body.

–Just in time to barely block a force-dagger.

“You are starting to irritate me,” Vedric said, calmly. He didn’t even look out of breath. “You Heralds never know when to give up and die already.” He paused dramatically. “You know, Herald Vanyel, I would consider sparing you. If you agreed to go back to your own land and your own business.”

Seriously, does he have a bad minstrel on his staff to write his lines? It was no moment for humour, but Vanyel found himself laughing. Nerves, as much as anything. He felt like he was cascading down the side of a mountain.

Vedric stared at him, and threw another attack. Vanyel pulled a little more node-energy, as sparingly as he could.

The ground trembled under his feet. Damn it, I’ve already drained too much. But he didn’t have a choice. It would be worse if he lost this fight.

–And then Rasha was there, galloping towards Vedric’s back, and the mage started to turn but not fast enough. She knocked him flying, trampling him, squealing, and Vanyel reached and gave Donni a shove.

She began to run.

Vedric knocked Rasha aside with a careless wave of force. The Companion flew several yards, actually lifted into the air, and even from that distance, Vanyel heard the bones in her legs snap as she landed. A sound came from her that should never have come from a horse’s throat–
Donni was advancing on Vedric, she had her daggers out of her sleeves and they flashed through the air, deflecting his magical attacks. He knew that she had them bespelled with absorption-shields.

A hint of confusion showed in Vedric’s eyes, and the beginnings of alarm. He raised a barrier in front of him – and Vanyel shattered it.

Donni was only a few yards away, now. A small, bedraggled figure, clothing and hair singed, half-covered in blood, a madwoman’s smile on her lips. Laughing. Her wooden leg didn’t seem to be slowing her at all; she moved gracefully, a macabre sort of dance. An avenging angel of Death. Vanyel didn’t think he had ever seen her look more alive, or more herself, than in that moment.

She’s beautiful, he thought, apropos of nothing. I never noticed that before. It felt like it might have to, for a moment, see her through Mardic’s eyes.

She wasn’t even a yard away, now, but she couldn’t make headway; Vedric’s shields were too strong.

And then Rasha was lumbering to her feet, somehow, on two broken legs, but she lunged and nipped at Vedric’s shoulder, and that was the moment’s distraction that Donni needed–

She flung herself at him; her slight weight wasn’t enough even to budge him, and he started to throw her off, but she clung to him like some tenacious plant.

:Van: she sent. :Tell Savil--: She stopped. There were no words for it. Nothing except a thousand overtones, too much to unpack – all their history together, twelve years, affection and jokes and laughter and tears. She had been there since the very beginning. Since the day he stood in Savil’s suite and met ‘Lendel for the first time.

:Goodbye: Donni sent.

And then there was light.

Shavri turned to the next page of the book. “And so the Sunsinger and the Shadowdancer were cursed, for their pride and folly, to be apart, that they could never touch…”

Jisa squirmed in her lap. “I don’t like this part, mama. Can you go to the end? Where they’re happy?”

“Of course, pet.” She yawned, inhaling the scent of Jisa’s hair, and flipped past another two pages. “Are you sleepy yet?”

“Not yet, mama.” Jisa shivered.

Shavri was certainly exhausted. It was the middle of the night, no, probably closer to morning, and the Death Bell had wrenched both of them from sleep a few minutes ago. As usual, Jisa had been very upset, and in need of comforting. It probably didn’t help that it was Sovvan. Jisa had joined her at the Temple of Kernos this year, with Randi, and later, after her daughter was tucked into bed, Shavri had knelt on her cold floor and set up the rest of her candles. A hundred and six of them, and Jisa didn’t need to know the stories behind them. Gemma would say it was a waste. Van would say that wax was cheap.
So much cheaper than a life. Those little flames almost felt insufficient as tribute – but it was something.

Shavri didn’t yet know who they had lost this time. After all, she wasn’t a Herald, wasn’t in the Web. Once she had Jisa calmed down, she could go ask. Not Van, she told herself firmly. It can’t be Van. I would know.

Would she, though?

She took a deep breath. “All right. I’ll finish this story, and then I want you to try to get back to sleep.”

:Shavri!:

The mindvoice was Savil’s, leaking terror and utter exhaustion. It made no sense, Savil shouldn’t have been here, she was in Highjorune. Am I dreaming?

:Shavri, you’re in danger!:

Shavri dropped the book. :What?:

:No time – I’m waking Jaysen–: And the connection was gone.

Jisa was prodding at her cheek. “Mama, is something wrong?”

Shavri was already shedding her daughter from her lap, standing, reaching for her daggers that lay on the bedside table – she didn’t like to sleep with the wrist-sheaths, they were uncomfortable, but she always had the blades within arm’s reach.

–She closed her fingers on the handles just as something out of a nightmare exploded into the room.

Jisa screamed, high and shrill, and dove behind her skirt. “MAMA!”

Shavri barely had time to get the daggers up in time and slash at one of the – creatures? were they creatures? – as it dove for her face. It recoiled, making a sound more like metal tearing than like any ordinary animal, but two more took its place. She was flattened against the wall, and there must have been dozens, no, hundreds of the things, coming at her, all teeth and claws and horror–

:Shavri, hold on! I’m coming!:

Jaysen’s mindvoice, blurred with sleep, distracted her a moment too long, and one of the nightmare-creatures swiped at her cheek. It barely hurt, but she could feel something wet trickling. Shavri slashed at it, at the others, the blades winking in the candlelight, Jisa was still screaming and she realized she was screaming as well. Another creature tore at her shoulder with its teeth, and she cried out, tried to lift her arm again but it wasn’t working.

It felt like an eternity later, but must have been only seconds, when there was a crash, and Jaysen exploded through the door – literally exploded, knocking it from its hinges and shattering it to fragments. He waved his hands, his face a mask of concentration – and suddenly Shavri’s other arm, as she tried to slash upwards, met an invisible barrier. The things couldn’t reach her anymore, couldn’t reach either of them, they howled in frustration, flinging their horrible bodies at the shield – and then they turned, and swarmed towards Jaysen.

There were too many. Still streaming in through her window, there had to be hundreds in the room by now.
Flashes of mage-lightning – a vase of flowers went flying and shattered on the wall.

:What’s this about Jisa being Van’s daughter?: Jaysen sent.

What? She couldn’t understand what that had to do with anything. Or how he could possibly know. Savil hadn’t known… Van must have told her. Why?

:Long story: she sent. :What’s happening, Jay?:

:Trap-spell. Vedric triggered it on Van, it goes after anyone related by blood– Gah!: The mindcry of pain nearly knocked her to the floor.

:Jay: she sent, pointlessly – she couldn’t help him, she wasn’t a mage, she wouldn’t have lasted ten more seconds against these creatures.

He knocked a dozen of them aside with a blast of flame, setting fire to her bed at the same time – but a dozen more replaced them, instantly. He needs help, she thought frantically. Jaysen was only a Master-level mage, and he was clearly tiring.

:Get behind the shield: she sent.

:Can’t. Need to keep them busy: The overtones told her the rest. If the creatures attacked Jaysen’s shield in earnest, they would rip through – and so he would distract them with his own body instead.

:Where’s Savil?:

:Temple. Gated in: Jaysen’s mindspeech was jerky, barely coherent. :Coming – but she’s worn out–:

Shavri caught a glimpse of him through the massed bodies of the creatures; he was bleeding from a dozen deep gashes, on his face and arms and chest.

:Jay: she sent again. There were too many of the creatures. Jaysen couldn’t hold them off much longer. He was already injured, weakening.

It came to her in a flash of cold realization. They were after her, and Jisa. Not him. He didn’t have to be here… :Jay, get out:

:No: He was shielding her out hard, but even so she felt the pain and hopelessness leaking through. She couldn’t really see him, through the whirlwind of nightmare-creatures, but she thought he was on the ground now.

:Get out: she repeated. :Not worth getting yourself killed:

Hesitation, then something crystallizing. Determination. A strange, diamond-clear certainty :No: Jaysen sent, and there was only peace in his mindvoice. :Randi needs you, Shavri, that means the Kingdom needs you. More than it needs me: A pause. :Cover Jisa’s eyes. She doesn’t need to see this:

:Jay no no nonono–:

He blocked her. Shavri didn’t think he was even trying to fight off the creatures anymore. Just giving them a distraction, while he held the shield over her as long as he could.

:Shavri!: 
Savil’s mindvoice, and Shavri felt a wash of relief, a moment before the older Herald-Mage came through the doorway at a staggering run, and raised both her hands.

A shimmering bubble appeared in front of Shavri’s nose, just outside Jaysen’s barrier, which shattered a moment later. Then the shield-barrier began to move, pushing the creatures aside as effortlessly as a maid sweeping up dust. Blasts of flame knocked dozens of them out of the way, when they resisted.

Shavri sagged to her knees. Thank the gods she’s an Adept. She didn’t know how Savil was managing it, tired as she had to be after a Gate, but it felt like a miracle.

And then the barrier had moved to encompass half the room, and she saw the blood.

“Jay!” Abandoning Jisa, she scrambled across the floor to reach him. :Jay, it’s all right, you can rest now – hang on–:

He was barely recognizable – no, she wouldn’t have recognized him if not for the flavour of his mind, shields down, hazy with shock. The creatures had torn his flesh to ribbons. Savil was there at her side, reaching for Jaysen’s arm. For what was left of it. Shavri leaned into her Healing-Sight and scrabbled for his center – his life-force was disorganized, fading, and she couldn’t get a stable link to him. Savil was ripping off her tunic, wadding it up, trying to staunch the blood that gushed from a deep wound in his stomach, but there wasn’t only one wound. He was bleeding from so many places, every heartbeat pumping his life out onto the floor – and for all her power as a Healer, there was nothing Shavri could do. He had already lost too much to survive.

:Jay!: she sent again, desperately. :Jay, stay with me:

For just a moment, she felt him respond. Not with words, he was too far gone for words, but with everything else. He had whited out the pain, and his Felar was with him. He wasn’t afraid. It had been worth it.

“Jay,” Savil breathed, clutching his hand. “Jay, I’m here…”

Shavri did the only thing she could – leaned into his mind, pushing with her weak Empathy, all the reassurance and soothing that she could. It’s all right. Everything’s all right. You can rest.

In full rapport, she felt him die, a second before the Death Bell tolled.

It couldn’t have been more than a few minutes later, when the first of the others arrived, but it felt like a century. Shavri sat huddled against the wall with her trembling daughter in her arms, Jisa pressing her face into her mother’s crimson-stained robes. Savil was still on the floor, cradling Jaysen’s broken body, sobbing.

I’ve never seen Savil cry before. Certainly she had never seen her like this. She had loved Jay, Shavri thought. They had been close friends, and sometimes more than that, for so many years.

Her own eyes were dry. Jisa wasn’t crying either; she was curled up in a mute, terrified ball. Shavri stroked her hair.

We would be dead if I hadn’t had my daggers. If she hadn’t spent the last several years training every day, there was no way she could have survived long enough for Jaysen to reach her. The thought only made her feel sick.
It was technically still Sovvan. Should I burn another candle for him? A thought that drifted by, apropos of nothing. Surely the least important thing to be thinking of right now.

Voices. Footsteps. Shavri saw green robes, recognized Gemma’s voice, shouting something. Andrel was there, red hair standing up in spikes, reaching for Savil, who finally let her hands be pried away from the shredded thing that only minutes ago had been Jaysen.

A hand fell on Shavri’s shoulder, and she yanked her head up, heart racing.

“Healer Shavri?” Karis looked into her eyes. She wore a bedgown, sweat plastering the thin cotton to her breast, and her chest heaved; she must have sprinted the whole way here from the guest wing of the Palace. “Are you hurt?”

She closed her eyes. “He’s dead. Jaysen’s dead.”

“To save you he fought.” Karis’ voice was calm, even in between panting breaths. “Until the end he was a Herald. With honour he died.”

She just shook her head. I don’t care if it was an honourable death. It didn’t make any part of it less awful.

Then her eyes flew open. Randi. She had felt him coming, and now he was there, eyes puffy with sleep, feet muddy, chest bare, an unbelted robe thrown over his shoulders. Somehow he still looked every ounce a King.

Karis moved back, politely, and Randi knelt and took both of them in his arms, heedless of the blood. :Shavri, love, I’m so sorry: Relief and joy and gratitude, mixed with guilt, even shame.

:Randi: She leaned into his chest. :Oh, gods, Randi: Hazily, she saw Tantras sprinting into the room as well, dropping to his knees beside Andrel and Savil, his mouth moving. The words he was saying slid past her ears, meaningless noise. Savil seemed to have pulled herself together; her face was mask-like, but she was answering.

Randi was still holding her when the Death Bell rang a third time.

She stiffened. :Who?:

:Donni: There wasn’t much emotion in his mindvoice, only exhaustion. :I’m…not surprised. Earlier, the first time it went – that was Mardic:

It hit her like an unexpected blow to the stomach; she felt sick. The least the gods could have given them was to die together. It had been…half a candlemark? Not so long, but it must have felt like an eternity for Donni, trying to keep going with half of her mind shattered and broken.

What had happened down in Highjorune? Vanyel, Savil, Mardic, and Donni should all have been there – and last they’d heard, things were under control. What had gone wrong?

:Van: she sent.

Randi understood immediately what she was asking. :I don’t know, love. Tran’s trying to piece it together, what happened down there. But he’s alive:

For how much longer, she thought. At any minute, would they hear the bell toll for him as well?
Chapter Eleven

“Herald.” Someone was shaking his shoulder. “Herald, wake up.”

Vanyel struggled to open his eyes; his eyelids seemed to be gummed together. He was sprawled on
his back on a hard, uneven surface, and he was very cold.

Slowly, his eyes focused. He was still in the courtyard immediately outside the Palace – or, at least,
the still-smoking ruins of it. A few bits of debris were still on fire, so he couldn’t have lain there
insensible for long.

Kneeling beside him, he saw a small woman a little younger than Savil, clad in a plain blue wool
dress and linen shift – the style was that of a servant’s garb, but the materials were as fine as any
Lady Treesa had every worn. Her posture was erect, and she wore her dignity like a shawl. There
was a ring on her finger – plain, burnished steel, set with a dull quartz pebble. Identical to the ones
they had found in the Palace, but this one felt alive.

There were no bodies – no trace left of Donni, or Vedric. Stars still showed in the sky, but it was
lightening to a deep velvety blue, the horizon pearly.

Mardic. The grief was like a knife slipped between his ribs. Donni. Gone.
I failed you. I failed both
of you. Two more friends, lost, forever – I have so few people left, he thought, and felt a wave of
shame, for the selfishness of it.

No time for tears now. Focus on the mission.

“Herald Vanyel?” the woman said again. Her voice was odd – she sounded like someone half in
trance. He could feel power moving, through the talisman she wore, and knowing what he did now,
he could recognize the Heartstone’s influence. Maybe that was how she knew his name.

“That’s me.” He coughed, tasting blood, and tried to sit up. “You’re Reta, aren’t you?” Every part of
him ached, and there was a sharper pain in his right side; he remembered being flung aside like a rag-
doll by the force of Donni’s Final Strike.

“I am.” Her eyes watched him, serious. “You should leave, Herald. You are alone, and hurt, and
soon the people of Highjorune will be here. They will be angry.”

“I understand.” They would have no idea what had happened – all they would see was the
destruction, and an exhausted, helpless mage they would assume was responsible. “I – Someone
needs to know the truth, before I go. It was Vedric who killed everyone. He used a very dark spell.
Tashir can’t have done it, he’s not a mage – he has a different kind of Mind-Gift. My friend–” He
choked on Donni’s name. “She killed him. Killed the entire Mavelan family. They were all together
in a meld, raising power for him.” And Vanyel had felt it burn, felt all of them burn from the inside
out, as Donni poured every drop of her life-energy into them all at once.

He had seen, in an instant, a thousand flashes of the man Vedric had been, the life he had lived. His
mother’s favourite, the pride of her life and beloved of her heart, but not the firstborn, he would
never be King. The thing he had most wanted in the world was his elder brother’s approval, but need
was weakness, among the Mavelans, and so he had learned to hide it behind layers, behind masks
and theatre and the games of power he had played to win–

Vanyel shuddered, swallowing nausea, and pulled himself back to the moment. “Tashir’s somewhere
safe,” he finished. “And, you should know, he is Deveran’s trueborn son. The trap-spell wouldn’t’ve
worked otherwise.”

“And innocent. I am glad.” A smile creased her face. “This city owes a debt to you, Herald Vanyel. To Valdemar. I will speak to any who would listen, and tell them what you have learned, and what you have done.”

“We can send people in to help you maintain order,” he said dully. “If the Border-guards will let us.”

:’Fandes?: He barely had the strength to reach her; she was far away. :Are Lissa’s people still on the Border-stretch?:

:Chosen!: Joy and relief echoed along their bond. :Thank the gods. I’ve been trying to reach you. The answer is yes, and I told Lissa what happened:

He was surprised. :You spoke to her?: He knew she could, but she did it so rarely.

:It was necessary. She’s ready to move in. Has copies of all your paperwork. Think she’s negotiating with someone at the Border-post right now:

:Where are you?:

:Halfway to Forst Reach: He felt her worry, and guilt. :Rasha told me what you were doing. I – I wanted to turn back, love, but I knew I couldn’t reach you in time to make any difference, and I need to get word to your father:

:You did the right thing: He sent a wash of reassurance. :I don’t think I’m safe here. Reta, the servant who survived, says I need to get out, which means the Heartstone thinks so: It would take Lissa’s people a full day to reach the city, even once the Border-Guard allowed them through. He couldn’t wait that long, not if there might really be an angry mob soon, and if the Heartstone thought he was in danger, it was probably right. :I’m going to Gate: he sent.

:Chosen, no! I’ll come back for you:

:No. ’Fandes, it’ll take too long. Meet me at Forst Reach: He certainly couldn’t manage to Gate as far as Haven, but surely sixty miles was doable.

:You’ve never tried to Gate when you were this drained, love:

:It’ll be bad: He could barely face the thought. :Don’t think I have a choice: At least Savil had made it to Haven, and Randi would know what was going on. There were no Mavelans left to cause trouble, and Lissa would be there soon; things could hold together for a few days, long enough for him to recover.

Shavri, Jisa… He couldn’t take the time to dwell on that now. Either they were all right, or they weren’t, and in either case there was nothing he could do about it.

“I’m going to use magic to get out,” he told Reta. “Something called a Gate.” He would have to risk touching the node again, to replenish his reserves, though of course he couldn’t draw on it while he built the Gate itself. He would have only the energy that he could hold in himself. “There might be another earthquake,” he warned her. “Shouldn’t be too bad, though.”

She nodded, seriously. “I wish you godspeed, Herald Vanyel.”

He struggled to his feet, accepting the hand she offered to pull himself up. There, that archway – it was where he had built the Gate before, and it was intact.
Center and ground. He reached for the node one final time, wincing as the wild energies scorched his tender, raw channels, drew the power and took it into himself. The ground trembled, stones rattling, but calmed again when he broke the connection. As he did, he thought he felt the slightest brush of something – not quite a mindvoice, not quite a mind, but a wordless whisper of gratitude.

You're welcome, he thought.

He raised his hands, and called for the energies of the void-behind-the-world, the nothingness between two Gates, where there was no space or time, where any two places could be drawn together.

The ground trembled, stones rattling, but calmed again when he broke the connection. As he did, he thought he felt the slightest brush of something – not quite a mindvoice, not quite a mind, but a wordless whisper of gratitude.

You’re welcome, he thought.

He raised his hands, and called for the energies of the void-behind-the-world, the nothingness between two Gates, where there was no space or time, where any two places could be drawn together.

The pain was like molten metal in his head, searing, and he could barely maintain the focus to build up the layers of the threshold, one at a time, each pass bringing waves of agony.

Finally, it was solid.

He thought of the small family temple, the courtyard with the fountain. Safe enough. Yfandes would be there, and wherever she was, was a little bit home.

–His concentration faltered, and he found himself on his knees. The tendrils of searching power from the Gate writhed, confused.

I can’t do this. I can’t bear it.

But it was too late to turn back. The spell would kill him if he didn’t complete it now.

Summon the image of the the temple, the crisp autumn scent on the air… Not home, never home, but a sanctuary.

One of the wisps of Gate-energy found the other side.

Vanyel must have blacked out for a moment; he was on his side, his cheek pressed to the still-warm stone, and Reta was shaking him again. Her lips were moving, but he couldn’t hear her words above the roaring in his ears.

He tried to stand, and failed; he had no strength left, and the Gate was still pulling from him, sucking from an empty pool.

Then Reta was dragging him, he didn’t know where she found the strength, she looked so frail. Every inch she carried him closer was torture.

Suddenly they were on the threshold. Vanyel could see the courtyard, empty and silent in the soft predawn light. Reta’s eyes looked into his, worried, and she said something – and then shoved him across.

–He came clawing back to consciousness, gasping. Something struck him again, a purely mental blow. He was facedown on stone, his cheek stinging where he must have scraped it when he fell.

:Van!: Yfandes. :Chosen. Take down the Gate. Do it now: Even across the distance that separated them, he could feel her supporting him, scaffolding his mind, prodding him through the motions of reabsorbing the Gate-energies. :Almost: she coaxed. :Focus. You can do this. Almost...there...:
Then the Gate was gone, and there was only the pain, acid gnawing behind his eyes. She was trying to send him her own energy, and he struggled to find his center, to accept that wavering link.

_:I’m less than a candlemark out:_ she sent. _:Coming to you as fast as I can. Just hang on:_

Someone must have seen the light of the Gate; he heard footsteps. And a silky voice. “Herald Vanyel?”

Damn it. Leren was not the person he would have preferred to find him first, but of course he had been closest; he slept in a little set of rooms adjoining the temple.

“I’m fine,” he started to say, managing to roll onto his back as the priest’s shadow fell over him. “Could use…a hand getting inside…can you wake my father…?”

–And then there was a sudden, stabbing pain, just under his sternum. What? He screamed, as Leren jerked the blade up and twisted it before releasing it and standing again.

_Oh, gods._ Vanyel curled around the agony in the center of him, feeling warm wetness trickle over his hands. _I don’t understand_, he thought, pointlessly.

Pattering footsteps. “Uncle Van, is that you?” Medren’s voice, concerned but not alarmed. “Oh. Father Leren, what’s going on?”

Vanyel’s vision was narrowing and darkening to a tunnel. Their voices were starting to sound distant.

_:Chosen!: Yfandes was reaching for him as hard as she could._

“He came through his magic Gate and collapsed,” Leren was saying; to Vanyel’s ears, his voice sounded like it was coming from the bottom of a well. “He’s injured. Looks bad. Something must have gone very wrong in Highjorune–”

_:Warn Medren:_ Yfandes sent.

Desperately, Vanyel tried to speak, but there didn’t seem to be any air in his lungs. He was so very, very cold.

With the last of his fading strength, he reached for Medren’s mind – the boy wasn’t a Thoughtsenser, he would have to be gentle. _:Medren: he sent, setting his Mindtouch where the boy’s surface thoughts, full of sleepy confusion and sharpening anxiety, swirled over his natural shields. :He stabbed me. Father Leren:_

It was all he could manage. He heard Medren’s gasp. _Gods, _he thought a moment later, _what if he tries to fight him alone? _Medren wouldn’t stand a chance against the older man.

The icy panic helped him to focus, to cling to consciousness a moment longer. He reached for Leren’s mind, though he barely had the energy even for that, and felt – something. An alien presence, coiled and evil, like dark wings folded–

_He’s controlled._ Vanyel hadn’t seen many compulsion-spells, but he recognized the feel of one. _Why…I don’t…_ He could feel his heart racing, blood pumping out between his fingertips, and his thoughts were growing loose; he couldn’t keep track of anything anymore.

_:Chosen!: Yfandes was fighting to reach him, through the darkness, sending another trickle of energy. :Van, use your Healing–:_
There were scuffling sounds a long way away. He heard Medren swearing, panting.

And the darkness that ruled Leren’s mind was poised to strike. At Medren.

No.

Vanyel lashed out with that last dribble of energy, flinging it like an arrow of light, and felt it
penetrate – felt the darkness flee. Wounded, but not destroyed, and he had no strength to follow it.

He heard a distant crack, then the thud of something – someone – falling to the ground.

“Should’ve known those bloody practice-sessions with old Jervis would come in handy,” he heard
Medren saying, slightly out of breath. “Uncle Van?” His voice trembled, cracking. “Uncle Van!”

:Chosen!: Yfandes’ light was there, but she had no strength left to offer him.

He felt Medren’s hands, warm, cradling his head, slapping his cheek. The youngster’s voice was
tight, choked, between gasps that sounded half like sobs. “Uncle Van, please, stay with me, please,
it’s going to be okay, I promise, just hang on – HELP! NEED A HEALER! HELP!”

Vanyel tried to open his eyes, but he couldn’t see anything, only blackness.

:Chosen, do not die on me!: Yfandes, ringing steel in her mindvoice.

*Why do things like this always happen to me,* he thought. For all his efforts to cling to consciousness,
even the pain was starting to fade now. It was a relief. He felt almost peaceful – but still so, so cold.

:Van, you’re going to completely traumatize Medren if you die: Yfandes sent. :Don’t you DARE, do
you hear me?:

But even his sense of her was fading now – her light was further and further away every moment.

‘Lendel, he thought. Ashke, I tried… I miss you… I’m sorry.

“Herald Vanyel.”

Featureless white. He was on his feet. The hair that fell across his face was jet-black without a trace
of silver. There was no blood. No wound. His wrist, when he examined it, was untouched.

Nothing hurt. And yet. Somehow he still felt tired, his thoughts tangled and uneasy.

The Shadow-Lover’s jewelled eyes gazed on him, out of a shadowed face.

Vanyel sank to his knees. He should have asked if he had the same choice, but he couldn’t make the
words come.

*I don’t want to go back.*

He was so tired. And it was only getting harder. Ever since the start of the war, it felt like things had
been falling apart. Like he had been falling apart. One blow after another, never time to recover.

He could step back from it, here – but even from this vantage point, it didn’t seem much better.
“Vanyel.” The Shadow-Lover’s voice was gentle, as he knelt, reaching for Vanyel’s shoulder. “What is the matter?”

He lifted his head. “Everything. Everything’s the matter, and I – I can’t do this anymore. I can’t. It’s too hard.”

The Shadow-Lover took both of his hands. His touch was warm, and felt very real.

“You have a choice,” he said. “You do not have to go back.”

“Oh, I’m going back.” He spat the words. “I don’t actually have a choice. Not really. I – I couldn’t give up and still be me.” Tied to the world by a silver string, a thousands crossroads and he would always turn the same way.

Even though I don’t know what I am anymore.

“You are Vanyel,” the Shadow-Lover said, answering the unspoken – had it even been a question? “You are many things – but at the heart of it all, you try to find what is right, and do it. Always.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know! I don’t know what’s right or wrong anymore. I, I just let one of my friends kill herself because it was convenient, because it took out an enemy I needed dead, at a lower cost. A lower cost! Her life!”

The Shadow-Lover bowed his head – his face hidden, but somehow there was sympathy in the line of his shoulders. “It was not your choice, Herald Vanyel. It was hers.”

I could have stopped her.

There had been another option… A moment later, it hit him. Not with shame, exactly, that was too close to pain and he couldn’t feel it, but something closer to embarrassment.

“There’s something I completely failed to think of,” he said. “I want to kick myself. I’ve killed a man with Healing, before, and all I had to do was touch him. I should have – I mean, Donni had to touch him anyway.” Not that he had ever wanted to use that particular method again. He’d felt ill every time he thought about it for months. “I don’t know why I missed that. I mean. I was distracted, I guess. There was a lot happening at once, and I wasn’t thinking clearly. And…I tried never to think about it again, after I did it.” Years ago, now. “…Maybe I shouldn’t be so hard on myself, that I didn’t think of it.” Easier to do here; he had the sense that if he had been in the real world, tired and frustrated and probably in a great deal of physical pain, he would have spiralled into guilt. It was sort of anchor, wasn’t it?

You use guilt to make it easier to bear, Melody had said to him, not so many months ago. To feel guilt is to say that you could have stopped it. Maybe he could have. Here, with the Shadow-Lover’s gentle, sympathetic eyes shining on him, he could stare that in the face. Maybe, in another world, Donni was still alive.

–Would she have thanked him for it? Probably not. Would it have been better for Valdemar all the same? Hard to know.

And maybe it wouldn’t have worked. It didn’t take a lot of Healing-energy, but he didn’t have much of a Healing-Gift either, and he had already used it to its limits earlier that night, dealing with a problem that had been his own damned fault.

In another world… He didn’t get to live in that world, he reminded himself. In this world, his friend was dead, and maybe in some sense that was his fault…and it was the way it was. Set it aside, and
move forward.

It was awfully inconvenient, having yet another person trying to murder him, but he could find some gratitude in himself for this chance to speak to the Shadow-Lover again. *I might as well take advantage of it and talk things through.*

“I didn’t even get to say goodbye to Mardic,” he mumbled. “He was one of the first real friends I ever had. Even before ‘Lendel.” He shook his head. “He reached out to me when no one else did. He was there when I – after ‘Lendel died. Even though I must’ve been horrible to be around. Can’t have been easy for him to be my friend, but he never stopped trying. Even last night, he was, he put everything aside to sit with me and talk me through it.” He had been so calm, and that really had helped – Savil would have panicked, and it could only have made him feel worse. “Savil’s going to expect me to explain it. I have no idea what I’ll tell her.”

“Why not the truth?”

He sighed. “Because she’ll fly off the handle, and – and not trust me to be alone for the next year, or something. Which we can’t afford, because in case you haven’t noticed we’re still at war, so she’ll just worry herself sick.” He hugged his knees. Here, in the place where he could always think more clearly, always take an outside perspective… “I’m not sure I blame her,” he admitted. “I didn’t have time to think about it when it happened – no, I was trying very hard not to think about it – but that was scary. It’s the worst I’ve ever been except for right after ‘Lendel died, before k’Treva. I… I don’t know why it was so bad. Don’t know if I can get through another Sovvan like that.”

“There are a number of reasons this year was unusual, and you know what they are,” the Shadow-Lover said.

He frowned. “You’re probably right. Mardic pointed out some of them. The Palace really wasn’t a good place to be – I wasn’t sleeping enough – I messed with the Heartstone and half couldn’t remember I was a person – I handled blood-magic and that made me feel filthy – and then I hadn’t been keeping track of the days, I let it catch me off guard like that… All right, those seem like things I’d expect to make it harder. If I make more of an effort to, I guess to take care of myself, it probably won’t be so bad next year.” He looked up. “Oh, and I hadn’t really thought about this, but I think maybe the block Melody put in is causing problems. It seems to be…well, sort of half working, but in a way that makes it worse than not having it at all. I guess it’s been a long time since I saw her? I never had that problem with Lancir, but I saw him all the time.”

Why hadn’t it occurred to him before? It seemed completely obvious, now. “Maybe that’s another reason things have been so much harder the last three years. Not just the war – maybe it’s that Lancir died and I never actually made it a habit to see someone else. I only saw Melody the...” He tried to count. “Three times? Four? In three years. With Lancir, it wasn’t even just his Gift, it was that I could talk to him. About everything. Even if I was trying to ignore things and pretend to be fine, he would drag it out of me – and he’d remind me about places where I had to be careful. Seems like I forgot a lot of the basics when I didn’t have him doing that anymore. Like getting enough sleep, which should be *completely obvious* but I still manage to mess it up.”

The Shadow-Lover nodded, sapphire eyes fixed on Vanyel. *Why does it always feel like he hears me so well?*  

He shook his head. “I...haven’t wanted to put that on anyone else. It felt different with Lancir. I guess because he was trained to do that – to listen to people when they’re hurting. And not have it break him.” He slid a lock of hair between his fingers, thoughtfully. “I don’t feel right about putting all of that on my friends, not even Savil, but I could try harder not to hide things. To let my friends offer me a shoulder, if they want, and let them decide if it’s too much – it’s not fair to them to make
that choice for them and close them out. And maybe it’s worth properly getting to know another Mindhealer, so I’ve got someone who’ll make me notice things before I’m really in trouble.” He made a face. “That sounds like a lot of work. Not like I let that stop me for other things, though.”

“You find it much easier to work tirelessly when there is a problem out in the world to solve,” the Shadow-Lover said. “Less so, when the problem is your own happiness.”

“…I’ve never felt like I had that luxury.” Said out loud, something did feel off about that. “There is the thing Randi said to me, before.” He closed his eyes, trying to remember the exact words. “That it’s always going to feel like there’s too much going on, like tomorrow will be a better time, and it never is. That we don’t get to live after the work is done – we have to live while we’re doing it, or otherwise we never will.”

“A wise man.” Something shifted in that hidden face, the impression of a smile. “A good King.”

“He really is.” Vanyel stared into the white. “I would follow him anywhere.” But I won’t trust him, he thought. Not entirely.

“I need to tell him about the conversations with Leareth,” he said. “At some point. It’s important information, but I – I don’t know how to explain. I have no idea how he’ll take it. He trusts me, but I don’t know if he trusts me that far, gods, I don’t know if he should.”

Silence.

“Guess you can’t help me there,” Vanyel said quietly. “I’ll figure it out. Somehow. IThere’s another thing I wanted to talk about. In k’Treva, I tried to talk to the Heartstone – to the Star-Eyed. I don’t really remember anything, still, but I think I’m getting flashes of it sometimes. Nightmares, and…the dreams, flashbacks, whatever it was that happened last night.” Tylendel’s body in the temple. “It makes me feel like I’m losing my mind. I don’t understand… It seems almost like, I don’t know, a glimpse of another world. A different way things could have gone. Only I can’t remember the rest of it.”

A whisper of memory. You see, it could have happened many other ways, but the world in which you find yourself now is the one where you have the best chance.

He slammed his fist into the formless white ground. “I hate this. I’m a puppet of some damned god, they set me on this path and my entire life is about this one thing I have to do, except I don’t even know what that thing is, and, and it’s not fair. I’m tired of it. I just want a life that’s mine. Is that so selfish of me?”

The Shadow-Lover inclined his head. “I do not think–”

“And if that’s true,” he went on, talking over the Shadow-Lover, ignoring him, “then I had to lose ‘Lendel. In order for any of the rest to happen. I’ve thought about that before, you know? I mean, mostly I try not to think about it because it’s horrible. But either it was all a stupid pointless accident and I just happened to be implausibly powerful, or – or some force out there made all of it happen.” He swiped at his eyes. “I could blame Leareth. It’s at least part his fault. But there were so many things that had to happen just the right way… It’s not that I’ve forgiven him, exactly, but I’m not so angry about that in particular. I think he really is sorry. He cares, that he hurt me.” Leareth’s attempt at comfort had been one of the oddest parts of that night – and yet, even more strangely, it had helped. Not enough, but it was something.

“He is a complex man.”
“That’s certainly true.” Vanyel stared down at his hands – clean, whole, smooth youthful skin. Wondered what his face would look like, if he could see himself here. Would he be sixteen again? “I’ve learned so much from him,” he said slowly. “He’s my enemy, and yet… Sometimes I almost think of him as a friend. Hells, sometimes I feel like he thinks of me as a friend, and I can’t imagine he has many of those.”

Did he really know the man at all? He wasn’t sure if he had ever even caught a glimpse of Leareth’s true feelings; the mage was so good at controlling what he revealed. Almost had to be, with so many centuries of practice. *I wonder how old he really is?* Based on historical texts he was fairly sure Leareth was responsible for, a thousand years was a lower bound. How had he stayed sane, all that time? *I’m twenty-eight and I’m already tired of this world.*

“There is another thing,” the Shadow-Lover said. “You may rest here as long as you wish, of course. In the meantime, there are some friends who would like to say goodbye.”

He lifted his head, and saw Mardic and Donni, fading into view out of the misty background. They were holding hands; they, too, looked younger. Healthy and whole, clad in Whites, spotless and perfect except for an odd lack of detail. Like an unfinished painting.

A note of confusion. They were dead. Surely it wasn’t normal, to be given the chance to speak to dead friends?

Then again, most mortals were never given the choice that he had been given four times now. Since when had anything about his life ever been ordinary?

The Shadow-Lover offered his arm, and Vanyel scrambled to his feet. Tears came to his eyes as he reached for both of them. “Mardic…Donni… I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Mardic gripped his arm. His voice was soft, but full of expression again. “It’s all right. Everything’s all right. This is the end of our part, and we’re moving on now. I’m so glad that we both knew you. That we were given the chance to be your friend.” He looked into Vanyel’s eyes. “She – Lady Death – she told me, what you have to do. It’s a lot to carry. Feels like I understand you a bit better, now.” He bowed his head. “Good luck.”

Donni reached for his shoulder. “We did what we had to. We won. Vedric’s dead–”

“–And all the Mavelans with him,” Mardic jumped in.

“Lineas is safe,” Donni finished.

*I haven’t heard him finish her sentences like that in years,* Vanyel thought. To see them perfectly in tune like that again, happy, together… It would have hurt, in the real world, but here, he could just be glad for them.

“And the rest is up to you, Van,” Donni said softly. “I wish we could’ve seen it though, but – well, it’s always like that, isn’t it? Everyone dies in the middle of something.” She grinned for a moment, fiercely, dark eyes flashing. “Always hoped I’d go out gloriously fighting. Saving the Kingdom.”

*Not like this.* They were his age. Not even thirty.

“It’s not just up to you,” Mardic said. “Savil, Randi, Shavri, Tran… They’re your allies. You’re not alone. And, Van – don’t shut your friends out. Promise?”

He could hardly manage to speak. “I promise.”
“Goodbye, Van.” Mardic hugged him, and Vanyel leaned into his warm solidness for a long time. *He feels so alive.* Finally Mardic stepped back, letting Donni take his place. Her embrace was briefer, but she craned in towards his ear. “Go find a lover for me,” she whispered. “You deserve it.”

He pulled away, blushing. “Donni!”

Mardic snickered.

“There’s someone else,” the Shadow-Lover said.

Herald Jaysen stepped forwards, raising his eyebrows. “Van, what is it with you and nearly getting yourself killed?”

Vanyel lifted his head, dabbing at his eyes. “…Jay? No. No!” He hadn’t even felt him die – he must have been too away from the Web, and he had certainly been very distracted.

“I’m sorry,” Jaysen smiled crookedly. “Shavri and Jisa are safe. Figured you’d want to know.” He made a face. “My own damned fault those things got to me. I was distracted, finding out that you went and fathered our little Palace impling! The gods wonder how you had time.”

“What?” Donni said. “Van! You didn’t! Wait… You mean you bedded Shavri? What was that like?”

Vanyel ducked his head, feeling his cheeks warm. “About as awkward as you’d expect. They – she and Randi both wanted it. Randi’s sterile. No one else knows – except, well, I guess Savil does now.” Would anyone else put two and two together, with the trap-spell having gone at them? Hopefully they could keep the nature of it classified.

Jaysen’s lips twitched into a half-smile. “I promise, I’ll take your secret to the grave.”

“Jay!” Vanyel wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry.

Jaysen held out his arms. “Van, it’s been an honour.”

“I could say the same.” He leaned into the embrace, resting his head on Jaysen’s chest for a moment. “I learned a lot from you, Jay. We’ll miss you.”

“Don’t go all sappy on me, boy.” His voice was gruff, but his eyes twinkled. “Take care of Savil for me? Make sure she’s all right?”

“I’ll try.” He stepped back. “Goodbye.”

Their eyes were all looking past him, now, expressions transfixed. *What are they seeing,* he wondered. Slowly, they began to walk, Mardic with his arm around Donni’s waist, Jaysen beside them.

They faded back into the mist, and were gone.

Randi massaged his forehead. “Please, walk me through it again. I still feel like I must be dreaming!”

Savil knew her first account hadn’t been especially coherent; she didn’t blame Randi for asking her
to repeat it. *Center and ground.* She was as tired as she ever remembered being, had been on her feet ever since the Gate, candlemarks ago, and she felt scraped raw.

*Oh, Jay.* She had come too late. At least she’d been able to hold him, as he died. He had known she was there, and been glad of it.

They were in the King’s study; it was just her, Tantras, and Randi. Keiran was busy trying to find a way to redirect more troops to Lineas and Baires.

She took a deep breath. “We still don’t have complete information.” In particular, they didn’t yet know what had happened in Highborne after she Gated out, except that Vanyel was alive, and Donni wasn’t. “What we do know comes from Tashir, from examining the Palace, and from a surviving servant Mardic was able to question. But this is the story as we’ve been able to piece it together…”

She went through all of it, this time in chronological order, rather than the order in which they’d discovered things. She hadn’t known how to explain the trap-spell and the attempt on Shavri’s life, given that Tantras didn’t know about Jisa, until Randi had looked up and stated, flatly, that he had already informed his King’s Own. Meaning quite a lot of people knew, now, and it was worrying. There was that old saying – *three can keep a secret, but only if two of them are dead.*

“It was very well timed,” she heard herself saying; her own voice seemed to come from a great distance. “In terms of making it look plausible that Tashir might’ve done it. The city Guard was convinced he had, and I half-believed it myself.” She shuddered. “Poor boy. I hope Moondance can help him.”

Randi was silent a moment. He looked very tired, she thought; well, it couldn’t have been an easy few weeks. He was supposed to be married in a week – and, as far as she knew, the state wedding would be going ahead as planned. She had met Karis, briefly, and been impressed. *Girl’s done some growing up.*

“Tran?” the King said finally. “What’s your impression of the current priorities?”

Tantras raised a finger. “One. Figure out what the hells happened down there after you left. We’ve already contacted Herald Nina, the Mindspeech-relay in Sleepy Hollow – she’s the end of the line, so she’s going to be riding on as a courier, as fast as she can. And we’re redirecting Herald Joshel to head down that way, and split the distance – Nina’s not a strong enough Mindspeaker to cover more than a hundred miles. Hopefully she can send a message up-chain as soon as she reaches Forst Reach.” He folded up a second finger. “Two. Figure out what to do about it. At the very least, we’ve got a complete absence of leadership in Lineas, and who knows what’s going on with Baires. Vedric Mavelan was in the city – and since we think the city is still there, I’m inclined to think Van took him out, but we don’t know.” He sighed. “Three. Sort out what we’re going to do with Tashir. He’s a presumptive Herald; he’s also the only surviving heir to the throne of Lineas. And he’s…damaged. And stranded in Hawkbrother territory – not criticizing, Savil, I think it was the best you could do, and a good call, but it is awkward.” He took a deep breath. “Four. We need to replace Jaysen. I know none of us want to think about that yet, but he was doing a lot, and we need to fill that gap as soon as possible.”

Randi’s eyes drifted towards Savil.

“No.” She folded her arms, willing her eyes to stay dry. “Absolutely not. I’m happy to train and support whoever you do choose—” though it would hurt, she had helped Jay find his feet as Seneschal’s Herald twenty years ago, it would be a constant reminder of him, “—but it’s not going to be me. I’m too old.”
Randi held her eyes, and finally nodded. “All right. You’d be damned good at it, but I can see that we need you more for other things. I’ll have to think…” He glanced over at his King’s Own. “Honestly, Tran, I’m minded to pick Joshel.”

“Are you sure? He’s so young–”

“He’s twenty-three. I was crowned younger than that. He’s smart as a whip, and a very strong Mindspeaker. And, frankly, it’s a bonus that he’s not a Herald-Mage. We can’t afford to have half our mages tied up in administrative roles anymore.”

*Because there are exactly eight of us left.* There weren’t nearly as many trainees as there had been in the past, either. Only the four. Once they went into Whites, that would bring the total back to twelve – unless they lost someone else in the meantime. *There were nearly forty of us before the war,* she thought bitterly.

If she hadn’t known better, she would have suspected that ‘Master Dark’ was still plucking mage-gifted children from the towns and smallholdings across Valdemar – but he couldn’t be, the Web would have revealed it.

She pulled her attention back to the conversation. “I like that idea,” she said. “My other thought would be Shallan – she’s already in the senior Circle.” Not that she had attending a meeting in over three years; she was still assigned to General Alban, and with the strength of her Mindspeech and her many years of field experience, she had been more valuable there. “I’m going to add a fifth item, as well. Vanyel. We need to find out where he is, and what condition he’s in.” She glanced at the door, then back at them, and lowered her voice. “Randi. I’m very, very worried about him. He…wasn’t in a good place, last night.” And *I didn’t even know until five minutes before I had to abandon him there.* She would have been furious with Mardic for not telling her – had been furious, but she couldn’t muster it now, not after what had come next.


“It was unfortunate.” She rubbed her eyes. “He seemed to pull it together once Vedric was trying to kill us, but…I don’t know. It’s a problem. I don’t think he’s up for another mission right now.”

Randi said nothing, just leaned forward, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I hate to say it,” he murmured finally, “but this is just about the worst possible timing. Savil, you know how much we need him for the invasion.”

It wasn’t exactly the sympathetic reaction Savil had been hoping for, though maybe she shouldn’t have expected any better – she was dumping another constraint on him, when they were already so stretched.

Randi sighed. “It is what it is, I guess. We’ll figure something out.” He hesitated. “What happened? He seemed fine, before.”

Savil shook her head. “I should’ve seen it coming. Wasn’t paying enough attention. I mean, he has his ups and downs. I mostly trust him to handle it, at this point – he usually manages well enough. Until he doesn’t.” She closed her eyes. “On top of everything else, Tashir has a disconcerting resemblance to Tylendel.” And supposedly Tashir was the spitting image of his uncle Vedric, who she had never seen face to face. It made her wonder if ‘Lendel’s family had carried some Baires blood – it might explain where he had gotten so powerful a mage-gift.

“Oh, Tantras said softly. “That must have been awkward.”
That’s one word for it. She gave in to the urge to rest her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands. “Anyway. Randi, I would feel better if he could see a Mindhealer as soon as possible.” Not that he would thank her, later, for forcing the matter like this. Well, let him be embarrassed. Even angry with her. She would take it, if it meant that he was all right.

Randi ran a hand over his hair. “Unfortunately, that’s logistically challenging. Tran? Remind me who our Mindhealers are, and where they’re deployed?”

Tantras raised his eyebrows. “Don’t know why you expect me to know that off the top of my head. They’re run through Healers’. I think they’ve got five with strong Gifts. Hmm. There’s one in Haven, forgot his name. Melody’s rotating between Horn and Dog Inn. I don’t know the others, but I think we might have someone at Bakerston and someone at South Hardorn, and then there must be a fifth somewhere or other.”

None of which were anywhere close to Forst Reach. “Melody knows him,” Savil said. “Randi, what’s the timeline on the invasion? Are we waiting until spring, or going in as soon as possible?”

He met her eyes steadily. “It’s not formally decided, there’s a lot to push through with the Council, but I’m leaning towards as soon as possible. Sunhame is so far south, their winter is a lot milder anyway.” He made a face. “Actually, I did have to bring this up with you at some point. Currently our best plan involves Gating our troops directly there. Which means we need a Gate-terminus, and a mage.”

She felt knocked sideways by the change of topic. “What? But – oh.” There was a sinking feeling in her stomach. “You want Van to do it. Or me.”

“Preferably you, but I would send him into Karse with you, to hold your end of the terminus secure when you reach Sunhame. Savil, right now we have exactly four people in all of Valdemar who can Gate, and that’s counting Vanyel, who really shouldn’t. We’re going to need two mages to stay in Horn or Dog Inn, because – and this doesn’t leave the room – we’re likely all going to move down there as soon as we kick off, to cut the relay distance.”

It was too much to absorb. Randi was going down south himself? And he wanted her to travel overland all the way to Sunhame? That was – it had to be nearly three hundred miles south of the border, five hundred miles from Haven, and they didn’t even have good maps for the intervening distance.

“I’ll get the rest of the shock over with.” A hint of dry amusement in Randi’s voice. “Karis will be going with you.”

“But–” She closed her mouth. Took a deep breath. Let it out. “Are you out of your mind?” she said quietly.

A small, sad smile. “Maybe. It’s not decided for sure, in any case. We might think of something better. But Karis thinks she needs to be there, to manage any allies she can find in their ranks. And it’s going to be much harder to bring our people in overland.” He shook his head. “Easier to go straight for the leadership at the top.”

It did make sense, and it was incredibly dangerous. Did Karis have no fear at all?

–Or was she as thoroughly terrified as any reasonable human being, and choosing to do it anyway, because it was the plan that might work?

The things we do for our kingdoms, she thought wearily. She would be going into action again. At
past seventy.

“That’s the plan,” Randi went on. “But, Savil – I won’t send you in if you don’t think Van’s up for it. I want both of you in top form before we risk this.”

She nodded. “To be honest, I was thinking we send him direct to Horn, and have Melody judge.”

“That could work,” Tantras agreed.

“And you’ll send me down there as well,” she went on, only realizing a second later how much it had come out sounding like an order.

Randi only glanced mildly at her. “Of course. Soon. I’d like to keep you here a few days. There are a number of matters that could use your attention.”

Tying up the loose ends that Jaysen had left dangling, she thought. She might be the only person who could easily pick up where he’d left off. Which meant looking at treasury-budgets again, damn it.

Tantras was fidgeting with his pen. “Jay was teaching our mage-students as well,” he said. “I’ve got no idea what to do about that.”

“I can set them up with self-study,” she offered. “Ought to have some old lesson-plans floating around.”

“Good.” Randi leaned back in his chair. “Let’s wrap up – I know you need rest. One last thing. What’s our plan for getting Tashir back here?”

She groaned. “Suppose I’ll have to Gate him.” She could use Van’s communication-spell to contact Moondance, but it wasn’t an option for Tashir and Jervis, respectively untrained and un-Gifted, to travel through the Pelagirs unaccompanied, and she doubted the Hawkbrothers would be able to free up people to escort them anytime soon. She might as well just raise a Gate; the communication-spell was almost as tiring for a message of any length. “Is it urgent?”

“It can probably wait a few days. But he is the only surviving heir to Lineas.”

“You mean, you think they’ll want to put him on the throne? He’s nowhere near qualified for it, Randi.” It didn’t sound like Deveran had educated him for it much at all, even before he was formally disowned. “Besides. He’s a Herald now.”

“I know. It’s all a mess, isn’t it?” Randi closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. “We’ll sort it out somehow.”

_We fall down, and we pick ourselves up and keep going._ Somehow. Even without Jaysen. Without Mardic and Donni. She didn’t feel ready to face it, any of it – but the world wasn’t going to wait for her.
Vanyel drifted to awareness and lay still, waiting for memory to catch up. Where am I?

Warmth. Pale light on his eyelids. There was pain in his midsection, but it was distant; the fuzzy, dreamlike feeling in his head told him he had been dosed with something, probably poppy-syrup.

The last thing he remembered… I spoke to the Shadow-Lover, he thought. Oh, hells. Mardic and Donni… Jaysen… The grief rose like a tide, and he rode it out.

What had happened before that? Vedric. Donni advancing, daggers flashing, like a messenger of Death. Maybe it didn’t need to go that way… Think about it later. Stars in a midnight-blue sky. The elderly maid speaking to him.

Coming through the Gate. Leren, and the dark controlling force that rode him.

Medren.

:'Fandes?: he tried.

:Chosen!: She wasn’t far away, and he felt her relief like a warm bath surrounding him, light and love filling his mind.

:How long was I out this time?:

:Four days. You lost a lot of blood – for the second time in a night: Her mindvoice was tart.

Right. That. He thought of Mardic sitting in the linen-closet with him, arm around his shoulders, and tried to push the memory away. Grieving could wait.

:You should have told me: Yfandes chided.

How? Vedric would have detected it – and then, later, there hadn’t exactly been time. Of course she was worried, he couldn’t ask her not to be, but it still grated.

:We’ll talk about it later: She softened, and sent a wave of affection.

:You’re just glad you’re safe:

Was he glad of it? He remembered what he’d told the Shadow-Lover. I can’t do this anymore. It’s too hard. Remembered lying on the flagstones. Ashke, I tried… A moment’s disorientation as his thoughts bounced away from the block, but the ache in his chest was still there.

Echoes of another memory. Doesn’t matter whether you can. You will. Words he had spoken to Shavri once, and they were true for him as well, weren’t they? He couldn’t walk away.

No matter how much he wanted to. Ashke, I miss you. I’m sorry.

He tried his best to fold the grief away, and opened his eyes.

“Son?” Withen set down the piece of wood he’d been whittling, and reached out, his hand stopping a few inches short of Vanyel’s shoulder. He opened his mouth, then closed it, and his throat bobbed as he swallowed.

“Father,” Vanyel croaked. :'Fandes? Has he been here the whole time?:
Vanyel tried to moisten his lips. “Water?”

“Of course.” His father scrabbled for the jug on the side table; Vanyel, to his surprise, saw a faint tremor in his hands. “Afraid you can’t have anything to eat just yet. Healer says the wound made a real mess of your insides. Water’s all right, though.”

Vanyel’s Empathy was picking up quite a lot. Concern, embarrassment, pride. Fear – but not of him. He tried to sit up, and fell back, biting down a whimper, as every muscle in his belly screamed. “I could… use some help,” he managed.

Withen hesitated, then leaned in, reaching behind Vanyel’s shoulders and hoisting him effortlessly, stuffing a pillow in place to support his back. “Here, son.” He placed the glass in Vanyel’s hands. “Easy, now, take it slow.”

The first sip of cool water was wonderful. After the second, his gut cramped painfully. Vanyel lowered the glass to his lap.

“What’s been happening here?” he said.

Withen looked down at his hands. “I’ll let the Herald brief you,” he said.

“–Wait. There’s a Herald here?”

His father nodded. “Slip of a girl called Nina. Doesn’t look old enough for her Whites.”

She probably wasn’t. Most of the new cohort weren’t. Randi must have had Nina move down here while he was unconscious. Not a bad plan.

“We had a courier come by as well,” Withen said. “Herald Sera. She was going back and forth to your sister. Headed to the capital now.”

“Where’s Lissa?” Had the Border-guard let her across?

“Highjorune,” his father said, confirming it. “Sent her a dozen of my armsmen. Don’t like her being out there on her own. She’s got troops in Baires as well. Seems their entire royal family’s dead.” He wasn’t quite meeting Vanyel’s eyes. “Guessing you’re responsible for that, son.”

He dared another sip of water. “Actually, no. You remember Herald-Mage Donni?”

Withen’s eyes widened. “–She did it?”

“She gave her life for it.” Had no one told him? “And saved mine.”

His father’s face reddened, and he averted his eyes. “…I’m sorry, son,” he said gruffly. “She was your friend, wasn’t she?”

Vanyel nodded, not quite able to manage any words.

Withen’s flush deepened. “Listen. I’m sorry about Leren. Wouldn’t’ve ever guessed he was a plant.”
Right. That whole mess. Vanyel had talked it through a little with the Shadow-Lover, in the white place where he could think better, and he still didn’t have the slightest idea what had been going on with Leren’s assassination attempt. “Do we know who he was working for?”

“No, but it could be the Mavelans. They had an agent within the temple order, or at least a contact. High prelate isn’t pleased at all, and they’re taking it very seriously. Sending people to every Temple of Astera on the border, trying to find if there’s any more like him.” Withen paused. “Wanted to question him under Truth Spell, once you were up and about, but – too late for that. He’s dead.”

“What?” That made even less sense.

Withen shifted his shoulders. “We locked him up in the cellar-room, had him under guard. Found him dead yesterday morning.” His face paled a little. “Guts torn out. Looked like wizardry to me.”

Vanyel took a deep breath. “It probably was magic. Father, he was controlled. Under some kind of magical compulsion.” Laid by the Mavelans, maybe? But not Vedric. He hadn’t recognized the signature. And it can’t be them who killed him, he thought. They’re all dead. Had it been some kind of contingency-spell laid in advance? He wasn’t even sure how that would work.

A mystery that needed solving, but not now. There would be time to think about it later. “Father, can you pass this on to the priests of Astera, whoever you’re in contact with? They need to know, in case there are more.”

Withen winced. “Of course, son.” He pulled back. “Should let you rest a little before I sent Herald Nina in. Do you need anything more for pain?”

“I’m all right for now.” He was hurting, but he didn’t want to be any more foggy-headed. It was hard enough to concentrate. “Thank you, Father.”

“You’re welcome, son.”

Lissa stood facing the captain of the Highjorune city guard, a short, stocky man, brown hair trimmed short. Her hands were clasped behind her back; it was the only way she could resist the temptation to fidget. I am completely not qualified to be dealing with this. Leading her people into battle was one thing. Politics was another.

“I told you, sir,” she said again, “Tashir’s safe. We’ll bring him back as soon as we can, but Herald-Mage Šavil had to send him somewhere very far away, to keep him out of the Mavelans’ reach.”

The man just looked at her. “Major, the Council won’t have anyone but him.”

Incredible, how quickly they had gone from blaming Tashir for the entire mess, to wanting to crown him. The public announcement, where Reta had gotten up in front of a crowd and told of witnessing Vedric trying to kill Vanyel, and of the story he had told her, had turned everything around. They just wanted an answer, she thought; an end to the uncertainty.

Lissa liked Reta. The woman seemed a little odd – more than a little – but she was incredibly brave. She was staying in the Palace again, and had been ever since the first day Lissa had sent a team in to finish the cleanup. Someone has to watch over it, she had said.
“Herald Vanyel will help us,” the captain said, something like awe in her voice.

_I’m sure he will, as soon as he’s recovered from almost being murdered. Again._ Lissa had nearly turned and ridden right back to Forst Reach when the Herald-courier brought that news; only the knowledge that she couldn’t actually do anything to help, and that she _was_ needed here, had stopped her. “He has full authority to speak on behalf of our King,” she said. “We’ll figure something out.” Randale was putting a lot of trust in her brother. They would have to find a solution for Baires as well – currently missing an entire royal family, save for a few children, and their citizens were _not_ happy with the Mavelan family’s actions.

“We owe Valdemar a great debt,” the man said, gruffly. “Never thought I’d say this, but – the Council would accept the protection of King Randale.”

“…You mean,” Lissa said carefully, “that you’d want to be annexed?”

“Perhaps. Fact is, the boy’s not ready to rule an independent kingdom.”

He certainly wasn’t, but this was the last thing she had expected. “I’ll pass it on to my brother,” she said. It was worth considering. They badly needed, more than anything else, for the tiny kingdom to be under a secure and stable reign – for the spell at the heart of the Palace to stay protected. Yfandes, speaking into her mind for the first time since that awful night twelve years ago, had told her rather a lot.

“I won’t take any more of your time, Major,” the captain said. He bowed, a little stiffly. “Thank you.”

She nodded back, and turned to leave his office.

The second sealed and confidential package from Haven that had arrived by courier, a few candlemarks ago, had given her even more to think about. The King wanted her finish stabilizing things here as quickly as possible, because he needed her to move back down to Horn ‘in preparation for the invasion.’ Which was the last thing she wanted to do.

_I never did get that leave he promised either_, she thought, grumpily. Oh well. As soon as this was over, she intended to go to Forst Reach Village and spend one night getting very drunk, and anyone who thought it was unprofessional could go jump in a river. Then she could face anything.

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Vanyel had just made it through the exhausting, painful ordeal of shuffling the half-yard distance from bed to chair when he heard the tentative knock.

He extended a cautious thread of Thoughtsensing. “Come in.” With the sleeve of his robe, he tried to mop the sweat from his forehead. He was very out of breath, and lightheaded, symptoms of blood loss he was more familiar with than he would have liked.

The door opened. Melenna’s worried face greeted him. “Came to see if you were really all right, Herald Vanyel. And to pass on Medren’s regards.”

“He’s left for Haven, then?”

She bobbed her head, and crossed the room, smoothing down the rucked covers before perching on
the edge of his bed. “Afraid so. Two days ago. Didn’t want to leave, but the Healer said you weren’t in danger. I made him go. Didn’t want him to miss his chance.”

“He saved my life.” Vanyel tried to wriggle into a more comfortable position. *I seem to spend half my life recovering from one stupid injury or another, most of them my own damned fault.* Gut wounds weren’t on his list of favourite things. He wasn’t allowed to put anything in his mouth yet except clear broth, and even that had left him nauseated.

“He’s a good lad,” Melenna said. “I was real proud of him.” She fidgeted with her hair. “You scared us, Vanyel. We nearly lost you. Kaster’s wife was in labour, the Healer from the village was up here – only reason he got to you fast enough. That, and my Medren staying calm enough to try to stop the bleeding.” Her eyes widened a little. “And the Healer said – said he thought he had divine intervention, or he couldn’t’ve saved you. Though he’s real superstitious. Don’t know if I stand by all that.” But there was awe in her eyes.

*The Shadow-Lover intervenes for me*, Vanyel thought. Every single time, and he would have been dead several times over without that. He tried to smile, making light of it. “I’m tougher than I look, Melenna. Plenty of people have tried to kill me, and no one’s succeeded yet.”

“They say all Heralds court the Shadow-Lover, every day of their lives.” Her voice was soft. “You more than most, it seems. I, just – be careful, you know? We couldn’t bear to lose you.”

You will lose me. But he couldn’t tell her. “For you I’ll try, Melenna.”

A faint pink flush spread across her cheeks. She ducked her head. “Your father wouldn’t leave your side, the first day. Shouted at the poor Healer half a dozen times, when the man wasn’t doing something or other fast enough for his liking.” She hesitated, chewing her lip. “He loves you a great deal,” she said finally, the words tumbling out.

Vanyel blinked, surprised at the burning in his eyes. *I wish he would tell me that to my face.* Just once. Just once would be enough. “He was here when I woke up,” he said. That had been…nice. Surprisingly so. He would rather have had Savil there – he missed her desperately – but still. It had been a lot better than waking up alone.

“Could you do something for me?” Melenna said. “Just – could you write to my Medren, let him know you’re all right?”

“Of course.” He ought to write a lot of letters, really. “And I’ll look out for him once I’m back in Haven. Like I promised.” He sighed. “Not that I know when that’ll be.”

Herald Nina had briefed him, and it seemed Randale expected him to just up and *solve* the situation in Lineas and Baires. At least he could ask Lissa’s advice, and Herald Nina would be staying until everything was cleared up. Yfandes was very pleased about that; it saved Vanyel having to strain himself with Mindspeech-relay work.

“I appreciate it, Herald Vanyel.” Melenna bowed her head. “You’re a good man. A good friend.” She stood up. “I should go. Do you need anything?”

He looked at the bed. It seemed a very long way away. “Some more painkillers, if you see the Healer.” They would make him muddle-headed, which was unfortunate, he had wanted to spend some of tonight thinking about possible solutions for Lineas, but he didn’t think he could face moving again without them.

*:You pushed yourself too hard, Chosen: Yfandes chided.*
“Dada, dada!” Brightstar ran up, hands cupped together. “Look, dada! Papa, look!”

It was early evening, and they were lounging on the side of one of the larger pools. Moondance disentangled himself from Starwind’s arms. “What is it, ke’chara?”

“I found a pretty stone!” His son opened his hands to reveal a small, perfect chunk of amber.

“That is very lovely,” Moondance said, honestly. “Where did you find it?”

“Outside!” Brightstar pointed vaguely. “With Snowlight.”

Brightstar had been accompanying his birth-mother on some of the safer scouting runs, recently. Work started young, here. I cannot believe he is already ten, Moondance thought. Brightstar’s long hair was halfway to white; he had learned to touch the Heartstone a few months ago, picking up the trick of it with the effortless ease of youth. Everything came so quickly to him. Nothing like Moondance’s own training.

“You know, ke’chara,” he said, “this is a stone your Uncle Vanyel can use as a mage-focus.”

“Oh?” Brightstar’s silver eyes lit up. “I could make it a gift!”

“When he comes again, yes. Or perhaps you could give it to our friend Tashir, to offer to him when they see one another.” He smiled. “Likely that is to be before we see our Wingbrother again.”

“I could?” As usual, Brightstar’s face glowed at the mention of Tashir. He had attached himself to the young man almost the day he arrived, and seemed to regard him with a mixture of awe and proprietary affection.

The change in Tashir was remarkable, Moondance thought. He had been in k’Treva only two weeks, but ever since he had learned to Mindspeak with his Companion, he had seemed more relaxed and open with every passing day. He was easing into life in the Vale, as well – a number of things that had clearly shocked him in the beginning, he now seemed used to.

Right now he was in the pool, fending off the attentions of Moonfire, a certain fourteen-year-old girl, cousin to Starwind – or, rather, he didn’t seem to be trying very hard to fend her off. Which was new, and progress. She was speaking to him in her rather halting Valdemaran; he was answering her questions, shyly, and she was respectfully keeping her distance, sitting on the opposite side of the bench.

No, Moondance thought with a smile, he is certainly not shay’a’chern. Though, after Tashir had, finally, opened up and told him the full story about his childhood, he could see why the young man had felt so conflicted. I think I have finally half-convinced him that it was not his fault and he need not be ashamed. Those wounds would be a long time healing, but Tashir was young, and he had the unfaltering support of his Companion.

:You are thinking of the boy: Starwind sent. There was fondness in his mindvoice. :He will be all right, I think:
"Yes, ashke, I think so:

“I thought I might find you here.” The old armsmaster’s voice sounded behind his right ear. Moondance turned.

“Bright the day, Jervis.”

“Wing to thy wings.” To his surprise, the man had quite quickly picked up on a number of the Tayledras customs. In fact, Jervis had been making himself very popular, mostly by offering to go on scouting-runs, and then had impressed the scouts a great deal by charging in and taking on a Changebear with his sword before any of them could intervene with magic. He was getting quite a lot of attention from the women of k’Treva, Moondance thought with amusement.

“Tashir wanted to go for a ride with Leshya again,” he said. “Thought I’d go with him, but I don’t know that we should go alone. What do you think.”

:Ashke?: Moondance sent. Starwind had a much better sense of where the various scouting-patrols would be.

Starwind spoke. “The meadow to the south ought to be safe. Though perhaps I needs ask one of the–”

He stopped mid-sentence, scrambling to his feet. Moondance was a heartbeat behind him.

“What–” Jervis started.

“I sense a Gate.” And he already thought he could recognize the ‘flavour’ of Savil’s magic. “I think it is our Wingsister, your Herald-Mage Savil. Find Tashir, please.”

“She’s come to haul us out of here, then.” Jervis made a face. “Damn. I like this place.”

Scarcely five minutes later, they all stood in front of the Gate-archway, the silvery light of it playing over their faces. Savil was sitting on a bench; she looked very pale, but a quick check of her aura told Moondance that she ought to be able to hold the Gate a few minutes more.

“I’m sorry it’s all so sudden,” she said. “Tashir, I’m afraid we need you to come back to Valdemar.”

The young man stepped forwards. “What’s going on, back home?”

“A great deal of confusion, mostly. But Vanyel’s managed to figure out a compromise that’ll make everyone happy, or at least not furious. Trouble is, I’m afraid it’ll ask a lot of you. I want to make sure you’re ready for it, before we take you into that.” She paused. “If you’re not ready, you can stay here awhile longer.”

Tashir’s shoulders rose and fell as he took a deep, steadying breath, but his voice, when he spoke, was calm. “What do you need me to do?”

“All right, to start with some of the aftermath that you missed – Vedric Mavelan is dead, and so are all the rest of them. He was responsible for what happened that night – and, Tashir? We know for a fact, beyond a doubt, that you were Deveran’s son.”

Tashir blinked hard, several times, but kept his face under control. He nodded.

“We put the Council in Highjorune to a vote,” she went on, “and they want you in charge. If you’re
willing to do that, then they’re willing to officially join Valdemar. We’d like to annex Baires as well, since they have no leadership at all right now, and it sounds like Vanyel thinks he can talk them into taking you as well. There is a case to be made for it. You’re of their royal blood, as Ylyna’s son, but not involved in the whole mess in any way. Tashir – you won’t have to be King, and you will have Randale’s protection. Are you up for being Lord Holder of quite a large territory? We’ll give you all the support we can, of course. You won’t be on your own.” Her lips twitched into a smile. “If Jervis here agrees to it, we’ll be sending him as well. He can be weaponsmaster for your Guard. Vanyel is still figuring out the rest of your staff.”

Moondance looked over at Jervis, whose jaw had fallen open. After a moment, he closed it, and rubbed his eyes.

“Must be dreaming,” he said gruffly. His eyes fell on Tashir’s face, and softened. “Course I’ll go.”

Tashir closed his eyes. Moondance watched his lips move silently. Speaking to his Companion, maybe; he still found it easier to Mindspeak if he had that assistance.

Finally, he raised his head, pulling his shoulders back and standing tall. “Yes,” he said – quietly, but steadily. “If that’s what we need, to make everything all right, then of course I’ll do it.”

Savil stood up. “Then let’s go. Take a minute to say goodbye, but don’t make me hold this thing any longer than I have to.”

Tashir turned, looking around at the amassed faces. Moonfire caught his eye, and he took a step towards her.

:Starwind, Moondance: Savil had pulled them both into a link. :There’s something I need to tell you both as well:

:Go on: Starwind sent.

:No time to explain it fully, but we found a live Heartstone in Highjorune. It feeds a very complex spell that was laid in place by one of your ancestors, a Healing-Adept – a spell that’s holding together a major earthquake-fault and Healing damage that must be as old as the Cataclysm. Not sure how old the spell is, but it’s got to be centuries. Probably as old as the nation of Lineas: She paused. :It seems stable, for now. But neither of us is skilled enough to deal with it, if there do start to be problems. Is this something either of you has ever heard of?:

Starwind thought for a moment. :No. It was mentioned in none of our histories:

Moondance held Savil’s gaze. :Perhaps we must needs make a journey, at some point: A very, very long journey. :Or pass word to another Vale. I will think on it:

:Do that: Savil nodded curtly – and then swayed, her face going a shade paler. “Tashir! Please hurry.”

Stef twitched as he heard the knock on the door.

“Stefen. May I come in?” The voice belonged to Bard Breda.
Stef scrambled up. “I’m coming!”

It was still so strange to have his own room. With a bed of his own, and a bolt on the door! He knew he was to have a roommate soon, but Bard Breda had drawn a line on the floor and said that everything to one side of it was his, and he could do whatever he wanted with it. He couldn’t think what she meant. There wasn’t anything in the room that needed fixing, not even any cracks or drafts in the walls to caulk with mud and cattail-fluff. Not that Stef knew where the river was yet. He had figured out how to open the window, a few nights ago, and slipped out, climbing up a drainpipe onto the roof, but everything was so big and there were so many buildings and towers, going on and on as far as he could see. It had frightened him and he had quickly crept back inside.

He unbolted the door and opened it, then bowed. “Good morning, Bard Breda.” He had been practicing his speaking; he knew he didn’t talk right, not for here. It had taken him a few days to realize that the big wall with guards they had crossed meant his room was in the Palace. The Palace where the King lived. It felt impossible. Like something out of a song.

Breda chuckled and patted his shoulder; he managed not to flinch, he was still getting used to people touching him. “I’ve told you, Stef, you don’t need to bow to me. Are you ready to meet your roommate?”

Stef managed to keep his worry off his face. He didn’t especially want a roommate. What if they were cruel to him? But Breda had said it would be all right.

He tried to peer around her.

“Heya, Stefen.” A boy stepped forwards, setting down a canvas saddlebag. “I’m Medren.”

He looked about twelve or thirteen years old, only a little older than Stef was, but he towered over him – well-fed, sturdy, a rich soft boy in rich soft clothes. His smile was friendly, and though he was looking down at Stef, because Stef was shorter, he wasn’t looking down on him. Not like all the other boys on the floor did.

Well, Stef did have rich clothes of his own now. He had five tunics, in different fabrics for winter and summer, all a rusty dark red colour that was pretty enough. Bard Breda had apologized that they weren’t new – not that he could tell! She said it was because he was ‘on scholarship’, and Stef hadn’t wanted to look foolish and so hadn’t asked what that meant. They were all a bit too big for him. Bard Breda had apologized for that as well and said it was because the Healers thought he would be growing a lot this year.

Stef hoped that was true. All of the others were bigger than him, and he hadn’t gotten in any fights yet but he had been spending all of his time in his room. He knew they didn’t think he belonged. Well, they were right, he didn’t – but he was here, and he wasn’t going to turn that down.

In any case, he didn’t look so much like an orphan from the streets anymore. He had a bath every day, and when he looked in the mirror, he saw a boy he barely recognized. Breda had even trimmed his hair, sighing about how nice the colour was. Stef wasn’t sure he had ever thought about the colour of his hair before. Everyone’s hair looked brown when it was dirty.

“Heya, Medren,” he said, nervously, and started to bow before stopping himself.

“Guess we’re rooming together.” Medren smiled at him again, then looked past him at the empty side of the room. Their room. “Breda told me you’re from Three Rivers. That’s in the east, right? I’m from Forst Reach, it’s all the way to the west. What’s it like in Three Rivers?”
Stef didn’t especially want to talk about it. “Figure it’s like most places,” he said, noncommittally.

Medren gave him a brief, curious look, but let it slide. He was nervous as well, Stef though, though he was good at hiding it. “Well, I thought Forst Reach Village was big, but Haven is huge! I couldn’t hardly believe it, it just kept going and going. Just the market was as big as the whole village and the keep, back home!”

Stef just nodded, unsure what to say, and retreated to his bed.

“Well, boys,” Breda said, “I’d suggest you get to know each other. You’re both starting in the middle of a session, and I know that’s not easy – and this is a big change for both of you. Medren, please do come to my rooms anytime, if you have questions. My door’s always open to either of you. Stef, please don’t forget to go to supper again.”

Stef ducked his head, embarrassed; he hadn’t meant to forget! He had a new lute, and it was the right size for him – Breda said, in that apologetic voice again, that it was only a used student-lute, but he thought it seemed very fine. He had been trying to pick out one of the songs she had played for him earlier, trying different things with his hands until the sound was right, and all of a sudden it had been dark outside.

Breda closed the door, and Stef scrambled up and bolted it.

Medren, busy pulling things out of his bags and throwing them onto the bed, looked over his shoulder. “Do you always lock it?”

“Ain’t that–” He stopped himself, and started over, more carefully. “Isn’t that what a lock is for?”

“Guess so.” Medren flopped down onto the bed, right on top of the pile of hose he had laid out. “I’m worn out. Never spent that long in the saddle my whole life.” He smiled. “Can’t believe my grandfather’s even paying for my horse’s keep, so I could bring her.”

“You’s got yer own horse?” Stef said before he could stop himself – and froze, his cheeks flushing, because he had just spoken in pure street-cant accent.

Medren, if he noticed, said nothing. “I do. Her name’s Apple. She was a gift from my grandmother.” He rolled over onto his stomach and propped his chin up on his elbows, his friendly hazel eyes fixed on Stef. “It was very generous. I’m bastard-born, see. They didn’t have to be nearly so good to me as they were.”

Stef didn’t know what to say in response, so he said nothing.

“I should write to Mother,” Medren said. He hesitated. “Breda said you needed help with practicing reading and writing, and maybe I could help you.”

Stef felt his cheeks flame even hotter. Medren was going to think he was stupid. He was going to know that Stef was a gutter-rat who didn’t belong here…

Medren must have noticed his reaction, which made it even worse. “Stefen,” he said, the words tumbling from his mouth, “Stefen, I don’t think worse of you for it, I promise. My own grandfather can barely read! It’s not your fault and I’m sure you’ll learn really fast – Stefen, I, I want to be your friend. Please don’t look scared of me!”

Stef blinked hard. Don’t cry, he thought. Never show weakness.

Medren looked away, staring at the window. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t push. I, just, I really want to
have a friend here, you know?”

What was he playing at? Stef didn’t understand.

Medren was silent a moment. “Stefen,” he said finally, “Breda says you’ve got the strongest Gift she’s ever seen. And that you taught yourself how to use it, and you’re very good. Could you show me?”

Now Stef knew what the game was. Flattery. It still didn’t make sense, because it seemed like this Medren badly wanted Stef to like him, and Stef couldn’t see why he thought that was worth anything.

Except, maybe, because of the door in his head, the thing Breda called a Gift. It seemed like that truly mattered here.

Stef was, finally, starting to believe that he really was here to learn music. For some reason. He still kept expecting to wake up from the dream he was having at any moment – but in the meantime, he might as well act as though it was real. Everything was so different. And yet, even this wonderful, impossible place must have rules, just like the streets back home had rules.

If Stef could figure out what they were, he would be all right.

He smiled at Medren, his best smile, the one he had practiced for the ladies who came to listen to him sing, so that they would smile back at him and stop to listen to his song. “I can show you,” he said.

Lissa settled herself into the chair with a sigh, and put one booted foot up on the bed, then the other, each one leaving a dusty mark on the blankets. “Feeling any better, Van?”

Vanyel managed a weak smile. “Heya, Liss. Better not let Mother catch you.” There was a good chance she would; she had been coming to fuss over him several times a day. It was exhausting and he never had the heart to tell her to go away.

Lissa smiled as well. “Warn me if she’s coming, would you?” She looked tired, he thought. Her riding leathers were filthy, her hair a nest of tangles, and there was a smear of dirt on her forehead. She must have come straight to him from the stables. “Seriously, though, how are you feeling? You’re awfully pale. What’s the deal with you and getting yourself stabbed, anyway? I hoped that time at the front would teach you a lesson.”

“Wasn’t on purpose.” He shifted his weight, managing not to wince or groan. “Anyway, it’s not so bad. Healer’s been coming by every day.” Probably why he had been spending so much of the rest of his time asleep. Quick-Healing was always tiring. He had been valiantly drinking the bone-broth they brought him, but the village Healer didn’t know the trick Shavri had invented, of coaxing his body into making more blood. It had been days and he still felt on the verge of passing out every time he stood up. “I didn’t know you’d be back this soon,” he added.

“I’m not really back. Need to head to Baires tomorrow, but figured some things would be easier to discuss face to face. Like your plan for Baires.” She raised her eyebrows. “Seriously, Van? You think we can talk them into taking Tashir? And by ‘we’, I mean ‘me’, because it doesn’t look like you’re up for a journey.”
He started to protest, then took a deep breath and stopped himself. She was right. He wouldn’t last
more than ten minutes in the saddle, and they couldn’t delay this to wait for his recovery. Not when
Randi already had other plans for him.

“I think it’s the best option,” he said out loud. Though he didn’t blame her for being dubious. “Of
course I want you to use your judgement, and let me know if you think of something better.”

Lissa shook a loose lock of hair out of her eyes. “Can’t think of anything better either, unfortunately,
and I’ve tried. It’s a bloody disaster.” She nibbled at a fingernail, caught herself, and clamped her
hands together in her lap. She must have been very stressed, Vanyel thought; it was the only time she
succumbed to biting her nails.

He hated to throw anything else at her, but he had to. “Lissa, I’ve got other news for you. Rather, a
message from General Alban. Look on the table.” He didn’t feel like getting up.

She raised her eyebrows again, but stood up with a groan and went to his small table, picking up the
sealed envelope. “This?”

“Yes.” It had come two days ago, by special courier, and with an anti-tampering spell on it as well –
he recognized Sandra’s work. Clearly the general hadn’t wanted anyone opening it. Reaching out
with his Othersenses, he dispelled the thread of magic.

Lissa sat back down, and levered the seal open with a thumbnail. As usual, she started reading it out
loud, mumbling under her breath. “To Major Lissa from General Alban… Your orders are to
complete your current duties as promptly as is feasible…blah blah… Gods!” Her eyes widened.
“This has to be a joke. They want me to lead a battalion into Karse!”

Vanyel blinked. He hadn’t known that; his own orders had been simply to report to Dog Inn as soon
as possible. “Congratulations,” he said dryly.

She glared at him. “It’s a terrible plan. It’s almost winter! Will be winter, by the time we can move.”

Vanyel sat up straighter, grimacing at the pull of half-healed scar tissue, and reached for his glass of
cider. “I doubt the plan’s that simple. Probably they just don’t want to put it down on paper yet.” He
had some guesses about what, exactly, Randi was planning, and he didn’t like it either. “Figure we
might as well leave together, once you’re done with Baires. Go direct to Dog Inn.” There weren’t
any good roads, but he knew the whole area well, and there were trails that would be fine for riding,
if not carriages. “I ought to be able to travel by then.”

“Well!” Lissa huffed, flinging the paper down on the bed. “I’ll let tomorrow handle itself. Want to
get drunk?”

“I’m not allowed wine.” The Healer had been rather strict on that matter.

“Who said wine?” Lissa reached into her shoulder-bag, which she had dropped at the foot of the bed,
and drew out her travel-cup, then a small flask. “You’ve got cider, and I’ve got a little help.”

“Sure.” It would take the edge off the pain, at least. He was only taking the painkillers at night, now;
they were too strong, and made him foggy. He had asked for willowbark, but the Healer said it
would be too hard on his healing stomach.

Lissa took his cup and topped it up from the jug of cider, filled her own, and then doctored both with
a generous measure from the flask. Vanyel retrieved his cup from her outstretched hand and raised it.

“To ending the war sometime before spring,” he said wearily, and drank.
“I’ll toast to that.” Lissa took a long swallow, and lowered the cup to her lap. “Van…” She hesitated, chewing her lip. “How are you, really? Don’t just mean physically. I…” Her eyes dropped to the floor. “This can’t have been an easy month.”

Oh, Liss. You don’t want to know. It had been one of the loneliest weeks in recent memory – Mother’s fawning, and Father’s stiff, awkward visits, only made it worse. His sleep had been troubled by nightmares as well as pain. He missed Savil, desperately. And Mardic and Donni. And you, ashke, I don’t know how to do this without you but I have to. Randi needed him functional, and he was doing his best.

I want to go home, he thought, pointlessly.

“It hasn’t been,” he said out loud, trying to keep his voice light and not quite succeeding. “I’m all right, Liss. Thank you for asking.”

Shavri held her daughter’s hand, as they stood in their best formal clothing. She knew the child’s pearl-crusted gown was uncomfortable, for a not quite seven-year-old, but Jisa was doing her very best not to fidget. It helped that she had enough Mindspeech now for Shavri to talk to her a little, and keep her amused.

Which meant, mostly, answering questions that she would rather hadn’t been asked. Jisa was endlessly curious about Karis. Karis, who had been clearly trying to be so friendly to Shavri, all week, every time they crossed paths in the hallway or in Randi’s suite.

It felt like a farce, like one of the bawdy-plays they put on in the tavern district. Shavri had said once that she would never understand the highborn and their marriage customs – well, here was a prime example. It made no sense to Shavri that it was necessary for Randale and Karis to marry in order to cement the alliance. Except, apparently, it was – because everyone on the Council thought so, because of public perceptions, because someone, somewhere, once had decided that two people who didn’t love one another pretending to was the way to make peace.

What would Vanyel have said about it? To her surprise, she thought she could guess. The idea is to produce an heir together, he would say. Maybe that was the whole point, that two self-interested rulers who had produced a child would be less likely to turn on their fellow parent. It was an interesting way of looking at it.

Except that, in this case, there would be no children.

:Mama: Jisa sent, tugging at her hand. :Mama, who’s that?: Her eyes were fixed on a figure in Whites, part of the procession currently passing them by.

She glanced up. :Oh, that’s Herald Joshe. You’ve met him before. At that big party for the new century:

:Did I?: Jisa’s eyes narrowed in concentration. :He looks different. He has a beard now:

It scarcely deserved to be called that, Shavri thought wryly. She thought Joshe might have been letting his stubble grow in a failed attempt to look older. Poor kid – he had been Seneschal’s Herald for all of three days, and now he was expected to take part in the biggest public ceremony since Queen Elspeth’s alliance-marriage with Iftel.
He has Herald Jaysen’s job?: Jisa sent.

He does: She didn’t want to think about Jay either. Jay, who had asked her to cover Jisa’s eyes. She doesn’t need to see this. But she’d seen the blood; Shavri had been too busy fruitlessly trying to save Jaysen’s life to stop her.

At least Jisa hadn’t felt him die. Hadn’t felt, mind to mind, the moment he decided that Shavri, lifebonded to the King, and her daughter were worth more to Valdemar than he was.

Even now, she couldn’t wish to go back and change it. Not when his actions had saved Jisa. She was almost ashamed of it, except that Jaysen wouldn’t have wanted her to feel that way. She remembered his diamond-clear certainty, and peace. Acceptance.

At least I was there. At least she had been able to cup his mind in hers, and that had been worth it, no matter how much it had cost her, in nightmares and pain afterward. It made a hundred and seven. Too many lives she had guided to the Shadow-Lover’s arms, every one of them tearing out a piece of her on their passage out of the world, and Jaysen’s larger than most. She had added his name to her list, her hands shaking and smearing the ink, not that there was any risk she would ever forget it.

She and Jisa had knelt in their rooms, the night after Sovvan, and burned a single candle for him. The flame hadn’t seemed big enough, not for something so significant. It never was. Only a symbol. A paltry offering, to a god she didn’t believe was even listening.

But that wasn’t the point. It hadn’t ever been for Kernos; it was for her, a way to stay sane through all of it. Remembering the ones she had failed to save was the least she could do.

Is it starting now?: Jisa sent. My feet hurt:

I know, pet: Shavri craned her neck, trying to see through the sea of heads. I think it is starting:

A moment later, a booming voice echoed across the crowd. “Thank you, all, who have come to witness this union—” The voice belonged to Archpriest Everet, of the Temple of Kernos, still the largest religious order in Valdemar and the one to which most Heralds, and historically the royal family, belonged. He looked very dignified, Shavri thought – tall, erect, snow-white hair contrasting with the heavy robes he wore. He would be presiding over the public, Valdemaran half of the ceremony, using a standard marriage-text that was not overtly religious. Later, there would be a smaller ceremony, in one of the enclaves dedicated to Vkandis.

So much fuss and bother. All for a piece of paper, to declare two kingdoms at peace with one another when that was manifestly false – but clearly it meant something to the people of Haven. She had never seen the streets so packed.

And then she saw Randi. Fifty yards separated them, and still she felt like she could see every flicker of expression in his face. He wore formal Whites, and he rode his Companion, all decked out in blue-and-silver finery.

Something clenched in her chest. Even up until this morning, it hadn’t quite seemed real.

What’s wrong with my life, she thought, for the thousandth time. Why is this happening to us?

Jisa wriggled a little at her side. I see Papa:

That’s right, pet: She tightened her shields. No need for Jisa to know just how much this hurt.

Today, a wedding. Next month, an invasion – and Randi was going south for it, and she couldn’t
bear to think about it but she couldn’t stop either, her mind trapped in a loop of terrified denial. *It’s too much, too much to ask of me,* she thought – pointlessly, because who were those words intended for? She hadn’t believed in gods who listened to prayers since she was a little girl.

Karis believed. She wasn’t ostentatious about it, but it was so clear in everything she did – that she really, truly thought her Vkandis Sunlord watched over Karse, and had opinions about her plan. Vkandis’ name was in their alliance-treaty, and that was the weirdest thought Shavri had ever experienced.

She missed Vanyel. Randi had muttered something about assigning him to Haven for a good long time, when this was all over, and Shavri had been too distracted to ask why.

When would it be over, though?

Jisa didn’t even remember the time before the war.
Chapter Thirteen

Savil was sitting on a folding canvas stool in her tent, hands busy stitching together a tear in one of her tunics, when she felt the gentle mindtouch.

:Come in, ke’chara: she sent, setting aside the material and standing. :I’m so glad you’re here:

Vanyel pushed the tent-flap aside. “Heya. It’s good to see you.”

He’s looked worse, she thought. She knew that Lissa’s Healer hadn’t especially wanted to clear him for travel yet, but they had finished sorting out the situation in Highjorune, and Randi had been impatient to have him in Dog Inn for their planning sessions. Already there was little over a month to Midwinter. She had wanted him here sooner rather than later as well, she had to admit. For various reasons.

Vanyel shed his cloak, shaking the snow from it before hanging it over hers on the hook provided, and bent to pull off his boots. She thought there was even more white in his hair than when she had last seen him. He looked underweight, his Whites loose – not surprising, given that he had spent the last three weeks recovering from a gut wound. Damn it, will people ever stop trying to kill him? Paler than she liked, with dark circles under his eyes, and he carried himself stiffly – but the smile he offered her was genuine enough, as he set his boots neatly next to hers and let her fold him into her arms.

She tried to be gentle, not holding him as tightly as she wanted. I never want to let you go. But, finally, she did.

“When did you arrive?” she asked. “Here, let me get out another stool for you.”

“Two candlemarks ago.” He sat, gratefully. “Saw the Healers first.”

Savil frowned. “Having trouble?”

“Just sore.” He rubbed his stomach, absently. “You should see the scar, it’s horrendous. Anyway, they said it’s healing fine.”

“That’s good.” Savil sat as well. “Have you eaten? I can have a page bring us something.” She didn’t imagine he felt like going as far as the mess tent. Especially since it was quite warm inside, with the weather-barrier she’d been keeping on the tent ever since she set up, but it was below freezing outside.

He nodded without speaking.

She yawned. No excuse to be tired, there was still a candlemark left to sunset, but she was. “Wish you’d sent word ahead you were arriving tonight,” she said. “I’ll send a runner to Melody and see if she can clear her schedule to see you tomorrow.”

He blinked at her. “What?”

“I’ve spoken to her already, she said short notice was–”

Vanyel’s eyes narrowed. “Savil. I can manage my own appointments.”

She interrupted him right back. “Would you have, though? Because, I mean, you haven’t.”
His cheeks reddened. “I’m not a child.” Defensiveness, his shoulders rising. “I don’t need you to look after me.”

“Is that true, though?” She knew her voice was coming out harsher than she’d intended, and she couldn’t stop it. “Van, I’m worried about you. I don’t think you’ve been managing well this year. Randi and Tran are worried as well–”

“You told them?” Vanyel surged forward on the stool, glaring at her. “Why would you–”

“I had to. It was strategically relevant. I really don’t know what you were expecting.” Her voice had come out more acidic than she’d meant it. Savil made herself taking a deep breath. “Ke’chara, I know you’d probably rather I hadn’t, and I’m sorry. It’s not like I gave them any details about what happened in Highjorune. I just – look, if I hadn’t told them, we’d probably be on our way into Karse already. And you’re not up for that.”

He scowled. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. What happened that night – Van, do you know how scared I was? And I had to leave you there. I’ve spent the last month worried sick.”

Suddenly he was on his feet, voice rising to a shout. “It’s my life! I’ve been doing this for. Twelve. Damned. Years. Can’t you trust me?”

“No,” she said, flatly. “Not right now. Not anymore. I did trust you, ke’chara, and clearly it was a mistake.” She raised her chin. “Van, you handled it unbelievably badly. I’m not sure I can even count all the ways. You let it get to that point at all, and you didn’t say a word to me. I think it’s reasonable for me to be upset about it.”

She hadn’t meant to be so harsh, but nothing she had said was false. Vanyel flinched back from her words – and then started to turn, headed for the tent-flap.

“I want to help, all right? Because you matter to me more than
anything else in the world, and I want you to be happy.”

He turned to look at her, slowly, and she saw that his eyes were brimming with tears. “Savil… Don’t. Just don’t. Ask me to save the kingdom, fine, I can do that. I, I don’t know if I can be happy, if that’s even possible, and I can’t… Please don’t ask that of me, on top of everything else.”

She winced. Why can’t I stop putting my foot in my mouth? “I didn’t mean it that way, Van, that came out all wrong. The last thing I want is for you to feel guilty that you’re hurting! I – it is hard, for me, when you’re unhappy. But that’s for me to bear, not you.”

A slow nod – but he was still holding himself rigid, as though braced against an expected blow, and he wouldn’t meet her eyes.

She winced. Why can’t I stop putting my foot in my mouth? “I didn’t mean it that way, Van, that came out all wrong. The last thing I want is for you to feel guilty that you’re hurting! I – it is hard, for me, when you’re unhappy. But that’s for me to bear, not you.”

A slow nod – but he was still holding himself rigid, as though braced against an expected blow, and he wouldn’t meet her eyes.

She swallowed, and tried to soften her voice. “I don’t want to fight about it. Can we start this conversation over?”

He hesitated – and then moved, and was at her feet in a flash, resting his head on her knee, the tension slowly draining from him.

She stroked his hair. “Hey, hey, it’s all right. I’m not angry with you.” Only with herself. “Van, I promise, I’m not trying to put another burden on you. Really. Just, you’ve been happier than this before. You know it’s possible.”

“Have I? It’s… hard to remember.” His voice was thick. “I talked about that exact thing with Melody, last time. I know it, it just – it doesn’t feel true. I get so damned tired, everything feels so hard, it feels like it’s going to be like that forever.”

It was the most open he had been with her in a long time. Maybe ever. She ran her fingers through his hair, loosening a tangle. “Van… Can you tell me what was going on with you, that night?”

His shoulders stiffened a little. “…What did Mardic tell you?”

“How much? That you’d tried to hurt yourself, and it was complicated.”

He hesitated, and then switched to Mindspeech. :I don’t know what happened. I sort of blanked out for a minute. All of a sudden I was covered in blood:

Somehow that was even worse than what she had assumed, and the overtones he was leaking made her chest ache. “Ke’chara, that’s terrifying.”

:I know. It was really bad. I was going to see Melody anyway as soon as I got here: A pause. :But… thank you for helping arrange it: He pulled back from the mental connection, switching back to spoken words, and his voice was under control again. “I’m sorry I got upset. I meant to talk to you about things, I really did, just – you caught me off guard and I was defensive. It’s embarrassing, feeling like I can’t manage on my own, that people don’t trust me… I hate it when everyone else is fine and I’m broken.”

How to respond to that? She tried to choose her words carefully. “Van, you’re not the only person who needs help sometimes. You do manage quite well, and people do trust you – I think that’s part of the problem, sometimes. We’ve gotten used to counting on you for so many things. Honestly, you’re carrying even more responsibility than I am. And, listen – if it helps to know, I saw the Mindhealer in Haven three times in the last month, after Jay died.”

His shoulders twitched. “I didn’t know that.” For a moment he looked like he was going to say something else, but he didn’t, only looked down at the tent-floor.
“Well, it’s true. I was a bit of a mess.”

He lifted his head, looking at her with red-rimmed eyes. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

The guilt was clear in his voice. Why does everything I say end up making it worse? “It’s all right,” she said. “I wish you had been; you’ve no idea how much I missed you, ke’chara. But it’s not your fault, and you’re here now. The point I’m making is, we all fall apart sometimes.”

“…And we pick ourselves up and keep going.” His voice was barely a whisper.

“Because, what else are we supposed to do?” She closed her eyes again, wishing Kellan would step in and help, but apparently he was going to let her handle this on her own. “I know it’s hard. And that it’s your life, and there are burdens I can’t bear for you. You’re not a child, and I – I’m sorry if I made it sound like I think of you that way. I don’t at all. I know you can do this. I just don’t want you to have to do it all alone.”

“Thank you.” He was silent for a long moment. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking,” he said finally. “Things have been a lot worse in the last four years. Since Lancir died. I was just too distracted to notice the pattern. He might’ve been helping me even more than I realized. It feels a bit like betraying him, to find another Mindhealer to see, and I don’t know how I’ll have time…but I’m going to try. I promised Yfandes I would.”

“I’m proud of you.” It was a warm glow in her chest. “I know it’s not the easiest thing in the world.”

“It really isn’t.” He snorted. “It’s exhausting and stressful and one of my least favourite things, and even with Lance I used to wriggle out of it whenever I could. But he didn’t let me get away with it. Figure I need that. And… Savil, I made a promise to,” his voice caught, “to – myself, that I wouldn’t shut you out.” He shook his head. “I know you want to help, and I’ll try to stop making it harder for you.”

“Thank you.”

The silence stretched out, but companionably, the tension and awkwardness broken. Mostly. She could still feel the edge of it – they were both so raw, it wasn’t hard to be prickly, to prod each other’s sore places. But they could try to be gentle, to meet one another in the middle.

“Savil?” Vanyel said finally.

“Yes, ke’chara?”

“Can I…” He hesitated. “I’ve been sharing Lissa’s tent on the journey down here. Right now ‘Fandes doesn’t like it when I sleep alone. Can’t stay with Liss anymore, it’d be unprofessional, but can I stay here with you?” He looked up at her. “Pretty much everything about Highjorune was awful, but…it was nice, all of us sleeping together.”

“Of course.” She chuckled. “Anyone who thinks it’s unprofessional can go jump in a lake.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind? I might have nightmares and wake you.”

“I don’t mind at all.” She hoped that would be true. “It’ll be just like old times. Remember back in k’Treva, when you’d come sleep in my room?” There had been months when he would come to her door as often as once or twice a week and, usually still half-asleep, she would hold him until he stopped shaking.

He sighed. “Those were good times. Well, not the beginning so much. But some of it. I remember I
used to sit out with Yfandes and just watch the stars.” There was an odd look on his face.

“I used to do that with Kellan when I was a girl. Feels like there’s never time for that sort of thing anymore, but I figure we have to make time for it where we can.”

Vanyel nodded. “Guess that’s a lesson I still need to learn.” His eyes looked past her, and she wasn’t sure what he was seeing; she didn’t think it was the wall of the tent. “Savil, I’m glad we’ll be doing this together,” he said softly. “It’s been a lonely few years.”

“I am sorry about the twitchiness,” Melody said, as she dragged the broom across the floor. “You do understand why I couldn’t leave those blocks in, right?”

Vanyel nodded, trying to control his breathing. The shouts from outside the house in Dog Inn where Melody had set up had not, in fact, signalled an ambush. *Try telling my reflexes that,* he thought irritably. He had been a breath away from blasting his way out through the window; he had knocked over an end table and shattered a vase, and his pulse was still racing. He had forgotten what it was like, being this jumpy; it was just as bad as the day he had left the Border.

“Sorry,” he managed. “Need a minute.”

“That’s fine.” Melody blinked owlishly at him. “I think I forgot to warn you about this. Usually these overactive reflexes will fade out over time – every time there’s a false alarm, it breaks the association a little. I blocked it at the source, so your mind didn’t have a chance to start unlearning it. It would’ve happened eventually, gradually, I didn’t make the blocks to last, but it hasn’t been all that long.”

“I understand.” He appreciated how Melody always explained what she was doing. Lancir had never gotten into the details of how his Gift worked; Vanyel wasn’t sure he had even had much of a theoretical framework. He had always said that he worked on intuition.

“Tea?” Melody said mildly, as though none of the last five minutes had happened.

“Please.”

She refilled her own cup, and carried one to him. “Do let me know when you’re ready to start again.”

Vanyel took a steadying sip of tea, then set the cup down and let his head fall into his hands. Melody had cleared her schedule for him rather more than he would have preferred; this was the third consecutive day she had set aside four candlemarks for their session, and they were barely halfway through.

“All right,” he said. “I – sorry, I can’t remember where we were?”

Melody tossed the remains of the vase into the basket in the corner. “You were telling me about the dream you had.”

His nightmares had been about a hundred times worse, ever since she had removed what was left of her old block, in the first ten minutes she saw him. He wasn’t sure he could have faced it if not for having Savil there to comfort him ten times a night. Neither of them was getting much sleep. He had been just about useless during the day, and he hated it.
“It was one of the really strange ones,” he said. “The ones that feel like memories, only I know they didn’t happen.” And, already, the memory of it was fragmented, formless, hard to cling to – not at all like so many of his nightmares, which were usually all too clear. “This time… ‘Lendel had done something awful–’ His voice faltered, and he clenched his eyes shut against the wave of grief. He couldn’t force out any more words. *I never know what, or what happened after, just that it was bad:* It was hard to breathe; he felt like he was choking, his throat closing on the pain. *He wanted to die. I didn’t understand any of what was happening, only that they’d taken me to see him, and he–:*

A flash. ‘Lendel screaming, *I wish we were both dead*, over and over.

“Vanyel!!” The voice seemed to come from a great distance. “Vanyel, *breathe*, it’s all right, just breathe.”

He dragged himself back to the present – for a moment, again, he had nearly lost himself. He had been *there*. It had felt so real. Like it was still happening, somewhere, and he might fall through the cracks in his mind and end up in that never-had-been.

“Center and ground,” Melody prompted, and he fumbled through the inner motion that should have been instinctive and familiar. It did help, a little. “Good.” She reached and took both of his hands in hers; she didn’t touch him often, but she must have sensed that he needed that anchor. “Look at me. You’re here with me. This moment. Here and now. This is what’s real.”

Yfandes was reaching for him as well. *Chosen:*

He stared into Melody’s green eyes, clinging to that, his breath still coming in heaving gasps. *What’s wrong with me?:*

“I don’t know.” There was real worry in her eyes, and that scared him even more than the rest; he had never seen anything leave her rattled before. “I…have to confess, I’ve never seen this before.”

*I think I’m losing my mind:*

“You’re not. At least, not the way people usually mean that phrase. Whatever this is, it’s different.” She hesitated. “Is there anything else you can tell me about what happened at k’Treva?”

He had, finally, told her about the first part in k’Treva, the dream with ‘Lendel that had knocked out her first block. She had been more than a little annoyed that he hadn’t told her before. *I don’t know how you expected me to work with you safely when I was missing relevant information*, had been her exact words. Then she had given him a hard look, that made him feel like a naughty child, and he had filled her in about a lot of things, including the Shadow-Lover and the first part of his Foresight dream. It was impossible to explain any of the rest without that context, and he could trust her to keep a state secret. She had handled the revelations with her usual professionalism, none of the shock and horror that Randi and the others had showed, and listened as calmly as though she had Heralds telling her about their prophesied deaths every day. It wasn’t until he had brought up the Goddess that she had even seemed surprised.

He hadn’t said anything about the conversations with Leareth – it probably was relevant, but he wasn’t ready to try to explain.

“I think I said everything,” he mumbled. “I don’t remember it very well.” He looked up. “Melody, it’s getting worse. Can’t you just redo the block? I can’t go out if I’m like this.”

“No. You can’t.” She held his eyes steadily. “Meaning we have a problem. Vanyel, I am *this* close to informing King Randale he needs a different plan. One that doesn’t involve you.”
He stared at her. “…You can’t do that.”

She didn’t flinch. “I can.”

“I outrank you.”

“That’s not how it works.” Her voice was mild. “I’m with Healers’; that’s not your jurisdiction. Besides. Do you really want to override me on this? You know I’m right.” She let out a gust of breath. “But you’re right as well. I’m not a military strategist by any means, but even I can tell our best chances involve using you. So we’re going to give it another few days. I don’t want to put in any kind of block until I understand what’s going on.” She settled back in her chair. “I did get a better look at what was happening, this last time.”

“And?” he prompted.

“It does look like a memory. But there’s something very odd about it.” She reached for her tea. “I need to explain a little more about how memory works, at least what we understand of it. Which isn’t much, so I’m going to have to use metaphors, and probably a lot of it’s wrong.” She waited until he nodded. “To start. The things we remember are stored somehow in the physical structure of the brain. But you shouldn’t think of it like, oh, a cabinet with drawers, and a memory in each. It’s not discrete – all of our memories are piled together, and linked to each other, in a sort of web. You might have a memory of, hmm, your fourteenth name-day. Say you wore a blue tunic, and your mother gave you a carving of a rabbit. There are a thousand cross-links to that memory – the colour blue, seeing a real rabbit, the number fourteen, the word ‘mother’, the act of carving. I could go on. One might say that all the memory is, is a certain pattern of links between all of your other memories, and a mental ‘event’ is when a pattern of links ‘lights up’ – remembering an event in the past is one type of mental event, but so is adding up two numbers in your head, or thinking of a sentence as you write it, or even deciding to move your body in a particular way, and there isn’t that much of a clear difference between them.”

She waited for a moment, eyes fixed on him, until he nodded again.

“Some memories are clearer than others, easier to access. Maybe a good metaphor is – imagine the pattern of concept-links as grooves, and the grooves can be shallower or deeper. The groove that would lead from seeing something blue to your fourteenth name-day is probably quite shallow, and there are a million other ‘grooves’ leading from the colour blue to something else – you wouldn’t remember your name-day every time you saw the sky, most of the time you would go on to think of something else. But if you were carving something, and someone came in wearing a blue tunic and mentioned their mother, that’s enough cross-links that you might well find yourself thinking of that particular memory. Are you following?”

“I think so.”

She took a sip of tea and set her cup down. “Words and concepts aren’t the only things memories are made of. There are emotions as well. Anything that happened to you in a moment of strong emotion, you’re likely to remember quite clearly. You might say the grooves that event digs in your mind are deeper. It makes sense – our emotions are how our minds tell us that something is important, that we’d better pay attention. One other thing – memories aren’t fixed. Which just means that the pattern of links, and how deeply they’re engraved in our minds, changes every time we think of something.” Her hands were gesturing, broadly; Vanyel struggled to keep his eyes focused on them. “And as far as we understand, roughly how my Gift works is that my Sight allows me to see these types of patterns, and I can push and shift them. Though it’s much easier and safer for me to create new links, or make the grooves deeper, than it is for me to break existing links.”
Vanyel nodded. “I think I understand.”

“The block I put in for you, for example. I wasn’t really weakening or breaking any associations, because I can’t. Not without damaging your mind. I just took as many links as I could, and I gave them a new pathway to follow, and made the ‘groove’ for it as deep as possible. From the inside, it probably felt like every time you started to think about your ‘Lendel, you would suddenly find yourself thinking about something else instead.’

“That’s exactly what it felt like,” he admitted. He remembered how disconcerting it had been at first.

“The danger with that comes because I had to do a fairly crude job of it – I didn’t have time to fully map out the shape of your mind and follow it closely, like Lancir did with you. Which is what led to the problem you mentioned – getting stuck in thought-loops, where you would start to think about him, it would get redirected, but the new thought would just lead right back to him again. Right?”

He nodded again. “It was…very distracting.”

“I imagine. It can distort your thinking quite a lot. Which is why it’s a bad long-term solution, and risky even in the short run.” She stood up, taking her cup. “More tea?”

“No, thank you.” Her cup was empty; he had barely touched his.

She went to the sideboard, still half-looking at him over her shoulder. “Coming back to what I saw, a minute ago. This memory, if it is that – there aren’t any established cross-links to it. Which shouldn’t be possible, but it seems it is, and I have a theory.” She paused. “I think you really did speak to this Goddess, and she took you somewhere mortals were never meant to go. Your mind couldn’t hold it, so whatever it is she showed you, you couldn’t bring it back with you.”

He rubbed his aching forehead. “…But I am remembering it. Fragments, anyway.” That was the whole problem.

She nodded. “Our minds are always changing, making new links. Especially when we dream. One theory is that it’s the purpose of dreams, to help embed the memories of what we learned the past day. I think your mind is trying very hard to process whatever you saw.” She paused, pouring tea. “There’s another very odd thing, though – it’s as though your mind is forming that connection, and you remember for a moment, but it’s not leaving a new groove like it should. Hmm. Just occurred to me, this is actually true of dreaming in general for a lot of people – we don’t remember our dreams clearly or for long. Sensible, or else we’d start to confuse them for reality.” She tilted her head to the side, eyes fixed on him. “It happened again now, didn’t it? You were telling me about, well, the memory of a memory, but it wasn’t very clear – and then your mind made the link again, just for a moment, and you experienced it. Very vividly. Now it’s gone again, isn’t it? But our emotions are stickier, so you’re still feeling it.”

That was it exactly. “I…I think that was happening all along. Even right after k’Treva, I kept having feelings that, that didn’t seem to be about anything. I was angry for no reason.”

Melody settled back into her chair, the mug steaming between her hands. “I see. That makes sense, given what I’m thinking.”

“…Which is what?”

She paused. “This is well outside anything I can speak with confidence on. I don’t tend to interact with divine beings, and in general I’m skeptical, but I can’t think of another explanation. You saw something, it was too big for you to remember fully, but you do remember fragments, and your mind
is trying to put the pieces together, to integrate it – only there’s some kind of force preventing that. Steering you away from thinking about it at all.” She blinked owlishly at him. “You haven’t much, have you? Given that it was a very weird thing, novel thing, that happened to you, and you usually want to understand weird new things.”

“Oh.” The realization hit him like a punch to the gut. “I haven’t, have I? I knew it was important, but I wasn’t very curious.” Not like he should have been. There were a number of things he could have done, to try to understand what had happened, and it wasn’t an excuse that there had been no time – he could have made time. To start with, he could have been reading up on religious texts – there were surely reports of priests and others having spoken to their gods – and, inexplicably, he hadn’t.

From the very beginning, talking to Moondance, he’d had the sense there was something critical he had forgotten, and yet he had just accepted it, passively, without really trying to do anything to change it. He should have realized it wasn’t like him at all.

Melody nodded. “There’s a distortion in your thinking. I can kind of see the shape of it, now that I know what to look for. And I think that’s what’s causing some of your problem. It’s very diffuse, so I imagine it’s hard to notice from the inside – my guess is that it mostly feels like a lot of things are hard to think about, like there’s a sort of resistance there, and it’s easier to focus on the short-term. Is that something you’ve noticed?”

“Yes.” He had thought it was just the war – being out on the front, the constant grinding drudgery of it. It hadn’t seemed like it needed explaining; he could remember noticing it, but never being curious. Which was part of the problem, wasn’t it?

“Right. And recently, with everything that’s happened, I think it’s brought this closer to the surface. You’re getting caught in a redirect-loop, similar to what was happening with my block, because your mind keeps trying to go there, but the damned Goddess blocked your ability to even think about it.”

There was real anger in her voice, for the first time Vanyel could recall. She was normally so calm, so objective about everything.

The restless, itchy rage surged in his chest. *It’s not fair.* “Can you do anything about it?” he said tightly.

She shrugged. “I can’t undo the distortion – not properly, I would only be working around it, and it might well make things worse. I would suggest you try to talk to the Goddess again, ask her nicely to please undo whatever she did.”

“What?” He stared blankly at her. “How?”

“You could try one of the usual methods. Vision-quests and the like.”

He couldn’t help rolling his eyes. “I really don’t expect that to work.”

“Or you could try what you did the first time.”

“Mindtouch the Heartstone?” He shuddered. “I can’t. It’s all the way in k’Treva Vale.” Not to mention it was the last thing he wanted to do, ever again. It had been a terrible idea the first time.

Melody was silent for a moment, peering thoughtfully at him over the rim of her teacup. “I don’t know much about Heartstones,” she said finally. “To what extent they’re different from one another. You spoke to the one in Highjorune as well, and this didn’t happen.”

He shuddered. “It…recognized me, though.” *A glimpse of a void of stars…* “They say every
Heartstone contains a shard of the Star-Eyed Goddess. That it’s the secret of it – the reason the Tayledras can create them, and no one else can.”

Melody nodded. “I wondered. Well, is there a Heartstone nearer than k’Treva or Highjorune?”

“I don’t – Wait.” He froze with his hand halfway to his cooling mug of tea. “The Web.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Sorry. It’s probably not something you’ve heard about, since it’s specific to Heralds.”

She blinked. “I think I did, actually. It’s a ward-system over the entire kingdom?”

“Yes. King Valdemar originally created it, and I added a power source. By creating a Heartstone.”

A slight indrawn breath of surprise. “I thought you said–”

“That no one but the Tayledras could create them? They taught me – that’s actually what I was doing in k’Treva in the first place. And I suppose if the lore is true, the Star-Eyed cooperated, and lent us a piece of Herself. Unfortunately, the physical manifestation of the Heartstone is all the way in Haven, but… the Web knows me. I can touch it from anywhere in Valdemar. I don’t know how to go about using it to talk to the Star-Eyed – I mean, I haven’t got the faintest idea how I did it the first time either. But I could try.”

–He didn’t want to. I’m terrified, he admitted to himself.

:Fandes?: he sent.

:Yes, love, I’ve been following. I don’t like it any more than you do, but. I think Melody’s right. We need to get to the bottom of this:

He opened his eyes. “Fandes thinks it’s worth trying.” His heart was already fluttering in his chest; he made himself take a deep breath. And admit what he would never have revealed to anyone except her. “I’m scared, Melody. I – What if this makes it even worse? What if it breaks something?”

“Then I’ll help you put yourself back together. However long it takes. I am very good at my job, Vanyel.”

“…Shouldn’t we do this after the invasion? I know it’s not a good long-term solution, but if you could put in a block just for now–”

“No.” Melody’s voice was steely-hard. “I’m not doing that. This is the highest-stakes mission of the entire war. A lot of people are counting on you, Vanyel, and I can’t condone sending you in there when you’re barely holding yourself together.”

His cheeks felt hot again. “I’ll be fine,” he said tightly. Why does she have to keep rubbing it in what a mess I am?

“Maybe. You are very good at compartmentalizing. But I’m seriously worried. Vanyel, we can push back the timing on this by a few weeks, even months, but once we kick it off, we can’t abort it. If you have one of these flashbacks at a bad moment, we could lose you and Savil both, and quite possibly the entire war. Or if you make the wrong call on a split-second decision because I put in a block and it distorted your judgement… And it would. Right now, with how much of your mind is affected, I would have to put in a very strong block just to hold off the nightmares enough for you to get any sleep. I can’t send you into combat like that.” She paused. “There is a risk that we’ll make
things worse in the short run, but I genuinely think it would be better to scrub the entire mission, and wait until spring, than send you in like this. And that’s the worst case scenario, which I don’t think is likely.”

“It’s not your decision.”

“Really?” Her voice was mild. She raised her eyebrows. “Herald-Mage Savil outranks you, doesn’t she? What do you think she’ll say, if I ask her?”

Anger rose in him; he found himself half up from the chair. “You wouldn’t—”

“Go above your head? I absolutely would. I want this mission to succeed just as badly as you do. Trust me – if I thought it gave Valdemar the best chance, to send you in now, that’s what I would be recommending.” She blinked, mildly. “We’re on the same side here. And it would make this a lot easier if you would stop trying to fight me on it.”

“I’m not—”

:Chosen!: Yfandes’ voice rang in his mind. :Calm down. Listen to yourself:

He sagged back into his seat, closed his eyes, and forced himself to center and ground. To think over the last few minutes, and exactly how he must have sounded to her.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I…haven’t been very reasonable, have I?”

“Not exactly. Though I can’t blame you, given how I imagine you’re feeling.” She glanced at the sun-dial by the window. “I’m inclined to call a stop now. You’re worn out. Get some rest, spend some time with your Companion, and come back here at the usual time tomorrow morning. We’ll talk about what to do then.”

He nodded, and started to stand, then stopped. “Melody?”

“What is it?”

He closed his eyes. “Can you put in a temporary block, just for tonight? Please?” He realized he was gritting his teeth, and forced himself to relax. To open his eyes, and look at her. “I can’t face doing this tomorrow if I haven’t slept.”

Melody blinked owlishly. “Why don’t you take some of the herbs you got at Healers’?”

He just shook his head; he had tried, the first night, and it had barely done anything. “Please,” he whispered again. “I can’t… I can’t cope with another night like last night.

She frowned. “I didn’t realize you were finding it that bad. All right. Though I can’t promise how well it’ll work, and it will make you feel a bit out of it.”

“That’s fine.” Nothing to lose; it wasn’t like he was much use to anyone right now, and surely this couldn’t make it worse.

“So, major?” General Alban said quietly. “What do we have so far?”
Lissa had prepared for the question. She held his gaze, and rattled through the memorized list of initial positions, finger moving along the rough, hand-drawn map of Sunhame that lay on the table between them, a pile of papers detailing the numbers and composition for each of her companies beside it.

“I’m still not happy with it,” she said finally. She looked up. “Van, what do you think?”

“What? Oh.” His voice was hoarse. Silver eyes half-focused on her. “Sorry, I was woolgathering.”

He had been doing it a lot. Honestly, he didn’t look as though he ought to be in this meeting at all. There were dark, bruised-looking shadows under his eyes, which were bloodshot, and it seemed like he could barely concentrate. He was clearly exhausted, and she couldn’t think why; he hadn’t even been at the meeting that had run late last night, Savil had said he was resting.

She wasn’t sure what was wrong. Or whether she wanted to know.

Savil, sitting on Vanyel’s other side, laid her hand over his, and both their expressions went blank for a moment, a familiar indication that they were Mindspeaking. Then Vanyel nodded, briskly.

“I think we badly need better maps,” he said. “Aside from that, I would switch the order of the Sixth and the Second, going through the Gate. The Sixth has fewer cavalry, right, and a heavier balance of skirmishers and bowmen to regular infantry? I think they’re better placed to clear section three, since we think that’s denser, and that does need to happen first. The Second would do better securing section five – that’s where the main thoroughfare road, is, right? Because the market’s here.” He tapped the canvas again. “I’d think the cavalry will be more useful there, and the skirmishers will be more useful in a maze of tiny alleys. What do you think?”

“You’re probably right.” She hadn’t really thought about the cavalry – or, no, she had been vaguely thinking of stripping the two platoons of cavalry from the Second, and giving them to the Fourth. Only that would leave the Second seriously understrength, meaning she would need to reinforce them from somewhere else, and there was a definite advantage to keeping units that had trained together intact rather than switching random platoons around. She had some time to train with her current forces, once she had a plan blocked out, but not nearly as much as she would have preferred.

Vanyel rubbed his eyes, and smiled wanly at her. “Just a thought. Can I see the list of Heralds again?”

She passed it over. Not as many as she would have liked – in particular, she could very much have used more Farseers and Mindspeakers. All of them had combat experience, at least, often with the company to which they were already assigned. Though she might need to move some of them around, to meet other constraints. There were so many factors to take into account; her head felt ready to explode from the effort of trying to hold all of it.

“I see you’re trying to give each commander either a Farseer or a Mindspeaker but not both,” Vanyel said. “Think it’s better to assign them together, even if it means some of the companies won’t. Better for quick relaying, if they’re working together.”

Lissa nodded. “I did consider that. Think it’s worth more to make sure every company has at least one Gifted Herald – if I double them up, some of the companies won’t have anyone. Even the Heralds who aren’t strong Mindspeakers can relay through their Companions, at the distances we’ll be working with, and that doesn’t add too much delay.” She caught herself fidgeting with her braid, and lowered her hands. “I do intend to have a lot of couriers available, and hopefully some of those pigeons. Think we’re likely to be operating at a pace where that’s almost as good.” She glanced over. “Savil? Any news on that?”
“You’ll have them,” her aunt said, rubbing her eyes as well. She looked almost as tired as Vanyel did. A moment later, her eyes flashed to him, concern creasing her brow.

What’s going on with you, Van?

“That’s true,” Vanyel said out loud. He blinked, and lifted a hand to his chin, clearly trying to hide a yawn. “Sorry. I’m a bit tired. I still think it might be worth giving the Third both a Mindspeaker and a Farseer, since they’re going through the Gate first – they’ll be trying to get initial impressions of what’s going on, and relay it. Oh – actually, I would recommend sending the Gifted Heralds through as soon as possible, and maybe having them link back up with their assigned companies after. We don’t know how long the Gate will be up, and we want all the Heralds through.”

“Oh.” She hadn’t even considered that. “True. I’m a little worried about how they would find their companies, after, if they don’t stay with them the whole time – it’s going to be awfully chaotic, and we can’t pick landmarks out. Not with this map, anyway.” She looked at it with distaste. “Any suggestions?”

“I’ll think about it.” But his voice was toneless, and his eyes weren’t focused on her anymore; he stared past her at the wall, jaw clenched.

Savil slid back her chair. “Maybe we should come back to this. It seems like there’s an awful lot to mull over. Van? Let’s go.”

That was abrupt. Not to mention rude, and very unlike Savil. General Alban looked surprised, but didn’t protest, just nodded. “Major Lissa, I’d like to see a second draft of the plan with some more detail tomorrow.”

She nodded and stood as well, scooping up her papers and folding the map. Savil had taken Vanyel’s elbow and was already halfway to the door; Lissa had to jog a little to catch up.

Outside, she found Vanyel huddled against the brick wall, holding his head in both hands, Savil’s arm around his shoulders. Lissa thought they were having a Mindspeech conversation; she could usually tell. I wish I didn’t feel so left out.

“Come on,” Savil said out loud, after a moment. “Let’s just get back to our tent.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Lissa, you can come with. If you like.”

She trailed after them, trying and failing to think of something to say.
“Ready?” Melody says.

Center and ground. Vanyel looked up at her. “Here goes nothing.”

They were in the best place Melody had been able to find on short notice – a barn on the edge of the town, now used for storing Guard supplies. It wasn’t the most comfortable venue, but it was private, and Yfandes fit inside.

Vanyel was as prepared as he would ever be. Melody’s block hadn’t kept the nightmares away entirely, but with the sleeping-herbs, and Savil holding him, he’d been able to rest a little more. He took a deep breath, and laid down on the blanket they had set out, folding his arms over his chest.

Center and ground.

:I’m with you, Chosen: Yfandes sent. He heard the straw crackle as she settled down, and then felt the weight of her muzzle across his legs. Even now, with their bond as solid and strong as it would ever be, she could reach him more easily if they were touching.

He stretched out into the blue-and-silver that was always in the back of his mind, and plunged into the Web.

Valdemar unfolded around him, the sense of his body fading and replaced by the land – but he ignored it, and dove inward. Deeper. Falling towards the dense, glowing, living center of the Web.

:Vanyel?: Not quite a Mindtouch – not quite a mind – but it recognized him. He had helped to birth it, after all.

And, behind the not-quite-mind of the Heartstone – he had never Looked there before, but he could sense it now – there was another Presence. Huge, indescribably alien.

I have to talk to the Star-Eyed, he thought. Let me speak to Her.

The Presence seemed to consider, for a long moment.

You owe me this, he thought.

–And he stood on a path of moonbeams, dusty nebulas casting their violet light into the void.

“You,” said the black-robed figure, “are truly very stubborn.”

He clasped his arms behind his back and faced her. A moment ago, he had been terrified, but fear seemed pointless now. I was always a pawn of the gods. I would be dead a dozen times over if They weren’t watching over me for Their own purposes. He felt calm, almost peaceful. Like the answer was set in stone, had been since the very beginning, in that timeless place where everything had already happened and was still happening. Whatever happened now didn’t matter, because ‘now’ had no meaning.

“I have a request,” he said. “There’s something you need from me. For whatever reason, you want to use me as your tool. Well, I am only a mortal, and I can’t stop you. I can point out that if you don’t let me have my mind back, I’m not going to be of much use, to you or anyone else.”
Eyes that held all the stars in the sky gazed on him. He met that disconcerting stare without flinching.

“The last time we spoke,” she said, “you were the one asking the questions. I warned you that perhaps you might not want to know the answers. You accepted the cost.”

“I did. All information is worth having.” He took a step towards her. “Maybe there are things mortals weren’t meant to know. Fine. I’ll find a way to survive it.” He bowed his head. “I have to be able to cope with the truth. With reality. You’re not even letting me look at it, and I’m going to make bad decisions, if I can’t think straight.”

A brief silence.

“There are reasons,” she said.

“Fine. I believe you. I’m just warning you that the status quo isn’t working. I nearly killed myself by accident. Either take the memories away properly, so I stop getting these godawful flashbacks, or let me reason clearly about it, so I can find my own way to deal with them.” He would accept either, at this point. It had occurred to him that maybe some information wasn’t worth the price it bore.

Dry amusement in her voice. “You are trying to give a Goddess orders.”

“I’m not ordering you to do anything. I’m not threatening you. There’s nothing I can threaten you with. Except refusing to do this. He could, if he wanted – he could make an ultimatum here and now. But he wouldn’t. I can’t walk away, no matter what. He closed his eyes. “I’m just making a prediction. If things go on the way they have been, I’m going to end up insane or dead. Do what you want with that information.”

Silence.

Finally, he opened his eyes. The Goddess was watching him, with those creepy eyes that never blinked – and he thought that she was surprised. He wouldn’t have imagined it possible.

“If you insist,” She said, and raised her hands.

–He was on hands and knees, too weak to stand, tethered to the Gate at his back, watching in mounting horror as Tylendel, face twisted in a mask of rage, raised his hands–

“Vanyel!”

–He bolted the door of the Heralds’ temple behind him, and slowly made his way to the bier and the body–

Hands grasping at his shoulders. “‘Fandes, shield him!” someone was shouting.

–He lay on the stones, molten pain filling him, and looked up in time to see Tylendel at the top of the bell-tower, arms spread, poised as though ready to fly–

There was a voice in his head. :Vanyel. Breathe:

–Savil laid her head down on the desk in Lancir’s office. I tried, she said, through sobs. I failed. I should have stopped him–
Weight on him, pinning him down. Someone’s hands were on his forehead, cool.

—Tylendel looked so handsome in his crisp new Whites. He was a Herald, and Vanyel wasn’t, but they were together—

Another voice in his head. :Chosen!:

—I’m sorry, Tylendel said, eyes bruised and shadowed, looking up from the bed in his room at Healers’. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean what I said. I love you, I’m just, it hurts so much—

A flash of green eyes, looking into his.

—The wyrsa swarmed over Gala’s body, and Vanyel screamed, burying his head in ‘Lendel’s chest, and he felt the pain of their claws, blood spilling, but ‘Lendel held him and whispered, Van, I love you, it’s going to be all right—

:Vanyel: Nothing like ordinary Mindspeech, the words filled his head, drowning out the rushing images. :Sleep:

—Darkness—

—He was sprawled on the ground, and it took a moment to realize that he was no longer in the Void. There was light around him, and sound. Long seconds passed before his mind could do anything with either. The light hurt; finally, he remembered that he had eyelids, and closed them.

:Chosen?:

Yfandes’ mindvoice, gentle as it was, hurt his head. :Stop: he flailed.

Blessed silence in his head. He just lay there for a while, breathing. I feel like a cart ran me over.

“Vanyel?” Melody’s voice. “Vanyel, are you back with us?”

He swallowed; his throat felt raw, like he had been screaming for candlemarks. “I’m…awake,” he whispered. “Ow.”

“Well? Did it work?”

Did what work? He realized that he had no idea what he was doing on the ground. Oh, right. I was supposed to talk to the Goddess.

Had he?

—Violet nebulas, a path of moonbeams—

“Yes,” he managed. He forced his eyes open a crack; the light was bearable now.

Yfandes was still there, the warm weight of her head resting across his knees. She shifted a little, sending a wordless wash of affection.

Unsure how to respond to it, he tried to sit up. Melody reached in to help him, and he found himself leaning on the reassuring solidness of her shoulder. Every muscle in his body was sore. “I’m…very
tired.”

“I imagine so,” Melody said dryly. Her face swam into his vision. She looked relieved – and just as exhausted as he felt. “It’s nearly sundown.”

“…What?” He glanced around. She was right; reddish-gold light slanted at a low angle between the shutters of the barn window, catching dust motes in midair. “I’m sorry,” he said dully. “You must’ve had plans.”

“It’s all right. Are you thirsty?” She reached behind her, and then pressed a glass of water into his hand. “Drink.”

He obeyed, gratefully. “I was really out that long?” he said when he had finished. He didn’t remember anything like that much time passing. Only his conversation with the Goddess, jewel-bright in his mind.

And another conversation, nearly three years ago now, and a thousand bits and pieces. Moments that he couldn’t piece together in any coherent order.

The room with the glazed garden door, candles burning in every sconce, the dusty light of nebulas shining through the high window.

‘Lendel.

Melody held out a hand to take the empty cup. “Do you remember waking up, earlier?”

He blinked at her. “…No.”

“Well, you did. About a candlemark after you’d gone into trance – you were very agitated. Projecting left and right, it was all ‘Fandes and I could do to hold shields on you. I used my Gift to put you under. Couldn’t think of what else to do.” Her eyes darted to the window, to her hands, then back to his face. “I let up after about a candlemark, and you seemed to be dreaming. Which I thought would help integrate the memories, given my theory about what dreaming does, and it seemed better than hallucinating them, so I just put in some temporary blocks so you wouldn’t keep waking yourself up. How are you feeling? You’re a lot calmer than I expected.”

How was he feeling? It was a hard question to answer. More than anything else, he felt wrung dry. Like he had used up all of his emotions, and there was nothing left but numbness. The void in the back of his mind was still there, but it didn’t hurt, exactly.

Pain was only an interpretation. You had to be a person, to feel pain. He was conscious of this moment, here, now – or at least, something was experiencing it – and the bundle of patterns that was called Vanyel had existed before and would exist tomorrow, but it felt tenuous. I don’t feel like a person right now. It was nearly as strange as the way he had felt that one time with Lancir, nine years ago, when the Queen’s Own had blocked his conscious mind off from everything else. Yfandes probably didn’t like it, he found himself thinking, but he couldn’t seem to care much.

…Yfandes responded only by sending a wash of love and reassurance: I’m here, Chosen:

He made his eyes focus on Melody’s face. “I’ll probably be upset about it tomorrow,” he said, tonelessly. “Right now I don’t feel like talking about it. Did it work? I do feel different.” It was hard to remember why that was supposed to matter.

“Something worked, anyway. I’m not seeing the distortion-pattern anymore. Though…hmm. How solid would you say your sense of self feels, right now?”
It took a long time to even understand the question. “Not,” he admitted.

“I was worried about that. I did some reading, yesterday – people do lose their sanity, from speaking to the gods. It can be very destabilizing.” She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “I imagine you’re feeling pretty out of it, but I think you should try to do some ordinary things anyway. Get some exercise, eat some food, take a bath, talk to your aunt. Try to ground yourself as much as you can, sleep, and we’ll save the philosophical questions for tomorrow.”

Philosophical questions… Like ‘why?’

You have a part to play, the Star-Eyed had said. I might show you, if you are sure you wish to see. Darkness and death across a thousand futures. A scant few, winding paths, and the widest was his. It could have happened many other ways. In other worlds, ‘Lendel had survived – and their path had been narrower. And so this was the world where he found himself. The one where Valdemar had the best chance. Where his lifebonded was dead. His Gifts, hells, his whole life, all of it had only happened because the Star-Eyed had needed a pawn. Every choice he had ever made, that he had thought was his own…

“Hey.” Melody lightly slapped his shoulder. “I said, no philosophical questions right now. Not the time. Give yourself a chance to get settled. I expect this will be hitting you a lot harder tomorrow.”

He expected so as well, and he wasn’t looking forwards to it.

Melody stood up, and held out her hands. “Come on. I’ll walk you back to the camp.”

“I don’t need–”

:Listen to her, Chosen: Beside him, Yfandes rose gracefully to her feet. :I don’t trust you to manage riding right now, and I’d rather you don’t wander off and get lost:

General Alban rubbed the egg-smooth curve of his head. “Major Lissa, another company should be arriving in Horn tomorrow. That brings us up to fourteen hundred for your command. Only three out of the five companies have worked together at all, so you will want to do some training.”

Lissa tugged on the end of her braid. “Noted. I was going to head down there as soon as Herald Vanyel and the others leave – Savil?”

Savil lifted her head. “Sorry. What? Oh. I still don’t know when we’re leaving.”

Kilchas moved his stool closer, the legs screeching a little on the uneven flagstones. Savil winced; her head was aching fiercely. “What’s the holdup?” the other mage said.

“Waiting for the Healers to clear him.” That was still the excuse they were giving, though it had to be wearing thin by now. She stifled a yawn. She couldn’t remember the last time she had been this tired; she was trying not to be resentful, Vanyel clearly had the worse end of the stick here, but she hated being woken in the middle of the night, especially when he wouldn’t even let her come near to comfort him.

It wasn’t reassuring, either, how little stamina she had for it. They were about to embark on a journey that would take weeks, into hostile territory. Even now, in her very comfortable officer’s tent with a
folding cot and straw mattress, she tended to wake up stiff and sore. She wouldn’t have any of that once they left; in order to avoid detection, they were even going to have to minimize how much magic they used. Meaning no weather-barriers, no heat-spells, not even rainproofing. It sounded dreadful.

I’m too old for this mission.

Kilchas shot Lissa a look. “Major, I don’t understand why your damned Healer cleared him to travel here at all, if he’s still recovering.”

Lissa frowned. “My Healer wasn’t happy about it, and we probably should have waited longer, but I know Randi had hoped we could have him here for strategy-planning. Savil? Is he coming today?”

“I don’t think so.” -Kellan? Can you check with Yfandes how Van’s doing?: He hadn’t spoken a word to her today, when he got back from his appointment with Melody, only curled up in a corner of their tent. Better than two days ago, when he hadn’t come home until after sundown – she had been worried sick, even though Melody had Mindspoken her to warn her he would be late, if not give any details. She still didn’t know what had happened, except that for some reason Melody hadn’t felt comfortable letting him walk back alone. Not exactly reassuring. He hadn’t seemed upset, not then, but he had been in a very strange mood; it had reminded her of his distant, absent manner after touching the Heartstone in Highjorune.

And that night had been the worst so far. Before, when he woke screaming or sobbing, at least he had let her hold him. He hadn’t wanted her to touch him at all, these last two nights. She remembered seeing him sitting with his knees pulled in to his chest, tense and miserable, before she drifted into sleep – and how he had still been there when she woke, and she still didn’t know if he had slept at all.

A pause. :He’s in the stables with her. She says he’s not up for any meetings today:

Which was the same as yesterday. “Not today,” she said out loud. “He’s resting.”

Sandra leaned forwards, resting her elbows on the folding table. “At least he’s up and about, right? I saw him at the mess tent a few days ago. Can’t be too much longer.”

Savil pinched the bridge of her nose. I wish I could just tell them what’s really going on. “I don’t know. He – his reserves need to be in better shape than they are.” There, an excuse.

“I see.” Kilchas frowned. “He can use nodes, though, right? And you shouldn’t need magic at all for the first stage.”

She lifted her head. “Kilchas, this is the most dangerous thing we’ve ever done. Would you want to go in there in anything but top condition?”

“…When you put it like that, I suppose not.” The older Herald-Mage caught Sandra’s eye for a moment, then looked back at Savil. “Got to admit, I am relieved they’re not asking me to go. Guess I shouldn’t rag you unless I want to volunteer.”

“You could say that.” Savil’s voice came out tarter than she had intended.

General Alban rapped the table gently with his palm. “Moving on. We did receive a courier-package today – among other things, we have a more detailed map of Sunhame. It’s all from the princess’s memory, and of course it may have changed in recent months, but it’s the best we have to work with. Herald-Mage Savil, Major Lissa – I’d like you to both do some brainstorming on where you’ll want to stage.” He slid a folded square of canvas across the table. “Kilchas, Sandra, I’d like the two of you
to think about defensibility on our end. We should expect that the Karsites still have spies on our side of the Border, and will realize soon just how many troops we’re amassing. Hopefully they won’t realize exactly what we’re up to, but someone clever might put two and two together if they hear that Herald-Mages Savil and Vanyel were here and aren’t anymore, and either way, they will try to compromise our position here. They have to know we’re planning something, if not what. We can’t afford to lose a lot of people holding off on an attack, because Major Lissa is going to need those people, and we especially can’t risk the security of this end of the Gate-terminus.”

Savil felt her shoulders rising around her ears. “You’d better not.”

Alban aimed a genial smile at her; for all his competence and years of experience, when he smiled, he looked like someone’s jolly old uncle. “We’ll take all possible precautions, don’t worry.” He turned back to Lissa. “I want you to have the logistics for your movement through the Gate planned out fully, and drilled until it’s smooth. Herald-Mage Savil most likely won’t be able to hold the Gate long enough for all our troops to cross – so let’s make sure we get as many people through as we can, and the best of them first.” He slid his stool back.

Savil glanced at Lissa. “I have some ideas, if you want to look at that first…?”

Several candlemarks later, they were both in Savil’s tent, the canvas map spread across her tiny table. Savil rubbed her eyes, and slid her finger to the ‘X’ she had marked in charcoal.

“I still think the temple is best,” she said. “Hallowed ground is always a good place for a Gate.”

“What?” Lissa blinked at her. “Why? I mean, I’d noticed you mages use temples and chapels a lot, but…” She trailed off.

“It’s to do with what a Gate does, girl. Roughly, we go through the Void-between-the-Gates – another plane, where space and distance doesn’t behave the way it does here – to bring two points together. That means breaking the continuity of this plane, our ordinary reality. It creates cracks.” She massaged her forearm with the other hand; it ached. “Not often a problem, in practice – there isn’t much in the Void, thus the name, and the cracks through to the Abyssal Plane and others are very small and don’t last long. Still, it’s a commonly-used precaution and we might as well, especially given that I’ll be holding this Gate longer than most.” She yawned. No point trying to hide how tired she was from Liss. At least her mind was mostly working. And it was sunset, or just about; she could go to bed as soon as they finished this.

A sound at the entrance caught her attention, and she looked up to see Vanyel stumble through the tent-flap. His shoulders were hunched, hair full of bits of straw, and he didn’t look at either of them, just headed for his bedroll in the corner and folded himself into a tight ball.

She turned to look at Lissa, who met her eyes, eyebrows raised, lifting her shoulders and holding up both both hands in a questioning gesture.

Savil shrugged.

Lissa leaned in close to her ear. “Is he all right?” she whispered.

Savil just shook her head. Vanyel hadn’t been willing to talk to her about his sessions with Melody at all, but clearly something wasn’t going well.

Lissa looked uncertainly at her. “Should I leave?”
“No, stay.” _I need to talk to him._ She had been letting Vanyel avoid her, these last few days. Hadn’t wanted to push, and to be honest she hadn’t known how to approach it — she had hoped he would come to her, when he felt ready. It didn’t seem like that was going to happen.

She dragged herself up from the stool, biting back a groan as her hips twinged, and went to the corner. She knelt. “Van.” He didn’t stir, and his shields were locked tightly in place and didn’t budge under her gentle Mindtouch. At least he didn’t flinch away when she reached to touch his shoulder. “Van, please. Talk to me.” She could feel Lissa hovering anxiously at her back.

Finally, he uncurled and rolled over. Bloodshot silver eyes met hers. He swallowed, tried to speak, then gave up: _I can’t do this:_ The pain and despair in his mindvoice lashed at her.

“Oh, ke’chara.” She had no idea what to say. “I’m sorry it’s so hard. I — is there anything I can do to help?”

:_No:_ A pause. _I don’t know:_

“Well, can you tell me what you’re feeling?”

He closed his eyes again, turning away from her a little, and didn’t answer.

“Or show me, if it’s too hard to find words for it.” _Careful what you wish for,_ she thought. Did she really want to share his mind right now?

He sighed and parted his shields for her, and she only hesitated a moment before slipping through that opening.

It was like falling into a tornado. She hadn’t known it was possible for anyone to hurt so much. To want to die so badly; all he wanted was for it to stop. Over and over, she could feel how he tried to take a step back from it, to accept rather than struggling, to find the edges — it was a mental motion Lancir must have drilled into him deeply — but he couldn’t even finish a thought. He was barely aware of his surroundings.

In his thoughts, there were images that made no sense to her. The belltower, silhouetted against a stormy sky. Tylendel’s body in the temple — what? She didn’t understand. There hadn’t been a body after what he had done.

It was all she could do not to flee, screaming, from his mind. But he needed her — maybe more than he ever had before. Was she such a coward, that she would turn her back on him now and walk away?

:_I’m here, ke’chara:_ she sent. _I’m not going anywhere:_

She felt his gratitude, a note of light in a sea of darkness — and felt as, slowly and with effort, he struggled to carve out a corner of sanity and reason in the midst of the storm.

:_I’m sorry:_ he sent. _I didn’t want…:_ He trailed off, losing track of the thread of thought, and she could feel him struggling to keep his attention on her. To remember that she was even there. _—To fall apart on you like this:_ he finished.

:_It’s all right. It’s not your fault:_ She was more than a little annoyed with Melody, though, for leaving him in a state like this, and not warning her.

:_She’s helping all she can:_ Vanyel insisted. _Thought I was all right – trying to nap – ‘Fandes helping – from trance – but I kept – nightmares – I can’t–:_
She could feel how exhausted he was. He could barely string together two words coherently. When was the last time he had gotten any restful sleep?

“Lissa,” she said. “Can you go to Healers’ and ask for a sleeping draught? The stronger one, with valerian.” :Ke’chara, I know you don’t like taking it, but you need rest:

:Should’ve thought of it: Shame in his mindvoice. :I’m an idiot:

She stroked his hair. :Not your fault you can’t think clearly, when you’re feeling like this. We’re here to help:

“Well, you seem better today,” Melody said.

“You mean, I can finish sentences?” Vanyel said wryly.

“Also, I saw you smile at least three times.” Her voice was calm, crisp, but her lips quirked up at the corners. “Don’t deny it. What feels different?”

“I slept, for one.” Savil had measured out ten drops of the valerian tincture and practically sat on him until he drank it, then held his hand while he drifted into sleep. It was humiliating that he had needed that, like a small child, but it had helped.

“That is good, although I’d rather you don’t keep relying on drugs.”

He shook his head. “Not going to. I don’t like how it makes me feel.” He had been groggy for candlemarks into the morning. “And I can’t use it once we’re traveling, obviously.” Yet again, he would need to be ready to fight on a moment’s notice. “So I need to make sure I can manage without.”

“Exactly.” Melody tilted her head to the side and then back, watching him intently. “I’m inclined to suggest you bring a couple of doses anyway, for emergencies only – I can imagine scenarios where the only other option is turning back, and relying on Savil to guard you for a night seems better. But we’ll worry about that when we come to it.”

He nodded, and then his mind caught up with what she was saying. “You think it’s safe for me to go.”

“I think it will be. You seem to be finding it easier, now.”

Easier. Not easy. He still felt off-balance, and he didn’t know what to do with the new freedom in his thoughts. Hadn’t even realized how constrained he had been before. He preferred it, in some ways, but it was much harder to avoid particular paths; the habits of thought that kept him away from the shattered emptiness at the back of his mind were gone. And, face it, I’ve always coped by avoiding things. Lancir hadn’t approved of it. Melody seemed neutral on the matter. Whatever works for you, she had said.

She must have guessed what he was thinking. “Not yet. I think you do need a little more time. But not too long – a few more days. How do you feel about that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.”
She just raised an eyebrow.

_Fine._ He closed his eyes and tried to really – no, not think about it, that wasn’t quite the word. To be in his body, feeling it.

There was a heaviness. Tired? No, not quite that, though he was tired as well. Weary was closer. _I want to go home_, he thought, and the weight of it was still there, but different. More defined. He had given it a name, and so found the edges.

“She just raised an eyebrow.

“Homesick,” he said out loud. “I’m really, really tired of this. It’s been one damned thing after another, and it doesn’t feel fair. I want it to be _over_.” There was an edge in his voice. _I’m whining, aren’t I?_ He would have been embarrassed to catch himself doing that with anyone but Melody.

“I know,” she said. “It’s not fair. Listen. I’m going to ask you a serious question, all right? Try to really think about it.” She paused.

“Um, go ahead.”

She held his gaze. “Say the word, and I’ll tell Randi you need leave in Haven before I’m willing to clear you for this. I mean that. And he’ll listen. Is that what you want? I don’t mean what you think _you_ should want, or what you think is the right thing to do. I mean, do you want it the way you want a hot bath at the end of a long day?”

_I can’t_. He shook his head.

She made a face at him. “I’m fairly sure you’re not actually asking yourself the question. We’re not making a decision right now, all right? Just… There’s a weight on you, and it’s wearing you down, and I don’t know that it’s _possible_ for you to really rest and recover while you’re carrying that. Would it lighten that weight, if you could go home tomorrow, just for a week?”

He closed his eyes. Imagined riding up the South Trade Road, knowing that his own suite with a lock on the door lay at the end of that path. The heaviness was still there.

“No,” he said quietly. “It wouldn’t be over. It’d still be hanging over my head. I don’t think I’d be able to relax.” A corner of his lips tugged up, not quite a smile. “Besides, I’d be swamped with work in a day.”

“Well. A fair point.” Melody crossed her legs, and reached for her cup of tea, sipping. “Vanyel, at some point I think it’d be good if you learned to rest _before_ the work is done. Given that the work is never actually done. Maybe now isn’t the time to dig into it, but I do have one request.” She waited until he nodded. “I want you to take the rest of today off, and tomorrow. No work. No meetings. Preferably not just sleeping in your tent. I want you to do something just because you feel like it, for once.”

He grimaced. “Melody, the whole _point_ of me being here in Dog Inn is to help at strategy-meetings.”

She sipped her tea, watching him mildly. “No, it isn’t. The point is that I’m here. Vanyel, the best thing you can do right now, in terms of helping our chances with the invasion, is to take care of yourself. I feel like that should be obvious by now. Do you believe me?”

_I hate it_. It felt like weakness – and he knew exactly what Melody would have to say about that, didn’t he? “Yes,” he said, avoiding her eyes.

“Good. So, you’re going to do something fun this afternoon, right?”
“Doubt it. I’ll just be feeling guilty.”

A pause. “Vanyel, look at me.” He dragged his eyes back to her face, reluctantly. “I didn’t say you had to enjoy yourself. Can’t control how you feel, and trying usually makes it worse – but I want you to pick something that’s been fun for you in the past, even if you don’t feel like it right now, and just do it. Maybe you will feel guilty that you’re not contributing more. Do it anyway.”

“I can try.”

“Good.” She stood up. “More tea?”

“No, thank you.” He had already drunk three cups, trying to give his hands something to do, and he had to use the privy but was trying to hold it until they were done; it seemed rude to excuse himself. Melody must have a bladder like a horse, he found himself thinking, and smiled a little.

“So?” she said over her shoulder, pouring from the pot on the sideboard. “What’s your plan for the afternoon?”

“I don’t know yet.” She wasn’t going to accept that answer, was she? “Um. Take a bath.” He would feel bad about it, but he could pull rank and use the bathhouse in the former inn that now held General Alban’s meeting-room. The thought of slipping into a real bathtub sounded like the Havens. “I could spar with Lissa, if she has time and promises to go easy on me.” His wound had left a lot of scar tissue, and it still hurt to move quickly. He could push through it, though, and it would probably do him good – he had to get back in shape sooner or later, and he could go into trance and do some self-Healing in the bath afterwards. “Maybe I’ll go for a ride with ‘Fandes. Or play some music.” He had brought his lute with him from Forst Reach, planning to leave it in Dog Inn and retrieve it later – it certainly didn’t make sense to bring it into Karse.

“There. That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Melody smiled. Her voice was brisk. “If the weather were any better I’d suggest a picnic by the creek, but I doubt it would be much fun in this cold.” She sat back down. “Remember, you’re allowed to feel however you like about it. You can even be mad at me for making you do it. As long as you do it. All right?”

“All right.”

:It’s very pretty: Yfandessent.

“It is, love.” He stroked her neck, staring past her head at the ice encrusting a pine tree. Barely a twenty-minute ride out of the Dog Inn camp, but here in the woods, out of sight and earshot of the troops, he could almost forget there was a war going on at all.

The snowbanks were lavender and blue, very slightly translucent, crystalline. I wish I could paint. Back in Haven, Savil had a painting on her wall that Donni had done, sometime during their long months recovering. Autumn leaves, red and gold, matching the blazing sunset behind them. It had made him feel warm and cozy just to look at. Vanyel had never known she was so talented.

Donni. He missed her, a dull ache. Just as much as he missed Mardic, though they hadn’t been as close – and maybe that was part of the reason why. I’ll never really know her now. At least he could remember her as she wanted to be remembered, going out in one final blaze. And Mardic, sitting with him in the linen-closet, his voice measured and soft. Offering his company with nothing
expected in return, like one conversation twelve years ago in Savil’s old sitting-room. *I guess it’s hard to be different*, he had said. A gift of friendship that fifteen-year-old Vanyel had never expected to receive. *I don’t think I could have found the courage to open up to ‘Lendel, if he hadn’t showed me it was possible.*

:*They were good friends: Yfandes sent. *It’s all right to miss them:*  

It felt unfair that he hadn’t had more time to speak with Mardic, who had understood better than anyone else what it was like. It wasn’t something he would ever have asked for them to have in common, he couldn’t wish it on anyone, but still. Something in it had felt like a gift. *At least I got to see him again*, he reminded himself. In Highjorune, and in the Shadow-Lover’s white place. How many people got even that much?

There was a creek flowing somewhere, even in the dead of winter; he could hear it burbling. Running his gloved hands through Yfandes mane, Vanyel thought of a box that still sat in his rooms back in Haven, full of papers that were yellow and crackling with age now, faded ink and charcoal-lines. A gift Donni had given him, to remember ‘Lendel by. Now he could remember her as well, when he looked at them next Sovvan.

–He caught himself a little. *I expect there to be a next Sovvan.* Well, obviously – but the difference was clear. He really expected there to be a future now, one that held good things as well as bad, and he hadn’t before.

If they survived the mission. A thin blade of guilt slipped through the calm peace of the forest. *I should be preparing.*

:*You are preparing: Yfandes sent, gently. *Melody’s right. You need this:*  

Surely he wouldn’t need it if he were stronger. Better. Less broken.

:*Stop it, love: Yfandes sent, but with no heat. *Look at that tree-stump. It’s like it has a crown:*  

He realized he had been completely blocking out the scenery, caught up in his thoughts. She was right; the ring of ice did look a little like a crown. And there were humped rocks around it, reminiscent of kneeling subjects. “That’s funny,” he said. “The king of the forest, holding court.”

:*Unusually well-behaved courtiers: Yfandes sent, her mindvoice amused. *Not a one of them trying to interrupt. Bet Randi wishes he were as lucky:*  

Vanyel laughed out loud. “I bet he does at that.” He stroked her mane. “All right, I’m cold now. Let’s go back.”

Yfandes turned, navigating the tiny clearing with her hooves, and Vanyel lifted his forearm above his head to fend off a snow-laden branch before it whacked him in the face.

:*Ow:* Yfandes sent. *(Help? Think my tail’s caught in a bush:*  

It was. He thought about dismounting, decided against, and pulled it free with a little tug of Fetching. “There you go, love.”
“Van?”

He was sitting on her fold-out stool, aimlessly plucking at the strings of his lute. “Savil? What is it?”

He hadn’t expected her back until late.

“Got some news.” She pushed through the tent-flap and closed it behind her. “Figured you’d want to hear it.”

He set down the lute in his lap, and reached for the cup of watered wine he had brought over from the mess tent and was nursing slowly. “Go on.”

She lowered herself onto the other stool, wincing and rubbing her back. “Not about the war. It’s about the investigation, with the Order of Astera.”

“They’ve found something?”

“Definitely something.” She shrugged off her shoulder-bag and reached into it, drawing out a fat envelope; the seal had already been opened and clumsily re-sealed. “Not sure exactly what. You’re welcome to read the message they sent, there’s quite a lot of detail – I gave up. In any case, it seems someone, or some organization, did manage to infiltrate the temple. You know they’re a scholarly order; they have a very well-organized courier network, for requesting rare books and other records. Any local temple can quite easily send messages to all the other temples.”

He nodded; he had made use of it before, trying to hunt down particular works that Leareth had mentioned.

“In any case, it sees quite a lot of use. And it’s standard to have the messages in code – protection against bandits, or something. I never thought of books as something bandits would go after, but some rare books are worth a great deal. Anyway. The network carries private, directed messages as well as general ones – they use certain message-headers to make sure they end up with the right person. There’s another part I didn’t really follow, but you might. Two priests can exchange some kind of ‘key’ – metaphorically, it’s actually a number – and it allows them to encode messages for each other’s eyes only.”

Vanyel nodded. “I’m familiar with that.” Yfandes was, anyway. It had come up in conversations with Leareth. Though it surprised him any temple order would implement it; it seemed like overkill.

“Right. Anyway, so they’ve got constant message-traffic, all of it in code. Seems someone else has been making use of their couriers, for something that definitely isn’t temple business, and no one noticed because it wasn’t enough to stand out. We know for a fact that Vedric Mavelan made use of a contact with them – not Leren, but they did catch the priestess and put her under Truth spell. She was controlled magically as well. We don’t know any more, Herald-Mage Dakar isn’t exactly trained in that area.” Savil grimaced. “Wish they could spare one of us to have a look.”

Vanyel wished so as well. Herald-Mage Dakar barely deserved that title, and didn’t normally use it; he was much more skilled at Fetching and knew it.

Savil shook her head a little, as though trying to catch the thread of her thoughts. “Anyhow. She knew a few ‘keys’, and the Order keeps copies of all messages that pass back and forth. Can’t imagine why or how, must be mountains of paper, but apparently they have very good record-keeping systems. So we can retrieve copies of all messages under a given header, unless an agent manages to get in and destroy them. Which happened to at least one local temple. The high prelate isn’t pleased at all.”
Vanyel set the lute down on the floor, and rubbed his eyes. “I’m still confused. Leren…?”

“Leren tried to kill you. I’m very confused as well – but the one thing that was clear in the message is that there’s no evidence he was in contact with Vedric at all. Certainly not directly. It seems extremely unlikely this was unrelated – but Vedric wasn’t the only agent here. Someone else set up the spy-network inside their courier-network, before he was even born. They have proof of that, dates on records they’ve kept. Whatever Vedric was doing, he was making use of someone else’s work.”

Vanyel closed his eyes. There was an odd feeling of deja vu, or of something he had just barely forgotten. It doesn’t make sense. I’m missing something. But there was nowhere for the note of confusion to go.

“It’s very weird,” he said, reaching to take the envelope. He started to open the flap, and then stopped. I promised Melody no work. “I’ll look at it later.”

Savil stood up. “Need to get back to the meeting. Just wanted to tell you.” She stretched. “Enjoying your day?”

He had told her – well, complained to her – about Melody’s orders. “I’m bored.”

She smirked. “Good. I’ll see if I can send Lissa over. Figure she’s itching to talk about anything other than troop-movements.”

Lissa’s idea of a fun evening off is going to the loudest tavern she can find, getting falling-down drunk, and trying to throw random men at me. Vanyel remembered, all too clearly, half-carrying her back from that hole-in-the-wall place she had taken him near Forst Reach Village. And dissuading her from bringing home the blacksmith’s apprentice, who couldn’t have been more than eighteen. Surely she hadn’t been serious about persuading the lad to bed both of them – his cheeks were growing warm just remembering it – but nonetheless. Father wouldn’t have been happy.

Vanyel remembered all too clearly half-carrying her back from that hole-in-the-wall place she had taken him near Forst Reach Village. And dissuading her from bringing home the blacksmith’s apprentice, who couldn’t have been more than eighteen. Surely she hadn’t been serious about persuading the lad to bed both of them – his cheeks were growing warm just remembering it – but nonetheless. Father wouldn’t have been happy.

Well, Lissa couldn’t get away with that sort of thing in Dog Inn; everyone knew her by sight, and it would be unprofessional. He wasn’t averse to getting a little tipsy with her in the privacy of his own tent. Maybe he could talk her down to that as a plan.

Savil woke with a stifled whimper and lay in the warm darkness, trying to remember where she was. Her bed was too hard and uneven – right. She was in Dog Inn, sleeping in a tent. Like an idiot. Vanyel had pulled his bedroll over to the floor right next to her cot, letting her offer him that scant comfort; she remembered holding his hand as she drifted into sleep. He had rolled away from her at some point in the night, and lay sprawled on his stomach, half tangled in his blanket, one arm splayed across the canvas floor of the tent. Moonlight shone through the open window-flap and the faintly textured transparency of her weather-barrier, highlighting his hair like quicksilver.

Jaysen.

In the dream, they had been sitting together in her quarters, over dinner and wine, and he had been boring her half to tears with the treasury-budget, until suddenly, with the strange ordinariness of dream-logic, the wall had vanished, disintegrating into a thousand gretshke-creatures. She had screamed and tried to stand up, to push Jaysen behind her, but in that way dreams had, she couldn’t move. Could only watch as he stood up, as calmly as though he were going to fetch them more wine,
and walked into the storm. He had turned back, once, to look at her and smile, even as the Abyssal
demons tore him to shreds.

Jayson.

The tears came, irresistible, and she didn’t try to stop them, only to muffle the sobs in her pillow, and
clamp down her shields. Oh, Jay… Why?

It felt like such a waste. He was dead because she had taken two minutes too long.

Jayson. Every time she thought his name, every time his face swam in her mind’s eye, a fresh wave
of grief. He had been the oldest and closest friend she still had in Haven – hells, she had known him
nearly as long as she had known Starwind and Moondance. Since he was a starry-eyed boy, twelve
years old, newly-Chosen, newly-Gifted, in awe of everything and everyone. Of her. She hadn’t been
his main instructor – back then, she had still spent most of her time away from the city, dealing with
those problems only an Adept-class mage could – but she had taken him on his internship circuit,
when he was about twenty and she was, she couldn’t remember how old, exactly, but not so far from
forty.

They had been close friends, and sometimes lovers, for over thirty years. Nearly half her life. Savil
had known for a long time that she would outlive Justen, and Lancir, and Elspeth, but she hadn’t
expected to outlive Jay. I thought you would always be there.

She hadn’t expected to outlive Mardic and Donni, either. To part of her mind, they were still children
and always would be. She should have been there, should have protected them – and she couldn’t
have, not in any world, any more than she could go on protecting all of the dozens of students she
had taught. So many of whom were gone now. Dominick. Tylendel. So many more.

…Of all the mage-students she had taught in her long career, Van and Sandra were the only ones left
alive. How is that fair, she thought. Brokenly, pointlessly.

Slowly the grief subsided, and she relaxed, breathing. Vanyel was still asleep, thank the gods. He
needed every minute of rest he could manage.

Still, she wished that she could wake him. He would know what to say, he always did, and it would
help just knowing that he was there, bearing witness, recognizing along with her that they had lost
something immeasurable. In fact, she found she could imagine exactly what he would say. Of course
you’re sad, Savil. It’s awful. It’s stupid and a tragedy. It’s not your fault, you did everything you
could, we can’t save everyone – but that doesn’t matter, does it? That doesn’t make it all right.

She bit back a snort of bitter laughter. Thank you, imaginary-Van. Odd, how knowing he was there,
knowing that she could wake him even though she wouldn’t, still helped. She closed her eyes.
“We need to decide now,” Savil said. “Are we ready?”

They were in General Alban’s office – he had taken over the rooms behind the old tavern in Dog Inn. Lissa had left for Horn, twenty miles south, two days ago, and was presumably busy drilling with the two-thousand-and-some troops she would be leading.

Vanyel was certainly the readiest he had been, at least so she thought. He had slept nearly the entire night, without the aid of drugs, and he had been almost cheerful with her this morning; he had even brought her tea from the mess tent, a thoughtful gesture that had reassured her more than anything else so far. It hadn’t been an easy week – even once he was doing better, he had been irritable, prone to sudden mood swings that left her reeling. The anger that seemed to come from nowhere had been the worst part. He had thrown something at her, once; that had never happened before.

She forgave him for it. Whatever was going on in his head – and she wasn’t sure whether to hope he would tell her when he was ready, or to pray he would never speak of it again – it had clearly been difficult. She hadn’t pressed him to talk about it; she hoped he was talking about it with Melody, at least. Better her than me.

Savil would have preferred he have another week to find his feet, but after this morning, Melody thought he would be fine, and they were already a week behind the original schedule.

Kilchas tilted his chair back. Don’t fall on your head, you old fool, Savil thought, and then smirked despite herself; Kilchas was twenty years her junior. “Is she ready?”

“Karis? Yes,” Savil said. The princess was still in Haven, but she had been ready to leave on a moment’s notice for a week. “Are you ready?” Kilchas was the one who would be raising a Gate this time. He would move down to Horn at that point, and help Lissa hold off any Border raids until they were ready for the final stage, while Sandra stayed in Dog Inn; she would offer support, but she needed to be well-rested for her own upcoming Gate. Based on the map and their approximate route, Savil thought it would take at least two weeks, and up to four, for them to reach Sunhame.

Kilchas stroked the short beard he had grown. “Ready as I’ll ever be. I hate Gating.” Well, so did everyone. They had drawn straws for it; Sandra would be the one raising a Gate to move Randi and his entourage to Dog Inn several weeks from now, when Savil passed the signal.

It was a more complicated plan than she would have preferred – but, in the end, there weren’t that many moving parts. The downside was in how much they would be depending on Vanyel.

She turned to look at him next. He seemed steady enough, eyes alert, mouth a focused line. She reached out with a gentle mindtouch. :Ke’chara, are you sure you can do this?:

Silver eyes met hers. :As long as you’re there with me, aunt: “I’m ready,” he said out loud.

Savil glanced at General Alban. “It’s your call.” It was a candlemark to noon. They had to decide now, if they wanted to leave today.

Alban ran a hand over his bald head. “I don’t see any reason to delay. You’re packed?”

Savil nodded. Her saddlebags had been ready to go for days.

“Then let’s do it.” And he stood up, briskly rubbing his hands together. “Kilchas? Please go ahead
Shavri was sitting on her bed, a book open on her lap, when the door opened – and she felt the indefinable rightness, that meant her lifebonded was there.

“Randi?”

He crossed the room, and rested a hand on her shoulder, but was silent for a long moment.

“They’ve gone,” he said finally.

“Oh.” It had taken her a moment to remember who ‘they’ were, but there was really only one possible answer. Karis didn’t even come to say farewell, she thought, and it confused her that she felt a little hurt. It wasn’t like they were friends.

Randi must have guessed her thoughts. “She didn’t have much time. Once the Gate was up, Kilchas couldn’t hold it for long.”

Of course. What must that have been like for her, spending the last week in limbo – knowing that at any moment, she might be called to go on a minute’s notice? Her belongings, the little that she was taking with her, had been packed and ready by the planned Gate-terminus, at the Heralds’ temple, the whole time, and she had never strayed more than a five-minute walk from the area.

Randi sighed. “I hope Van’s all right.”

“…Why wouldn’t he be?”

Her lifebonded shook his head. “Savil was worried about him. It sounds like he wasn’t the most stable, emotionally.” He ran a hand lightly over her hair, fingers slipping through the curls. “I wish I could’ve given him more time, but we couldn’t afford to delay this. At least the Mindhealer must’ve cleared him. I told Savil not to go before that.”

“Oh.” Shavri hadn’t known. She felt her stomach tighten with anxiety. “He seemed fine, when he was here last.”

“Van is very good at seeming fine, I think. Regardless of whether he actually is.”

“That’s true.” She stretched, then leaned against his shoulder. “Is that why they delayed, then?”

“I imagine so. Wouldn’t be something he’d want to broadcast on the Mindspeech-relay.”

No, it wasn’t. Vanyel was so private about these things; he would probably have been upset if he knew they were discussing him right now.

She almost didn’t want to ask, but… “Do you think they’re going to succeed?”

“I hope so.” Randi closed his eyes, and rested his chin on her shoulder. “I really, really hope so.”

Karis believes Vkandis is on her side. The Karsite princess hadn’t gone around proclaiming it, exactly, but it showed.
What would it be like, to believe that a deity was on your side?

*I feel like all the gods have ever done is play games with my life.*

Maybe for a greater goal. Maybe it was worth it.

But she didn’t trust that very far at all.

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*Icy wind whipping at his hair, flattening his cloak to his body—*

“*Herald Vanyel.*”

“*Leareth.*”

They exchanged polite nods.

(Vanyel had expected the dream to come sooner. Sovvan had been the last time, and that was well over a month ago now. It had been a relief, in some ways; he still felt so confused, so off balance. And, at the same time, he had missed it.)

“You must have defeated Vedric Mavelan,” Leareth said finally. “The reports out of Highjorune claim it has become a part of your Valdemar, and there has been no mysterious cataclysm. You have my gratitude, if in fact this is something you prevented.”

Vanyel nodded, silent. *It felt too hard to keep his voice controlled.*

Leareth watched him, impassive. “You do not seem pleased. The cost was high, then?”

*How was he supposed to respond to that? He said nothing.*

“I have heard nothing of your King’s plans regarding the invasion,” Leareth said. “I assume there will be one, now that the alliance has been formally declared. Your operational security is quite good.”

Vanyel smiled thinly. “Thank you.”

(He had no intention of telling Leareth anything about the plan. Even though, maybe, the other mage could have given him valuable advice.)

“You never met Vedric Mavelan, right?” he said instead. “It was interesting, facing him. He was like a villain out of a bad play.” He closed his eyes, trying to remember the exact words. “He said ‘in the flesh you are even more beautiful than I expected. I regret I have to kill you.’ Literally said that, out loud. Also said he would spare me if I agreed to go back to Valdemar and mind my own business. And that Heralds never know when to give up and die already.” He paused. “I think it was...almost a role he was playing, to himself. A mask. Avoiding showing weakness.”

He opened his eyes. Leareth was watching him, and he thought there was a hint of amusement at the corners of his eyes, the slightest smile playing at his lips. “He is right,” the mage said. “You in particular are very hard to kill.”

“I suppose you would know. You’ve tried your hand at it a time or two.”
Leareth tipped his chin slightly forwards, acknowledging the verbal blow. They looked at one another for a moment, standing at opposite ends of an expanse of white – Leareth with a frozen army at his back, Vanyel alone at the mouth of the pass.

(What would it be like at the end, facing him for real, with all the years of history that lay between them? Would there be anything left to say? Probably not. Leareth wouldn’t take any risks. Wouldn’t hesitate to eliminate the threat as fast as he could, if he still saw Vanyel as a threat, when the time came – and so Vanyel couldn’t afford to hesitate either. There would be no last-minute banter. No apologies.)

Vanyel reached to carve a block of snow, and sat, raising a heat-spell with the false magic of the dream place. Leareth did the same.

“There is something I wanted to ask you about,” he said, just loudly enough to be heard across the distance between them. “A hypothetical scenario.” Though Leareth would be able to guess it wasn’t entirely hypothetical. “It’s an ethical question, and I don’t think Seldasen ever brings it up. Imagine you had a comrade, and you were fighting together – and there were two ways you could win. A decision you had to make in seconds. One would bring a high cost, in damage and destruction, and both of you might die, but if you were lucky you might both survive. Or, your comrade could call Final Strike, and nearly guarantee that you would get out alive. If they volunteered to do so, unasked – if they thought it was the best way, and they were willing – is that ever a price you would accept?”

(Vanyel hadn’t thought about it until later – but if he had gone with the original plan, and pulled enough node-energy to kill Vedric, there was a very good chance neither he nor Donni would have lived through it. He had barely been able to Gate out as it was; the additional backlash might have pushed him past the point of no return, where attempting a Gate at all would have killed him, and meanwhile the Palace would have been falling to pieces around them. The earthquake might have buried them before they could Gate at all. He hadn’t thought about it; had been deliberately avoiding thinking about it. Had Donni realized? Would it have changed her decision?)

Leareth watched him for a moment in silence. “That is a difficult question,” he said finally. “It would never be my preferred option, but I suppose I would consider it a matter of probabilities – would add together both of our chances, and aim for the highest number. If, in one scenario, there was a four-in-ten chance for each of us, and in another a nine-in-ten chance for myself in exchange for the certain death of my comrade – the second number is higher.” He hesitated. “Of course, in a situation of life-or-death, there may not be time to do the maths in detail – and it is a very human error, that our thinking may not be clear when the question involves a chance of our own death. Thus it is to your advantage to consider these scenarios in advance, and have a policy.”

(It was a very Leareth-style answer, Vanyel thought. He wasn’t sure what else he had been expecting. Still, in some obscure way, it helped.)

Leareth still watched him. He seemed to be thinking. Finally, he spoke. “Also. You did not tell me about the attempt on your life. I am glad it was not successful.”

(What? For a moment, Vanyel was baffled, trying to figure out what Leareth meant. Not Vedric. Father Leren? It had been over a month ago now – but, hells, that was about the right length of time for Leareth’s spy-loop, and this was their first dream since the incident.)

“I’m glad as well, trust me,” he said, smiling thinly. “I appreciate your concern, I guess.”

(Though it felt odd. There was a note of confusion, something that didn’t quite line up. Why had Leareth brought it up so directly? The man had tried to be comforting before, but this didn’t quite feel like that – it wasn’t like Vanyel was especially upset about Leren trying to kill him. Not anymore.)
What would be the point?)

Leareth nodded.

(And somehow, in a flash, his mind made the connection. Back in Dog Inn, he had spent an evening poring over the message and documents from the Order of Astera. He hadn’t been able to make headway on the code either, but something about it had caught his attention.)

*He nodded back, keeping his face impassive, trying his best to reveal nothing. “I do seem to spend half my life recovering from nearly getting killed.”*

(Leareth knew a great deal about codes, and mathematics. He cared about efficiency and elegance. The system used by the Order of Astera was very elegant – it was exactly the sort of thing Leareth would design. It predated Vedric by a long, long time. The high priest had speculated that some spy long ago had set it up for their own purposes, and passed it on to their successor, or that maybe there was an organization. What if it wasn’t that? What if Leareth had set it up for his own record-keeping, centuries ago, and used it ever since? Hells – he could have *founded* the entire temple order. It was exactly the sort of religion he would start. Scholarly, focused on knowledge and preservation... It made far too much sense.)

“You Heralds of Valdemar live very dangerous lives,” Leareth said.

(Vanyel thought he had noticed the hint of awkwardness, but hopefully he hadn’t guessed the source. Surely it was unlikely – but Leareth was so damned good at wringing information from the tiniest words and gestures.)

*The work we do is important,” he said, stalling. “It’s worth it."

(It made far too much sense – and none at all, at the same time. Leareth might have offered Vedric Mavelan some limited use of his spy-network, as well as the bespelled dagger, but Leren hadn’t been in touch with Vedric. And, besides, the communication-network with the temple was reliable but slow. It seemed somewhat unlikely that Vedric had known enough about Vanyel to lay an assassination-plot in advance – and it had been an attack of pure opportunity, reliant on the fact that Vanyel had been defenceless and Yfandes hadn’t been there. An unlikely scenario, given his power. Bad luck? The kind of bad luck that wasn’t so unlikely anymore, rolling the dice over a decade?)

“It is worth a great deal,” Leareth said. “Yet I would not say it is worth your life, Herald Vanyel. You are a light, one that burns brighter than most, and it seems of value for you to be in this world.”

(And yet you tried to kill me, Vanyel thought, bitterly. He had to think of a way to confirm it, but it seemed like the most likely explanation. At some point, maybe as soon as Leareth had known he existed, he had reached into Valdemar through his private spy-network and laid a contingency plan. One that might never bear fruit, but one that could keep. It could have been a mostly-dormant compulsion on Leren, one that would rise to the surface and take over only if the priest saw Vanyel in a position of weakness. And then Leareth, maybe, years later, had come to see Vanyel as less of an enemy – but he hadn’t updated his plan. Or maybe he had only been manipulating Vanyel all along; maybe he had always intended to kill him, in the end. He would have succeeded, if not for the Shadow-Lover. If not for the direct intervention of a god.)

“Very flattering,” he said out loud, and cast about for a neutral topic. “Anyway. I was reading about some maths that might interest you...”
“Major Lissa,” the camp cook said, nodding respectfully. No bowing and scraping, which was nice. It was good to be back in Horn again, she thought. Everyone here knew her, and they weren’t so formal. In a strange way, it almost felt like home.

And, like back home, she knew the locals. “Jarvi,” she said, nodding back. “How’s your wife?” She had forgotten her name. “The babe was due this autumn, no?”

Pride and pleasure flashed across his broad face. “Born a month ago, Major. A healthy little girl.”

Lissa’s answering smile was genuine. Incredible, how people went on living their lives, even in the midst of a war. Crossing the town of Horn itself, yesterday, she had passed a wedding-party. Horn had suffered as much as any town on the Border, more due to hunger and illness than raids; last winter they had lost a quarter of their population to a flux. Still, their people had picked up the pieces of their lives and kept on going. In some obscure way, it gave her more hope than anything else.

“What’s her name?” she asked, holding out a hand to accept the bowl of stew.

“Violetta,” he answered. “For her grandmother.”

“That’s beautiful.” Lissa took the thick slice of bread he offered her, setting it on top of the stew. “Give her a kiss for me today, all right?”

“Of course, ma’am.” He nodded to her again, then turned his eyes to the next soldier in line.

She carried her food out of the kitchen proper, a real building with walls of mud-and-adobe, towards the rest of the mess tent, trestle-tables laid out under a canvas roof. It wasn’t exactly warm inside, despite the braziers set in corners. Once upon a time, they might have asked Kilchas or Sandra to lay weatherproofing spells, but their magic was needed for a great many things, and mere comfort was far from a priority.

“Major Lissa?”

The unfamiliar voice startled her. She managed not to jump, and turned calmly instead. “Yes?”

A red-haired woman in the green robes of a Healer was pulling herself up from one of the tables. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you.”

“And you are?” Lissa hadn’t spent much time at Healers’; she knew most of their staff by sight, but not their names. The woman looked vaguely familiar, she thought. Sturdy, not quite heavyset; intelligent green eyes, a spray of freckles across her broad face…

“I’m Melody.”

“Oh!” She knew the name. “You’re the Mindhealer down here, right? I thought you were in Dog Inn these days.” She must have been a week ago – Van had been seeing her there. *I hope he’s all right,* she thought, before wrenching her thoughts back to the moment.

“Part-time. Two weeks there, two weeks here.”

“Right.” Lissa blinked for a moment, trying to gather her thoughts. “What is it?”

“You’ve been asking for volunteers at Healers’,“ the woman said. “To accompany your battalion through the Gate. I’d like to volunteer.”
…Lissa wasn’t sure what she had been expecting, but it wasn’t that. She just stared at the woman for a moment. “Are you sure?” she said. “Don’t they need you here?”

“Well, yes. And in about fifty other places. Fact is, there are five of us in the entire Kingdom. I can’t be in two places at once, much less fifty – and once you take your people through, there’ll be more Valdemarans in Sunhame than here. Seems like the most useful place for me to be.”

Lissa took a deep breath. “No. It’s too dangerous.”

“I’m willing to accept the risk.” Melody’s eyes darted to the door, then back to Lissa’s face. “Besides, it may not be so much safer here. There’s going to be a lot of confusion, and you’re stripping this place bare.”

That was a valid point. “You could stay in Dog Inn,” Lissa said. “Or go even further north. We can’t risk you.”

Melody raised her eyebrows. “And then what use will I be? Major, I knew the danger I was taking on when I came down here in the first place. I think it’s worth it.”

“—Oh. Wait.” Lissa glanced around; no one nearby was paying any attention to them; and took a step closer, lowering her voice. “Is this because of my brother?”

Melody frowned. “Partly. I think it’d be worth it anyway, having one of us around is really quite valuable, but – yes, that’s a reason.”

She made a face. “Why did you clear him to go, if you’re still worried about him?”

“I’m not worried, exactly.” Melody blinked owlishly, lifting one hand to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear. “I think I’ve got a good read on him, now, and he was roughly back to normal. To what’s normal for him. Trouble is, his baseline is terrible. He’s remarkably stable and functional, given that – I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone so good at compartmentalizing – but he’s in pain just about all the time.” She shook her head. “I know he can handle this mission, and anything else that comes up. He’s been doing this for twelve years; if he was going to break, he would have already. Doesn’t mean I like the idea of him being miserable out there. Figure I can make it a little easier, and that’s worth it in itself.”

Lissa just stared at her for a moment, unsure how to respond. “I… You really care about him,” she said finally.

“Can’t spend as much time in someone’s mind as I have with him, and not care. I don’t like anyone suffering.”

_He’s in pain just about all the time._ Somehow Lissa had managed to forget that. Vanyel was so good at hiding it. Even on their journey here from Forst Reach, when they had spent all day and night in each other’s presence. She had known _something_ was wrong; she’d gotten a concerned, if vague, letter from Savil, and there had to be a reason Van had wanted to share her tent; but he hadn’t spoken of it, and she hadn’t really asked. Not after the first time, when he had brushed her off.

And that one day they had both been in Dog Inn, when had come back to Savil’s tent, clearly distraught – she hadn’t known what to say or do, it had made her horribly uncomfortable, and she had been relieved when she saw him a few days later and he acted as though nothing had happened. They had gotten tipsy together, and spoken only of trivials, mostly he had played all of her favourite songs. A few times he had seemed on the edge of tears, and she had pretended not to notice until he got himself back under control.
Had she even asked him how he was feeling, or given him any opening to talk about it? No. She hadn’t really wanted to know.

“All right,” Lissa said. “I should probably run it by General Alban, I think it’s his decision in the end, but… If you want to come, I’ll back you.”

Shivering, Vanyel tucked his chin in closer to his chest, wishing his cloak did more to block out the wind. Two weeks to Midwinter. The winters were milder, south of Valdemar’s borders, but that didn’t make it pleasant.

He couldn’t have looked less like a Herald, though he rode Yfandes; Savil had taken her time laying a thorough illusion. Yfandes, much to her dismay, looked like a spavined old mare who might be of better use in a stew-pot than carrying a rider, and Vanyel resembled a scrawny Karsite farm-boy. He had played a simpleton, the few times they ran into people; he couldn’t manage the accent well and it gave him an excuse not to talk much.

They were very good illusions; he couldn’t have done anything near as realistic or detailed. The most important, and impressive, part was how well-camouflaged they were. Even he could barely sense the residue of mage-energy unless he was within a few yards. It was the only magic they had risked, aside from the occasional heat-spell on freezing nights; it was unlikely the Karsites had any strong mages, but there might still be a few hedge-wizards about, and they couldn’t afford to risk being detected.

Even off the main road, currently picking their way across a wooded ridge, they were making better time than they had expected. In no small thanks to the fact that, inexplicably, the Companions had volunteered one of the herd for Karis to ride. As far as he knew, it was unprecedented.

The Companion in question was Delian, which made it even weirder. I wonder how Tran feels about it. His former Companion, going into danger…

It meant they could outrun any skirmish, though, and so all three of them were a lot safer. There had been a back-and-forth discussion on sending additional guards, but in the end, it had been decided that having more non-Heralds along would slow them enough to outweigh the additional protection. The Companions were taking turns on the night watch, so even though they stopped early each day and the nights were quite long at this time of year, each of them only had to spend two candlemarks on watch duty.

Not that his sleep had been restful. They were carrying as little baggage as possible, and didn’t have a proper tent, only a roll of waterproofed canvas and lightweight poles to make a lean-to. When they could, they slept in natural caves; there were a lot of them in the region, and Karis was remarkably good at finding the entrances. Vanyel wasn’t sure how she did it. It wasn’t like she had followed exactly this route on her own journey.

Karis. He could have wished for a less awkward travel-partner. She was clearly very uncomfortable around him, only marginally more relaxed with Savil, and he couldn’t exactly blame her. For years, she would have known of him only as the Butcher in White, the mage who had killed more of her people than anyone else.

Words couldn’t convey how tired he was of being someone else’s weapon. And he hadn’t been able
to find the words to apologize to her, either, so the awkwardness remained. She rode ahead of him, right now; the illusion laid on Delian’s body made him look like a donkey, clearly underweight, patches of hair balding, and Karis looked like a middle-aged peasant woman. All three of them could pass for refugees, fleeing a war-torn Border, in search of a better life or, at the very least, safety.

Somewhere ahead, a stick cracked. Savil, leading the way, raised a hand, and they all froze until she lowered it, just before a deer bounded past them and away.

…it was very tempting to send a levinbolt after it, and have something other than travel-bread and dried meat and fruit for their supper. Vanyel had already been underweight going into this, and now, coming on two weeks’ journey out of Horn, he could count all of his ribs. Even if they hadn’t been on short rations, they were all burning energy just staying warm. Meat for the stew-pot was very tempting, but that flashy magic was too risky.

They crested the ridge and started to descend, following Savil along a narrow game-trail. Their route was planned for the day; in the mornings, Vanyel would go into trance and send his Farsight ahead, selecting a path that avoided difficult terrain and, more importantly, people. So far there had been no sign that anyone was looking for them, but that might not remain true. If the Karsites could still get spies in and out of Horn, they would know something was going on, and for all the layers of secrecy around their plan, it was possible they could find out what.

At which point the only thing protecting them would be the sheer difficulty of searching thousands of square miles of forest and scrubland for a party of three. Slim protection, and they were a long, long way from any backup. It would have to do.

Hard to tell how long they had until sunset; the sky was a solid mass of grey cloud. Vanyel found his thoughts wandering again.

*I suspect you are the result of a meddling god.* Words spoken by Leareth, who had tried to have him killed, again, whose name still brought a sharp pain to his chest, pointlessly. *Your power is so improbable,* he had said. And that was true, wasn’t it? There was no one else like Vanyel.

His life wasn’t his own. There was clearly some force working in the background. Had been from the very beginning. The Tayledras believed that lifebonds only happened when the gods were meddling…

‘Lendel. The ache in his chest sharpened, and he felt the brush of the void, icy, the parts of him trailing out into nothing. Even now, he was still raw, nearly as bad as after the first dream in k’Treva. Without the block, it was much harder to keep his thoughts away – but it was easier to move on, and Melody had put in a few soft-redirects that helped. *Honour his memory,* she had said.

He let himself hold the image of Tylendel’s face for a moment. ‘Lendel, frozen in a single moment, seventeen years old forever. *I’d understand if you couldn’t forgive me.* ‘Lendel’ s eyes, staring at him, full of startled hurt and confusion. Baffled by the person that Vanyel had become. *What if it’s something wrong with me,* he had said to Moondance. *You have grown up,* Moondance had said. *The world seems black and white to children.*

‘Lendel would never have the chance to grow up – and yet a fragment of him still existed, somewhere, and that was oddly comforting. *Someday I’ll see you again, ashke.* But in the meantime, there was a war to win, and ‘Lendel wouldn’t understand – wouldn’t understand the stakes, or what Vanyel needed to do, or why – but he wasn’t here.

*Ashke, why aren’t you here?* A pointless question that some part of him never stopped asking.
Vanyel blinked away tears, and gently folded the memories away.

The Star-Eyed had opinions on the matter. She had spoken to him, she had let him talk to ‘Lendel, and he still had no idea why. Did it even make sense, to wonder about the goals of a god? She wasn’t human, even if she had put on the guise of a human body to speak with him; she was huge, deeply alien…

_I have to assume She wants things_, he thought. Or else where could he start? Maybe it was beyond his ability as a mortal, to understand any of what was happening, but he ought to at least try.

_:’Fandes?: he sent. :Help me think through this?:_

_:Of course, love: He could sense her discomfort, though; there was something she didn’t like about his curiosity. She hadn’t been pushing him to stop thinking about it, but she hadn’t been volunteering her help either._

--The Companions had, almost certainly, been created with the help of a god. What did that mean? How much were Yfandes’ goals her own, and how much was she only a pawn as well? He didn’t want to think about it – and the quiet voice in the back of his mind was flagging that fact.

He could mull over it later. _:Start with what we know: he sent. :I’ve spoken directly to the Star-Eyed, and to the Shadow-Lover. Both of them told me I had a part to play: Neither of them had given him much information, exactly. Not directly. What was it that the Shadow-Lover had first told him, all those years ago?_

_You are not the only chance, the god-avatar had said. You are the best chance, at least at this juncture in time. You could go back, and Valdemar might still fall – and you could choose not to, and your Kingdom might still endure. But the odds are better if you are there._

There had been something rote in the words – looking back, it reminded him somehow of the standard headers on Palace message-papers. It hadn’t been _specific._

The Star-Eyed had been even less clear.

_:The trouble is: he sent, :neither of them is telling me exactly what I need to do – rather, what they want me to do:_

Did he know for sure that what the gods wanted would be the same as what was best for Valdemar? No. He didn’t know that. Somehow he had never even thought about it before.

_I do not trust the agenda of any god, Leareth had said. Of course he would say that, given that the gods seemed to oppose him. Vanyel had taken that as a bad sign. A sign that whatever Leareth had planned, it wasn’t going to be good for the rest of the world–_

– Why had Vanyel been assuming the Star-Eyed would agree with him, in terms of what was good for the rest of the world? Leareth certainly hadn’t been assuming it. And he was right, at least about that one thing, if nothing else. The world _would_ look different if the gods had the best interests of humanity as their goal.

There were two separate questions, here, and Vanyel had only been asking one. Even if he could figure out what the Star-Eyed and the Shadow-Lover had intended, that didn’t mean it was the right thing to do, to go along with their plans.

Maybe he only needed to answer the second question, of what path _he_ thought would result in the best outcome… No, that wasn’t right either. It was like he had told the Star-Eyed. _I don’t know how I’m supposed to make plans if there’s some deep plot of yours I don’t know about._ He had to
understand the other players in this game, or he would be at the mercy of their scheming.

…And what would he do, if he answered the first question, and it came out different from the second? Would he really try to go against a god? Could he? A sliver of fear crept into his chest.

All along, he had thought he had a choice. What if that had never been true?

On the heels of that thought: Leareth was fighting the gods. And if he hadn’t yet succeeded in his plans, centuries later – well, he hadn’t given up either. He was still alive. Still trying.

Focus. Start with what he knew.

:The dream: he sent. :On the face of it, it seems pretty straightforward – I’m clearly meant to fight him: He had thought it was that simple for a long time, until the dream changed. :Then the conversations come in, and it gets less clear. Why? No matter which way I slice it, it seems like letting me talk to him makes it less likely I’ll decide to fight him:

Was that true? Think it through. The conversations had a few effects. :I suppose I’ve learned a lot about him, and about magic – maybe it’s more likely I can succeed at stopping him: But it didn’t feel like that outweighed the rest, the fact that, even now – hells, even after the assassination attempt – he was half-convinced Leareth was right. And Leareth had surely learned even more about him. He was smarter, older, more experienced; he could wring more information from their conversations, no matter how hard Vanyel had tried not to give anything away.

And he hadn’t been trying as hard lately, had he?

Yfandes had no response, but he knew she was there, listening.

How much had his greater openness ever been a decision? Not much. Only the slow erosion of barriers, of certainty, of anything and everything he could feel sure of, until Leareth had started to seem like the most solid thing in a world of grey, hopeless confusion. He might not be trustworthy but at least he was competent. At least he was trying.

:I accepted his comfort on Sovvan: he sent. He must have revealed a great deal, that night, and it was no excuse that it had been the worst possible time. Later on, facing Vedric, he had been able to put the pain aside and function well enough. He could have held himself together – he had, when there had been an immediate threat. An enemy.

I don’t think of Leareth as an enemy anymore.

It hit him like a bucket of cold water to the face. He had never put the thought into words before, but he couldn’t deny it. It wasn’t quite true, but it definitely wasn’t false. He no longer thought of Leareth as anything so simple as an enemy – and yet, every time he thought of the future, he expected to die fighting him in the pass. He had never really considered otherwise.

I’m not afraid, he had told Randi. Afraid of failing, maybe, but not of dying.

Afraid of failing…

:Damn it: he sent, the mental words bursting out of him – he felt Yfandes flinch back from their link. :All along I’ve been afraid I would try to stop Leareth and fail. That even a Final Strike wouldn’t be enough. Or that he would just come back to life again. But what if – what if it is enough, but I’m wrong, and I kill the one person who could’ve made anything better?:

It didn’t actually matter whether Leareth was a nice person in any conventional sense. Didn’t matter
if he’d tried to have Vanyel killed. It mattered whether he was telling the truth about his goals, whether he was right about what would make for a better world, and whether he could really succeed at what he wanted to do. All three of those things seemed far from certain – and yet.

By killing Leareth, Vanyel could do more damage to the world – to the future – than anyone who had ever lived.

And the converse was true – if Leareth was lying about his intentions, or if he was just wrong about what mattered in some fundamental way that Vanyel couldn’t yet grasp – then he was the greatest danger they had ever faced. Not just to Valdemar – to everyone, everywhere.

Because he was competent. Because he was trying.

And, again, Vanyel was the only one who could stop him. If he chose wrong, if he failed in that… Many thousands, maybe millions, of people would die.

–Death and darkness across a thousand futures–

Either way, whichever path he chose, this was the most important thing he would do in his entire life. Killing a thousand Karsites in a moment was nothing. Even the Web-spell paled in comparison.

:I thought I was preparing: he sent.:But isn’t what I do more important than how well I do it?: Had he ever, really, been trying to answer that question? Or had he just hoping that answers would come to him in time?

…How much had he lacked curiosity because even now, calling down Final Strike alone in a mountain pass would come as a relief? Because it was convenient that what Valdemar needed of him most was his death, at the right time and place? One final duty…

But duty was fake. Vanyel hadn’t thought those words in a long time; it had come to seem a solid enough scaffolding, to build a life from. Still. Duty was an abstraction, a simplification over the world. Duty was virtue, not results. Results were real. People were real, half a million of them in Valdemar alone, who knew how many others in a wide, wide world. Children still starving in the streets of Haven. Who might, if Leareth was telling the truth, have a chance at something better, or maybe not them but their children would, those who weren’t even born yet but still mattered – unless Vanyel destroyed that.

The quiet voice in him was raising a flag, echoing a whisper that sounded like Lancir. Sometimes there are more than two choices.

What were his choices?

One: he could fight Leareth. But that wasn’t actually a single option. Surely Randi was right – there might be ways other than Final Strike, he had promised his King he would try to find them, and he hadn’t put any thought into it at all. Hellfires – he didn’t have to wait until Leareth had his army. He could go searching for him, now.

Two: he could decide not to fight him. That single phrase held a multitude as well, an entire spread of choices. He could offer an alliance in their next dream, or in five years; he could ride north and find Leareth; he could do nothing at all, and wait to see what would happen.

It had always felt like an either-or choice. Why had Vanyel never noticed it wasn’t? There were so many options; it was hard to know where to start. How had he wasted twelve years not even trying to figure it out?
I never asked for this. An echo of the old resentment, bitterness. He was the wrong person for it. Not smart enough. Not curious enough. Too caught up dwelling on his own ghosts to ask the right questions. Ashke, I need you. I can’t do this without you. But ‘Lendel was gone, had turned his back on the world and walked away and nothing was ever going to change that – and maybe that part had been set from the very beginning, wheels turned by a god or goddess’ hands.

It’s not fair.

No one had ever promised that anything would be fair, and apparently he was the one available for this. What had he told Shavri, years ago? You will do it. Whether or not you can, you will. Because you can’t walk away.

So hard to know what it even meant, here, not to walk away. Maybe he could find out. At least he could try.

:Chosen: Yfandes sent. :It’s not exactly the best time for it: There was an odd hesitancy in her mindvoice.

: ‘Fandes, when is it ever going to be a better time? It’s like Randi said, isn’t it? It’s always going to feel like there’s too much going on, like tomorrow will be a better time, and it never, ever is:

:That was about something different:

:Was it, though?: He knew his frustration and impatience was leaking through. :I don’t know how much time I have left. I can’t afford to waste any more:

:You can’t afford to be distracted either:

A valid point; he had been oblivious to his surroundings for the last candlemark. They were at the bottom of a gorge now, and he didn’t even remember getting there. Still. :We’re on a long, boring journey miles from the nearest farmstead. Seems like a pretty good time to do some thinking I’ve been putting off for a decade:

Yfandes had no response to that, but he felt her confusion and discomfort. She doesn’t like the questions I’m asking, he thought, a whisper behind shields that he didn’t put into Mindspeech.

Nothing but forest for miles around.

Karis stared into the dimness, ears and eyes alert for any sound or movement. Twice she had leapt up, alarmed, and then settled back in embarrassment when she recognized harmless animal sounds.

The two Herald-Mages with her both had their uncanny Gifts, so common among the Heralds of Valdemar. They could read minds, sense thoughts, and she knew they were using those capacities. She didn’t have that advantage, only her ordinary senses. Which were well-trained. She had certainly had enough practice at holding the night watch. The moon was barely a sliver, but the stars were bright in a clear sky, and the horizon was just starting to grow lighter.

She reminded herself that Savil had laid a perimeter of low-powered alarm-wards. Nothing strong enough to stop anyone approaching – too easy to detect, if a mage came looking, more risk than benefit – but they would have warning.
Don’t worry:

She looked up, no longer startled by the voice in her head. She hadn’t expected Sola to accompany her, and she wasn’t sure how the Suncat had managed, so far, to stay out of sight of the Heralds and their Companions.

I wasn’t about to let you do this alone: the Suncat said. And I won’t let any danger come near:

“Thank you.” She kept her voice to a low whisper, not wanting to wake the others, who were sleeping bundled together under the thin canvas of their shelter, only a yard behind her. The lean-to was large enough to fit one of the Companions at a time, currently Savil’s Kellan. She had the final watch tonight; it was perhaps a mark until dawn. Candlemark, she reminded herself, that was what it was called in Valdemar.

But they weren’t in Valdemar anymore, were they? The first time she had heard the voices of farmers speaking Karsite, it had nearly brought tears to her eyes.

Karis shivered, and wrapped her cloak more tightly about her body. They didn’t dare a fire or magic heat-spell at night, except in the bitterest cold, and they were already far enough south to have outtraveled the snow. The trees and foliage were changing, taking on the look of home.

Home. It was really happening, she thought. Even now, ten days into their journey, it didn’t quite seem real.

You’re cold: And Sola twined around her and settled into her lap, a warm weight.

“I can help:

“Thank you,” she hissed again, and bent forwards to cuddle her, burying her chilled hands in Sola’s fur. Sola submitted to it without complaint. She knows I am lonely, Karis thought. Though she wouldn’t put up with it forever. She was still a cat, after all.

They were making good time, thanks to the witch-horse – no, the Companion, she reminded herself – who had volunteered to carry her. His name was Delian, and though he had never spoken to her like Sola had, she could see the intelligence in his odd blue eyes. It was disturbing, but less so every day. She was getting used to the strangeness of Heralds.

They aren’t so different from us. Valdemaran or Karsite, it seemed it made little difference – only people, none of them perfect, most of them trying to be good.

Even Herald-Mage Vanyel, the Butcher in White.

She had been horrified, when King Randale told her that the man would be traveling with them. It made sense, strategically; as the strongest of Valdemar’s mages, Vanyel had the best chance of keeping Savil safe while she raised the Gate. He was even more powerful than Priest-Adept Jaral. After all, he had killed the man in single combat, or at least that was what the rumours they’d gotten out of their spy-reports had claimed. Remembering it, Karis felt the cold rage settling in her stomach again. She had liked the old man.

…Though, she had to admit, the priest-Adept had killed nearly as many on the Valdemaran side as Herald-Mage Vanyel had on the Karsite side. A thousand casualties alone at the Battle of North-Hill, or what the Valdemarans called Deerford. She knew the toll it had taken on poor Jaral – had seen his face, during his few brief periods of leave – but hadn’t King Randale described the same with Herald-Mage Vanyel?

Only people. No so different after all. She had never been able to think of the Valdemarans as monsters; all along, she had known that they slept and ate and breathed and cried, just the same as
everyone. So why did it still come as a surprise?

Herald-Mage Vanyel wasn’t at all like she had expected. She had always pictured him as a tall man, larger than life, but he was barely her own height, and she thought she might weigh more. Even when he wasn’t illusion-spelled to look like a farm-boy, he was still much younger than she had imagined; his half-silvered hair came from the use of node-magic, not age. He had been quiet and subdued for most of their journey – if she hadn’t known better, she would have thought he was a little shy. Herald-Mage Savil seemed very fond of him, almost maternal, and the few moments she had seen Vanyel anything close to relaxed were when the two of them thought they were alone.

He had nightmares nearly every night. Not that he made much noise, but it would have been hard for her not to notice, in their close sleeping quarters. *I wonder, does he dream about the people he’s killed?*

She pushed the thought away; it wasn’t helpful.

…As though thinking of it had made it real, she heard Vanyel’s breathing catch. He whimpered, stirring under the blankets – and, not for the first time, she caught a hint of something. It must have been his Mind-Gifts; he was projecting, that was the word for it. Against the darkness, she saw a flash of – a storm. Lighting, rain. A river. Blue fire, consuming everything – and, with it, a brush of the deepest anguish she had ever felt. It chilled her to the marrow of her bones.

Karis couldn’t take it anymore. Moving cautiously, she nudged Sola from her lap, turned and reached under the shelter of the canvas. “Herald Vanyel,” she whispered. He didn’t move; he lay rigid, breath coming in ragged pants. She reached to shake his shoulder. “Herald Vanyel, wake up. It is only a dream.” A moment later she realized she had been speaking Karsite.

–Vanyel rose to his heels in a single motion, throwing the blankets off, eyes wide, lightning crackling in the palm of his hand. Her heart thudded in her chest, a moment of sheer terror. *He’s going to kill me.*

And then sense came into his eyes, and he lowered his hand, blinking and shaking his head. He was breathing hard and looked thoroughly disoriented.

Behind him, Herald-Mage Savil stirred, but only cuddled closer against her Companion’s side. Sola had vanished, quietly taking herself elsewhere.

“Having a nightmare you were,” she whispered, this time in the Valdemaran tongue. Her lips tingled, the after-effects of the shock, as her pulse gradually slowed.

“Oh.” He lifted a hand to his face and rubbed his eyes. “Sorry.” She saw that he was shaking. “I, I thought – I heard you speaking Karsite – I’m sorry.”

“No, I am.” She should have remembered. Of course it would alarm him, waking to a voice speaking her native language – during his years on the Border, it would nearly always have signified a surprise raid.

He closed his eyes for a moment, his features taking on the blankness of a mage in trance, and she saw how he fought to control his breathing. Maybe a minute later, he opened his eyes, looking much calmer. “You can go to sleep, if you want,” he said. “I’ll take over the watch.”

Could she fall asleep? Probably not. Certainly not after the backwash she had gotten from his nightmare; she still felt shaken from it. “Do not mind,” she said. “Watch together we can, if you wish.”
“If you like.” He slid forwards until he was entirely out of the lean-to, then reached back and dragged out his blanket, pulling it over his shoulders. “I’ll watch to the left, you take the right?”

She nodded, and shuffled over, making room for him. Already she was cold; she missed Sola’s presence, but the Suncat wouldn’t show herself when either of the Heralds was awake.

After a few minutes, the silence felt too awkward. “You dream about the war?” Karis said, just to break it.

The Herald-Mage’s shoulders twitched. “No.” His voice sounded odd, and he turned his shoulders a little away from her.

Then what? She wanted to ask, but going by his body language, he clearly didn’t want to talk about it. Why am I so curious? It was none of her business. She didn’t know why she cared. But she did.

Breda tried to keep the annoyance off her face as she faced the two boys in front of her. “Medren, Stefen – what did I tell you about fighting?”

Medren tucked his chin in to his chest. “That it’s against the rules, ma’am. I’m sorry.”

Stefen said nothing, only stared sullenly out at her from under a fringe of hair. He had clearly gotten the worst of it – one eye was blackened, swollen shut, and dried blood crusted under both nostrils and down his chin.

Medren elbowed him.

“Sorry,” he muttered, avoiding her eyes.

She sighed. “Want to tell me what happened?” She had thought they were both settling in well enough. Stef had put on weight; he was still by far the littlest boy at Bardic, but he no longer looked like a small gust of wind would blow him away. He was suspicious of her, and of every other adult she had seen him interact with, but he and Medren seemed to get along well enough. She had hoped to start both of them in regular classes after Midwinter, just over a week away.

Medren nudged Stefen again. “Stef,” he whispered.

Stefen looked up. “Ma’am. They said he were a bastard an’ don’t belong here.” He was much easier to understand, now, but his accent still slipped out when he was upset.

“I see.” She took a deep breath. “What did I say about name-calling?”

Medren stared down at the floor. “That it’s only words, ma’am.”

“Exactly. You’re more than welcome than retaliate with words of your own – in fact, I recommend it. Learn some good insults. It’s something of a tradition. But I will not tolerate physical fights in the Bardic dorms. No matter what anyone calls anyone, it doesn’t justify using your fists.” Or nails, or teeth. She had witnessed the tail end of the fight, and for all that Stefen was half the size of the older boys involved, he was vicious. She had just spent half a candlemark patching up the lad in question, and soothing ruffled feathers; he was the son of one of the Councillors, and she very much didn’t want his father to get involved. Stefen had enough of an uphill battle to face here without getting
himself into that kind of trouble.

“We understand, ma’am,” Medren said. “It won’t happen again.”

“Good. It had better not.” She stared them down for a moment longer. Medren fidgeted, red-faced, but Stefen held his chin up and seemed unperturbed.

“Well,” she said finally. “I am going to assume you’ve both learned your lesson.” She settled into her chair, and patted the stool next to it. “Come here. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Stefen stayed where he was until Medren prodded him again, then came forward with trepidation.

“You should know by now I don’t bite,” she said, reaching for the bowl she had refilled with warm water. “Hold still, please.” He still flinched a little when she reached to dab at his cheek. Poor boy, she thought. He still half expects me to hit him. She hoped she had finally convinced him she wouldn’t, that no adult ever would again – but it was different to know that intellectually and to really believe it gut-deep, wasn’t it? I wonder if he’ll ever really trust me.

Medren hovered a yard away. “Bard Breda?” he said finally.

“Yes, Medren?” she said without looking up.

A hesitation. “Do you have any news about Karse?”

She lowered the bloody cloth and levelled a hard look at him. “What about it?” Medren wasn’t supposed to know that anything was happening down south. Even she wasn’t supposed to know anything about the invasion plans.

Medren squirmed. “Just, my uncle’s down at the Border. I sent a letter ages ago and haven’t gotten a reply.”

“Right.” How had she forgotten? “I’m sure he’s fine, lad. I haven’t heard any news. If I do, you’ll be the first to know.” Van, you had better be careful out there. She very much didn’t want to be the bearer of bad news to a twelve-year-old.

Thought it wouldn’t be the first time, if the worst did happen.
Chapter Sixteen

*I didn’t expect it to be beautiful,* Vanyel thought.

Two and a half weeks on the road, and they had reached Sunhame with remarkably little mishap. For the last three days, traveling through densely inhabited farmland, he had watched the tension in Karis wind tighter and tighter. She hid her nerves well; he wasn’t sure he could have controlled his face so well. Nonetheless.

Savil hadn’t dared drop their illusions even at night, not once it became impossible to avoid people; they were close to undetectable once in place, but the process of laying them was much ‘noisier’. Vanyel was worried about his aunt. She hadn’t been able to fully relax and rest in days, and their Companions were back outside the walls – they were far too conspicuous to risk entering the city. Now Savil would have to raise a Gate, across a distance nearly as great as that from Haven to k’Treva, and hold it longer than she ever had before.

They had risen very early that morning, and come into the city on foot, blending in well enough with the considerable traffic around the Great Temple. Karis, joining the other petitioners, had spent a candlemark there while the sun rose, kneeling in prayer. Time Vanyel hadn’t wanted to spare, but oddly, he thought he understood why she needed it. This was the hardest thing she had ever done. Of course she wanted any reassurance she could find.

And maybe her Vkandis Sunlord really was listening. It wouldn’t be the strangest thing that had happened.

Every candlemark they spent in the city was a risk – that their illusions would be detected, that someone would realize they weren’t what they seemed. Vanyel had told Karis he could give her three candlemarks to spread the word amongst as many of her contacts as she could find. Only those she trusted entirely – and, gods, he hoped her trust wasn’t misplaced. She could defend herself surprisingly well, and she had a talisman she could use to call him if she ended up in trouble, but having to rescue her would destroy their element of surprise.

Karis hadn’t dared to send any kind of message ahead, and so anyone she spoke to would be learning for the first time that she was alive at all, let alone formally allied with the King of Valdemar. Their plan didn’t absolutely depend on any of her possible allies taking their side now; Lissa would be bringing through more than enough soldiers to take the city, and Vanyel was almost certain none of their remaining mages could threaten him; but it would make things much easier later.

Damn, that priest is a mage. The very young man was making his way down the street, holding up his robes with one hand to step through a heap of slush. Vanyel could feel the aura of his mage-energies even from ten yards away – he was low Master-level. Likely only his youth had kept him from the front, and thus saved his life; he couldn’t have been more than sixteen.

Vanyel was loitering by a public fountain, travel-worn cloak wrapped around his body, the hem crusted with mud from their passage through the streets. Savil dozed on a bench beside him. They ought not to look out of place, a dull-eyed country boy visiting the big city with his grandmother – but if the priest came much closer, and he was well-trained and paying attention, he might well notice the trace of magic from their illusions.

–The priest’s head lifted, eyes fixing on Savil.

No time to hesitate. Vanyel had hoped they could avoid this, but he had planned for this
contingency. Above all, they couldn’t afford anything that would raise an alarm.

*Center and ground.* He unshielded a little, reached out with his power, and for the first time in his life, he laid a compulsion-spell.

It took only a whisper of energy. *Nothing to see. Nothing out of the ordinary. But you are feeling ill. You want to go home. Rest.*

It probably wouldn’t be enough to keep the young priest out of the coming battle, but it might. The man’s eyes glazed over, sliding away from Vanyel’s face – and he turned and walked away, a little jerkily.

It had worked. He hadn’t been sure it would; after all, it wasn’t like he had ever had a chance to practice. What would Leareth think, he wondered – and felt a pang. Anger, and confusion. Of course there had been no chance to seek out information and confirm or disprove his theory. He was almost sure, but not quite, and it hurt. It shouldn’t have felt like a betrayal – Leareth owed him nothing, had never pretended otherwise.

And yet.

On the bench, Savil stirred, and reached out with a sleepy tendril of Mindspeech, tightly shielded. :

:`Everything all right, ke’chara?:`

:`It is now:`

She settled back, closing her eyes again. Trusting him utterly.

It had taken them some time to find their balance with each other again, after his arrival in Dog Inn and their fight. Words had been said that both of them regretted, he thought, and some of them still stung. *I did trust you, ke’chara, and clearly it was a mistake.* Even now, thinking of it brought a hot, tight feeling to his chest.

Vanyel knew he couldn’t have been easy to be around after his conversation with the Star-Eyed, either – his memories of the first few days were hazy, he had been so distracted, but he remembered enough. Melody had spent three or four candlemarks a day with him, and Savil had been there nearly all the rest of the time, day and night. Of course she hadn’t wanted to leave him alone; Melody had probably asked her to keep an eye on him; and he could appreciate the effort she had made now – but at the time it had felt suffocating. He must have snapped at her a hundred times, and he had thrown something at least once.

…And she had forgiven him, and now things were almost as they had always been. They needed each other too much to stay angry for long. Savil had tolerated his brooding silences, offering her presence without nagging him to talk, and covered for him on night watch more than once when he desperately needed another candlemark’s sleep, even though she needed her rest just as badly.

*Ashke, I miss you.* The void was a little easier to bear, now; he was getting used to it again. Often enough on their long days of riding, he had let his hair fall across his face and tucked his chin under his hood, hiding tears from Karis. The nightmares were back – old nightmares, that he hadn’t had regularly in years, of wyrsa outside a ruined stone cottage, a Gate, a storm, a river that promised peace and an end to the pain. Both Savil and Karis had discreetly woken him a few times, during their turns on watch; he hadn’t spoken of it and they hadn’t asked.

He heard footsteps behind him, and spun around, alarmed for a moment until he recognized Karis, no longer under illusion, she needed to wear her own face in order to speak to her potential
supporters. It was a risk, but clad in rough, loose peasant’s garb with her face veiled, slouched until she appeared almost hunched over, and wearing a dull expression that made her look rather stupid, she couldn’t have looked less like a princess. He doubted anyone would have recognized her.

Very gently, Vanyel rested the delicate touch of his Mindspeech on her surface thoughts, which were like ripples over a deep, still pool. :Is it done?:

She nodded, her thoughts full of ‘yes’, then bent over Savil. “Mother,” she said, in Karsite. Savil yawned and sat up, shaking out her cloak. “Mother, let us go to the Great Temple for the noon rites.”

Vanyel closed his eyes, taking a deep breath.

Almost time. If they could avoid detection for long enough – not a certainty, any remaining mages were likely to be found among the temple-priests – they would wait until immediately after the noon ceremony. It was when the main temple sanctuary would be emptiest, while the priests took their afternoon meal. Fewer people he would have to kill or incapacitate.

Center and ground. More than anything, he wanted to reach for Yfandes, just for a moment’s reassurance, but she was over a mile away, outside the city walls, and he couldn’t risk it. Not when he had already spotted a few Gifted Thoughtsensers. Thankfully all of them had been distracted, and with shields up – not surprising, a busy city was never a pleasant place to go unshielded. Especially not when it was the capital of a kingdom at war.

You can do this, he told himself firmly. An echo: whether or not you can, you will.

“Major Lissa!” The child had run up to the mess tent, halting a yard away from her table. “Major Lissa, it’s time!”

She was on her feet in an instant, snatching her cloak from the bench beside her, half-eaten bowl of stew forgotten. “How long?”

“Five minutes, ma’am!”

Lissa was already shouldering her way past the child, patting the girl’s shoulder. “Spread the word to my captains!” she called back over her shoulder, and then broke into a run.

They had gone back and forth for days on the exact plan. Sunhame was at extreme Mindspeech range for any of their people – Vanyel thought he had enough rapport with Tantras to reach him across three hundred miles, but hadn’t been sure about Shallan, whose usual range was closer to a hundred miles – and they couldn’t plan on a specific day or time. Too much uncertainty in how long the journey would take. But they couldn’t be ready to leave every moment of every day, either, and if the Gate itself was their first warning, it would take precious minutes to organize her people.

In the end, they had agreed that Vanyel would use a particular communication-spell he knew to contact Kilchas with an extremely brief one-word message; it would be tiring for him and Kilchas both, but not as much as Mindspeech at that range, and Kilchas could draw on the Web for mage-energy to replenish his reserves. They would wait exactly ten minutes before having Savil raise the Gate. Kilchas would already have contacted Shallan, to pass word up the Mindspeech-relay to Haven, and Sandra, twenty miles away in Dog Inn, would be preparing to raise her own Gate.

It’s time. Oddly, Lissa wasn’t feeling much emotion; it was as though she had used up all of her
nerves, anticipating this. It had been wearing at her for the last few days – never being able to relax, never knowing whether the signal would come. Now, though, she felt distantly calm.

Around her, Horn had burst to life. There were shouts, and people running, but no confusion. *There had better not be.* They had drilled this more than enough times.

Her warhorse, a mare who might really have some Shin’a’in blood, was saddled and ready, and she nodded to the groom before hauling herself into the saddle. Blue-clad soldiers moved aside, clearing a path for her.

Counting down the seconds…

The Temple of Kernos loomed ahead. It offered the largest doorway in the town of Horn, tall and wide enough to fit several cavalry-soldiers abreast, and it had been used for Gates before. Savil had said that would make it easier; Lissa didn’t need to understand why. The great bronze doors had been pulled aside, and the street was packed solid for the next three blocks. She’d had two of her infantry companies staged outside it at all times for the last three days, ready to swarm through – currently, the Third and the Fifth.

Hoofbeats behind her. “Lissa!” The voice belonged to Herald Marius. He was a strong Mindspeaker, and would be sticking by her side for the duration of the battle, relaying her orders to the other Heralds who would be accompanying them. There were ten, including two with weak mage-gifts – not really much good for combat, but they would be able to warn of mage-attacks or traps, hopefully in time to avoid them or request support from Vanyel.

She stood up in the stirrups, looking around. Solid blue, as far as the eye could see, Guards packed shoulder-to-shoulder in perfect formation, occasionally interrupted by spots of white. They had practiced and timed it, and she thought could move just under a hundred infantry per minute through the Gate, or fifty cavalry, and by the time the Third and Fifth had crossed, more would be ready. Off in the distance, she saw a clot of green – the Healers who would be following after the first two companies, just over twenty volunteers, Melody among them.

Her warhorse pranced under her. She settled back into the saddle, reaching to stroke the beast’s neck. “Easy, Blossom. We’re fine.”

Marius sidled in beside her. “Orders?”

She glanced at him. “Nothing new.” If everything went according to plan, they would be emerging at the Great Temple to Vkandis, in the heart of the city. They wouldn’t have complete surprise; it was very likely the Karsites still had some priest-mages, and if Vanyel’s initial message hadn’t gotten their attention, clearing out the temple to secure Savil’s end of the Gate certainly would. Hard to know how much resistance they would face; they didn’t know to what extent the Karsite leadership might have guessed at what was coming and made contingency plans. *They know we’ve been gathering troops here for months.* Horn had come under attack a few times, but nothing she hadn’t been able to hold off, and their casualties had been light.

The plan itself had been classified, known by only a few people, until three weeks ago – but she’d needed to tell the troops *something*, in order to start training. Could a Karsite spy have gotten in and out and passed a message to Sunhame in that time? Maybe. In fact, she ought to assume they had, and that they would be ready for her. In her best attempt to be as prepared as possible while minimizing the risk of plans leaking, she had briefed only her captains on the details of the attack. Their planned route through the city *ought* to be a surprise.

Had it been five minutes yet? Lissa stood up in the saddle again, looking around.
And the doorway to the arch began to glow.

Anticipation thrilled in her chest, on the knife-edge between fear and joy. *I can’t believe I’m really doing this.* Barely thirty years old, a major for less than four years – and she was about to lead a decisive attack that might, if she could pull it off, end the war. Oh, she had leaned plenty on General Alban for the planning phase. But in a couple of minutes, she would be on her own–

No. Not on her own. Her aunt was there, and her brother. This wouldn’t have been possible at all without them. Just for a moment, she let the warm glow of pride fill her, basking in it. *Father, Mother, if you could see us now…*

And then she pushed it aside. Focus. Win the battle first, and then celebrate. Herald Marius was unfolding his map, canvas fastened a wooden cylinder on either end to hold it rigid, held to his wrist by a leather cord. She heard shouts, in the distance, could see the seething bustle as more and more of the Guard lined up behind her – but around her, there was stillness and silence.

The doorway blazed white for a moment, and Lissa involuntarily clenched her eyes shut. When she opened them, the shadowy interior of the temple was gone. Instead she saw a courtyard – and, directly ahead, a fountain, under a statue she assumed was meant to represent Vkandis. There was gold leaf, everywhere, glittering in the weak winter sun.

Deep breath. “Go!” she shouted into the murmuring silence, and the first ranks began to move.

She was maybe the fiftieth person through the Gate. Blossom wasn’t exactly happy about approaching it, but the warhorse was well-trained, and she only bucked a little before letting Lissa spur her through.

–A moment of disorientation, the feeling of falling–

And she was on the other side, three hundred miles away. It was the first time she had ever crossed a Gate, though she’d seen half a dozen by now. The first of them twelve years ago.

She backed Blossom against a wall, moving aside to let the Third Company finish crossing. They had their orders, and she could hear Captain Tarvi shouting for them to spread out.

Looking around, she had to catch her breath. *It’s beautiful.* Not the time to be distracted by it. She saw a few slumped bodies in red-and-gold robes – and, past them, a shimmering, translucent wall. The Guards were crossing it easily enough, swarming out into the square and the streets beyond. A one-sided mage-barrier, Vanyel had explained. He could keep Savil’s end of the Gate-terminus safe, while allowing her troops to cross.

Where was he? She played her eyes over the courtyard, and eventually saw a figure against the wall of the temple itself, built from enormous slabs of pink-veined white marble. No, two figures. Her aunt was sitting with her back against the stone, and Vanyel was beside her, one hand on her shoulder, leaning heavily on the wall. He and Savil still wore their Karsite peasant garb, ragged and travel-worn. It was why she hadn’t seen them at first; even though she knew better, part of her had been searching for Whites.

She beckoned to Marius, and urged Blossom across the courtyard, running Guards parting on either side of them to clear a path. Reaching them, she slid down from the saddle, reins in one hand. *He looks awful.* Vanyel’s eyes were clenched shut, face white, beads of sweat standing out on his forehead, and his breath came in pants through gritted teeth.

She wanted to hug him, but decorum wouldn’t allow it.
“Herald-Mage Vanyel?”

For a moment, she thought he hadn’t heard her. Finally, he lifted his head, though he didn’t open his eyes. “Major Lissa? Sorry, I’m…not good for much…while the Gate’s up.”

Of course. He had to be in agony, and she knew he couldn’t shield himself fully, not without Yfandes there and while holding a mage-barrier powered by node-energy. *I hate that we have to ask this of you, Van.*

“How long can Savil hold it?” Their original guess had been anywhere from ten minutes to twenty-five, but her aunt had said she could make a better guess once it was up.

“Maybe…another…fifteen minutes.”

“Good.” That might be long enough for all of her people to cross. “Where’s Karis?” The plan had been for the Karsite princess to accompany her and Marius.

He gestured vaguely to the left. “Over there…”

“Very good.” She would find her in a moment. “Any updates on how much resistance we’re facing?”

He shook his head. “Not sure… Took down…a few mages…tried at my barrier.”

“Can you give us any fire support now, or do you need to wait until the Gate’s down?”

He opened his eyes a crack, and managed a tight smile. “I’ll do…my best.”

“Thank you.” She hated to leave him to face this alone – but neither of them had a choice. “I’ll see you when it’s done.”

He nodded, and she nodded back, and she led Blossom away.

“I’m coming,” Shavri said firmly.

Randi was still frozen, halfway through lacing his tunic. “No.”

“Yes.” She folded her arms; maybe it would hide the fact that her hands were shaking. “Tran agrees.”

They had been on high alert for nearly a week now, packed and ready to leave at any moment – and, just a few minutes ago, Tantras had received a message via the relay. Ten minutes.

“What do you mean, Tran agrees?” Randi stared at her.

It had been Tran’s idea – at least, he was the one who had spoken it out loud first, but she had already been thinking it. Randi’s dizzy spells had been worse, the last few mornings. Maybe he thought the stress and long hours were getting to him; she knew that it was more than that, though it definitely wasn’t helping how hard he was pushing himself. He *had* to know something was wrong, but he had been brushing it off, and she knew what he must be thinking. No time to worry about it now. Win the war first.
In the short run, it meant that he needed her, though he didn’t know why. Didn’t know that she had been discreetly sending him Healing-energy during every long meeting and planning-session. We should have told him already. She and Tran had talked about it after Karis left, but it had never felt like a good time. Which she knew was cowardly of her, but, well.

“I’m coming,” she said again. Her things were packed as well; it had been Tran’s idea, not to tell him until they were minutes away from leaving. He’ll just try to talk us out of it, he had said. Best not to give him time.

“What about Jisa?”

“She’ll stay with Beri. It won’t be for too long.” It took every scrap of control she had to keep her voice light. I’ve never been this afraid.

“Shavri,” Randi said. “I don’t have time for this. Listen, I don’t want to be two hundred miles apart either, but… It’s too dangerous. I have to know that you’re safe.”

She had anticipated that objection, and planned her response. “Randi. It’s not that dangerous, or else you wouldn’t be going. You’re taking your personal Guard with you, and there’ll be over a thousand troops left in Horn even if Major Lissa has time for all her people to cross. There’ll be four mages down there,” even if two of them were only hedge-wizard potential, “and there aren’t any mages in Haven anymore. Meaning if there’s another attempt on my life, with magic, there’s no one who can protect me here.”

Randi flinched, taking a step back. She hated to bring it up like that, but it wasn’t false.

“And Jisa?” he said sharply.

“Beri’s going to take her out of the city. No one will know where they are, except for some discreet guards.” It was the last thing she wanted, to be separated from her daughter, they had never been apart longer than a few candlemarks, but it was unconscionable to take Jisa into a combat zone. She took a deep breath. “Randi, you’re not going to talk me out of this. I’m coming. We’re partners, right? That means for this as well.”

Randi closed his eyes, breathed in and out, opened them. “I don’t know what’s got into you,” he said slowly, “but we have five minutes and I don’t have time to argue about it. Fine.” His eyes narrowed. “I really hope I don’t regret this.”

So do I. She wasn’t sure what had gotten into her either. It wasn’t that she wanted to do this. She didn’t want to, at all. The fear made her sick to her stomach.

If Karis can be so brave for her kingdom, I can do it for mine.

If Vanyel had known it would hurt this much, he might not have had the courage.

Surely no more than a quarter-candlemark had gone by, that Savil had been holding the Gate, but it felt like it had been years. Vanyel was still holding the barrier, steadily feeding in power from the node that lay under the temple. He had been responding to quite a large number of requests for support in the battle that was already well underway. There were other Farseers, thankfully, and Mindspeakers, but aside from Savil, who was very much occupied, he was the only mage out here.
above Master-level.

He had been trying to avoid property damage as much as possible; they wanted to take the city, not leave it in ruins. Still, he didn’t have the fine control for targeted attacks; he had come to rely so much on the Web. He had taken down several freshly ‘fed’ bloodpath mages – the ones who wore black robes, he hadn’t felt guilty at all about killing. At a distance, he hadn’t been able to manage a binding-spell on the Abyssal demons one of them had summoned before he could intervene, but there weren’t all that many and, at the cost of maybe fifty soldiers’ lives, they eventually succumbed to cold steel. Vanyel had barricaded a few roads with walls of invisible force, and knocked down a few buildings to clear paths.

He had only the vaguest sense of how the battle was going; with the acid-like pain of the Gate eating at his skull, he could scarcely manage Farsight for a second at a time, and only when he was in contact with another Mindspeaker and could use that link as a focus.

It felt like it would never end.

:Savil?: he sent. He had been trying to hold an energy-link to her, when he could, but he didn’t have much attention to spare to manage it, and she was far too busy with the Gate to hold her end of it stable.

:I’m all right: Her mindvoice was faint, leaking overtones of growing confusion and fog.

He pulled from the node, filtering it through his focus-stone, and poured more power into the shield; the Karsites must have realized that physical attacks would drain it and keep him distracted, even if they had little hope of breaking through. The region immediately outside had deteriorated into close melee fighting, a cacophony of shouts and steel-on-steel that he tried to tune out – every once in a while, he would throw a clumsy wind-spell just to knock enough people out of the way that the next platoon could get out.

:Savil: he sent. With his mage-sight, he could see that her reserves were nearly gone. :Savil, you need to drop it:

:Not yet: Stubbornness and determination. :Only got a thousand through:

Only that? He hadn’t been counting. Lissa had well over two thousand of the Guard, lining up to cross. He knew as well as Savil did how important it was for her to hold to Gate as long as possible; once it was down, they would be a very long way from backup.

:You’re going to drain yourself unconscious: he sent.

:Then let me: No hesitation. :I’ll have a few minutes before it’ll cause any permanent damage:

:No!: He couldn’t believe she was even considering it. Once her reserved energy was gone, the Gate would start pulling the life from her blood, slowly eating her alive.

:You’ve got enough Healing-Sight: Savil urged. :Take down the Gate for me before I run out of time:

:Savil, no. You’ll be out with backlash the next week: If she survived it. :We need you!:

Mental laughter, dry, dusty. :I’ll be out the rest of the day no matter what, and we’re going to win or lose this in the next few candlemarks. After that, what does a week matter?: A pause. :I outrank you, ke’chara. It’s an order:
He lost the link with her, as a second Mindtouch tapped at his shields. The pain made it so hard to think.

:Herald Marius?:

:Priest-mage coming at us: The man’s Mindspeech was harried, fragmented. :Take him out?:

:I’ll try: Vanyel gritted his teeth, breathed in and out; it must have taken him fifteen seconds just to center and ground. Holding to the link with Marius as an anchor, he Reached out with Farsight, and managed to focus in on a hazy image of the street. Marius and Lissa were riding closely together, galloping away from another mage in black robes; Vanyel felt a pang of fear, and nearly lost hold of the image. Lissa wore a shield-talisman, a new, more powerful design that Savil had worked out in the weeks before they set out, based on his previous work and some specimens they had from captured Karsites. Karis had one as well, and most of the Heralds and Lissa’s captains had talismans of his own design, still functional enough.

Still. His sister was in danger, and he hated it.

Lean into mage-sight – and he nearly lost control again. The priest didn’t have potential above the hedge-wizard level; Vanyel wasn’t even sure he had the sensitivity of true Mage-Sight, to even see the flows of energy; but he radiated the slick feel of blood-magic. And the raw, uncontrolled edge of someone who had never used it, never held such power, before today. His shields were overpowered, but rudimentary, and didn’t block Thoughtsensing at all; Vanyel could sense his fear, and the soul-deep faith that drove him to go on fighting anyway.

For a moment, he let himself feel a reluctant respect for the Karsite priesthood. They had so few resources. He hadn’t seen more than a dozen priests wielding mage-energies at all, and half of them had been like this man, with no real ability to *guide* the blood-bought power they wielded. In their place, desperately trying to hold off an attack in overwhelming force, he might have done the same.

*If I weren’t here, it might even have been enough.* A single priest wielding enough blood-power could take on nearly an unlimited number of un-Gifted soldiers. Except that they never had the chance, because each company had a Gifted Herald, and they could contact Vanyel for support in seconds.

Clinging to his Othersight with the desperation of a drowning man holding to a fragment of driftwood, he reached through the man’s shields, along the Mindspeech channel, and struck. His control was faltering; he put more into it than he’d intended, and felt the young priest, barely a boy, felt as he died…

–He found himself on hands and knees, stomach heaving. Swallowing bile, he sagged back against the wall, not bothering to try to stand.

:Savil?:

:? She was hardly aware of her surroundings, now, just barely clinging to consciousness.

:Ke’chara: Her mindvoice was a breath on the wind. She couldn’t remember why she was here, only that she had to hold the Gate, had to had to had to – but she recognized him, and she was glad he was with her.

:Everything’s going to be all right: he sent, and hoped it wouldn’t be a lie.

His shield was weakening. He reached for the node again, trying to breathe through the agony as power flowed through his raw, scorched channels, and renewed it. Then he took Savil’s shoulder,
and extended a mental hand, gently, offering a trickle of node-energy filtered through his focus-stone and keyed to himself. Off in the distance, he could feel Kellan trying to feed energy to her as well.

:Herald Vanyel?: Herald Lia, this time. :Give us a barrier?:

:Just a moment:

…The minutes passed in a haze. On and on and on. It will end, he told himself, over and over, every time it felt like he couldn’t bear the pain for a single moment longer. Though it seemed to hurt every so slightly less if he relaxed into it. It was impossible to shield out the Gate-energies; he needed to stay in close rapport with Savil, to keep sharing his strength.

It wasn’t supposed to be possible to raise a Gate in concert, he thought dully, except with a lifebonded partner. And yet Savil couldn’t have held the Gate anywhere near this long on her own.

Even so, she was fading, minute by minute. Each time he had to let go of the link with her, to knock down a building or block an alley or drench some helpless untrained bloodpath mage in fire, she slipped further away.

He missed the exact moment when she lost consciousness; he had been busy tossing up a mage-barrier around a tower one of Lissa’s platoons had taken and were using to stage the next advance. When he came back to himself, he had to reinforce his own shield around the temple, and then take a moment just to catch his breath, fighting back nausea and spots that danced in his vision.

Savil was leaning against his shoulder; she had been for the last few minutes, but now she felt heavier, deadweight. He reached for her mind, and found her shields down. Prodded her, but there was no response.

The Gate-outline had gone uneven, but it was stable enough. Men and women in Guard-blue were still crossing at a run and pouring out into the city. I’ve never seen so many soldiers in one place. Surely they must have two thousand across, by now – but they were still coming.

With his Healing-Sight, he could see the life-energy draining from Savil, her aura waning. But her heartbeat and breathing were still steady, if slow. A few minutes, she had said.

:Herald Vanyel?:

:Can it wait?:

:Yes: Herald Kera backed away from the mindtouch.

Gods, he hurt. More than anything, he wanted to shut down Savil’s Gate now, just so the agony would end.

Not yet, he told himself firmly. Soon.

Seconds passed.

Not yet.

Minutes.
Not yet.

Savil’s breathing faltered.

He raised his hand, waving, and managed to catch a soldier’s attention. The woman – no, a girl, she couldn’t have been more than eighteen – pushed through the flow of people to him. Her eyes were wide, awed. She must have recognized him, despite his lack of Whites.

“Herald Vanyel?” she said, and bowed.

“Tell them,” he started, coughed, took a breath, “tell them... the Gate’s... coming down...” He didn’t want to find out what would happen if someone was crossing a Gate at the moment it closed.

“Oh course, Herald.” And she darted away.

Shouts. Cries. The rush of bodies trickled to a stop.

He reached in – it was among the hardest things he had ever done, the pain was unbelievable – and pinched off the flowing of energy from Savil to the Gate.

With a sucking feeling, it collapsed and was gone.

“Princess Karis!” Lissa called out. “Stay close!” She used the Karsite honorific, and pronounced it properly too.

They were still quite near the temple, in a blind alleyway, staying back from the fray as thousands of men and women in Valdemaran blue streamed out into the city she had once called home.

Karis closed her eyes, letting the anguish and frustration rise in her chest for a moment. There would be many dead bodies by the time the sun set tonight. Karsite bodies. The very people she was trying to protect.

Vkandis, my Lord, I wish You would give Your daughter a sign. That this is truly right.

There was no answer to her silent prayer, and she hadn’t expected one. Sola’s presence alone was a stronger sign than she could ever have hoped for.

Delian, the Companion she rode, didn’t wait for her answer; he backed them up against the brick wall. Karis stood in the stirrups for a moment, rebalancing herself, trying to ease her already aching buttocks. In full royal regalia, cloth-of-gold and flame-coloured embroidery and a gilded headpiece, she felt both conspicuous and out of place.

That was the point, wasn’t it? It was why she was here at all – to be as visible and obvious as possible, to be recognized, to make it clear that, at the very least, what was happening right now was a little more complicated than an invasion.

In the end, what did that really mean? It wasn’t like she had asked the city folk for their permission.

“Major,” she said, nodding. Oddly, she had found that she liked Lissa, though they’d spent barely a half-candlemark in each other’s company, and most of that too busy for chitchat. The major didn’t look at all like her brother, Herald-Mage Vanyel, but she did bear a marked resemblance to her aunt,
Herald-Mage Savil. An impressive family, Karis thought for the dozenth time.

Maybe she would have liked Vanyel better, too, if not for all the ghosts that lay between them. It was odd. Lissa had served at Horn for three years, and must have slaughtered any number of her people. Why didn’t it bother her more? Hells, why did being around Lissa make her feel safe?

She was a lot safer than she would have been, thanks to the Herald-Mages, and their shield-talisman that she wore strung on a leather thong under her shirt. It had already turned a few sword-blows, when she’d let herself get separated from Lissa and the Herald in the initial melee, and Herald Vanyel said it ought to last all day. She should have been grateful.

“Major Lissa.” Herald Marius sidled up to them, stroking his Companion’s neck. “We’re moving on in five minutes, does that sound all right?”

“Of course.” Lissa’s voice was as calm as though she were at home sipping tea. It was a mask, Karis thought, but a good one.

She closed her eyes. Vkandis, my Sunlord, I pray that you are with me today.

Herald Shallan opened her eyes, lifting her head. “Gate’s down.”

There was a whispering sigh, as everyone in the room let out a breath. It had been over thirty minutes. I didn’t know it was possible to hold a Gate that long, Tantras thought. They were in General Alban’s planning-room, behind what had once been the main tavern in Dog Inn. With a fire in the grate, it was almost warm enough.

“How many?” Randi said quietly.

Shallan’s expression went blank again. “Two thousand four hundred, give or take,” she said. “Eight companies… Well, seven and a half. Only a hundred of the Second got through before it came down.”

It was better than any of them had hoped for.

“Now we wait.” Randi turned to Tantras. “The relay got past?”

Tantras nodded confirmation, without speaking. Sunhame was at extreme range even for his Mindspeech – in an emergency, he could probably reach Vanyel in particular, they had good rapport, but it would strain both of them and they certainly wouldn’t want to pass long messages. Besides, Van would be exhausted by the time the day was over. In an ideal world, they would already have sent someone in to hold the midpoint, but every additional Herald in Karse would have meant a risk of interception, capture, interrogation, and the Karsite leadership piecing together the details of their plan.

Savil’s party had needed to detour nearly twenty miles west just to cross the Border unseen. The Karsites had already amassed considerable troops to the south; there had been probing raids on Horn nearly every day out of the last week, and holding them off had borne a cost, in lives and injuries. Nothing near enough to change the final calculus. No attack had included any mages; Vanyel had said the vrondi in the Web-spell would make it very disconcerting for any mage who wasn’t also a Herald to enter Valdemar. Disconcerting, and likely fatal. The vrondi and the alarms tied to them
meant even ordinary Heralds could detect the use of mage-energy.

Herald Nina had been waiting to ride south on their signal, in disguise, thirty miles to the east of Horn. On the Sunhame end, Heralds Marius and Kera were both strong Mindspeakers, with ranges of something over a hundred miles on a good day; one of them would ride north as soon as they could be spared. They ought to have a full relay in place by evening, one that could pass longer messages without anyone needing to tire themselves out.

He wished they had someone with the Farsight range to See Sunhame. Herald Efrem could have done it, maybe, if he had still been alive. They had no one else with anywhere near that strength.

Focus on problems nearer to hand. “Shallan?” he said. “Any update on the attack?” Not too surprisingly, the Karsites must have had someone who was at least enough of a mage to detect the Gate-energies, and someone else smart enough to realize what it meant – they had mounted an attack on Horn within five minutes.

The other Herald massaged her forehead for a moment. “They’re still moving people in, and we’re taking casualties, but they never got anywhere near the Gate.”

*They’d better not have.* Security over the terminus had been one of the highest priorities, second only to moving Lissa’s battalion through as efficiently as possible. They couldn’t afford to lose Savil. And Tantras had promised her.

–Shallan’s eyes flew open, and a heartbeat later she was already half out of her chair. “Damn!”

Tantras rose as well, reaching for her mind; between the two of them, Mindspeech was as effortless as spoken words, and faster. :What?:

:*Alarm from the perimeter:* A pause. :Karsites somehow got a raiding party in around from the east: She dropped the connection, clearly busy Mindspeaking with someone else outside.

Tantras swore. *I knew we didn’t have enough Farsight coverage.* He was already halfway to the door.

Randi had started to stand. Tantras glanced over his shoulder. “Stay put!” :Taver, warn the guards: They had thirty of Randi’s personal Guard deployed around the building.

He heard Shallan’s breath leave her in a gust. :They have a mage:

“Oh, no.” How in the name of all hells had they failed to detect the attack sooner? The Web should have sensed any foreign mage crossing the Border.

:*Where’s Sandra?:* he sent. She was surely still exhausted – Gating at all was a strain for her – and he hated to ask her to fight now. But Kilchas was in Horn, twenty miles away. Too far.

:*On her way:* Shallan replied. :She says the mage may not’ve cast anything until now, could be why the vrondi didn’t pick them up. They know we can detect their use of magic:

Damn. Though Van had in fact warned him that a mage with good enough shields, who refrained from using magic, might be able to go undetected for a time –the Web detected the use mage-energies, not the Gift itself. :Taver?: he reached. :Can you reach Kilchas’ Rohan?: Maybe the other Herald-Mage would be able to cast at a distance, using the Web. Kilchas was a strong Mindspeaker and Tantras ought to be able to reach him easily if he had a moment to go into trance, but he didn’t have even those seconds to spare right now.
Focus. Tantras realized he had stopped mid-stride, one hand on the door. “Randi, stay there!” he shouted back over his shoulder, and shoved through the door. Into mayhem. He recognized Randi’s personal Guard, in their darker blue, silver-hemmed uniforms, intermixed with regular Guards and Heralds sprinting to join their Companions.

*Taver, where’s Shavri?:*

*Shielded cellar:*

He knew the place; the cellar in question was under the mayor’s house, and any mage below Adept-class would have considerable difficulty breaking the very comprehensive shields Savil had laid.

*We need Randi in there: he sent.*

*You as well, Chosen:*

*No: He was needed out here; he was the strongest Mindspeaker on site, and from down there he wouldn’t be able to reach through the shields to coordinate the others. “Captain!” he called out, waving to the Guard he recognized. “Get the King under cover!”*

A terse nod, and the man turned, already calling out orders, arms raised and gesturing. It had been maybe thirty seconds since Shallan’s alert. Too slow…

*Chosen, I’m coming to meet you: Taver sent, along with a flashed image of the camp and a sense of direction.*

*Where’s Alban?: he sent. The general had been in the meeting with them until ten minutes ago.*

*Latrines. He’s coming: A pause. Meet at the second marker: The camp had numbered flags as landmarks at each path-crossing.*

*I wish I hadn’t eaten. His stomach was churning, the bread and cheese he had bolted down sitting like a leaden weight. He knew he had needed the fuel. It wasn’t exactly an option, not to eat for the duration of a high-alert period.*

It was very cold. The first real snow had come a few days ago, carpeting ground that was frozen hard, and slippery. His breath steamed in front of him, and he realized he had forgotten to grab his cloak before running out. No time to go back for it now.

–Taver galloped up, planting all four feet and skidding to a halt. *Chosen, get on: He wasn’t wearing any of his tack.*

Tantras swung himself up, bareback. *Don’t take any corners too fast, or I’ll fall off:*

*I won’t let you fall, Chosen:*

Seconds later, they were at the marker. General Alban waved to him from the center of a knot of people. “Herald Tantras! Have you seen Sand–”

Out of nowhere, something struck.

*What just happened? He was sprawled on the ground, ears ringing, half-blinded. Taver?: He rolled over, tried to struggle up on his elbows; pain lanced through his arm and shoulder, and he collapsed back, whimpering. You said you wouldn’t let me fall, he thought, pointlessly.*
Tantras flattened himself to the ground, cheek pressed against the snow. He had never heard that sheer ringing authority in Taver’s mindvoice before; it was unimaginable to disobey.

Center and ground. He must have hit his head when he fell; everything was spinning. Focus. He could feel the seconds slipping by, like sand falling through the cracks between his fingers.

Think. Reach. :Sandra?:

:I’m almost there!: Overtones of panic. Sandra had never coped well with combat.

Reach further, out and out. He searched for the familiar mind-shape. :Kilchas?:

:Tran?: Confusion. :We’re a little busy–:

:We’re under attack. Need help:

:Oh, gods. I’ll–:

Later, he would never be sure what had warned him. But something did, and he lifted his head, blinking tears from his eyes.

The young woman, some fifty yards away, didn’t show up to his Thoughtsensing. She was a blind spot, like there was no one there at all. It was hard to make out her face, through the blotches that danced against his vision, but she couldn’t have been older than fifteen. She wore blue, a reasonable mock-up of a Guard uniform. She seemed to be alone.

Shields, he thought. The Karsites must have had a shield-talisman left, from the Adept Van had killed years ago. It was the only explanation. :Sandra–:

:Chosen: Taver’s mind blazed against his, blue-white. :Chosen. Stay where you are:

And he was there, interposing his body between Tantras and the mage.

For just a moment, Taver turned his head, and their eyes met. Bottomless blue. Tantras remembered falling into those depths, one night more than four years ago. How different it had felt from the first time, with Delian.

:Tran!: Sandra’s mindvoice, raw-edged. :Tran, I'm almost–:

Taver turned his head away.

And then the young mage raised her hands, and drenched them in fire.

Someone was screaming. It took Tantras a moment to realize that the cry came from his own throat, and a second longer to realize that, though the air blew hot and dry on his face, the fire wasn’t reaching him. Taver blocked it with his own body. He glowed, blue-and-silver against the red-and-yellow, an ancient, undying star meeting the flames.

His white coat was already blackening, flesh peeling away, but he held his ground.

:Taver no Taver nonono–: His Mindspeech bounced uselessly from impenetrable, inhuman shields.

:Tran!: Kilchas. :I'm going to–:
He raised his own shields against the other Herald. :Taver!: he tried again, desperately.

The shields parted for just a moment, just a little. :Chosen. I love you: His Companion’s agony was leaking through – he wasn’t human, and never had been, but he was close enough to it to feel pain. :Valdemar needs you. I am sorry to ask this of you, but you are not allowed to give up: A pause, laden with a thousand overtones, everything that had ever been between them, sorrow and regret and joy and, under it all, the inexorable song that was Taver’s love for him. :You will always be my Chosen:

Taver closed off the channel again, and there was a strange feeling in Tantras’ head. Like a splinter sliding out from beneath his skin, not quite painful but somehow deeply, uncannily wrong. He recognized it; it was what it had felt like when Delian withdrew from his mind.

He’s undoing our bond.

There was something horribly inevitable about it. It was too late to act, too late to change the outcome here. Maybe it had always been too late, since the very beginning.

(A glimpse of blue and silver, a spreading tangle of threads, one of them was ending, torn off, and Taver had known, gods, he had known this was coming, had always known, and he had come anyway–)

Tantras didn’t feel Taver die.

Only the part of him that died with him, as the half-unraveled remains of their bond was torn away. It felt like he was coming apart. Shreds of him drifting away. Nothing left to hold the center together.

:Tran!: Sandra’s mindvoice dragged him back, flailing at his shields, panicked. :I’m casting at her, can’t get through–:

He wanted to close her out, but he didn’t remember how. And there was something else. One thing that he could still remember.

Not allowed to give up.

:Contact Kilchas: he sent. :If you attack at the same time–: He lost the link. It was too hard to stay focused. Too hard to care about the outcome anymore.

Time passed. He lay still, helpless, alone, waiting for a final blow that never came.

Eventually, he felt another Mindtouch. :Mage is down: Kilchas, exhausted, fading in and out. :Thanks for the idea, we used the Web to work in concert…: He trailed off. :Tran? What’s wrong? Are you hurt?:

:I don’t know: He could barely manage to shape the words. It was nearly impossible even to hold his end of the link steady, across a mere twenty miles. :Taver…:

:Oh, gods: He felt the rising horror as Kilchas realized. :Are you – hang on, it’s going to be all right, let me – Sandra’s coming – Tran, stay with me, just hold on:

He laughed. It turned into a coughing fit; his ribs throbbed. :Stop panicking. Not going to kill myself: Strangely, it didn’t hurt as much as he had expected. There was a bottomless void in his mind, it felt like he was slowly bleeding out into nothing, but he was mostly numb.

And it didn’t matter, did it? Didn’t matter if it was bearable. Taver’s final words sat in his memory
-like a steel weight. *Not allowed to give up.*

It was hard to breathe, and he was very cold.

Running footsteps. Someone was kneeling over him, a blur, light and shape and colour that had no meaning. Sounds he couldn’t process. Cool, soft hands touched his cheek, and moments later he felt the brush of a mind. *:Tran:*

He coughed again. *:Shavri?:* What was she doing here? *:Get under cover. Too dangerous:* 

Her mindvoice rolled over his. *:Taver called me:* She was shielding well, but there was a nakedness there, grief and loss and fear. He felt something she offered with her mind, a gentle inflow of energy. Weight settling onto his chest, warmth, and he realized she had thrown her own cloak over him. *:You’re in shock:* she sent. *:Just lay still. I’ve got you:* 

He closed his eyes. It felt like he was falling. Like there was no floor left to the world, and he might slide right out into the nothing. 

*Not allowed to give up.*

Stef had lost track of time, as his fingers moved over the strings of his new lute, but he wasn’t quite absorbed enough to miss the supper bell. And Breda said he had to go to supper. It was one of the rules.

He set the lute down and scampered to the door. Then looked back, and hesitated. His eyes had fallen on the other side of the room – and Medren was still there. He had been out all afternoon, and Stef must have been too busy playing to notice him come home. Maybe that had been rude. Was it rude, to ignore your roommate? Maybe he ought to say sorry.

“Medren,” he said. “It’s supper. Are you coming?” He took care with his accent, even though Medren claimed he didn’t mind and might even be telling the truth. You learned faster if you practiced all the time, and Stef couldn’t afford to keep making mistakes.

Medren, huddled in the middle of his bed with his arms around his knees and his head down, shook his head.

“Are you upset?” Stef said, taking a step closer. “Why?”

Silence, broken only by a sniffle.

“Medren?” Stef stopped at the foot of the bed. “You can tell me. I’m your friend.” Saying the word gave him a funny feeling. But it was true. He had asked Breda, what the rules were for being someone’s friend, and she had given him a very odd look, but one of the things she had said was that friends talked to each other when they were sad.

Berte must not ever have had a friend.

Medren raised his head, dabbing at his eyes with his sleeve. “I’m all right, Stef. Let’s go to supper.”

“No.” Stef held his ground. “Please tell me why you’re upset.” It bothered him, not knowing. There was something he didn’t understand, and he had to understand. It wasn’t safe not to. “You’re
supposed to tell your friends why you’re sad. That’s the rule.”

Something softened in Medren’s face. “Oh, Stef. Sometimes you’re so…” He trailed off. Took a deep breath. “I’m worried. About my uncle. I’m probably not supposed to know, but there’s a battle happening right now and he’s fighting in it.”

Stef tried to think of what to say. “Is he very good at fighting?” he tried finally.

Medren actually chuckled, under his breath. “I would say so.”

Stef tried to smile brightly at him. “Then he’ll be all right. ‘Cause he can kill all the enemies.”

“That’s not…” Medren rubbed his eyes. “He probably will be fine. He’s ought in a lot of battles before, and he’s still alive. I just…” He closed his eyes. “I’m scared.”

Stef shuffled his feet. “Was he very kind to you?” he said finally. He was still getting used to it, to people who knew who their parents were, who had brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and cousins. Families who were kind to them even if they were bastards. Medren had said his grandfather was strict, but Stef didn’t know what he meant, because Medren also said his grandfather had never even hit him.

Medren nodded. “He’s the reason I’m at Bardic at all. Saw me play and said I was Gifted. He talked Grandfather into sending me.” He picked at the edge of his thumbnail. “I owe him. Mother told me to keep an eye on him. Said he’s no good at taking care of himself.”

“Oh.” There were so many bits and pieces there, and Stef didn’t know how to put them together.

“Stef,” Medren said, his voice soft. Tentative. “Have you ever seen anyone die?”

“Yes.” Of course.

Medren shivered. “Was it awful?”

“Not usually.” Stef pulled himself up onto the opposite end of Medren’s bed. Medren had said he could sit there, if they were talking, even though it was on the other side of the line on Medren’s side of the room. “Dead people just look like they’re sleeping.” If it was the winter cold that had killed them, anyway, and it was that often enough, for drunks and oldsters who had nowhere to go to stay warm, or who hadn’t bothered. Stef still hadn’t liked it when Berte made him take their clothes, but she said ghosts weren’t real and he wanted to believe her.

“My Berte knifed a man once,” he added. “He was trying to steal me.”

Medren’s eyes went very wide.

“Sorry,” Stef said. “Is something I shouldn’t say?” He had been trying to figure out what was all right to talk about. It was very confusing.

Medren looked down at his knee. “Probably not,” he said finally. “It’s all right. I don’t mind you telling me. I – My uncle almost died.” His shoulders trembled. “Our priest stabbed him. We still don’t know why. I grabbed a flower pot and hit him in the head. The priest, I mean, not my uncle.”

Another shudder. “I thought I’d killed him, but I hadn’t. He just died later for a different reason. Anyway, my uncle was – there was so much blood, I was so scared. Thought he would die for sure. He didn’t, the Healer thought it was a miracle.” He lifted his head, eyes shiny. “And he said I saved his life, because I was there and called for help.”
“That’s lucky,” Stef said, unsure if those were the right words.

Medren smiled weakly. “Mother says my uncle’s very unlucky and very lucky at the same time. Unlucky that he keeps nearly getting himself killed, lucky that he always survives. She says he must be like a cat, with nine lives. Just…what if this time’s the tenth?”

Stef didn’t know what to say, so he said nothing.

Medren sniffled again, then leaned over and absently patted Stef’s shoulder. “I’m glad you’re my friend, Stef. Glad I can tell you things like this.” He uncurled and slid his legs over the side of the bed. “Won’t help to sit here and worry. Come on, let’s go to supper.”
“Major!”

Lissa halted her warhorse and tilted her head back, looking up. “What?”

The figure in Whites waved to her, head and shoulder shoved out a high window. “Up here! We’ve cleared this building. Want a vantage point?”

She stretched in the saddle, reaching to rub her back. The light was grey and fading, the sky a dense wall of cloud, weather patterns upset by the Gate. At least the initial hailstorm had trailed off, and there was only the wind and drizzle. It wasn’t, quite, cold enough to snow.

Out of habit, Lissa played her eyes over the street. It was deserted, save for the bodies, but it wouldn’t be the first time someone had popped out at her from nowhere. The shield-talisman had saved her life a hundred times over, but that didn’t mean she could afford to be complacent. She had been holding all her senses alert, all day; there was a buzzing feeling in her head, and it was hard to finish a thought.

Herald Marius was riding ten paces behind her, map spread in his hands; they had been on their way from one company’s assigned section to another, both cleared with a perimeter in place. She gestured with her chin at the building and made a questioning face.

He and his Companion caught up to her. “I’d be up for a rest,” he said.

He looked like he needed it. There was a greyish tint to his face. Despite the cold, sweat had plastered his pale hair flat to his head, and dried around the neckline of his shirt, staining the white yellow. He had been using his Gift to the limit all day, both keeping them in contact with the various companies now spread throughout the city, as well as the relay to Horn, and using his Thoughtsensing to detect soldiers under cover.

_I wonder if I look that tired._ Lissa lowered her voice. “Is the building actually clear?”

Marius closed his eyes, face slipping into a blank expression. “…Not entirely,” he said. “There’s a cellar. Hidden trapdoor, I think. Family down there.”

“How civilians?”

“Think so.” Another pause. “They’re staying put. Terrified.”

_I hate this._ She felt like a butcherer. Her soldiers were disciplined; there was no looting, or not much, and their orders were to avoid hurting non-combatants as much as possible. Which wasn’t entirely. She had seen more than one too-small body. Hells, she knew they didn’t have a choice, not when the children of Sunhame had been raised to think of Heralds as worse than demons and some of them were heroically brave.
They were only trying to defend their home. Thinking about it made Lissa want to cry – so she boxed it away, because right now she couldn’t afford that distraction.

She looked back up at the window. “We’re coming up. How do we get in?”

“Around the back.”

Marius urged his Companion forwards, and she followed, trying to summon her mental map of the city. They had divided the map into sections and numbered them, assigning them to particular companies and commanders, but of course nothing had gone as planned – some sections had fallen to them easily, but some had proved the next thing to impossible. Not just those that had some horrifically young priest or priestess using blood-magic, either. There didn’t seem to be all that many Karsite troops in Sunhame – probably less than her eight companies, in fact – but they were experienced, and wily.

At least the new Son of the Sun, the arch-priest who had led the coup, had apparently executed most of the Palace Guard. Maybe they had resisted, staying loyal to their dead King; maybe he had only feared they would. It didn’t matter why, only that there were fewer experienced bodies to fight.

In the narrow alley-way behind the building, she nodded to the youthful Guard watching the door, dismounted onto wobbly legs, and tied Blossom’s reins to a post. Marius stroked his Companion’s nose and patted her neck, resting his forehead against hers for a moment, then turned back to Lissa.

They went inside.

The ground floor was split into two halves, a cheesemonger’s shop and a bakery. Three storeys, and the upper floors were divided into tenement-housing. Climbing the stairs, she stepped carefully over bloodstains, but someone had thoughtfully carried any bodies away. With a pang, she thought of the family huddling below. Did they hear her footsteps? Were they expecting to die at any moment? I’m sorry, she thought, pointlessly.

Marius led the way, and ushered her into what must have once been a family’s apartment. It was small and shabby. There was a straw-ticking mattress in the corner, strung on a frame of ropes, where they must have slept all together – a spinning-wheel, with a basket of yarn and carded wool abandoned beneath – a wooden chest, and a few children’s toys scattered on the floor, pushed up against the wall – a kettle dangling from a hook over the hearth. Someone had lit a small fire. The room was still cold.

The young Herald who had waved to her from the window had claimed the table, spreading out her map. She was a thin red-haired woman who looked to be in her early twenties; Lissa knew her by sight, but not her name. She had three Guards with her. Two were squatting by the fire, warming their hands.

The Herald glanced up. “Major Lissa. I’m Herald Elyna, my Gift is Fetching. Captain Nuban sent me with a party to find a higher vantage point, since the Fifth doesn’t have a Farseer.” She pointed at a row of lightweight message-tubes; Lissa recognized them as the type designed for Fetchers to transport. “Been sending my observations to him.”

Lissa nodded. “I was on my way to find the Fifth, actually.” They didn’t have a Mindspeaker either; there weren’t enough Heralds with either Gift to go around. “What’s their status?”

“They have section eleven secured.” The youthful Herald ran a finger along the map. “Sounds like the Seventh ran into some trouble in the next quadrant over, um, ten, I think. They’re lending some support.” She looked up at Lissa. “If you have orders for the captain, I can send them over.”
“I would appreciate that.” She stifled a yawn. “I think we’ll rest here for a little while. Marius? You’re worn out. Get something to eat and take a nap.” The Herald opened his mouth, ready to protest. “I’ll wake you if I need you for anything urgent,” she added, putting a little more firmness into her voice.

He nodded, reluctantly, and slung his bag onto the floor before settling next to it.

“Lieutenant,” Elyna said, and one of the men by the fire looked over. “We have some extra rations, right? Herald Marius, would you like some willowbark tea? I know I’ve got the worst reaction-headache I’ve ever had in my life.”

Lissa’s stomach rumbled. *I’d better eat as well.* She didn’t feel hungry, exactly – she never did on the battlefield – but she was a little lightheaded, and this looked to last for many more candlemarks. Food could wait until she had decided what orders to pass to Nuban, though. She turned her eyes back to the map, on which Elyna had been scrawling notes with a charcoal-pencil. Next to it, on a roll of paper, she had been recording other notes. Estimated casualty-numbers, both Valdemaran and Karsite, including the number of mages Vanyel had taken out. Nearly a dozen. Surely they couldn’t have many more left?

Overall, it could have been going a lot worse. Whatever Elyna knew was surely out of date, but they now had control of *all* the sections surrounding the Palace. The area now held by the Fifth had been the last. They had taken heavy casualties, but so had the Karsites, and she hoped she still had enough troops for the next part. The Palace itself.

Lissa didn’t know what lay inside those inner walls. How much resistance they would face. Whether the Son of the Sun would have held any of their surviving mages in reserve.

*We think the Son of the Sun is a mage,* she reminded herself. They had already been able to question a few captured priests and priestesses, all of whom seemed to genuinely believe that their new leader was truly chosen by Vkandis and his ‘miracles’ proved it. Both Karis and Vanyel thought those supposed miracles were nothing of the sort.

Maybe they could take the Palace before nightfall, if she passed the order to move now. It would certainly be easier while there was still some light. Delaying would give the enemy more time to prepare, and the Palace was a tough enough nut to crack already.

And she wanted it to be over.

“Herald Elyna,” she said. “Any word on Karis?” The Karsite princess had last been with Captain Jared and the First, securing the section she had numbered as three, to the east of the Palace and the Great Temple. It was where a number of the minor nobility lived – people who might well still be loyal to Karis and her family, where her presence might make a real difference.

Should she send Karis with the forces attacking the Palace? It was incredibly dangerous, of course. Should have been far too high a risk to accept – but it might make the difference between success and failure. Meaning she didn’t have a choice.

Deep breath. *You can do this.*

“Herald Elyna,” she started. “Can you put down the following…”
A spear of reddening light slanted through the billowing, grey-black bank of cloud, shining through the slackening rain. Reflected off the gold leaf all around, it felt like being inside a furnace. Except that a furnace would be warm, and the temple was so, so cold.

:Vanyel?:

The mindtouch pulled him out of his stupor. It was gentle enough, but it still hurt; everything inside his head felt raw.

:Marius: he sent, dully. They had been formal with each other at first, but less and less as the day wore on. :What do you need?:

A pause. :We’re advancing on the Palace. Can you blast the gates for us?:

:I’ll try: He dropped the contact, and lifted a hand to rub his eyes. I don’t think I’ve ever been this tired before. Six or seven candlemarks of continuous fighting, and he had never gone longer than five minutes between requests for help. The node beneath the Great Temple was long drained, and three more distant nodes along with it. Unsurprisingly, the local currents of mage-energy were writhing in confusion, and that, plus the Gate, had brought in a continuous storm. Vanyel had been trying to take breaks, to choke down food, but he had no appetite. At least the fountain was right there and the water was safe to drink.

They’d lost Herald-Mage Tina a candlemark ago. He hadn’t heard the Death Bell, of course, or even felt it in the Web – he was too far away. Yfandes had passed it on, sorrow leaking through their bond.

Valdemar had seven Herald-Mages left, now.

Vanyel reached for a fourth node, over a mile away. It was small and tame in comparison to the Heartstone back in Highjorune, but still it buffeted him, and he could barely control the flow.

He fed a trickle of energy into the barrier-shield, which he had shrunk and pulled in to cover just the corner of the temple where he huddled, holding Savil’s hand. He had found some rugs and blankets in a side room, and gotten her bundled up; she lay unmoving, pale, breathing shallowly. One of Lissa’s Healers had looked at her, but there wasn’t much they could do about backlash, their facilities weren’t any better than this – and he could keep her safe. He could defend himself better than anyone else here; the Guards were holding a wide perimeter around the Temple, but candlemarks ago he had asked them not to bother with a close guard. Better those men and women be elsewhere, where they actually had something to do.

It was safer than a Healers’ tent in hostile territory. He had suggested the Healers could set up in the temple with him, but they wanted to be closer to the action. To help as much as they could, which he supposed made sense. It’s only what all of us want.

:Fandes: he sent, just wanting to feel her presence in his mind.

:Chosen: He could feel her anxiety and worry. :I’m coming to you as soon as I can:

But she had been saying that for candlemarks. The fact was, she was doing more good where she was, on the outer edges of the city, fighting alongside Lissa’s soldiers, carrying people back and forth as couriers. It was rare for a Companion to let anyone but their Chosen ride them, and yet Yfandes must have borne several dozen people by now. She could move much, much faster than an ordinary horse, and she was a fighting force in her own right.

Kellan was there. He had come as soon as Lissa’s people had secured the area immediately around
the temple, and now lay curled half around Savil, keeping both of them warm; his white coat was bloodstained, crisscrossed with minor wounds he had taken fighting his way through the streets of Sunhame, racing to reach his Chosen.

Focus, Vanyel reminded himself. Reach for Farsight, trying not to whimper at the pain of his raw channels, centering on where Marius had been – no, that was wrong, they weren’t at the Palace at all. He Saw a multi-storeyed brick building, a high window. Quite a good vantage point. Lissa must have decided to stay back, staging from there. He could see her, in fact – leaning out through the window, hand shading her eyes from the sunset light. He had to admit, he was relieved she wasn’t leading the advance, and a little surprised. She had generally been the sort of commander who led at the front rather than the rear.

Karis didn’t appear to be with her. Was she with the force moving on the Palace? It seemed like a bad idea, but he found he couldn’t make himself care. Or even feel very curious. Whatever they had decided, he trusted Lissa’s judgement.

Move his mental ‘eye’ forwards, skimming the rooftops of the city. Too many bodies. Blue and rust-red and the motley clothing of civilians. Find the Palace. There were four gates in the walls, one facing each cardinal direction, and there was at least a full Valdemaran company assembled outside each.

Marius hadn’t specified whether he wanted all of them blasted. Usually, Vanyel would have mindtouched again to confirm, but he would lose hold of the Farsight if he tried now, and have to start over.

Pull in more energy from the node. Feeling the power scorch its way through his channels, he nearly lost control again. This isn’t safe anymore, he thought, distantly. He was too drained.

And there weren’t any other options.

He struck the first Gate with a blast of raw force – and saw dozens of blue-clad soldiers in blue knocked over, flying through the air. Oh, no. Clumsy. He couldn’t manage any better, not now. Hopefully none of them were badly hurt. He ought to feel guilty about it, but he couldn’t muster anything except numbness.

Blast the second gate. It felt like at any moment, his head would shatter into fragments.

Blast the third… And then the power of the node tore through him, scouring away all thought. He saw something on fire, before losing grip on his Farsight entirely. He couldn’t feel his body at all, anymore – there was only darkness, and falling.

:Chosen!: A frantic mindvoice, wavering in and out. :Let it go!:

With his last moments of consciousness, he managed to break off his connection to the node.

:Chosen?:

He was so cold. Each breath seemed to take forever; he couldn’t get enough air.

Warmth, dampness, nuzzling at his face. :Van, please, wake up:
“Fandes?” He tried and failed to sit up. “Fandes, what…?”

He felt her relief, like sinking into a warm bath. :Thank Kernos. You scared me. Drained yourself empty and blacked out:

“How did you…” He coughed. “My barrier…?”

:It’s down:

A thin blade of panic pierced the numbness. “I, I need to, to…” But his reserved energy was gone, and when he tried to reach for the node again, he couldn’t. It was like trying to stand on broken legs.

:Don’t. You’re too drained:

He knew that, damn it, but Lissa needed him.

:She’ll have to do without: Yfandes’ mindvoice was sharp. :I’m not letting you kill yourself. You can’t even hold your own personal shields right now:

She was right; now that he thought about it, he could sense the external shields she was keeping over him.

“Not safe,” he whispered, pointlessly.

:I just passed a message to Marius’ Companion: Yfandes sent. :Said you’re out for the rest of the battle. They’re sending over reinforcements and a Healer. You just have to hold on the next ten or twenty minutes:

“No.” It wasn’t over yet. “The Palace–”

:They’ll take it or they won’t. We have them surrounded. At worst, Lissa can hold them under siege and wait until you’ve had some time to recover:

She was right.

And yet.

His thoughts were starting to drift away into fragments.

:Van!: Yfandes’ light blazed in his mind. :You’re going into shock. Stay with me:

“I’ll…try…” He clung to her presence. Adrift in darkness, nothing left to hold onto except for the light that was her, further and further away every moment.

:Kernos’ balls!: A wash of alarm, and he felt the vibration through the stone as Yfandes reared up, away from him.

Running footsteps.

The clash of steel on stone.

No, he thought, pointlessly.

Somehow finding a crumb of strength, he managed to roll over, forcing his eyes open. His vision was blurred, darkening around the edges, but he made out a knot of men. Soldiers in rust-red. Yfandes snarled, teeth snapping, hooves flying, and a man fell, screaming, to lie unmoving and
crumpled on the ground – but she was bleeding from a gash on her side, and seconds later a swordblade flashed past, slipping past, adding a second line of red across her chest.

He lifted his hand a few inches from the paving-stones, searching desperately for one last shred of power. Nothing. Yfandes squealed in pain, and she was shielding but he could still sense her terror leaking through their bond.

Ten minutes. Help was coming, but they weren’t going to arrive in time. Yfandes was wounded, weakening, she couldn’t hold them off much longer.

Their would-be rescuers would find only bodies.

_We’re going to die here._ The thought drifted by, oddly calm. It felt so inevitable. Like his entire life had been leading, not to a frozen pass in the distant north, but to this, a gold-plated temple five hundred miles south of home, under the last baleful light of the setting sun. _Is Vkandis watching_, he wondered, vaguely. He tried a final time to lift his head and then gave up, letting his cheek fall against the cold damp stone.

Another scream of rage, that shouldn’t have been able to come from a horse’s throat. Kellan had risen from his Chosen’s side and joined Yfandes. Buying them seconds more, maybe. Not enough. This was how it was going to end–

Savil.

Desperation rose, burning away the fog. Maybe this was _his_ destiny, but he was by no means ready to accept that it was hers as well.

_No._

His mind scrabbled for options – and landed.

_All decisions involve compromise_, Leareth had said to him, once. _Sometimes there is not time to explore and chart out the results I anticipate from each path... Better to fall back on rules I have set, before, when things were not so rushed._

Years ago, bleeding out on the ground inside a tent in Horn while a battle raged fifty miles away, Vanyel had made a choice in seconds. One he still regretted.

_In the tradeoff between actions you think are right and results you think are good, you chose the virtuous action, perhaps at the cost of failure._

At the time, he had decided there were some lines that weren’t ever worth crossing. He had thought long and hard about it since then, and come to no satisfactory conclusion. Except that, in the end, rules weren’t real. Only results.

It was like everything in his mind had crystallized, falling into perfect clarity. There were two paths here. In one of them, he and Savil died now, and that was unacceptable.

_I can’t believe I’m really going to do this._

He could feel guilty later. Precious seconds were slipping past. He couldn’t afford to hesitate.

Somehow, he dragged himself across the floor, towards the body of the fallen Karsite soldier. The man lay twisted, his back at an unnatural angle; he wasn’t ever getting up again, but he was still, barely, alive.
Yfandes might have stopped him, if she’d had a moment’s thought to spare, but she wasn’t paying him any attention, she was too busy fighting to keep both of them alive for a few seconds longer. Time he could use.

With trembling, numb fingers, Vanyel drew his belt-knife. For a moment he looked into the soldier’s unfocused eyes.

_He was going to die anyway_, he told himself. In some sense, this was more merciful. Why didn’t it make him feel any better?

In a single motion, he drew the blade across the man’s throat.

Blood gushed, warm on his hands. No going back now.

–A _flash of memory_, _he knelt in the temple, staring at the spreading pool of his own blood_–

Vanyel wrenched himself back to the moment. He needed to focus, because it wasn’t like he had ever done this before. The man’s mouth moved, gasping like a fish out of water, blood bubbling at his lips. Vanyel watched as the last hint of awareness faded from his eyes, leaving them fixed and staring.

–And something blazed against his mage-sight. He hadn’t meant to touch the man’s mind, but somehow he knew that his name was Galrich, he was twenty-two years old, he had wanted to marry a girl called Nuari when the war was over, when he was a child he’d had a tame pigeon as a pet and called her Sundew… And now everything that he had ever been was escaping, a crack torn open in the fabric of the world, streaming out in a river of energy. It didn’t feel like a node at all; it ‘tasted’ metallic, and sweet, there was something heady and exhilarating about it, like fine wine. Vanyel was drunk on it, lightheaded, euphoric.

The man who had been called Galrich was gone, and there was only the power, filling what had been empty. There was a pulsing in Vanyel’s head. It felt twisted and wrong, this new strength, but it was his.

He flung up a shield in front of Yfandes, and flattened the remaining soldiers with a blast of force. Dizzy, he managed to cross the flagstones, kneeling between their broken bodies.

:Chosen–:

“In a moment, ‘Fandes.”

He killed them, one by one. Six deaths, and he knew all of their names, knew fragments of their lives, he had borne witness as their spirits fled the world and he took the energy that had bound them to this plane, took it and made it his.

Mostly his. It still felt wrong; he didn’t feel like himself, entirely. His ears were singing and the world was red-tinged around the edges.

:Chosen?: There was no anger in Yfandes’ mindvoice, not yet. Only confusion. :What are you…?:

He left their bodies on the floor and made his way back to Savil, sinking against the wall. “Don’t know how long this will last,” he said, lifting a hand to massage his temples. His head felt too full, throbbing with every heartbeat, it wasn’t quite painful but he felt ready to break open and spill out. “Got a feeling I’m going to be very ill when it wears off. In the meantime, I can fight.”

She came to him, nuzzling his face, blowing into his hair. Blood dripped down her flanks onto his
knees. *You saved my life, Chosen:* There was gratitude there, mixed with the sick horror.

*I wouldn’t use blood-magic to save a thousand people, but I did to save three.* Did Savil and Yfandes and Kellan matter that much more to him, just because they were friends and not strangers? What sort of person did that make him? He had killed six people, blotted their light from the world, to save half that many.

–And however many thousands more, in the future. He and Savil were the two most powerful mages left in all of Valdemar. Randale couldn’t have recovered from losing them. If Leareth intended harm, he was the most dangerous man ever to have existed, and Vanyel was the only one who could stop him. He *couldn’t* ignore that. Couldn’t ignore the stakes.

And yet.

*Ashke, what would you think of me?* Not hard to answer that question. And no time to think about it, now. He could look at that pain later, when he could better afford to be distracted.

He had done it in the Great Temple, only yards away from the altar of Vkandis Sunlord, at the heart of the Kingdom He protected. *I doubt he’ll be pleased with me.*

It wouldn’t be the first time he had been inconsiderate towards a god.

*I was always their pawn.* Oddly, there was no anger in the thought, no bitterness – only a cold, distant peace, under the wild drunkenness of blood-power. It steadied him just enough.

He could regret it later. For the moment, he had power to spare. He reached out. *:Marius?:*

*:Vanyel?: The other man must have sensed something different; Vanyel felt his confusion, and the questions he didn’t ask.

*:What can I do to help?:*

Shavri felt Randi coming before she heard his footsteps, and looked up. “Any word?”

His brown eyes were weary, and there was no emotion in his face. “They’ve taken the Palace,” he said. “In Sunhame.”

“Oh!” Something thrilled in her chest. “It’s over, then?”

He sighed. “It’s a long, long way from over.” A brief silence. “How is he?”

She looked over at Tantras. Someone had found a fold-out cot and brought it to the shielded cellar; he lay on his back, face turned away from her, swathed in blankets.

Physically, he wasn’t badly hurt – a broken collarbone, cracked ribs, and a mild concussion from the fall. But he hadn’t spoken to her in many candlemarks, out loud or mind-to-mind, and she didn’t like how he looked at all – ashy-pale, clammy, eyes sunken and bruised. She wasn’t sure if he was conscious of anything. Only her continuous effort was keeping him from sliding deeper into shock, and she was nearly at the end of her strength.

She didn’t want to speak out loud, in case he could still hear her. *:It’s not good, Randi. His body’s*
slowly shutting down:

Randi rested a hand on her shoulder. :Just keep trying:

Taver had told her quite a lot, in those brief seconds that their minds had touched. It shouldn’t have been possible for him to reach through the cellar-room shields at all, but it seemed Taver had been capable of more than she knew. More than any of them had known. *He knew this was coming.* He hadn’t said so, exactly, but somehow it had been clear in the overtones.

Just as it had been clear that he still loved her. That he had never stopped, even though she had refused the bond with him – and even though he had come to believe, eventually, that she had made the right choice.

*Keep him alive,* he had said. *Do not let him give up. And if he does not survive, Shavri – you will need to do what he cannot.*

That was as good a motivation as any to keep Tran alive. It would be a terrible idea to make her King’s Own, assuming that was what he meant. Though she had other doubts – even if Tantras survived, was he going to be in any shape to fulfill his duties anytime soon? Mardic hadn’t been for years.

And he’d had Donni. Tantras had nothing.

Worry about it later. First, she had to get him through the night.

*Be strong, Shavri,* Taver had sent, pride and love ringing in each word. *You will always be my Chosen.* Words imprinted on her memory, still echoing in her head. She would never forget it.

:I don’t understand: Randi sent. :Wasn’t Mardic hurt much worse? And he pulled through fine:

For some definition of fine. Her eyes burned again. :*He would’ve been drawing on the lifebond. Tran doesn’t have that:* Only one exhausted, frustrated Healer, doing her best, and even Taver had thought it might not be enough.

*He knew this was coming.* And yet Taver had still advised Tantras to come down south, knowing what the cost would be. Somehow, he must have thought it was worth it. Maybe it was. They had been in contact through the relay for the last four candlemarks, Shallan to Nina to Kera to Marius, a short enough chain that they could stay in nearly continuous contact. Randi hadn’t countermanded any of Lissa’s orders, but he and Alban had discussed everything, passing along recommendations, and maybe that would turn out to have made a crucial difference.

Or maybe not. She wouldn’t ever know, would she?

“They haven’t found the Son of the Sun,” Randi said. “The priest who led the coup. He wasn’t in the Palace. Must be in hiding.”

Meaning he might be planning a counter-rebellion even now.

Randi knelt next to the cot. He reached out, hesitated mid-motion, then finally rested his hand on Tantras’ shoulder. “Tran? Hey. It’s me.”

Slowly, Tantras turned his head, opening his eyes a crack. “…Randi.” He coughed. “Glad…you’re safe.”

Of course he would think of his King’s safety before his own. *We so nearly lost both of you.* She
hadn’t even known the danger until it was over.

“I’m sorry,” Randi said softly. “I would say we shouldn’t have come south, but… I still think you were right. It was worth it.” He closed his eyes. “Will you forgive me?”

A rough, dusty sound came from Tantras’ throat. It took Shavri a moment to realize that he was laughing.

“Nothing…to forgive,” he breathed. “We won. Worth it.” He closed his eyes.

_I never thought I would see this room again._

Karis stood with her hands clasped behind her back, shoulders erect, wearing her calmest and most dignified expression. She knew she had to look more than a little bedraggled, by now – her formal garb might have been purpose-designed by the best tailors in Haven to be as durable as possible, but an entire day of fighting had taken its toll. Her headpiece was bent from a fall, and she had taken a dozen sword-slashes – the shield-talisman that she wore protected her skin, but nothing else.

Oddly, though, her gut told her that it was appropriate. She stood in the throne room, watching the candlelight flicker over the gold-leaf decor and reflect from the eyes of the men who knelt at her feet, a conquering queen, every tear in her clothing a testament to what she had been willing to do. How far she had been willing to come.

_The city is ours._ At least half of the senior priesthood were confirmed dead or captured. Which meant the other half might well have escaped, and could already be building alliances and strongholds to plan a counter-coup – a counter-counter-coup? Nonetheless. Sunhame was hers, and it had been accomplished with less bloodshed than she had expected, though more than she had hoped. They wouldn’t know the full casualty-numbers for days.

“Lord Everich,” she said, fixing her gaze on one man’s face. He was short and plump, in his middle age, balding. Never one of her father’s most loyal supporters – but he had dandled her on his knee when she was a little girl.

He gulped, paling, but met her eyes. There were no bindings on him. None were needed. She could feel the weight of the Valdemaran Guards’ eyes at her back. Major Lissa would be there, with her Herald, and she found she could imagine the woman’s expression perfectly – composed, with a hint of icy grimness around the eyes and mouth that would terrify the most hardened man far more than outright anger.

_We are so much more alike than I knew._

“You know me, Lord Everich,” she said, speaking Karsite, slow and deliberate. “You swore fealty to my father, and you know that I am the surviving heir to the throne of our kingdom. Will you recognize this, and swear your loyalty to your Queen, that together we may bring this country in line with the will of Vkandis Sunlord?”

The man swallowed, audible in the utter silence. Sweat beaded on his forehead, sparkling in the candlelight. He tried to speak, cleared his throat, tried again. “My Queen. I d-do vow to you my loyalty.” And he bent over his folded knees, prostrating himself on the gold-inlaid marble.

She breathed out, and held the silence for a long moment. “I accept your oath, Lord Everich. Let Vkandis bear witness.”
She was exhausted. It had to be nearly midnight, now. She let none of it show on her face, only turned her eyes to the next kneeling figure. “Lord Taret.”

It took only five minutes to accept the oaths of fealty from all of the lords in front of her. This was the easiest part – these men were the ones who had come forwards of their own accord. She knew that Lord Estral had holed up in his manor, and had at least one mage with him. Nothing they could do about it right now; Herald-Mages Vanyel and Savil were recovering, out of the fight for now, though Vanyel had somehow found a second wind for the attack on the Palace. They had lost one of the two other, weaker Herald-Mages in the long afternoon of fighting. She ought to feel guilty for that, she thought, to recognize just how much Valdemar had sacrificed for this. For her. But guilt took energy, and she had none left to spare.

Finished, she held her stance, letting the silence stretch on. Let them think she was trying to intimidate them, showing she could demand their attention as long as they wished. In actual fact, she was trying to figure out what to do next. Lissa had mostly led everything up until this point; she was the one with military experience, after all; but she was clearly deferring to Karis now.

What she really wanted to do was go to bed. Only the hard-earned, iron discipline of many months on the road kept her on her feet.

:Karis:

She managed not to twitch, or show any outer sign of surprise, even as she heard the muted gasps and sighs around her. She turned, slowly.

Sola padded silently across the marble, tail raised, and her tawny fur seemed almost to glow in the candlelight. She rubbed up against Karis’ legs, purring. :You have done well: Pride and satisfaction radiated from her.

Karis blinked, her eyes suddenly pricking. You are not going to cry, she told herself firmly. Every eye in the room was on her – well, on the Suncat, a creature out of myth and legend, stepping into reality. The faces were awed, and terrified.

It was hitting her now, the enormity of what they had accomplished. For all that the months she had spent planning, and praying, she hadn’t really expected them to succeed.

:Karis: Sola coiled around her legs, vibrating. :Karis, listen:

She listened. Beneath Sola’s purr, there was a deeper hum, in the ground and in the air, coming from everywhere and nowhere.

She closed her eyes. “Vkandis,” she whispered, barely moving her lips. “My Sunlord.”

…And there was a Presence, filling the room. Filling her, a sudden fiery certainty, a joyful, exuberant, unstoppable song that had always been there, in the background, now front and center.

Sunlord?

The answer wasn’t quite a voice – it was a thousand times more than that. It was everything falling into alignment, a pattern that had always been there, that she had never seen until now.


Karis turned her head. Everything in the room seemed bathed in a golden glow. It took her a moment to realize that it came from her. Lissa had flung up an arm across her face, and peered out at her from
behind her wrist.

Feeling half in a dream, she took a step, then another. The song and the Presence moved with her, pulling her.

**Come with me.**

The fear was gone. The doubt was gone, and any hint of tiredness. She was nothing but a vessel, a bowl filled to the brim with light, no space left for words or thought. Imperfect, a mortal body never meant to bear such grace – but it didn’t matter. She was what she was meant to be, where she was meant to be, here and now and always.

She knew where she was going, if not why, and her steps sped.

Outside. It was dark, the moon and stars hidden by cloud, and rain fell steadily, but somehow it never touched her, and the molten-gold radiance lit her path.

Karis saw the ruins of the Palace. Her home. She had been a child here, running through these paths and gardens, now trampled to mulch and strewn with bodies. Nearby, two people were lifting a third, limp, broken. She couldn’t see the colour of their uniforms, with the dark and the rain, but it didn’t matter, did it?

She went to them. Wide eyes reflected gold, and she saw that the injured soldier wore a rust-red uniform, and so did one of the others – but the second rescuer wore blue.

She rested both hands on the injured man’s brow. His eyes were closed, face slack, blood bubbling from one side of his mouth.

“You fought bravely,” she said – and then the vibrant song surged in her, and a Voice that wasn’t her own came from her throat. **“Be healed.”**

He opened his eyes, blinked a few times – and then saw her, and gasped, scrambling free of the two on either side, features shining in the golden light. Karis wondered what he was seeing. He knelt, bowing his head.

“My Sunlord.” His voice cracked.

The Voice spoke through her again. **“My son.”** Then she turned and moved on, the Presence moving with her. There were more places that she needed to be.

There was no time. Only the moments, one after another. The part of her that was still Karis watched from a distance as she walked a widening spiral, through rain and wind that never touched her.

At some point, she came to what must have been a makeshift Healers’ camp. Weary men and woman in Valdemaran green, and a few youngsters in the simple cream-coloured robes of Karsite acolytes; their Healers were priests, trained in the Temple, just as the priest-mages were. They had taken over a tavern and the tailor’s shop across the street; there were lights burning in every window, tents and simple canvas roofs thrown up to cover the street in between, and bodies were laid out on mats and more sheets of canvas. A child who couldn’t have been more than six ran past, arms full of blankets – and saw her, and stopped, mouth dropping open.

There were shouts. Running footsteps.
The Voice came. “Be calm.”

Silence.

She went to the tavern back-room, where somehow she knew they had laid out the worst-wounded, the men and women unlikely to survive the night. The Presence moved her limbs, and she knelt by each of them and touched their heads, and then the song pulled at her and she turned and walked away. Past rows of tired, limping soldiers, some kneeling, some standing, all in hushed silence with their eyes fixed on her. Awe and hope and confusion and fear – and then she was past, and there was only rain and silence.

At some point the sky cleared, a dome of velvety black sparkling with a thousand diamonds, the waxing moon a fat crescent, silvery light mixing with the gold.

Karis knew these streets. Here, where her father had let her ride up in front of him for the Midsummer ceremonial parade. There, where her mother had taken her once to buy sweets. The wounds were ugly, buildings burned to blackened skeletons or crushed to rubble – but it was only the flesh of the city, and flesh could heal. The bones of Sunhame were whole, and on that foundation they could rebuild.

An infinite time later, she found herself on the outskirts, following the outer wall. She remembered, vaguely, passing most of the Heralds, all of Lissa’s captains, and many of her lieutenants, who had recognized her. None of them had knelt, only offered her the formal bow of respect to a ranking officer – or just stared at her, startled, until she nodded to them. Everything had been fairly orderly; there were Guards at every street-crossing, many of them walking wounded, but with weapons at the ready. There didn’t seem to be any ongoing fighting.

At least, there wasn’t once she passed.

The eastern horizon was lightening when the Presence tugged at her again, this time back towards the center of the city. She moved through the streets – before, she had stopped frequently, guided lightly by the wordless song that strummed in her chest, but now it dragged her relentlessly forwards.

A manor-house, dark and silent.

A set of heavy oak doors, bolted and barred.

She kicked them open with no effort at all.

A hall, her footsteps echoing from the high ceiling, then muted by the thick rug.

Another, smaller door, looming ahead, shattering into splinters under her boot.

Stairs, leading into a deeper darkness – but the light was with her. Down and down and down, into the belly of the earth.

A cellar-door, and she reached to open it.

–Fire, washing around and over her. Someone was screaming. She stood at the threshold of the store-room, bathed in flames, but there was no pain, and no fear.

A shout, and someone shoved past her. “Karis, get down!” Lissa’s voice. A trickle of surprise – had the major been following her all night?
Metal, clashing on stone. A cry, and suddenly the fire was gone, and there was only a man, on hands
and knees, dazed eyes, blood oozing where Lissa had struck him across the temple with the pommel
of her sword. He wore the red-and-gold robe of a priest, filthy and torn. She recognized him only
vaguely, but it didn’t matter. Somehow, part and parcel of the brimming certainty in her, she knew.

—And then the Presence faded, and the overflowing light drained out of her. Her knees nearly gave.
Only an incredible effort of will kept her on her feet; she didn’t think she had ever felt so drained.

“Vkandis?” she breathed, pointlessly. It was very dark in the cellar, now – she couldn’t make out the
priest’s features anymore, only his silhouette against the flickering light of smouldering shelving and
supplies.

:Karis: Sola was there, rubbing up against her calves, circling her. :You must do this part on your
own:

On her own. She steadied herself against the doorframe, trying to force her breathing under control; it
felt like she had been running a footrace all night. Maybe she had been.

Lissa was looking at her, face in shadow but the line of her shoulders expectant, sword still raised.
There were others in the room, she realized, several Guards in blue that looked black in the dim red
light. She hadn’t even noticed.

Light flared. Someone had lit a candle from the smouldering shelves.

“The trick with mages,” she said, a little hoarsely, “is to keep them distracted. Go for the hands, most of them need gestures to
cast. Head injuries will do as well, if you don’t care too much about damaging them.” Her shoulders
rose and fell. “Thank the gods for the shield-talismans, or we’d be toasted. Lieutenant, please help
me.”

Karis straightened her shoulders, and led the way, nearly stumbling and falling on her way up the
narrow stairs. Her thighs burned, calves cramping. Down the hallway, out through the open door,
hands clasped behind her back to hide their shaking.

The sky was clear, a pale delicate blue, horizon streaked pink and gold. She pointed with her chin to
the marble steps, and two of the Guards wrestled the priest down onto his knees.

A single ray of sunlight lanced across the gardens, slanting over the man’s face. He was younger
than she had expected. She had imagined him as taller, too, larger than life, but he was just an
ordinary man.

What am I supposed to do now? There was no answer. Sola had leapt lightly onto the head of a
statue, tail flicking; her amber eyes revealed nothing.

She knew what she ought to do. There were formalities; she had memorized all of the relevant laws
as a child. But she was weary, her feet hurt, and she was angry. More than she had realized. He
ekilled Father. He had slaughtered her mother, her siblings, every living relative she’d ever had.

“Vkandis Sunlord,” she said, speaking as loudly and clearly as she could manage, pulling the words
from some deep, unyielding part of her. “Hear me. This man is Archpriest Hanovar, who calls
himself Son of the Sun. He is no true representative of Your will, and he has led Your priesthood
into corruption and ruin. You know of his misdeeds, and You have led Your daughter to him.” She
closed her eyes. “In the light of Your Presence, I do hereby condemn this man, who is no son of
Yours, to die.”

Silence.

She opened her eyes. “Major Lissa. May I have your sword?”

Lissa raised her eyebrows, a wordless question. Karis nodded. Lissa extended the blade pommel-
first, and Karis took it.

She had held a sword before – her father had been a flexibly-minded man, and there had been
weapons lessons for her as a child alongside her brothers – but she had never killed anyone. She had
watched public executions as a child, and she remembered leaning forwards, pushing against her
governess’ arm, filled with a mix of curiosity and sick horror.

Her hands shook. *I cannot do this.*

She could order the man made a prisoner instead, and convene a formal trial – but that would take
weeks, and she probably couldn’t do it at all until a great many other details were sorted out. In the
meantime, he was a mage. She knew, as well as anyone could, how challenging it would be to keep
him captive. He was half-stunned right now, but that wouldn’t last long.

No. She had to end it, now.

*I only wish this to be over.*

She raised the blade.

---

*Oh, gods.* The nausea was rising again. Vanyel groaned and flopped onto his side, feeling around
blindly for the basin one of the Healers had left him. *I’m not sure if I’m dying or I only wish I was.*
He had been violently ill at regular interludes for most of the night. Somehow he was hot and cold at
the same time, his head felt like an overripe melon ready to burst, and every few minutes another fit
of uncontrollable shaking would come over him, leaving him drenched in sweat. His skin was
crawling; he felt filthy, inside and out.

*:Easy, Chosen:* Yfandes sent.

He was tempted to send something angry back – her mindvoice hurt his head, and besides, *she*
wasn’t the one heaving up her guts – but he stopped himself. She was only trying to help, and she
had every reason to be upset with him – he ought to be grateful she was still speaking to him at all.

At least the Healers had been able to give him a minimum of privacy. They had taken over some
lord’s manor near the Great Temple – maybe a summer-home, since they hadn’t needed to evict any
residents – and had recruited the skeleton crew of servants to help. Vanyel hadn’t exactly been
paying attention by that point. In any case, he and Savil had a room to themselves, tiny as it was – he
thought it had once been a linen-closet – and Savil wasn’t likely to be bothered by his noisy retching.
She was still deeply unconscious.
I would much rather be unconscious. It was morning, by now he must have been awake for a full day and night, and all he wanted was to sleep, but he hurt too much, and he couldn’t even keep down water, much less any painkillers. The backlash from pushing through almost a whole day of fighting after the Gate would have been enough by itself, and the after-effects of using blood-magic – and it wasn’t like anyone had ever warned him about that, either – were just a bonus.

:It will pass, Chosen. You’ll get through this:

As if he’d needed another reason to never, ever use blood-power again. There must be a technique to it. Surely no one would ever use it if they felt like this afterwards. He could research it later… No. That path led nowhere good.

There was a quiet knock on the door. “Herald Vanyel? I’m coming in.” The voice was familiar, but he was too bleary to place it. Forewarned, he squeezed his eyes shut against the sudden light. It still sent a lancing pain through his head.

“You poor thing.” He heard the rustling of robes as the Healer knelt next to his mat. “Wish we could do more to help you feel better.” Her voice was pained. Healers hated it when they couldn’t ease their patients’ discomfort, he thought; it had always bothered Shavri as well. “Here, let me hold that for you. It’s Roa, by the way.”

Roa. No wonder she had sounded familiar. She was pressing a wet cloth to his forehead, and it helped, giving him something to focus on. Center and ground.

“I don’t understand why it’s hitting you like this,” Roa said. “You’ve never had a case of backlash this bad before.” She pushed his hair aside, sponging the back of his neck, and he could feel the cool touch of her Gift as well. “Is this helping?”

“Mmm.” His stomach had settled a little. After a few more deep breaths, he rolled onto his back again, searched around for the handkerchief he had stuffed under the pillow, and blew his nose.

“Thank you.” It hurt to speak, his throat was raw, but he didn’t even want to attempt Mindspeech.

“You’re welcome.” He felt her fingers on his wrist, checking his pulse. She made a soft, disapproving sound. Probably because his heart was still racing – he could feel each beat throbbing in his head. “You’re getting very dehydrated.”

He wasn’t sure what she wanted him to do – he had been trying valiantly to drink water, but his body wanted none of it. Squirming, he tried to find a comfortable position. The sheets were wrinkled under him, itchy, and his back ached fiercely.

Roa noticed, and tugged them straight. “There. Anything else I can get for you? I’d offer clean sheets, you’re all sticky, but I don’t think we’ve got any extras.”

“Just want to sleep.” He managed to drag his forearm over his face; even through clenched eyelids, the light was painful. “Can you use your Gift…?”

“To put you under? Not safely – only if I sit with you the whole time, and I can’t stay long. Hmm. I’ll ask Melody if she can do anything.”

“…Melody? She’s here?” He wouldn’t have thought they would risk her.

“She pulled rank to come down, apparently. Can’t say I mind, it’s been awfully useful having her around. Anyway, I can go see—”

A dusty cough. “I hate to be a cliche,” Savil croaked, “but where in all hells am I?”
He heard the breath that Roa sucked in. “Herald Savil. Didn’t think you’d be awake before tonight. How are you feeling?”

“Absolutely dreadful.” She coughed again. “I can’t remember… Did I do something idiotic?” A pause. “Oh. Kellan says I ordered you to let the Gate drain me. What a wonderful idea.”

“It was fairly stupid,” Roa said dryly. “I would give you a piece of my mind, but we did win. And the attack on the Palace itself was awfully close – could be a few hundred more troops made all the difference. You’re at the temporary Healers’ station, by the way. It’s morning, you were out about eighteen candlemarks. Water?”

“Please.”

Vanyel felt his aunt’s mind reaching for his. :Don’t: he flailed at her. The mindtouch hurt just as much as he had expected.

“Healer Roa,” he heard Savil say. “Could you give us a few minutes?”


He heard the door close. The light dimmed again, and Vanyel dared to open his eyes, turning his head to the side. A single candle burned in a sconce by the door, and he saw Savil’s features in relief, her face half in the shadow. She lay on her side on her own mat, a yard away, propped up on one elbow with her other hand around the cup, and her eyes were locked on him.

“I think we have some catching up to do,” she said, just above a whisper. “Figure you’re not up for a long conversation, right now, but – what were you thinking?”

Right. Of course she could tell he had used blood-magic. She was the only other mage who had seen him, and the only one who was likely to. There was technically another Herald-Mage left in Sunhame, Herald Luvas, currently with Lissa’s troops, but he wasn’t above hedge-wizard potential and might not even have the experience to recognize the distinctive aura of blood-power. The Healers, and anyone who had Mindtouched him during the battle, must have known something was off, but hopefully not what.

He swallowed. “We were going to die. Both of us. Wasn’t any other way.” Just thinking about it, the awful queasiness surged again. He pressed his lips together, breathing deeply through his nose.

“I see. Hmm. Don’t try to talk, Kellan says Yfandes can…” She trailed off. “Oh. Right. You let yourself get drained enough that you couldn’t touch nodes safely or hold a shield, and you’d sent away all the Guards. Damned stupid of you.” Her voice was still quiet, but he flinched back from the cold, steely anger in it. “You weren’t thinking at all. If you’d spent literally one second considering what could go wrong, none of that would’ve happened. You nearly killed us both.” Her eyes bored into him. “And then you tried to salvage it by using the darkest magic that exists. I can’t believe you. Can’t understand how the Van I thought I knew would even consider using blood-power, much less do it.”

He couldn’t hold her gaze any longer; he curled into himself, wrapping his arms over his head, burying his face in the tangled sheets.

The silence felt heavy and tight enough to cut with a knife.

“And I have to be grateful you did it.” Weariness weighing down her voice. “My damnedfool nephew saved my life. With blood-magic. How am I supposed to feel about that, Van? How do you think I feel?”
He had no answer; he couldn’t form words through the barrage of emotion he was picking up from her, he didn’t mean to but his shields weren’t working. Anger, yes, but under it was an aching betrayal. The tears were coming now. I’m sorry, he thought, pointlessly, I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry—

“‘Fandes,” Savil said to the air, “can you please help your Chosen with his shields?”

Oops. He must have been projecting. And Yfandes must have been listening in through his ears, though she had otherwise stayed back. The rush he felt from Savil cut off.

Silence, broken only by his muffled sobs. Distantly, he had the thought that he ought to get himself under control, but it didn’t feel possible. Or like it mattered, now.

Finally, he heard the sheets rustle, and felt her hand on his shoulder. She sighed, heavily. “I’m sorry, ke’chara.” Her voice was toneless. “Don’t think I’m not still angry with you. I’m very angry, and we’re not done talking about this. But I failed you again, and I know it’s half my fault. Of course you weren’t thinking clearly, after all that time fighting, and you were exposed to my Gate for half a candlemark, you must’ve been in agony all day. Of course you weren’t yourself. I should’ve asked Lissa to make sure someone was there with you, and I didn’t.” She took a ragged breath. “We asked too much. Dragged you out here before you were ready, put the weight of Valdemar’s future on your shoulders, and asked you to pull out a miracle. And you did. Kept the both of us alive, and I can’t imagine we’d have taken the city at all without you, much less the Palace.” Another breath, and her voice tightened. “It’s the cost I don’t like. Though I reckon you’re regretting it plenty. And – gods! Van, if you’re going to be sick at least avoid doing it in your bed!” With surprising strength, given how drained she had to be, she wrestled him onto his side and shoved the basin at him. He clutched at it, though he was mostly dry heaving, there was nothing left in his stomach.

“Gah.” Savil rubbed his back, more roughly than he would have liked; his skin was tender and her touch was like sandpaper. “Think I can see what’s happening here,” she said gruffly. “Your aura still has traces of foreign power, and your body’s reacting badly to it. Moondance could probably cleanse it, but unfortunately he’s not here.” Her voice sharpened. “Or fortunately. Might teach you a lesson. Are you done yet?”

There was another tentative knock on the door. “Can I come in?”

“Melody? Please do.”

Vanyel didn’t want to talk to Melody. Didn’t want her to see him like this. He was sure she would be able to tell, to see the stain on him, the putrid slime that coated his mind. What would she think?

“Vanyel.” Her voice was as crisp as always, utterly unperturbed with a hint of warmth. If she could tell, she was revealing none of it. “Not exactly having a fun morning, I heard. Let’s see. Roa asked if I could help you be a little more comfortable. Don’t think I can put you to sleep like I did last time, it’s not safe unless I’m here to watch you and I’ve got about a hundred other places I’m supposed to be. I can put in a temporary block, though. It’s going to be quite disconcerting, and you’ll still be in pain, but you might not mind so much. Is that all right?” A pause. “Vanyel, I need you to answer me. If it’s too hard to talk, just – here. Squeeze my hand once if you understood that and want me to go ahead. Twice if you’d rather I didn’t.”

It sounded like what Lancir had done, nine years ago. He squeezed once. The tremors were back, and his palm was slick against hers.

“Good. Can you open your eyes a moment? It’s going to be easier if you’re looking at me.”
Her face was a smear of colour through the tears.

“Very good. I’m going to ask you to think some things. Imagine moving your fingers. Good. Picture the colour white. Imagine touching something warm. Good. Imagine saying something to your aunt. Now focus on the part of your body that’s hurting the worst… Good. Now take a breath and hold it. Ready? This is going to feel strange.”

The world melted, and then came together again, but somehow out of alignment, no center left. He was floating, unmoored, shapes and colours in front of his eyes but they didn’t matter. There were sensations. Not pain. You had to be a something, to feel pain, and he wasn’t.

:Chosen: A voice in his mind, and he should have recognized it, it should have mattered, but it didn’t. :Chosen, it’s all right. I’m here:


“Good!” Medren’s face lit up. “You’re very clever, you know. It took me a whole year to learn my letters.”

Stef ducked his head. “I’m not.” It was frustrating, feeling like he was so far behind. All the rules he had never even known about. He still felt like the ground was shifting under him, and he didn’t know quite where to place his feet.

“How about the next one?” Medren said. There was a determined cheerfulness in his voice. It reminded Stef of the way the women talked at the market when old Abe with his bad leg said he felt a storm coming in. Worried, but knowing there was nothing more to be done but wait.

He scrunched his face, peering at the paper, the shapes Medren had drawn on it with a pen, lines and circles and corners. It was still incredible to him that you could put words there, just like speaking them into someone’s ear. Somehow it seemed more like magic than anything in the battles he had heard sung about. Words had power, and you could just…put them out into the world. Medren had been reading to him from a book of poetry that he said a man had written two hundred years ago, and it had made Stef dizzy. With just ink and paper, you could whisper words into someone’s ear even after you were dead. How?

There was a knock on the door. Medren, who had been jumpy all morning, leapt up and ran to answer it.

“Hello, boys,” Bard Breda said, standing in the doorway with her crimson robes askew. She looked like she might have been running. “Medren, I need you to promise me that you won’t go spreading this around, because it’s classified and you aren’t actually supposed to know about it, but…I have good news. The battle’s over, and your uncle is all right.”

“Oh.” Medren’s voice was a breath on the wind. He swayed against the doorframe for a moment, and then flung himself against her midsection and wrapped his arms around her. “Thank you, Bard Breda, thank you thank you thank you–”

“Oh, stop it.” Bard Breda made a face, arms at her sides like she didn’t know what to do with them, then sighed and patted Medren’s back. “It’s all right, lad. Now, I know you want to tell your mother, but promise me you won’t put anything on paper until it’s announced officially. Shouldn’t be more
than a few days.”

Medren clung to her for a few moments longer, then pulled himself away, straightening his back. It was still surprising to Stef how he just went up to people and touched them.

“Breda,” he said, “Stef has something to show you.”

Stef shot him a sideways glare, hoping that Bard Breda wouldn’t notice. He didn’t want to make a mistake in front of her. But he was committed now – and he knew he wasn’t really clever, but if he could pretend, maybe Bard Breda would be pleased. That would be good. She had looked so disappointed in him about the fight, she’d been trying to hide it but he was good at seeing how people felt, and it had stung, he had been trying so hard to follow the rules and one of the rules was that you didn’t let anyone hurt your friends. Never show weakness.

If he could learn to read, maybe he could learn better words. A strange game, to fight with words without touching – but maybe not. There was something he liked about it. Words have power.
Crying out in agony, he falls out of the world and into the blue.

His name is Taver, and he has died before, and come back, again and again. In the blue-and-silver, he remembers everything, holds the weight of the past, and the future in a million shards. Shifting, always changing, yet some things remain the same. A path through a wall of darkness and death, narrow, twisting…

He knows, and has always known, that he would not see it through to the end. If Valdemar survives, there will be a time when it is once again his turn to stand at the center of the herd, to lead the Companions – and to Choose. When the time comes, if it comes, he will be ready. It is what he is made for, after all. But for now, though he is not human and never has been, he is close enough, and he is tired.

A blaze of light barely in the form of a man, he begins to walk, not forwards or sideways, but in a direction that has no name. The blue grows milky.

He stands in a formless place, and a Presence faces him. If he saw with eyes, perhaps the Presence might appear in the shape of a man, and wear Whites, with a face in shadow. Instead, Taver faces a tower of sapphire brilliance, pearly, nacreous, shifting and reforming.

It is done, the Presence behind the Shadow-Lover’s facade says, in something deeper and more fundamental than words.

The being that is Taver nods. It is done. I have guided the path as best I could.

You are weary.

Yes.

You have earned your rest.

I know.

And yet, in the timeless place where there is no pain, he still feels regret. Still grieves, for all the Chosen who pass from the world before him, the Chosen who is never his, and, most of all, the Chosen who he leaves behind. It seems such an impossible thing to ask of a mortal, who is not made for this – who is born to a mother and father, a squalling babe in a wide and frightening world, who dreams of being a Herald, but not this way.

And yet he Chooses the man who is called Tantras anyway, knowing how it will end.

His Lancir is a little boy and he wants to be a falconer when he grows up – and instead he serves his Kingdom and his Queen for half a century, he binds the heart of Valdemar together by sheer strength of will, through turmoil and heartbreak. He holds up his strength to the world, and keeps his weaknesses to himself, he bears witness to the pain of others and never reveals the scars it leaves. At the end of it all he dies in his bed, among friends.

Taver loves him, and always will.
His Shavri asks only to be a Healer and a mother, and she holds to that, still, stretched between the 
life she wants and the life that is hers, somehow she holds together that contradiction. She is 
kindness, and curiosity, and the gentle hand that guides lives into the arms of the Shadow-Lover, and 
she writes their names down, all of them, and on Sovvan she burns a candle for each one of them, 
every year.

Taver loves her, and always will.

His Tantras is a simple man, in some ways, and yet that is always deceptive. Loyalty, laughter, 
friendship, and under it a determination that sometimes yields but never breaks. He is not a pattern 
that can give up.

Taver loves him, and always will – and it does not matter at all, because his path ends here.

It is all right to grieve, the Presence says.

I know.

It does not matter at all.

His name is Delian, and he runs.

Behind him, a battle rages. Ahead there is only the horizon – and, somewhere far in the distance, 
home.

He fights his way past sentries, sometimes, with hooves and snapping teeth, but for the most part he 
simply outruns them. Nothing can move as fast as a Companion.

He cannot feel his once-Chosen. The distance is too great, and there is nothing like a Call – no song 
in his chest, none of that inexorable certainty. There is only the knowledge, and with it pain and 
restlessness, like a splinter under his hide. Tantras was his Chosen, once.

But not now. Not anymore.

Perhaps he should stay and fight.

No. He must be there. Needs to be there. Needs to know.

Delian runs.

The other Companions call after him, at first, but he is beyond their range now. He is outside the 
Web. For the first time since he was born into this body, he is truly alone.

There is no single road to follow. Karse is hilly and wild, and he finds paths where he can, detouring 
around woods and bogs and hills that would slow him, but for the most part following a straight line 
that cuts over and through all obstacles.

Delian is tired. He tries so hard, for so long. Four years, now, that he is alone, since he gives up his 
Chosen because it is needed, because Taver asks. And he stays in the herd, not exactly broken but 
not exactly whole either, unsure why he is still needed. Until a month ago, when something brings 
him to the Palace gardens in Haven, and he first looks into a pair of dark eyes in a foreigner’s face
and feels the silver threads in the blue place tightening, something almost entirely unlike a Call.

She was never his Chosen, but nonetheless, it is an honour to carry her home. Princess Karis has a god on her side, and he knows her, now. She gave her word to Randale, and she will not break it. Maybe, if she can succeed in what she is trying to do Valdemar will be at peace again. At least, for now.

He sees the future in shards, and danger is coming. A nameless danger that Taver will not be there for. He had thought Taver would be there – though he knows the Monarch’s Own Companion can die, he never expected it to happen now, not in his lifetime. There will be another Monarch’s Own Companion, there always has been before, and yet for now the heart of the Web stands empty, and there is no leader to guide to herd.

Go, the princess, the soon-to-be-Queen, said to him, when he explained what is the matter. Go. Be with him. And when he hesitates, she adds, that is an order.

And so he runs. He does not even know if his Tantras is alive. I would know if he were dead, he tells himself, but he is not sure of that.

He gallops, on and on and on, a pace no horse could sustain – but he is not a horse, though he is shaped as one, and magic and desperation drive him. He stretches out with his muzzle, reaching to bite the horizon, as though that will bring him to the place sooner. As though minutes will make a difference, when it has already been candlemarks. He is lathered, bleeding from the nostrils, but still he runs.

The sun is setting now.

It sets on foreign land – but perhaps, by now, it is no longer enemy land. Maybe. There are technicalities, paperwork, a treaty to be signed, a delicate pact of ink and paper that, maybe, will be enough to hold the peace.

Delian runs.

Darkness falls, and still he runs, he has found a road to follow, empty of people, and he leans into the wind. Snow is falling, small hard flakes of it, whipping through his mane and tail.

He thinks of Sunhame again. He did not expect it to be so beautiful. A gilded temple shining under the noon sun. Will it still be beautiful tonight, after a battle raged in the streets? Will Karis still recognize her home?

The wind howls, slowing him only a little.

Delian runs.

Aching with exhaustion in every muscle and sinew, he sees camp-fires in the distance. Hears the sounds of distant fighting.

Inconvenient, he thinks, he is too tired to be angry or even desperate. He leaves the road, turns to detour around the place where it crosses the Border. To the west, perhaps he will be able to cross.

There is no moonlight, not with the snowstorm that rages, brought in by a Gate held far too long. Trees rush past, dim black-on-grey, and he dodges, somehow placing his hooves on solid ground – he is a Companion, not a horse, and perhaps it is the strange magic of Companions that guides him. Delian knows only that he runs, and the woods and hills slow him, but only a little.
He feels when he crosses the Border. Not all at once, it is fuzzier in reality than a line on a map, but he feels the Web rushing in, sprawling blue and silver, feels the watchful presence of the vrondi. The Web gives him new strength, and he speeds his pace.

—And then he is there, sprinting through a war camp at full alert. Voices cry out, but no one moves to stop him. He is a Companion, after all, and cannot be mistaken for anything else. He is on their side.

He is not alone, not anymore. Other minds call out to him, reaching for him in the blue place. Delian? Is that you? Delian?

My Chosen. Where is he? The words are not quite a lie. Tantras was his, once. Before.

Now, even this close, he cannot feel him at all. But he knows his Tantras is alive. I would know if he died, he tells himself again, and he is not sure who he is trying to reassure.

The others answer him. This way. Come.

Soldiers in blue dive out of his way as he runs, hooves kicking up slush, sliding on ice. He passes a wagon emblazoned with the arms of a Guard supply-caravan. Torches burn in rows, lighting each street-corner.

Sondra, he calls out. Companion to the King, and they were foals together once, playing in Companion’s Field. In the blue, she is an older woman, silver hair, eyes the mud-green of a pond in summer. She knows what he is there for. Come, she says, guiding him between two narrow wooden buildings. You’re looking for Tantras? He’s in the cellar. I don’t think you’ll fit.

Delian feels nothing like a Call – no hum in his ears, no song in his chest. Only his own private fear and worry and regret.

Can he come outside, he says.

Hesitation. I don’t know if that’s a good idea, with the cold, Sondra says. Suppose if you can bond to him again, that’ll help him. She sounds dubious.

Please, he says.

A door opens. Two figures, a man in filthy Herald’s Whites and a woman in the green robes of a Healer – and it takes him whole seconds to recognize the King and his lifebonded – they half-carry his Tantras out into the snow.

In body, he looks well enough, though he cannot stand unaided. His spirit is a broken, curled-up ball of pain, screaming silently into the emptiness where something was torn away, a gaping wound, half of a bond streaming out into nothing. Under the agony, there is a constant litany, words he repeats to himself over and over. Not allowed to give up. Not allowed to give up.

He was Delian’s Chosen, once, but he is different now. They are both different. No longer two shapes that fit together.

And yet, Tantras is and will always be his, and Delian cannot let him face this alone.

He takes a step forwards, and looks into dazed eyes. Tantras. I Choose you. I love you. Always. And he takes him, and pulls his spirit with him into the blue, holding him, trying to fill all of him with the light he can bring. They are together. It is almost, but not quite, enough.
In the world of snow and torchlight, the man who is called Tantras, Monarch’s Own Herald to Queen Elspeth and now King Randale, once-Chosen by Delian, later by Taver – he flings his arms around his Companion’s neck, clinging to him, and sobs.

Chapter End Notes

This brings us to the climactic finale of book five! Um, my apologies.

Book six will start posting next Friday.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!