

Renegade

A Fantasy Novel



Steph Shangraw

Prysmcat Books

Renegade

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Prysmcat Books
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
www.prysmcat.com

Dedication

It's impossible to list everyone who, over a lifetime, has helped to encourage my writing in general and assisted with this book in particular.

However, I do need to mention:

My parents
Jackie LaRonde
My cats

Of course, my awesome beta-readers:

Benita Burger
Linda Mull
Robin Collet

who made this a better book

And a special dedication:

For everyone who has ever been certain that the world has no place in it for them,
and those who help to create a place.

Note on Characters

If you need a reminder about characters, at the end of the book you can find a list. If you'd like to see the Jordan/Telsea family tree as an image, drop by <http://prysmcat.com/renegade/>

This hasn't generally been an issue, but the author would rather it be ignored as unnecessary than needed but absent!

Introduction or Preface or Something

It's perfectly okay to skip this bit and get right to the main text, but there is a story behind the story that some might be interested in.

This is part of the Resurrection Project, which is about looking back at my earliest writing and considering what can be salvaged from it. This is discussed in more detail on my blog at <http://prysmcat.com/blog>, under “The Jordans”.

Twenty-five years ago, Alina and Jai, who became Matt's parents, met as the result of a rather ridiculously dramatic situation that I thought would be interesting to write. They took off running to a degree that was unlike anything I'd experienced before, racing around Caalden through a series of adventures that, while completely lacking in logic or coherence, nonetheless left me obsessively writing to see what was going to happen next. Ultimately, it came down to the pair of them, Alina's brothers Chris and Rob, Jai's sister Lorienne, and a handful of other friends tackling a renegade telepath, one with a magic gift-enhancing crystal, who wanted a war between humans and the nocturnal, carnivorous *alasir* for reasons that were never clear. Alina and her brothers being human, Lorienne *alasir*, and Jai half human and half *alasir*, the situation simply reeked of drama and angst.

I got curious, eventually, about what their children would be like. Ultimately, that was the birth of the mixed-blood Jordan house, which became in many ways my creative home for several years.

The original material is, frankly, atrocious. I was, after all, in my mid teens and my writing skills were crude at best. The characters, however, or at least some of them in each group, have never been willing to simply fade into obscurity; they linger, still vivid, waiting.

I'm unsure whether I can ever find a way to fix the gaping holes in the fabric of Alina's own story (you can find my reflections on the original version of Caalden and of Alina's generation via the blog link above), but that of her son is another matter. When I picked it up again as an experiment, Matt and his companions came back to life on the page for me, so eagerly and energetically that roughly 85% of the first draft was completed in 4 weeks, a straight-through run without coming up for air. After a pause to finish up with *Yin-Yang's* final revisions and release, I completed it, did some light editing, read through it with Jackie, and released it informally on my website—all in a little over 2 months.

I had intended to leave this there, with no further revision—something, maybe, for someone who liked my 'serious' work to stumble across. I'm finding, however, that I'm not willing to do that. I like Kisea and her companions, I like the story she needed to tell, I like what she has to say about fear and choices, I even like the backdrop of Caaldani culture as it currently manifests. I'm not willing to let this hide in the shadows, overlooked because of its roots.

However, because this came from that early a date, there are some things about it that I wouldn't do now, and I can only ask that readers be a little more forgiving. A significant one involves naming. I would not, now, write a story with major characters named Kisea and Kian and secondary ones named Kallima and Kara—the names are far too similar. No, I can't simply rename them; call it a personal eccentricity, but for me, the name *is* the character. I have no idea why the name of the world (Caalden) has a double 'a', nor why the human capital city (Calton) is so much like it. Similar issues not involving character names I have, however, been able to work around. I apologize, and hope I've managed to make everything clear enough and interesting enough to be worth overlooking a few small flaws. I'm looking forward to sharing Kisea, Matt, and their family with others for the first time in over two decades, and to continuing the experiment with more about the Jordan family.

For anyone who might be curious about how extensive the changes have been, the original core

premise, from multiple hand-scrawled versions, was this:

1) Matt, because of his mother's exposure to magical energies at the end of her own big adventure, is born with a very strong but poorly controlled gift of sorcery and also, though it should be impossible to have both gifts, is a telepath;

2) While at the College for sorcerers (in a slightly later version, telepaths as well), Matt meets Kisea on her first day, while her roommate Fala is showing her around, and forms a close connection to her;

3) Kisea discovers that she has a gift variant that is badly misunderstood and effectively illegal (one track I explored was that she was a lifewitch), and/or Matt does something intended to protect her that she can't help but see as a betrayal, and she runs away without taking the obligatory Oath;

4) Kisea meets up, separately, with Matt's cousins Kian and Shon and develops a relationship with each;

5) Kallima, another cousin, is kidnapped, and Matt and Kian and Shon and their friend Jori need to go after her;

6) Kisea is with Kian at the time, and goes along for Kallima's sake to help, even though Matt technically is sworn to take her back to the College as a renegade.

That, generally, is as far as I got. There was abundant angst, drama, and head-scratching illogic; I had little experience with life, little skill at handling complex situations or relationships, and little concept of consistency and flow. However, as you'll see, the current version actually succeeds at salvaging far more of the original threads than I expected—while weaving them into a much stronger fabric with a strikingly familiar pattern.

I hope you enjoy this flashback to my earliest writing as much as I have.

Steph Shangraw, 2014

Renegade

01

Matt dropped the report on recent legal hearings in one of his uncle's larger villages into the 'Finished' stack with relief. Most of them had been small issues of straying livestock causing damage, property infringements, failure to meet legal responsibilities, and disputes between neighbours. In one case, a father was swearing that his daughter had been sexually abused; that was in blatant contradiction to the daughter's own testimony that she and the youth involved considered themselves betrothed and were making arrangements for their own household. Cohabitation with intent would certainly constitute a legally recognized marriage. Ordinary things that he had no need to get involved in.

Only two cases called for further investigation as part of his job, and neither was urgent.

Why can't people just see each other as people? he thought tiredly, a question he asked the universe frequently but had yet to get an answer for. *Why should it make any difference whether your parents were both completely human, when it comes to being treated fairly and impartially?*

Of course, he was biased, since his father was half alasis, as was the cousin he'd grown up with practically as a brother. The improbable quirk in the whole family was that his uncle, who was one of the eighteen human Lords who were one step below the human King, remained genuinely and openly fond of his siblings who had chosen another life, and of his mixed-blood nephews. That was considerable protection in a world fermenting with tension between fullbloods of two powerful races, a no-longer-powerful one, several relatively rare ones, and the inevitable crossbreeds.

Knuckles tapping on the open door of his office made him glance up.

His full-alasis cousin Shon crossed the room, not even having paused at the door, to hand him another dozen sheets of paper. "The reports came in from Elmford," he said in alasis—his own first language, and one of Matt's, so they tended to use it frequently despite Shon's command of human. "There's a siren one. A particularly bad one, so brace yourself." He dropped into the chair next to Matt's desk. "It wasn't her."

"Well, that's something," Matt said, scanning the top page for details. Depressingly typical, at first, but this one did indeed turn nasty. "I would say we need to go check this one out personally and immediately. We can't wait for Kian to get back."

"I already sent word to the stable to get the horses ready and to the kitchens to put something together we can eat on the way. We should be able to reach Elmford within four hours."

Until three years before, Shon had been Heir to an alasis Lord in his own right; he had a formidable grasp of a wide variety of useful subjects, many of which Matt lacked any practical experience with at all. It was a perverse quirk of law and fate that Shon now officially lacked any status at all other than as personal guard to his several-years-younger mixed-blood cousin who happened to be born a sorcerer.

On the other hand, Matt was intensely grateful for him on virtually a daily basis, and not only because Shon's presence meant Kian could at times wander off to the woods he loved without

worrying that his sorcerer almost-brother was going to impulsively run off on his own to confront a bad situation.

"Time to throw a few things together and get going, then." Matt fetched a flat leather satchel from where it had been kicked under the desk, and shoved the most recent handful of papers in. "Have we had problems from Elmford before? Can you remember?"

"No more than the usual, I believe." Shon rose and went to the shelves, chose one book, and flipped it open. "Several rapes of siren-blood that were acquitted despite clear evidence, on the usual grounds of doubt whether the siren-blood initiated it. One earlier instance of a magistrate declaring the rapist to be the victim of the siren-blood he raped. Several typical instances of violence involving alasir-blood. Oh, yes, that was the place with the woman who agreed to a hand-fast marriage with a quarter-alasir relay telepath after several months of courting, and the next morning set her male relatives on him because he bit her during sex."

"Right. Isn't that the one thing about alasir that humans generally *do* get right?" Matt sighed and rolled his eyes. Drinking blood was generally the first thing humans thought of when alasir were mentioned. Being nocturnal by nature, quite possibly. Being obligate carnivores, like cats, much less often. Being readily identified by the tall rangy build, black hair, and extremely fair skin that tended to breed true for several mixed generations, frequently though not always with complete accuracy. But the involuntary reflex that demanded a mouthful or so of blood at the moment of sexual climax, and the voluntary option that did have a few limited biological advantages, those were generally exaggerated and distorted but nonetheless commonly known. "Maybe the world is just too stupid for anything we're working for."

"Possibly. That is no reason to not work towards it." Shon closed the book and handed it to him, to be added to the satchel with various other things Matt thought might prove useful.

"Until now, I was thinking of asking whether you'd like to spend a few days running the roads in the disputed lands. Lori passed on a rumour of a siren-blood mindhealer that spent the worst of the winter in Hope-of-Luck and put at least two people back together. One was a teenaged Exotic rescued from a rogue lifewitch's experiments, one was a siren-alasir who was kidnapped onto an alasir ship for over a month and was so badly abused he couldn't function at all."

"The usual improbable miracles, then," Shon said, getting up. "As soon as we create a miracle of our own, we can go."

"Sooner or later, we're going to catch up with her instead of just tracking down stale leads."

"Eventually," Shon agreed. "But until then, as long as these stories keep appearing, we know she's alive and more or less intact, and therefore that there is still hope."

Lord Jordan having a rather less biased and more accurate view of his mixed-blood nephews and their alasir cousin and the relationship between them, all three had rooms that were substantially the same side by side in a quiet hall. They separated there long enough to do a hasty packing job.

Probably they'd be there at least two or three days, so Matt tossed extra drawers and knitted socks in his pack, and a shirt of extremely fine bleached linen with black embroidery around the neck and sleeves, very like the one he was wearing now.

The currently-fashionable highly-fitted knee-length breeches and short jacket were ridiculously impractical in the Northern climate other than high summer, unless you could stay indoors all the time and afford to pay a fortune in heating, and they restricted movement to a considerable degree. They were nonetheless popular with hangers-on and aspiring upper-class men as well as highborn and high-level magic-users who might legitimately have little need for free range of motion. The men of the Jordan House, from the Lord on down, tended to prefer the simpler and relatively timeless option of full-length trousers with the usual drawstring waist and hip-length tunic with elbow-length or forearm-length sleeves over a linen shirt. The fit, however, was more customized

than most could afford, and the quality of the wool and linen and the quality and colour of the dyes and embroidery was beyond the reach of any but the wealthy.

Because Matt was going to have to deal with upper-class townspeople on this one, he rolled together trousers and tunic of shades of strong deep blue and stuffed them in his pack, and traded his current rather casual grey trousers and undyed tunic for equally-expensive intense greens.

Who cares I'm going to be on a horse for the next four hours in warm weather? he thought drily. *Must look the part as representative of the House.*

Shon and Kian, at least, could get away when working with the Jordan guard uniform. Over goldenrod-coloured wool trousers and a shirt went a jerkin, made of many layers of quilted linen with an outer facing of tooled leather dyed rose madder red; thin plates of horn were embedded into it over particularly vulnerable areas, and even with the sleeves removed for summer temperatures, a flap still protected each shoulder. It was essentially the same armour used across the entire North, other than the expensive chain sometimes worn by highborn or high-level military officers—though the poorer-quality versions lacked the interior plates, the leather facing, the sleeves, a number of layers, or some combination.

Matt had been tempted more than once to simplify his life and follow suit, only swapping the armour for a simple tunic.

He laced his boots back on, snatched up his cloak, and rejoined Shon in the corridor to go down to the manor's stable-wards door.

Tied to the rail were two horses. Both were tall and sturdy, bred for endurance along with the intelligence Jordan horses were known for. One was a wheat-gold buckskin with walnut mane and tail and dark legs; the other was a liver chestnut, dark brown with a reddish tone that showed most strongly on her legs and muzzle, a white star on her forehead. Their tack matched, simple but elegant and perfectly fitted: halter with lead-rope for when they had extended stops, and over it a bridle; a long low-cantled saddle designed to be adaptable and comfortable for horse and rider under varying conditions and long hours, that of the chestnut already with a compact but bulging pack strapped into place.

Next to them on the rail perched a red-tailed hawk. Those were common enough all over the North, though finding one on a horse-rail, not so much—nor the electric-pale shimmer of its eyes at close range, nor the complete lack of alarm from the horses.

Matt reached out to stroke the hawk's breast gently; she rubbed her head against his hand. "Horse," he said, willing it as well as saying it.

Jori hopped to the ground, her form already dissolving into a blur of dense electric energy. Within a few heartbeats, the hawk was gone, replaced by a striking dapple-grey mare with flaxen-yellow mane and tail and flaxen feathers on her ankles, less tall and more solidly-built than the other two horses. She was already wearing a hackamore, a bridle lacking a bit, and a saddle of similar style to the other horses, but all of hers was spotlessly white leather, richly tooled and ornamented with gold.

Matt gave the grey an affectionate scritch around her forelock. "I'm sorry I've been so busy. The way things are going, I should start sending you with Kian when he goes wandering so you don't get bored."

She snorted at him, nudged him with her nose.

"We need to go sort out a bad situation," Shon told her, fastening his own pack and his long riding coat behind the saddle of the buckskin and sliding what resembled a slightly unusual staff into its rings on the side. "Before an innocent siren-blood woman suffers any more than she already has. Elmford." He untied the chestnut's lead and knotted it to a ring on the buckskin's saddle, untied the buckskin's and tossed it across her shoulders, then swung up into the saddle of the latter and

gathered up the reins.

Matt hastily added his own pack, his sorcerer's cloak, and the leather satchel behind the grey's saddle and mounted. The hackamore and reins were sometimes useful for subtle communication, but not really necessary. Jori knew the way at least as well as he did. Probably better, since she saw all the roads and settlements from above in her hawk form.

Not truly tireless, she did have far more stamina than a true horse. If Shon switched between back and forth between buckskin Butterfly and chestnut Rose, they could keep up a rapid pace all the way to Elmford, without Matt needing to use magical means that would leave him paying for it afterwards.

They reached Elmford after dark, which in high summer meant it was fairly late, but neither particularly cared. Matt could see nearly as well in the dark as a full alasiir, and so regularly got distracted and forgot to go to bed until well past midnight that the whole Jordan Manor was used to his odd hours; though Shon had adapted with good grace to the necessity of an inverted schedule much of the time, he preferred the dark. The moons were both bright enough that the horses had no trouble seeing the road and their footing, and light levels seemed largely irrelevant to whatever Jori's primary senses were.

When the lights of the town came into sight, Matt reached behind him to pull his cloak free so he could toss it around his shoulders white-side-out, fasten the throat-clasp, and slide his arms through the side-slits. He often thought that he was going to redesign it, against all tradition, to include about half as much actual fabric, but he had to admit, it did create a dramatic impression and that could be useful. His sorcerer's medallion normally stayed under his shirt and out of the way, but he pulled it out so it rested against his tunic: a silver hexagon with rounded corners, deeply engraved with a six-sided star, set with white opal in the centre.

The only places likely to have a concentration of people who were still awake were the local taverns and inns, so they went to the best of the former. Matt unstrapped the leather satchel that held the reports; Shon hitched the mares to the rail, drew his unusual staff from Butterfly's saddle rings, and fell into step a stride behind Matt and to one side.

Showtime.

Whatever he might think of all the trappings, and no matter how real and sweeping the authority his uncle had given him, people could still find a way to thwart him if they put their minds to it. Respect was different from power or authority, and that he had needed to learn to command, if not for himself then at least for his job; both his mixed blood and being not yet thirty tended to work against him. Much more inclined to simply treat everyone as equals, he'd been finding that a hard lesson, learned mainly from Shon. The lives of people who had no one else to stand up for them depended on it, though.

The heavy wood door swung easily open on well-oiled hinges, admitting them to a large room, brightly lit with wax candles and oil lamps and not one hearth but two. Around the occasional beams supporting the second floor with its private dining rooms, a number of tables were arranged, rectangular ones of well-sanded oiled wood around which six chairs fit comfortably for dining, more for drinking and socializing.

At this hour, respectable women were for the most part in their own homes, but the predominantly male crowd did include a few aside from the serving maids. All the customers here were well-dressed, though the revealing styles worn by three of the women suggested their source of income might be considered less than respectable by some.

Matt had met all three and considered them more respectable than many of the town's officials, no matter how they made a living. Besides, all three had distinctly red hair, and siren-blood by nature found it all but impossible to load sexual activity with all the extra weight that humans

insisted was intrinsic.

One of the red-haired women caught his eye, and flashed him a quick relieved smile, though she hardly missed a beat in laughing with the group of men she was sitting with. Neither of them was much of a telepath, but enough for brief and slightly fuzzy contact.

I'm glad you're here. You're going to help Petra, right?

Of course I am. Talk later?

Yes.

Multiple pairs of eyes were tracking him. Visibly alasir-blood, the opalescent shimmer of his cloak unmistakably marking him as a sorcerer, his visibly alasir-blood companion in Jordan colours, they knew who he was before he said a word.

He found an empty table, and seated himself in the chair at one end. Shon, formally, stayed on his feet, behind and beside, grounding the metal-capped base of his staff and clasping both hands around it loosely, just above the oval metal disc that looked like it was embedded across the grain a foot from the upper end.

One of the serving maids was already on her way over.

"Wine, m'lord?" she offered.

"Please. And I need to speak to any of the town's officers who are around, even if they have to be pulled out of the private rooms. If they aren't here, ask someone to go fetch them."

"M'lord... is this about Petra?"

"Yes." *One of the sirens asked me as soon as we came in if that's why we're here, too,* he said privately to Shon, who wasn't any kind of telepath, but shared blood and familiarity went a long way.

Given her job, many people would know her. And it was too brutal even to excuse by the normal twisted reasoning. I think people are likely to be unsettled by it.

"The reeve's upstairs, although not officially," the maid said. That might explain where the one human harlot was. "I'll tell him myself."

"Please. You can tell him it was on my orders." He didn't want her in trouble for it.

She swirled off. In this tavern, the serving girls were dressed respectably, in full-circle wool skirts and laced wool bodices, more often over fitted blouses of bleached or pastel-dyed linen than the more casual loose drawstring-necked chemise of unbleached linen. Colours tended to be solids rather than shaded or pattern-dyed or brocade, usually not the more expensive ones and sometimes from second- or third-batch lots with less intensity, but dyed evenly and in pleasant hues. Hair was always gathered into respectable nets, pinned with combs that might be carved wood or might be copper or occasionally silver. The management wanted them dressed well enough to be acceptable to customers of both sexes using the premises for business or pleasure, and the serving maids were strictly off-limits for pleasure as business.

That last was rather underscored by the fact that all were entirely human.

Why go after a good human girl with those sirens around to do what they're best at? Matt sighed to himself.

One of the other maids brought him a bronze goblet of wine; he took a swallow mainly because he was going to have to talk a lot.

The reeve was a human man in his fifties, the girth of his waistline suggesting a sedentary lifestyle; he was, in fact, one of the wealthiest landowners in the town, who leased out small properties both residential and business-oriented. Matt shared his uncle's misgivings about conflicts of interest with a man like that having too much additional power, but he'd been consistently elected by the town's collective landowners and skilled tradespeople since long before Matt had fallen into this job five years before. Mid-brown hair was both greying and receding, which he made no vain

efforts to hide; possibly he thought it added to his façade of wise father-figure.

Currently, he was not pleased with the interruption, though he was savvy enough to hide it behind a mask of courtesy.

"This is a dreadful hour to be out riding," he said heartily. "Surely it could have waited until tomorrow?"

"It isn't that late for some of us," Matt said. "Especially when there's a job to do. Could you explain to me please why the men she named are not in cells?"

The reeve sighed, not wasting time pretending he didn't know exactly what brought Matt here. "Where are they going to go? They're all respectable local men with homes and jobs. Four of the five are married. What's the point of locking them up on the word of a siren-blood crying rape?"

"She's not crying rape. She was beaten, with several bones broken." It was a considerable effort to keep his voice even and not let the anger turn it into a snarl. "Because she refused to submit sexually to your five respectable men. If she weren't siren-blood, they would probably have been tried and heavily sentenced before I ever heard about it. Instead, she's in a bed she can't get out of and your respectable local men are running around free."

"But she *is* a siren, and they're always looking for sex. All five said when they got near her, she started the conversation and they all found within moments that they could only think about wanting her."

"That is not how siren fascination works." *I've explained this how many times? Just to this man, let alone others? Just keep your voice calm. Don't shout it. It won't help.* "All three factors have to be in play for there to be any noticeable effect at all. Pheromones are only released under emotional or physical stress, neither of which is plausible for her walking home after having dinner in a public place with a companion following work. The vocal effects tend to be cumulative and only work at the same time as the pheromone release. Psychic projection is the only one of the three that's under direct conscious control."

"Some of them learn to do it all deliberately," the reeve said curtly.

"A very strong half-siren telepath can often learn to trigger the other effects deliberately," Matt admitted. "But Petra is by all report only a quarter siren. She's a strong enough telepath that it was one factor in her being hired to work in the town hall administration, but that suggests that she's not strong enough to get a job primarily as a telepath. And having a more active sexual nature than the average human does not mean that every single siren-blood of either sex is completely indiscriminate and irresistibly attracted to every single individual they see. Most of what you and others think is siren fascination is that they lack most of the inhibitions that human society believes are natural and proper. The rest is your own projection." He crossed his arms on the table, met the reeve's gaze flatly. "Is the reason you were upstairs with, what's her name, the human one, Reba, because all three of the siren-blood ones refused to have anything to do with you after ordering the release of those men, even under threat of losing their jobs?"

It was a guess, but it hit home. All senses alert, he saw the flicker of discomfort, the hint of anger.

"I was upstairs discussing business."

"Yes, I'm sure. The way you've handled this one runs completely counter to the mandate from Lord Jordan that all justice in the Jordan province will be delivered without regard to race, sex, income, or other extraneous factors. I'm taking over personally. I want those men arrested *now*. Before I decide to consider you and others to be accessories complicit in a violent crime." He heard some of the anger starting to creep through, felt the sense of warning from Shon, and stopped there.

His uncle Rob had given him a frightening degree of authority, insisting that he trusted Matt not to abuse it but that he wanted him able to do anything he needed in a situation without delay.

Which meant he was answerable to no one but Lord Jordan personally, could command and overrule any magistrate or town official, and had the right to hold his own hearings and make summary verdicts and sentences on crimes of property and person.

Which meant the reeve had no choice but to obey.

The reeve's expression went from anger to apprehension to resentment to carefully neutral, all within the space of a breath. "Yes, of course. I'll see to it."

"Thank you. Shon, could you assist?" "I'll be good while you're gone, I promise. I don't trust him."

"Don't get killed. Kian will never forgive me." Out loud, Shon only murmured a soft assent.

The reeve didn't particularly care for that, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Once they left, Matt beckoned the helpful serving maid back over.

"Thank you. Dealing with him directly is definitely more efficient than needing multiple steps. Do you suppose you could find someone to take our horses around to the stables and find me a room for whenever I might get a chance to sleep?"

"Of course, m'lord. And..." she hesitated. "It's not my place, but thank you. A lot of women have been feeling less safe."

"With them still loose, not much surprise. Siren blood is an excuse. It's too easy to invent more excuses."

"Yes, m'lord. And I know Petra. There's no chance she invited anything. There's a journeyman butcher she's in company with often these past two years, no one else anyone's seen."

In company with. That was actually mixed-blood slang, a noncommittal statement about observed behaviour without judgement either way on what might happen unobserved. It always intrigued him when mixed-blood words and phrases appeared in "respectable" settings.

It was in fact possible there'd been no one else, if he was able to keep her satisfied; at the very least, she was clearly too discreet to solicit the attention of five men in a public street.

"I'm going to do my best to make sure everyone can feel safe again," he said gently.

"Thank you, m'lord. Should I find you something to eat? The kitchen is closed but there's always something around."

"Later, for my guard and myself both." The Jordan Manor cooks had provided them with food they could eat in the saddle, semicircular pastries stuffed with dense minced beef and only enough vegetable matter for flavouring. "Right now, there are other things I need to do. The report doesn't mention where Petra currently is. Do you know?"

"No, but Arilai might."

"Could you ask her if she has a moment?"

"Certainly, m'lord."

He took another swallow of wine, and pulled out the reports to scan through the details again on Petra's current condition.

"Nail them to a wall."

There was nothing of the smooth seductive purr he'd heard Arilai use to potential customers in it, only rage.

"I take it you're sure they're guilty," he said, looking up as she sat down next to him—that she circled around rather than sitting in the chair the reeve had been in was probably not an accident.

As much as he had to appreciate the lush curves under a low-cut blouse and a bodice styled and laced to emphasize her natural assets, her fiery-red hair falling in thick loose waves completely unrestrained, her green eyes outlined dark by artifice but the blush of her lips entirely natural, he knew very well it had nothing to do with siren fascination.

It did, probably, have something to do with her being siren, but only because of another siren.

"You want the real story?"

"I would very much like that, yes." And because she knew he understood sirens, he had a pretty good chance of hearing facts that no one else in authority would.

Arlai's version matched comfortably with what he already knew.

He'd met Petra several times, remembered her as a briskly competent woman probably a bit older than him, always dressed respectably and impeccably. Only the auburn hair really suggested her siren grandparent's blood.

Not a native of Elmford, she'd accepted a job in the town hall, thanks to the recommendation of the local relay telepath who had met her elsewhere and heard good reports about her. Lacking the range to be a relay telepath herself or any other particularly noteworthy gift, she was nonetheless extremely useful in the right setting for her ability to read deception and intention in combination with her excellent organizational skills, her high literacy, and her sympathetic demeanour. Her job, typically, involved dealing with townspeople seeking assistance with anything from land ownership questions to registry of birth and death to taxes, either supplying assistance herself or getting the appropriate settlement officer involved. Not a glamorous or exciting job, but a dependable and vital one that would allow her to be independent, always deeply important to siren-blood.

"To keep her job, she plays by human rules about sex. Mostly. She's had the odd moment of weakness, but she's careful and she doesn't do it with anyone who lives in Elmford. She has a lover who keeps her happy most of the time anyway. She comes in here for a meal sometimes, and if it's a quiet night for us and she's alone, sometimes we keep her company. Just to talk, no matter who says what. She's not one of the ones that gets a position with some respectability and decides that makes her superior to all other crossbreeds. You know the type, I'm sure. We thought you probably would be, at first."

"I devoutly hope someone will thump me with something heavy if I ever do. I've met a lot of them." Being a strong or skilled sorcerer or telepath was one of the most reliable ways to get acceptance and status in fullblood society, and frequently the strongest gifts in both turned up in crossbreeds. He'd met a nauseating number of crossbreeds who abandoned their own heritage or worse as soon as they stopped needing the support of the mixed-blood community as a whole. "So she's smart and discreet. Soliciting five local men in the street, which would quite possibly lead to losing her job or at least to public disapproval..."

"It just wouldn't happen."

"It never did sound very plausible."

"Just between us..."

"Absolutely."

"She told me, confidentially, that she was feeling uncomfortable around Wilmot Tanner. He approached her multiple times, at work and in the market and on the street and once here, hinting not very subtly that he wanted her. He's married, and his wife had their first child maybe a month after the first time. Petra turned him down. I heard her the time he did it here, she was polite but very firm and very clear and suggested that he talk to me or the others. He let it go before he got thrown out, but not much before."

"Oh gods." *Human believes all sirens want sex constantly and indiscriminately, siren-blood keeps refusing sex with him, now his ego is all bruised to go with stress at home.*

Arlai nodded. "She didn't report it to anyone, because he hadn't done anything, really, and who'd believe her that it wasn't her gaming him? But she was really nervous."

"Then she's found beaten badly and violently raped and unconscious, somehow no one heard anything, she finally wakes up and gives the names of the people responsible, one of whom has been

harassing her... and they're given a brief preliminary hearing and released because, well, she's a siren and she must have asked for it, and probably they were her victims and she got what she deserved."

"That's it."

"I'm not getting the impression that it's a popular decision, releasing them."

"Most people in Elmford forget she's part siren at all. She doesn't, but they do. So a lot of women are scared, especially any that have met Petra and have trouble imagining her gaming them. Mixed-blood women, especially the siren-blood ones, are watching behind us wondering who'll be attacked next. If they can get away with not just the usual rape but with almost killing her..." She trailed off.

"They won't. I need to make sure I have all the evidence there is and that I haven't missed anything, but I'm not leaving Elmford until I make this right. As right as it can be. Do you know where Petra is? I'll wait to go talk to her, but I do need to."

"Clear it with the boss and I'll take you there myself right now. She's sleeping a lot but not well, she's in a lot of pain. We're taking turns sitting with her as much as we can to help, but we can't while we're working. Now or tomorrow won't make a difference, and she'll feel better knowing someone's on her side."

"I can't take sides."

"Of course you do. You take the side of anyone who's been hurt against the people who hurt them. You mean you wait until you have proof of who was hurt and who did the hurting. That's not the same thing."

He smiled. "I need to wait until Shon gets back before I go wandering around Elmford. Then I'll certainly steal you away. And thank you."

Judging siren ages was always hard; they tended to ripen and then stay there, with all the appeal of youth and maturity both. For just a moment, as her eyes met his, they looked very old. "I wish there'd been someone like you around when I was younger."

"I'll do my best." It was a promise he'd made to a lot of people on Jordan lands, mostly crossbreeds and others who didn't quite fit and fell to the bottom.

Because it just isn't right. No one should be doomed to a life of abuse and victimization.

And because even though Jordan lands are one place my beloved stays well away from, maybe what I do makes the world just a little bit safer for her. Just maybe, she'll hear and she'll stop running and let me help.

02

Kisea paused at a crossroads, squinting at the sign in the gloom of a drizzly and heavily overcast late afternoon, and finally running her fingers over the rain-slick wooden boards to check the shapes of the characters.

Straight ahead or to the east, there was no way she'd reach the next village today. If she turned to the west, though, it was no more than a couple of miles. She wasn't happy about going any deeper into human-dominated lands than this road had already led her; the broad disputed areas along the borders tended to be friendlier to those who fell through the cracks. On the other hand, she had enough coin on her to pay for a meal and a bed for the night, and ready cash tended to change attitudes. She was fairly sure she was skirting along the Jordan province by now, and she had a much better chance of being safe there than she would in the Larkin province. Ironically, the same

thing that made Jordan somewhat safer for crossbreeds meant she dared not stay long, but for a few hours, the chances were very low.

The alternatives were walking all night, or sleeping on soggy leaves or needles in whatever shelter she could improvise. Again.

She turned west.

At least, not long past midsummer, it wasn't cold. She could count her sturdy waxed-leather boots as a blessing, too, a gift from a cobbler: she'd cured his daughter of recurrent nightmares that kept the whole household from sleeping through a night and left the girl terrified of her bed. Her calf-length hooded coat of tightly-woven and felted wool with the oil intact likewise had been a gift: the much-loved husband of a skilled weaver had been kicked in the head by a cow, which had made him prone to bursts of aggressive anger until Kisea had minimized the damage. Most of her belongings were either directly thanks-gifts or bought with outright coin from those who had nothing she needed.

They didn't care how she did it. She was a telepath, and she healed minds where other telepaths had failed or refused to try, and that was all that mattered to them. She doubted very much that most of them would have cared in the least how badly the Telepath Assembly would like get to their hands on her.

Not that she had any intention of obliging the Assembly. Ever.

She trudged onwards, head down. Farmers would be blessing the thin rain, which would saturate everything and make the plants grow madly with harvest approaching. Even knowing that, she wished it would go away. Days like this, her mood usually matched her surroundings; she found herself brooding on the injustices in her life that had led to her endlessly walking the hundreds of miles of road that crisscrossed the North. Everything she owned, she carried, because she had no home to leave anything else in and no friends she dared trust. Being born to a human mother and a siren father had been no choice of hers, nor was her highly unusual psychic gift. Human-siren crosses often turned up strong telepathic abilities, after all, and sometimes they were variants on the common ones. Her vagabond existence could be traced directly back to those two facts, especially the latter.

And yet, it was a part of her, and she would die before letting anyone tear it away from her. Even if it meant hiking in weather like this.

Lights, ahead. Not many of them, but any light was welcome as a sign of shelter.

As she drew closer, she stifled a sigh. This was a very small village, probably not much more than a hundred people all told. There would probably be a tavern of some sort—locals always wanted a place to drink and socialize, and there'd be the occasional party of travellers through—but probably not rooms to rent. That meant the tavern floor.

Well, at least it should, in theory, be dry.

The village buildings clustered primarily around a crossroads with a couple of secondary roads that supported more houses. The ones in the very centre would be the businesses that catered to the farmers who owned, not particular fields, but generations-old right and responsibility for strips of land in multiple fields that varied in best use. It was nonetheless easy enough to identify the single-story building she wanted, made of the ever-available wood that provided all village structures, the shutters closed against the damp. The branch hung over the door, off a faded sign she couldn't read, still had a couple of green leaves on it: new ale, not all that long ago.

She lifted the primitive latch and went inside, grateful the moment she stepped across the threshold for the respite from the rain. She pushed the door shut, against some resistance since either hinges or wood had warped slightly, and turned to face the room.

With the hearth-fire aided only by inexpensive tallow candles in wall sconces, the room was

patchy gloom not much better than outside. It was less so near the hearth, which was inevitably where most of the current patrons had collected. She could see a little better than a human could, enough so to get a clearer impression of the room than anyone in it would gain of her.

One square room, which occupied the full ground floor. Four long tables on trestles were arranged in a cross with the ends pointing to the corners; in one space between the arms was the hearth, with a cast iron cauldron over it on a metal arm, and in the opposite was a small counter in front of a few barrels stacked in a neat frame. The door she'd used was in a third space between arms, and directly across from it was another door, which probably led to a privy and any outbuildings.

Kisea had seen places like it before. Often, rather than belonging to any individual, they belonged to a group of women as a cooperative venture. The woman who was serving might do that regularly, or might be taking her turn, depending on the local division of labour.

The patrons were clustered along the two tables that stood nearest the hearth. Overwhelmingly human: earth-coloured hair, sun-weathered skin, sturdy build, practical trousers and shirts in solid colours of muted dyes. The sole woman stood out like a goat among sheep, pausing in the act of filling a cup from an earthenware pitcher; she wore a simple chemise and bodice and long heavy skirt, tendrils of her greying beaver-brown hair escaping from the intricately-braided multicoloured net that attempted to confine it.

The sole other non-human was equally obvious, though he'd chosen a seat far from the noisy group by the hearth, at the end of one of the other arms of the cross: black hair, pale skin that saw the sun much less often than that of most humans, rangier build though details were hard to see under the tooled dark leather of the padded jerkin he wore. Interestingly, he wasn't alone; with him were a middle-aged local and a younger one.

Kisea, ignoring several dozen pairs of eyes watching her, made her way to the end of the fourth table, as far from everyone else as she could manage. With considerable relief she let her willow-framed leather pack slide off her shoulders. She'd have liked to keep her hood up, but her coat had picked up enough moisture to be growing uncomfortable, so she unfastened the carved wooden buttons and shrugged out of it. In this lighting, her elbow-length braided hair, the red of Southern paprika, might pass for deep brown if she was lucky.

"Here, I'll hang that near the hearth for you," the woman said sympathetically, and Kisea let her take it, not without a faint twinge—without a decent coat, travelling in the North was suicidal, and one of that quality wouldn't be easy to replace. "Man outside still with beasts?"

"No," Kisea said. "Just me. The companion I was travelling with expected more than I was willing to offer in trade for his company and protection." Let her assume she meant sexual favours. "Since I really need to get where I'm going, I've had to take a chance on travelling alone." More accurately, she needed to not be where she was last. "I give you my word, I'm not a harlot or a thief, and I'm not after anything but a dry place to sleep tonight and something warm to eat."

The woman regarded her doubtfully for a moment, her surface thoughts shouting to Kisea that she had strong reservations about her intentions, then shrugged. "Not sure if you're brave or desperate or foolhardy, on the road by yourself, but it's your own business. I'll bring you a meal. There's no rooms to rent, here, just space by the hearth overnight. A penny for both."

"Which is far better than outside. Thank you." Kisea slid a hand under her long outer tunic and, by feel, freed a silver penny from the lining of her belt.

The coin magically alleviated any further questions; the woman bore Kisea's coat away to hang neatly to dry. Kisea dropped wearily into the bench, wishing she could have her back closer against the wall both for security and so she had something to lean against. She took a chance, let her eyes close for a moment. She wasn't going to get a chance to strip to the skin and dry self and clothing

thoroughly, but the sturdy wool of her coat and even of her trousers and tunic had kept her linen chemise and drawers and tooled-leather bodice from anything more than the humidity that permeated everything. The tunic's three-quarter sleeves had allowed the exposed wrists of her chemise to get wet, but that would dry quickly.

She opened her eyes again as her mental senses gave her a proximity warning; the woman set a tray, really nothing more than a flat board, in front of her, bearing a generously large wooden bowl of thick steaming pottage, a round of dark bread, and a rather coarse pottery mug. Kisea thanked her and fished her own carved wooden spoon from one of the side compartments of her pack.

The pottage had more grains and root vegetables in it than anything else, but then, since it had probably been stewing on that fire with more ingredients added at need for weeks, if not months or years, she had no problem with that. She tore the bread, thick dark rye that would be heavy and filling, into chunks and dipped it into the pottage while it cooled a little. The ale proved to be rather thin and weak, but not much surprise if the better and stronger stuff was saved for the locals; it was safer than water, anyway. She took her time eating, unexciting as it was. For the past several days, she'd had only limited dry biscuit and jerky and even less pemmican and dried fruit, mostly eaten on the move since camping was an exercise in misery. Comparatively, this was an enjoyable change.

Finished, she asked the landlady to watch her pack for her while she made use of the privy, a trip she vowed to make no more often than absolutely necessary. Aside from the unpleasantness of the facilities, it took her closer to the men by the hearth than she liked. Far too many of them turned to watch her, the raucous conversation dropping off briefly before picking back up once she was past.

"She's got red hair," one hissed, none too quietly, to his friends. That sent the surface impressions she was getting from them, already uncomfortably speculative, into a frenzy of sexual fantasy. She kept her gaze carefully away from them, watching only the floor and her destination, and made her strides long and purposeful with as little sway as possible; her tunic, unbelted, was already loose enough to minimize her curves, to what little extent anything could. A couple called invitations, which she pointedly ignored; she'd learned the hard way that any response at all was encouragement.

The landlady was amenable to Kisea moving one of the benches to the corner, against the wall, and in fact helped her do so. Kisea, with nothing else to do, drew out the bag that held her worn-smooth weaving tablets with her current project and sundry supplies. She unlaced and drew off her boots, setting them under the bench to let them and her feet air out, and arranged herself with the far end of her weaving hooked around one wool-socked foot outstretched on the bench. She attached the other end to the belt under her tunic, and wriggled until her back was against the wall for support. Colourful patterned belts, trim for clothes, and the like could sometimes be bartered, and it didn't add much to the weight of her pack; there was, as well, something soothing about turning the collection of random strands into a neatly-ordered attractive pattern. It was something she could control, something with a beginning and an ending, something wonderfully ordinary and commonplace.

She saw, in fact, the landlady's body-language change, and the surface feelings Kisea got from her smoothed out considerably. The strange red-haired woman travelling alone was, despite her odd behaviour, doing the kind of productive small task that many women did when they had time. The landlady even scolded one of the men for loudly telling an extremely bawdy joke about a female half-siren who worked her way through a series of male livestock looking for a lover who could satisfy her where human men had failed to do so.

Kisea could have told her that she'd already heard it, in multiple variants, including one that made the half-siren male and one that made her other half alasil rather than human. Nor was it the

worst 'joke' in circulation about mixed-blood sirens.

Staying quiet, staying calm, keeping any projection tightly under control, meant no 'siren tricks' even involuntarily, as the defence mechanism it had probably originally been. A high sex drive and a different set of values around sex didn't mean what human and alasir fullbloods, the men especially, seemed to enjoy believing it meant.

The alasir, or part-alasir, gave her a courteous nod as he left with the pair he'd dined with. She picked up a faint sense of speculation from him, a feeling of trying to put pieces together; possibly she'd run into him somewhere before, but it was more likely she just reminded him of someone else.

These were farmers, for the most part, and others who worked for a living, and who needed to be up early in the morning; the noisy socializing that in a larger town would have gone on well past the high part of the night wrapped up relatively early, all wandering off to their own beds.

The landlady banked the fire in the hearth, snuffed most of the candles, wished her a good sleep, and left her alone.

Kisea put away her weaving, tucked her pack into the corner to serve as a pillow of sorts, and unstrapped her extra blanket, in its own moisture-resistant wrapping, from the bottom of her pack. Had it been colder, she'd have moved nearer the hearth; as it was, the blanket was enough. She did loosen the lacing on the front of her bodice, just for the extra bit of comfort. The candles would burn out before much longer, so she let them be.

Hard bed though it was, after scant sleep the previous night without shelter and two days of trudging through drizzly gloom, once she'd made sure the knife from her belt was in easy reach she fell asleep quickly.

* * *

Her inner senses shrieked a warning, just before hands grabbed her. Too many hands, large strong ones, seizing on arms and legs, one over her mouth and muffling her scream, hands that tore her blanket aside. She fought, got a leg free to kick hard, felt something soft that was probably an abdomen judging by the lack of bone and the sudden whuff of expelled air, but other hands trapped that leg and more grappled the other one. Fingers dug in painfully in more places than she could quickly count. She couldn't get at her knife, which left her options terrifyingly limited.

One of the men from earlier, the one who had told the joke, wrapped the braid of her hair around one hand, and held the sharp edge of her own knife against her throat.

These were men who could and did slaughter livestock; she had no doubt he knew exactly how to kill her. Everything she sensed was about sex, nothing specifically violent, but moods could change in a heartbeat.

"Settle down. We're just going to give you what your kind always want. Pulling siren tricks, making sure all any of us can think about is fucking you, why are you acting all surprised?"

Kisea surrendered, breath coming in hard pants that were almost sobs, as she tried to consider her options rationally. She could deal with the ringleader, the one with her knife, but she counted nine men around her in total, and there was no way she could affect that many. If she could force even two to turn on the rest, that would probably give her a chance to escape, but there would be consequences later. She wouldn't make it clear of the village before they all came after her in fear and rage, and she might not survive that.

Badly outnumbered and defenceless, her best bet was to just go limp and hope she got through this with minimal injury, though the thought made her feel like vomiting up her meal.

Here we go again. I should've stayed out in the forest, even if I had to sleep outside again.

Lucky boys, picking the one siren who doesn't dare even try to lay rape charges here. The one province where they might actually be heard fairly, and the one place where they'd be more dangerous to me than to you.

One with a hand free reached up under her tunic and found the drawstring of her wool trousers, jerked it loose so roughly she grunted as the strong wide ribbon dug into her lower back. Another hand groped her left breast hard, her hidden anti-scriving charm grinding against flesh.

That's going to leave a horrible bruise.

She heard the door creak as it opened again. Someone late to the party?

"That's enough. Let her go."

That accent certainly wasn't local.

"She asked for it," said the ringleader belligerently. "Siren bitch in human lands, messing with our minds, why else unless she wanted this?"

"Then why do you need a knife at her throat?"

Kisea felt several of the hands pinning her loosen slightly, not enough to allow room for escape, but it matched the sudden currents of uncertainty she could sense.

"Playing coy, like all these bitches who run around pretending to be men instead of settling down with a husband."

"I think not. And siren power is not selective. It does not affect some in a room without affecting all. I felt nothing, nor did my companions, nor did at least half of those present this evening. She is not responsible for the depravity within your mind. You simply use her siren blood as an excuse."

Kisea definitely knew that accent: Equals Village, the oldest and largest of the mixed-race and crossbreed settlements, some way north of here. Begun by human and alasis, it had developed a creole of its own that mingled the two languages with contributions from others; some learned the original languages as well, but growing up there left an unmistakable mark, akin to but distinct from those of the other dominant mixed settlements.

"Who do you think you are, making accusations like that?"

"Someone armed, who is prepared to inflict damage as necessary to protect an innocent woman from being raped." That tone left no room for compromise.

"It's not worth getting hurt over," one of the others muttered to the ringleader.

"How do I explain broken bones to m'wife, or get the harvest in?" another said.

Cautiously, as though she might spring up and attack them, hands released her and the men backed away, most of them turning so they could watch both her and the main door. Kisea rolled off the bench and retreated so she had her back to the wall, her trousers held up with one hand. She had a second knife in a hidden pocket of her pack, but she didn't go after it. Clearly, she'd been rescued, and if only a single man turned on her again, she could defend herself from that.

The alasis-blood who stood there was at least half a head taller than any of them, and looked deceptively casual in the scant light of two guttering candles and the glow of the banked fire. His staff, a length of solid-looking wood bound with metal so polished it glinted, was grounded on the floor in front of him and held loosely in both hands. The eyes of a nocturnal carnivore caught the same weak light and shone faintly, an animal-like effect that frequently made humans nervous—especially when they remembered that those eyes could see most easily in what to them was darkness.

"Fine," the ringleader spat, tossing Kisea's knife across the room; she heard the metal ring against one of the stones of the hearth. "She's all yours. Both of you, get out of our village."

"Soon," agreed the alasis-blood, stepping aside in an invitation for the men to pass him and leave. As the last crossed the threshold, he closed the door.

"Are you injured?" he asked her gently.

She shook her head. "A few bruises. I don't think they actually planned to beat me or kill me unless I fought back too much. Thank you. Your timing is wonderful, and I'm extremely grateful you chose to get involved at all." She hiked up her tunic so she could reach the waistband of her trousers,

retied them, and wriggled it up further so she could secure the laces of her bodice again, wincing from the pressure on her abused breast.

The alahir-blood, meanwhile, retrieved her knife, inspecting it as he crossed the room to her. "Good steel, that." He offered it to her hilt-first; she accepted it and returned it to its sheath, under her tunic. "I should have been here sooner. I'm sorry it took me as long as it did."

"You just saved me from being gang-raped by a bunch of humans who had convinced themselves that I was forcing them to do it. Why are you apologizing? You even did it without actually having to hurt anyone. I'd rather not get tangled up in legal issues. Especially one siren against nine men whose wives would swear blind their husbands would never consider straying on their own." She gathered up her blanket, shook it out vigorously, and rolled it back up.

"I know. It is, I think, one of the worst forms of prejudice among far too many." There was none of the cold iron that had been in his voice when he'd demanded the villagers release her, only sympathy. "Though we are, barely, within Jordan lands, and Lord Jordan is making considerable effort to eliminate it in law, things change slowly and this is a very small place on the very edge. Can I ask why you travel alone?"

She'd been hearing about those efforts. And about who was now responsible for enforcing them, as well. It was the sort of news that the mixed-blood community in general found extremely relevant.

"It isn't my first choice, I promise. I wouldn't read minds and emotions for someone who wanted to pull a confidence scam. He threatened me, so I told the local authorities what I knew and then ran for it before he got out of prison."

"Where are you going?"

"I was thinking. I'd wander through Eyrie. What brings you to a human village?"

"An escort job, now complete, leaving me with nowhere I currently need to be. I could go to my parents in the Village, but now I think of it, I do have friends in Eyrie I have not seen recently, and it isn't so far from here. And any road is shorter with company than alone."

Kisea strapped the blanket, in its wrappings, back into place on her pack while she considered that. Travelling with company had a considerable list of advantages, and he'd already saved her once. He clearly knew better than to believe the things the ignorant 'knew' about sirens. And it was only three days, maybe four, to Eyrie, nearly as large as the Village.

"I'm Kisea," she said. "Do you have a name?"

"Kian."

She didn't raise her head from her pack until she was sure her expression would betray nothing. He might be a way of staying safe between here and Eyrie, but as soon as they got there, she'd have to make sure they parted ways, preferably before he could introduce her to any friends he had.

That puzzled look earlier wasn't just that she reminded him of someone. Had she seen him in better light, she'd probably have recognized him, though it had been long ago and she'd had a different name then.

"I don't think I'm going to be able to fall back asleep here. I imagine you prefer to travel at night? Shall we see how far we can get before the villagers wake up and questions arise? Maybe by morning we can find some decent shelter that has less vermin in it."

He inclined his head. "Will you wait here, where it's dry, while I fetch my pack? I don't believe they'll return."

"All right. I think this village owes me another bowl of pottage, anyway." Why turn down hot food?

"I won't be long."

Once the door shut behind him, she sat down on the bench, her back against the wall, and

closed her eyes, slowing her breathing. As her attention turned inward rather than outward, she felt the crystal that hung at the hollow of her throat begin to warm; had anyone been present, they'd have seen it begin to glow under the collar of her tunic.

She checked Kian first, found him moving away from her as expected, his surface emotions predominantly thoughtfulness and determination, with a strong overtone of frustration and anger and a current of relief: nothing out of place, no impression of ulterior motives. She set a corner of her mind to keeping track of where he was, so she'd know when he was returning.

Then she scanned the rest of the village, found nine minds that were still awake and all in turmoil. Delicately, she insinuated herself into eight of them, left the germ of a nightmare that should give their consciences a chance to work. She doubted any of them were truly bad men; they probably believed the 'common knowledge' that sirens were sexually insatiable, that their mere presence caused uncontrollable desire in return, and simply never questioned the truth of it or the logic of needing nine of them to hold her down. Without the ringleader, they'd have gone home to their wives and had sex while fantasizing about sirens. That didn't mean she forgave them, since they'd have cheerfully raped her and blamed it on her, but it did mean that it shouldn't take much to make sure they hesitated the next time they saw a siren-blood.

The ringleader, however... she found him rousing his wife roughly, smothering her sleepy protests with a savage kiss, climbing on top of her.

What I can fix, I can also create.

She had to be careful, though, not to leave anything that would have direct associations with her; having him turn into a fanatical siren-hunter would be counterproductive. Nor did she want to do anything complex that would take a long time and leave her still working on it when Kian returned.

Absolutely the last thing she wanted was to leave any further sign of her presence, anything that would announce, to the one person who knew what to look for, that she personally had been here. As long as Kian never realized who she'd once been, she could be any siren-blood, not worthy of note.

She planted a seed, a single question, *are you sure?* and linked it to his sense of confidence so that each time he was certain of something, that question would whisper in his thoughts. The way minds created associations, it would spread gradually, triggered by a broader and broader range of conditions. Bluster and bragging might help him to cover it, but like creeping rot, it would undermine everything.

She sensed Kian approaching as she tied off all the ends of her work neatly, leaving no trace for a telepath without her unusual gift. By the time she opened her eyes, he was back inside and filling two bowls from the pot at the hearth.

He set the bowls on the table, went to the small counter to fetch two rounds of bread from under it and fill two mugs with ale. Kisea stretched carefully, making sure nothing had tightened during her brief trance, and joined him.

"Checking they've gone to bed?"

She nodded. "I'd rather no one was still awake to rouse a mob." She groped for her spoon, dug into the pottage. "This can't be much to your tastes."

He shrugged. "Meat would be better," he agreed. "I'll hunt something small when we decide to stop. One advantage of being half alasir rather than full is a much better tolerance for vegetable foods."

"I travelled with a full alasir for a while. That was tricky to work around sometimes. All the more since he grew up in Felorton and knew very little about hunting. Watching him with a sword was like watching a dancer, but you can't hunt with one if you run out of supplies between settlements. I

don't like setting snares, they're too indiscriminate, but there were times we didn't have much choice. I hope he got himself settled somewhere."

She'd enjoyed his company quite a lot, come to care about him more than she should have allowed, and would have liked to stay with him longer. It had, however, become painfully obvious to her that he needed a life very different from hers, and life had already treated him badly enough. Better for him and safer for her to go separate ways once she'd healed him enough to be sure he would no longer consider suicide.

"Not snares," Kian said, and nodded towards his pack, leaning against the wall near hers; his staff was beside it, but strapped to the pack were a quiver of arrows and a compact recurve bow. "Bow may be more traditionally a woman's weapon, but I'm very fond of the wilderness and it is often of much more use there." A smile flickered across his face. "I'm very quiet when I choose."

Yes, I know. Stealthy enough to stalk a bird that doesn't even exist.

They spoke little while eating, which was fine by Kisea. She tried to make sure that there was as little in her current and recent life to hide as possible, since lies got complicated quickly, but it was going to be tricky making sure she let nothing slip he could use to connect her to her past life and she was glad to have a little time to think about it.

They left the soiled bowls and mugs on the counter, and Kian dropped a pair of silver pennies in one.

"It was not the actions of the women who brew and bake that caused injury," he said mildly, when she gave him a questioning look. "Best to leave them with a good impression, hm?"

He had a point, but Kisea had no compunctions about filching the last two loaves of bread from under the counter to add to her pack before they left the building. They paused at the well to empty and refill water-skins, and departed from the village.

03

Shimai listened quietly to the high-speed chatter of the web-fingered girl who guided her through the grounds of the College.

She was unsure how she felt about the College policy of, as much as possible, not having two telepaths or two sorcerers sharing a dorm room, leading to Shimai being assigned the other bed in Fala's room upon her arrival here yesterday. She was unsure how she felt about most things, including her own presence here. In her fifteen years, she'd learned first and foremost that trust was perhaps the most dangerous concept of all, especially if you were half siren, and yet it was hard not to like Fala, who was as cheerful and outgoing as... well, as Shimai wasn't.

Because sorcerers stayed much longer at the College, but telepaths were significantly more common, that meant roommates were typically from different years, as well. That, at least, was some comfort: Fala had been here two years already, and knew her way around.

Here at the College, just outside the city of Perifaithe where North and South met, nothing was familiar to Shimai. She'd seen women with their heads covered, Southerner-style, and others who confined their hair in nets, like conventional humans and alasis, or braids, like crossbreeds, and women who left it loose like a Southerner but didn't cover it. Clothing styles similarly ranged from one to another to fuzzy ground between. This garden they were walking in, between two of the College buildings, had small trees that looked stunted compared to the North's lush growth, and stone-walled beds of flowers and herbs, and stone benches were scattered along the walkways; it

seemed very Southern, but the concentric layout seemed very Northern, and many of the plants were ones she recognized.

The rhythm of Fala's speech changed abruptly, and she hailed a boy who was strolling along one of the radial paths. "Matt! Come meet Shimai!"

"All right," the boy said amiably, detouring to join them. He gave Shimai an easygoing smile, offered a hand to clasp, Northerner-fashion. "You're new to the College?"

"Yes," Shimai said shyly. "I got here yesterday." His hand was harder than a girl's, and she could feel strength in it; though strength, to her, often equated to threat, he didn't hurt her, only gave her hand a friendly squeeze. At least part alasir, he had to be, with skin that light even in the Southern sun, and hair that black, with that tall lean long-limbed build, but the daytime sun caused him no apparent discomfort so she figured he probably wasn't full alasir. Not so surprising, since crossbreeds so often turned up the strongest gifts.

"It feels strange to everyone at first, but you'll get used to it soon. Teachers will mostly go easy on you for a while, and if any of them don't, we can find someone to help if you need it. My roommate Brylain's starting his second year, and he's a 'path, of course. Before things get hard, they'll stop feeling so confusing." He spoke the human language perfectly, but there was a distinct and rather pleasant lilt to it, an unfamiliar accent.

"Words of wisdom," Fala said drily. "I want to hear later what kind of mischief you were up to over the break."

Matt laughed. "Kian and I caught a stormhawk."

"Oh, you did not! They don't even exist!"

"Seriously. We saw lightning hit an oak, and once we could see again there was a bird perched in the tree. I made a net and Kian threw it over her. I'll tell you the whole story properly later."

"You'd better! I'd believe it more if Kian was here to back you up. He's a lot less prone to exaggeration than you are."

"Every word will be the truth, I promise. Nothing other than what my cousin would say if he were here."

"Except probably in five times as many words. When did you get here? I didn't see you at dinner last night." Fala looked up as the clock in the tower at the centre of the College campus rang, deep sonorous bongings. "It's that late? I'm supposed to be in an alasiran language class! Matt, can you..."

"Of course. Go."

"You can trust Matt, Shimai, I promise. He's crazy but he'd never do anything to hurt you. I'll see you at dinner." Fala bolted back the way they'd come, her lightweight Southerner-style skirt snapping in the wind of her motion until she gathered it with one hand, a few tendrils of blue-tipped blonde hair escaping its braid unheeded.

"Did they put you in any classes today?" Matt asked.

Shimai shook her head. "Not until tomorrow morning. Other than the orientation this morning." Being alone with any male, in her experience, was bad; being in a public place with a great many other people around mitigated it only partially. Her inner senses, untrained as they were, picked up nothing from Matt but friendliness and openness, but she stayed wary.

"So Fala was just showing you around? Would you like to continue the tour?"

Shimai hesitated. It would be safer back in her room, but she couldn't hide there all the time she was at the College, could she? "Please. If you have nothing else to do."

"I don't need to be in the alasiran language class because I grew up in a trilingual household, and after it there's a practical exercise on divination and I get private lessons in most practical exercises because, well, I'm a bit odd magically. They haven't decided yet who's teaching me what this year. So I have time. Odd doesn't mean dangerous, by the way, no matter what you hear. I spent

practically my entire first year here learning how to make sure that nothing happens accidentally anymore.”

“I... all right.”

“So, what have you seen so far? Have you been to the library?”

“Not yet.”

“Expect to spend a lot of time there for the next two or three years. Not as much as sorcerers do, though. Sometimes I think they should just give us all stacked bunks in between the bookshelves. Although then they'd probably only let us out of the building at all for the five-nineday break twice a year, and there are some fellow sorcery students I'd really prefer not to be confined in close quarters with for five years, so I suppose hiking back and forth to the library multiple times a day is worth it. Sometimes it feels like the only exercise we get, too, and no exercise at all would drive me pretty much mad. The library's over this way.” He gestured as the path they were on reached a crossroads.

She realized, long before they reached the library itself, that there was little need for her to add more than occasional responses. Matt kept rambling cheerfully in what was, as far as she could tell, a more or less random thread of shifting topics, filling any potential uncomfortable silences.

The library was in one of the larger buildings.

No, the library was one of the larger buildings.

The whole thing.

She'd never imagined that that many books existed anywhere in the world. Wide-eyed, she gazed at the shelves upon shelves of them as they walked through the rooms. Here, even Matt obviously tried to restrict himself only to immediately relevant information.

“It helps, that sorcerers can copy text,” Matt said. “One page out of a book, say, and one blank page, and then you just reproduce what's on the page of the book onto the blank sheet. The basic trick isn't all that hard, really. They don't start anyone off with anything important, though, which is good because the first few times I got it backwards and actually made the original go blank.” He grinned, completely unfazed by his own mistakes. “It takes some pretty serious concentration to get the result accurate and clear. It's easy with a few words in big regular letters, and a lot harder if you're trying to copy a lot of dense handwriting or a reproduction of a woodcut or something like that. It's a lot faster than copying by hand and, if someone's good at it, a lot less likely for errors to creep in, which is why the College can have so many books, but it still keeps a few sorcerers employed, I bet.”

“Some of us,” a dark boy sitting at one of the many tables and desks, a book open in front of him and two more stacked next to him, said pointedly, “would like to actually have the luxury of reading said books in peace. If you think you can be quiet even briefly, Matt.”

Shimai flushed, but Matt just laughed. “It's too early in the year to be that serious about anything, Hamo. Quit grouching or I won't help with outdoors stuff anymore.”

Hamo rolled his eyes, braced an elbow on the table, and buried his face in his hand. Nothing Shimai picked up suggested real annoyance or real concern, though, only a kind of vague exasperation.

“My cousin Kian,” Matt explained to Shimai, leading her onward, “well, sort of my cousin but on both sides because my mom is his dad's sister and my dad is his mom's brother and we grew up in the same house so he's more like my brother in any way that matters, he spends as much time as he can outside in the woods. He drags me along with him a lot, less now because I'm here but he still does during breaks, so I've picked up a lot about identifying plants and animals and all sorts of other things about nature. Mostly in self-defence, I think. I'm not nearly as happy living rough as Kian is, but it's good to see him happy and to spend time with him. And it's useful, because a lot of classmates come from backgrounds without it, so when we have classes in botany and things like

that, I can figure it out fast and then help other people. Telepaths don't get so many of those. I don't actually know why they make us take them, unless it's just part of the overall premise that to influence the world we're supposed to know as much as possible about what we're influencing. Which makes sense, because why do things in complicated ways if knowing exactly the right place to push can make it happen a lot more easily? But it does mean that we get a lot of classes that don't feel very immediately relevant and that frustrates some of my classmates who don't get the fun of learning stuff just for the sake of learning it. So you do know how to read, right?"

He waited with no impatience, guiding her subtly back towards the doors and out into the sunlight, while Shimai caught up with the final question and nodded. "I've been living in a temple for the past few years," she said quietly. "It was always understood I'd be coming here once I was old enough. They made sure I knew what I'd need." Life at the temple, which like most honoured the various gods more or less impartially, had meant hard chores along with her lessons, but the priests and priestesses who cared for the temple and its dependents were for the most part kind, if sometimes remote. It had been better than life in her mother's house, with two older siblings and two younger ones who were all clearly human, and her mother and ostensible father who never forgot when they looked at her what unspoken shame of her mother's Shimai's red hair betrayed.

She'd changed her name, from a human one to a siren one, when she'd gone to the temple, and had made no effort to contact her human family since. Nor, in the years at the temple, had she heard of any effort on their part. She'd learned early that she could depend only on herself.

She picked up something that felt oddly like... sympathy? Compassion? Something in that general range, at least. "Well, it's going to help, having some of the basics. Coming here and missing essentials like literacy generally means a lot more work and usually being here longer. I mean, it's generally assumed that any telepath or sorcerer that has graduated can be trusted to have some basic skills. Half the jobs that are typically available to sorcerers and telepaths have less to do with actual sorcery or telepathy than they do with having a decent education. It's really just not fair since there are lots of people out there who could do at least as well at those ones but they never get the chance because the only place to consistently get a more advanced education is here and that's restricted to people who happen to be born with a gift."

"If those jobs could be filled by just anyone, they'd hire fewer crossbreeds," Shimai pointed out. "The one big advantage we have is strong gifts." She bit her lower lip. They kept telling her at the temple that she was too ready to argue, that she should be more accommodating and agreeable. What if she got her roommate's friend angry at her on the very first day?

"Sadly true," Matt sighed. "Which doesn't help the crossbreeds who didn't get that particular advantage, either. It isn't fair for anyone. Not for crossbreeds who aren't particularly gifted, not for crossbreeds who are because there's a whole collection of issues there, not for fullbloods who never get a chance to show what they can do. Can you imagine how amazing the world would be if everyone, absolutely everyone, no matter their race or their parents' jobs or anything else, got to be exactly who they are and use their abilities as fully as possible? The things that would be invented and created? How happy people would be?"

"I don't think that's very likely to ever happen."

"I know. But I can wish it could."

"A lot of the people I know, being exactly who they are would be a terrifying thing for everyone in the vicinity."

"But how much of that is who they really are, and how much of it is created by pressure and expectations and rules and fear of not living up to any of it? How much of it is from being unhappy with their own place in the world and not being able to see any way out?"

That was an interesting idea. She pondered it, while he pointed out buildings that held

classrooms and workrooms and storerooms and administration.

"You might have a point," she said finally. "About expectations and who people are. Not just living up to them personally, but whether parents and such lived up to their own, too."

"That too. In all kinds of ways. I know I'm going to have a hard time living up to the standards my parents set, even though my parents don't expect anything from me, because everyone else figures that Alina Jordan's only child with the unique gifts must somehow be able to be superior. Or at least that I think I'm somehow superior. Which I definitely don't. Because of my parents *or* my rather weird gifts."

Shimai blinked. "Your mother is Alina Jordan?" Everyone knew that twenty or so years before, Alina Jordan, the runaway daughter of a human Lord, and her future husband Jai, the half-human illegitimate son of a sorcerer from an alasir House, had fought against and defeated a renegade telepath with an artifact that amplified her power enormously. That power had been considerable to begin with: the renegade had been a controller, a telepath with a set of specific abilities that turned up only about once a generation and allowed total domination of other minds to a terrifying degree. That any other telepath, however strong and with whatever support, had been able to fight her and stop her from provoking all-out war between humans and alasir made Alina already the stuff of legend.

He ran a finger along a fine gold chain around his neck, bringing a small pendant into sight from under his shirt. On the disc was a rearing horse, left in exposed gold, with the background enameled blood red. Everyone knew the red and gold horse was the Jordan house badge. "Yes. Which someone would have made sure to tell you soon, so I figured it was better to just get it out in the open now." He heaved a sigh. "I love my parents and I know they love me but they're tough to live up to sometimes. And my rather weird gifts let me do some things I shouldn't be able to do but they're also extremely inconvenient sometimes. The other thing you're going to hear, very soon, is that I'm not just a sorcerer. I'm also a very low-level telepath."

"I didn't think that was possible."

"It isn't, normally. Probably the whole thing with Mom and the controller and the crystal is responsible for that and my weird gifts and I should probably be grateful that I don't have lifewitch gifts too. Other than just a little bit of healing, that is. Which I do have. But the people who think that having all that makes my life any easier are not paying any attention."

"Extra classes?" she guessed. "Some telepath and lifewitch ones too?"

"To start with, yes. So, anything anyone tells you about me, it may not be all that accurate. Everyone knows Fala and I are good friends, so someone is probably going to try to 'warn' you sooner or later."

"I know better than to listen to gossip." She had a very good idea what had been said about her, before she'd gone to the temple.

"Good. Hmm, what else can I show you, I wonder."

Somehow, he kept finding more places and features to show her, often with stories. One was a tree that looked rather like about a third of it had been torn sideways, splitting it partly from the rest, though it was healed and healthy.

"That's my fault," Matt admitted. "The first year I was here, I saw a couple of students who'd been here for two or three years harassing a siren-blood. Out of everyone to choose to bully, going after siren-blood just seems really unfair but I suppose it means having a safe target since siren-blood generally are just no good at physical violence. So I stepped in and told them to leave him alone. They weren't very happy about that. One of them threw a basic magical attack at me, straight percussive force, which really would have made a mess if it connected, but somehow just on instinct I deflected it. It hit the tree instead. I got in some trouble for not going to find a teacher instead of

getting involved myself, but they got in worse trouble, and the siren was safe, so it all worked out.”

“You put yourself in danger for someone you didn’t even know?”

“I didn’t really think I was in danger. I’m not all that good at fighting but my parents made sure I can at least defend myself without magic. It’s a useful kind of skill for anyone to have but especially crossbreeds. And Kian makes sure I remember it.” He looked up at the clock tower. “Nearly time for dinner, actually. Meal times are a bit strange, with some people awake at night and some during the day so there are actually just meals available four times a day evenly spaced, and you can always get bread and fruit and hard-boiled eggs or cold meat in between. Some of the alasir-blood complain about it but eggs work just fine with alasir biology and they aren’t being expected to live just on that or something. The dining hall’s that way. Just watch where everyone else is going.”

“I was there this morning and last night, but I don’t know where it is from here.” He was right, though: most of the people in sight were drifting or hastening in the same direction. Even from outside, it was obvious that it was more crowded than it had been the previous evening or that morning. Uncomfortably so, in fact.

Matt held out a hand to her; she hesitated, gave him an uncertain look.

“Just so we don’t get separated,” he assured her. “I don’t want to lose you in the mob.”

Nervously, she slid her hand into his.

The dining hall was large, filled with rows of tables lined by benches, and even more filled with milling bodies in their mid to late teens edging into twenties. Matt was nearly a head taller than her, and what he lacked in physical bulk he managed to make up for in sheer presence: people actually let him by, though sometimes grudgingly, and often with a nod of greeting and sometimes more.

Somehow, he led her directly to Fala, who was sitting at one table across from a gangly brown-haired human boy in a mixture of Southern and Northern garb. Matt steadied Shimai while she stepped over the bench and sat down next to Fala, before letting go and circling around to claim the seat next to the brown-haired boy.

“Safe and sound,” Matt said cheerfully. “Shimai, Brylain, my roommate. And the other way around.”

“Welcome to the College,” Brylain said, with a friendly smile, and passed her the basket of bread. Clearly a staple here were oval rolls of pale wheat bread; they always seemed to be available in abundance.

“Now what was that about a stormhawk?” Fala demanded of Matt. “They’re just a story. Aren’t they?”

“They absolutely are not,” Matt assured her. “Kian and I were out camping, and a storm blew in. It was the middle of the night, we didn’t have a camp set up, so we kept moving hoping to get into a more sheltered spot, but we came to a lake-shore instead, so we must’ve gotten turned around somehow.”

“Odd for a pair of alasir-blood,” Brylain commented.

“I know, especially with Kian such a good tracker. Anyway, before we could figure out the best thing to do, we saw lightning hit a big old half-dead oak right at the edge. Neither of us could see at first, but once we could, there was the most beautiful bird you’ve ever seen sitting on one of the few branches the tree still had. Every possible shade of silver and grey, sort of more like a falcon than a hawk, sleeker, but with a longer tail and a crest of feathers, and we saw later that the wings were longer and narrow. Absolutely breathtaking. All we could do for a few heartbeats was just look at her.”

“Most of us, that’s all we’d do, at all,” Fala said.

“She wasn’t looking at us, she was facing the other way. So I started using material from the front of my tunic, which was the closest thing, to create a net. My aunt Lori wasn’t very happy with

me, that's Kian's mom, she's a weaver. I gave it to Kian, and he snuck up on her. He can be amazingly quiet when he decides to try. He hunts small game with a bow, and he's very good at it. He got up close to her and threw the net over her."

"Oh, you didn't," Fala said, aghast. "You saw something like that and trapped it? Matt, how could you?"

"Actually, she wasn't upset. She just sort of looked at us and said that we'd caught her and what would we like in return for letting her go? I told her the truth, that the only thing I couldn't find any other way of getting was a horse that would be able to compensate when I've been doing a lot of magic. Even the smartest and calmest horses my uncle Rob can breed still can't completely help when it's bad. Kian said the only thing he wished he had was a hawk he could communicate with. We'd been talking earlier about hawking as a way of hunting and he thought it would actually be a lot more useful to be able to send a hawk to scout and be able to understand the answers."

"Oh, it figures," Brylain said, rolling his eyes. "A question like that, and what do you first think of?"

Matt just flashed him that unabashed grin. "She thought about it for a minute and then said that the only way she could do that was to be horse and hawk herself, with a more-or-less human form so she could talk, because in the shape of a mortal hawk she wouldn't be able to. She said the mortal world is an interesting place and she'd like to see more of it, but could only stay if she was bound by a bargain. So the bargain is, she has three forms, horse and hawk and human, and she can't change between them, Kian or I has to actually touch her and tell her which form to change to. She'll look out for our best interests and act more or less appropriately for each form. Until Kian and I either dissolve the bargain or both die. Her name's Jori. The Assembly doesn't want her around, they think she'd be disruptive, so she's with Kian, but I'll introduce you whenever he drops by to visit. You know he always does."

"You have a stormhawk," Fala said. "To be a horse for you. And to scout for Kian as a hawk."

"Exactly." Matt accepted a platter handed to him from his far side and held it where the other three could reach while spearing slices of meat for himself with his free hand. "She won't talk about where she's from, other than that apparently it's boring. At least she thinks it is. She's very nice."

"And you're actually going to force her to keep a bargain like that?"

Matt gave her a wounded look. "Do you really think I'd do that if she hadn't made it extremely clear that she *wants* to stay here? Or that Kian would? I told her all she has to do if she's unhappy is tell us. She's curious about our world."

"I can't believe you actually saw a stormhawk and then acted like that!"

Shimai reflected on the improbability of two *alasir-blood*, who typically had an excellent sense of direction, getting lost and being in the right place at the right time, with a stormhawk who was conveniently sitting there low enough to reach and facing the other way. Possibly she was excessively sceptical, but to her, it sounded like the stormhawk had *meant* to be captured, quite possibly by Matt and his cousin specifically. Unless all the stories about the stormhawks, who were messengers who acted for several of the gods, were wildly inaccurate, then it almost certainly wasn't with any harm in mind for Matt or his cousin. Maybe the stormhawk really was simply bored.

She listened quietly while Fala and Matt and Brylain caught up on news from outside the College and about events here as well. The food here was better than in the temple, though basic and it seemed to be pretty much the same thing each time with a few options to choose from, no variation between morning or evening—which under the circumstances made sense.

After they finished, Matt and Brylain walked back to the girls' dormitory with Fala and Shimai.

"Can I ask you something?" Shimai finally asked Matt.

"Of course you can."

"What did you mean about no horse being enough to compensate?"

"Now there's a big question in a few words," Fala said.

"Ever seen sunlight go through a prism?" Matt asked Shimai.

"I don't think so," Shimai confessed.

Fala held up one hand, and what looked like a triangular piece of polished glass winked into sight hovering above it. A beam of white light from nowhere struck it, but it came out scattered into multiple colours.

"Oh, like water mist," Shimai said.

"Like that," Matt agreed. "Most sorcerers only have a piece of the whole spectrum. They can do, say, magic that falls in the green range. They might have an uncommonly broad range and be able to reach into blue and yellow on either side, but it's limited. Some can get very intense colour like right close to the prism, and some get a more faded and diluted version like farther from it."

"All right."

Fala closed her hand, and the illusion vanished.

"Whatever left me with traces of telepathy and the lifewitch gift also removed all the filters. I don't have just one colour or a limited range of colours. To me, magic is the white light before the prism. But everything I try to use magic for only uses one part of the spectrum. So if I do something that falls in the green part, the energy from the blue and yellow on either side bleed through no matter what I do. Which means that when I stop actively using magic, it catches up with me. Feeling intensely cold, from inside, almost always happens. Losing my sight for a while happens a lot too, particularly if I've been doing anything that involves directly looking at magical energy, and it's worse if I'm doing divination or something like that. There are a few others that turn up irregularly. Small things mean it's a bit inconvenient for a little while. Using more magic can put me completely on my knees and no use for anything for hours."

"We try to help minimize the damage," Brylain said. "There are a few others who are fairly sympathetic, too. There are also some people who think there's something wrong with Matt, including a few who said in his first year that he should be Blinded for everyone else's safety."

"To be fair," Matt said mildly, "there was a period when my gifts were getting strong and I only had very shaky instinctive control, which made being around me rather risky."

"Your family all survived," Fala said fiercely. "I survived that year. Blinding's for people who have committed atrocities, not for people born with an atypical gift as a result of their mother saving thousands of lives."

"Well, yes, and I'm glad they didn't do it. You all have more courage than I think I would have. I just meant that I can understand being nervous then." He smiled at Shimai. "And there's no reason for anyone else to be nervous anymore, I don't lose control now."

"The only person who suffers for it is you," Shimai said quietly.

"Suffer's a pretty strong word. I'm used to it and it's part of me. Both the part about having a ridiculously broad range and the part about paying for it afterwards."

They stopped outside the main doors of the girls' dormitory.

"If there's anything you need when you start classes," Brylain said, "telepath-specific stuff I mean, just yell. It's everyone's first day sometime, and some things are confusing, and different things are confusing for everyone. If I can help, I will."

"Thank you," Shimai said softly.

"Try not to let them put you on an alasis schedule," Fala told Matt. "I hardly ever see you when they have you doing classes at night."

"I think Honora's got some of them," Matt said. "And she's human, so they'll be day-time. But no matter what, I'll be around. See you tomorrow, at dinner if not before." He offered Shimai a flower

she knew he hadn't had in his hand a moment before, five ruffle-edged petals that she thought she recognized as an evening primrose, of golden-yellow so vivid it almost glowed. "A little sunshine for you, milady, to get you through the night."

Shyly, she took it, gazed at it in wide-eyed awe and delight. The heart of it shaded to a scarlet not unlike the colour of her hair, and it really did look like a little piece of sunshine cupped in her hand.

"There, and you do know how to smile," Matt said in satisfaction. "I would never have gotten to sleep otherwise. You're even prettier when you smile, you know. Sweet dreams." With a casual wave, he turned away, and Brylain fell into step beside him.

Shimai blinked, looked questioningly at Fala.

"He's right," Fala said, opening the door. "I think that's the first time I've seen you smile, and it's a wonderful thing to see."

"But... he just finished telling me he can't use magic without paying for it! And he didn't have this before!"

"If you discovered that you were going to have some sort of backlash every time you opened your mind, would you be able to just not use your telepathy at all?"

"Um... I think that would be very hard to do. Like trying to walk around with my eyes voluntarily closed all the time."

"Exactly. He can't not use it. He's getting better, very slowly, at reducing some of the effects, by focusing more narrowly on the specific energy he needs, but it's a fight for every inch and I seriously doubt that even fifty years from now he'll get it down to nothing at all. And he's better at finding ways to do things that take the least actual magic possible so the consequences are milder. But he can't just stop. All he can do is trust his friends to watch out for him. Which isn't really so hard to do, most of the time, although it can be when it's bad and there's not much you can do that will help. But this is Matt we're talking about, who's absolutely crazy but has a heart the size of the sky. I wouldn't trade him for anyone in the College, weird gift or not."

Shimai followed her inside and up to their room, her flower cradled in her hands, and wondered why the comment about her being pretty had failed to trigger the apprehension it should have.

04

Though Kian wasn't particularly talkative, and Kisea generally preferred to let companions talk while she listened, the quiet as they walked was a comfortable one rather than the strained silence of strangers searching for something to say.

They retraced Kisea's route to the crossroads, and this time went southwards.

The stillness of the soggy forest, even the wind in the leaves muffled, gave way to first just a few bird voices, then to more, a rising chorus. Kisea squinted at the sky to the east. Presumably the birds sensed the sun starting to come up, but she saw scant difference.

"Dawn is a good time for hunting," Kian said, his voice low enough to merge into the sounds around them without a ripple. "If we seek shelter now, we can be asleep by the time they even realize we've gone already."

"I do know how to start a fire when it's wet," Kisea offered. "My wilderness skills aren't quite up to finding a good site in dim light, though."

"Better, I think, if we aren't right next to the road. It's unlikely they'll be anything but glad to be

rid of us, but trouble avoided is not trouble at all. There's a stand of evergreens, it should be less damp there. Perhaps if you wait, and I leave my pack, so I can scout more quickly?"

"Done."

The ground under the grove of pines was, at least superficially, wet. While Kian unstrapped and strung his bow and slung his quiver across his back, Kisea slipped her hatchet out of its loops on her pack and removed the waxed leather cover that protected the blade. Some of these trees had lower limbs that were still reasonably dry, and pine burned well. Though it left her blanket exposed, she stripped the wrapping off it and used the waxed canvas to pile the collected kindling on, one corner pulled across the top to keep it as dry as possible. Better still, a small nearby pine had fallen, leaving her access to the heavy resin-imbued heartwood that could catch fire even in the rain; she harvested as many pieces of that as she could.

"I found a good place," Kian said quietly, startling her—she hadn't even heard him approach, and hadn't been paying any attention to her inner senses, intent on doing her job without losing any fingers.

"And I have the beginnings of our fire. It's all right, I can carry it, there isn't that much. I'd rather you watched where we're going and kept an eye out for breakfast."

He was too kind to point out that no wildlife was going to stay anywhere in the vicinity while she followed him through the forest—he might be stealthy as a cat without even trying, but she certainly wasn't.

The place he'd found had a slope to break the worst of the wind, a tree fallen against it to create a relatively dry place to build a fire, and enough other trees that constructing a shelter should certainly be possible.

Kian unfastened a roll attached to his pack, which turned out to be a sheet of canvas so large and thin that she knew instantly that there was sorcery involved, modifying its original form to make it far more effective for its weight than even the best-quality non-magicked canvas could ever hope to be. She had no doubt it would be absolutely waterproof. Tucked inside it were a coil of fine rope and a handful of metal-capped wooden stakes.

Any guesses whose work that is?

I wonder what it cost him to do it? Whatever it was, for Kian, he wouldn't have cared.

Kisea scraped the ground clear under the fallen tree and hacked off a few green branches to lean against the far side to both shelter the fire and deflect the heat towards them; while she worked, she watched sidelong while Kian deftly turned the canvas into a lean-to facing the fire. It would be cozy for two adults, to say the least, but that was a limitation of the size of the canvas. She'd given up on keeping the like, since she already carried about as much as she could, and she couldn't afford anything remotely that quality.

But then, Kian wasn't carrying everything he owned, and he was taller and stronger than she was. And for his family, cost was never going to be the same kind of issue.

"I'll be back soon," he said, when that was done.

She nodded acknowledgement, picked up her hatchet, and went looking for more wood, heavier than the kindling she'd already collected.

She built a neat hunter's fire with two heavier branches, stripped of their wet bark to expose the dryer wood within, sheltering a careful nest of kindling and tinder between them. Of all the things that could make the difference on the road, being able to start a fire was one of the highest, and the means to start one reliably had cost her more than most of her gear but she'd paid it gladly: the fire piston, a tube of polished wood closed on one end with a second piece that fit tightly into it, was worth every bit of it. With a bit of dried mushroom tinder from her pack in the little niche at the inner end of the piston, she fitted one into the other, and slammed them forcefully together. Quickly

pulling them apart, she added the ignited shred of tinder to the waiting pine shavings and coaxed it into a flame.

There. She was no woodsman, and preferred civilization whenever possible, but some of the most fundamental skills she'd learned well enough.

Once she was sure it was going to continue burning, she turned her attention to setting up the rest of the campsite and gathering more wood to keep the fire going.

She returned with an armload of wood that was dry enough on the inside, and would be drier after time stacked around the fire, to find Kian cutting the meat off a hare in chunks and spearing it on the thin green branches she'd peeled for the purpose. Roasting the thing whole would take longer than she was willing to devote to it, and while she knew he could eat it raw with no consequences, she refused to in anything less than a dire emergency. She did see him lick the blood off his fingers absently a few times, and doubted the innards would be either discarded or cooked, but then, alasir were like that. Ones that spent a lot of time around other races generally took their squeamishness into account, but the fact remained that full alasir were as completely carnivorous as a cat or a weasel. Cooking meat had both advantages and disadvantages for them, and purely muscle meat wasn't sufficient. Mixed-blood alasir generally figured out young how to match their diet to their individual needs.

She'd had a weak spot for alasir, fullblood or part human, ever since her days at the College with her first love—her only experience with genuine unguarded intimacy. When she felt the most alone, she missed those days desperately, the two of them learning their own bodies as much as each other's, the warmth of the connection of love and trust between them...

"You just sighed," Kian said quietly. "And you look sad."

"Just... thinking of someone I haven't seen in a long time." *Your double-cousin who is all but your brother, in fact.* But she dared not say that, ever.

It was a stupidly reckless subject to bring up, but right then, she didn't care. She kept her gaze on the wood she was arranging around three sides of the fire, as she asked casually, "Do you have any family?"

"Yes. I'm a Jordan."

"That explains having an escort job for a human."

"The son was visiting his grandparents, who are part of Lord Jordan's household. I had intended a visit to my mother, and my uncle asked me to make a detour. I'm grateful he did."

"So am I," Kisea said fervently. Nine would have been a new personal low. "Your uncle's Lord Jordan, then? The one who still acknowledges family who ran away to Equals Village?"

"Both a brother and a sister. My mother Lori abandoned Felorton and an alasir high House because she did not wish to be married off for the good of the House. Her half-human brother Jai took her to Equals Village, and she being an excellent weaver, she was welcomed there. My father's sister Alina, some years later, fled a similar fate. Jai helped her escape to the Village, with my father Chris and their brother Rob covering for her. My father, soon after, accepted that he was unhappy as the Jordan Heir and would be more so as Lord, but that Rob thrived on it and was very good at it, so abdicated in his favour and followed my aunt and uncle."

"Ah, and thus came to meet your mother."

"Yes. They share a house in the Village, and raised my cousin and I together. My aunt and uncle and father do escort work, primarily, and the connection to the Jordan House leads to jobs that otherwise would not be available." He handed her several of the meat-bearing sticks, and went back to cutting up the rest of the hare. Anything they didn't eat now would keep better cooked than raw.

Kian, presumably, was following family tradition, though she suspected he preferred jobs that led more to wilderness than planning routes along major roads to reach inns. "What about your

cousin?" She laid the sticks meticulously across the tops of the walls of wood surrounding the fire. She already knew part of it, she'd been picking up little bits of gossip for several years now about Lord Jordan's sorcerer nephew and the job he'd been commissioned to do.

"He's a sorcerer. With some unusual abilities, which led to it taking an extra year to graduate with his Seventh medallion. Last year was the seventh since he graduated, and when he went back, he was granted his Sixth. It's generally acknowledged to be extremely improbable that he won't, in time, reach First. Possibly, in the thirty-five years or so before that, he'll do as they wish and become more sober and respectable, but I doubt it."

Of course he has his Sixth, and of course he'll keep climbing, unless they deliberately try changing the rules to stop him. An extra year isn't much surprise, but must have been frustrating for him—accepting being different is one thing, but with me gone, Brylain gone, Fala too by then, and surrounded by new students with no idea why he was still there, that would be hard for him. But Matt, sober and respectable? When the sun rises in the west.

"Unusual but strong, then."

"Very. Which might be worrying, despite the Oath, save that he is one of the most compassionate people I've ever met, and his anger is nearly always in defence of others. When he acts without thought, it is because he sees wrong or hurt and his first reaction is to right it. Had he been present instead of me, I think your attackers would have suffered worse."

"Which could have turned it into a legal battle," Kisea pointed out. "Just as well he wasn't there." *Matt promised me once he'd always protect me. I wonder what he would have done, had it been him and not Kian? Probably not killed them, not unless he's changed even more than I have, but they'd certainly have regretted ever seeing me. Afterwards he might remember about being Lord Jordan's damned High Warden of the Peace and whatever ridiculous degree of authority comes with that. Not really much of a legal battle after all, I suspect.*

"There is that," Kian said noncommittally. "The strength of his gifts is countered somewhat by the after-effects of each use, as well. For a small thing, the price is small, but for a large thing it can be high. He's better at reducing the effects than he once was, but he can do more than he once could, so the ground he gains overall varies."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just not use it, then?" She knew the answer, but someone else might ask.

Kian smiled, and her inner senses picked up affection. "Then he would not be Matt. Could you simply stop using your gift, if it had prices?"

"No, I suppose not." After all, his meant short-term, if sometimes uncomfortable, consequences after each act; hers meant living homeless and alone and always looking behind her, which she could probably put an end to simply by sacrificing all use of her gift. "It's an interesting sort of family."

"Very much so. The house in the Village is quite crowded when we're all present, but since Matt works directly for Lord Jordan, he spends most of his time at the Manor. As of three years ago, so does a cousin from the alasis side of the family. He was Heir to his father, Lord Telsea, my mother's full alasis brother, but chose to stand up for someone who was, quite emphatically, not in Royal favour. Having been disowned and banished, he apparently encountered a half-siren mindhealer who stayed with him a while and finally convinced him to come to the Village."

"Shon? He's your cousin?" She barely stopped herself before *too* slipped out at the end. *Oh, what are the chances? Seriously? Not that Kian and Shon are the only two alasis-blood I've ever travelled with since leaving the College, far from it, but nonetheless...*

"Yes. I did not think there were likely to be two sirens with your name, and you mentioned a swordsman who certainly sounded like him. He spends less time at the Village than he does shadowing Matt and protecting him. He's much better suited to most of the job than I am. He helps

Matt in ways I cannot, and I believe feeling needed is something Shon badly needs. He misses you, though. I've heard him wonder, now and then, what you were doing."

"He rather obviously needed a home. I thought he'd have a better chance of that in the Village or Eyrie, and we were closer to the Village at the time."

"And you do not?"

"I get too restless," she said lightly. "Being alone is dangerous sometimes, but it's better than the alternatives. I don't like being dependent on other people. They tend to let you down when you need them most, and the longer you're around anyone, the more likely it is to happen. I wander around the border areas, heal minds when I can, trade bits of weaving or things I find in the forest like bunches of herbs, do anything from herding livestock to mending to chopping wood when I need to. I've picked up a lot of odd little skills in the process."

"And over the winter?"

"I can always find someone willing to give me a place to sleep and meals in trade for working. The only tricky part is generally making sure they understand that sex isn't part of the deal." And against one or two men in a winter-bound house deciding to change the terms of the deal, she could protect herself quite effectively.

"That sounds very lonely," Kian said gently.

You have no idea. She shrugged. "Sometimes. I can usually find company."

"Should a day come you need help, come to the Village and ask for the Jordan house. Tell whoever is home, mostly likely my mother Lorientie if no one else, that you are my friend and Shon's. Or come to Jordan Manor and say the same, though that may be less simple."

"That's a large offer based on a few hours' acquaintance."

"Not my cousin's."

There was no way she could ever take him up on it: the one person in the world who would know her instantly, no matter how much she'd changed and despite changing her name, was Matt. And he was now sworn to take her back to the College as a renegade. She seriously doubted she could force herself to hurt him even to defend herself, and with his defences, she'd have to do damage to get through; without that, she had no hope of escaping from him. Equals Village and Jordan Manor were, therefore, the two places other than the College she never dared go under any circumstances.

Still, the thought was a generous and touching one. "Thank you. I'll remember that."

Kian gave her the rest of the meat, and gathered up the inedible parts to dispose of far enough from them to not attract scavengers. When he returned, he turned his attention to creating a comfortable bed that would keep them off the damp ground, in a way new to Kisea: he cut still-springy small evergreen branches and drove the end into the ground under the lean-to, all of them upright but flexing the same direction. When Kisea paused in turning the meat to offer her blanket to spread over them, the result looked surprisingly comfortable.

They sat at the edge of it to eat, Kisea tearing hungrily into the hot gamey meat.

After which, they settled down to sleep, which Kisea figured she needed even more badly than the food, now that the adrenaline from being in danger had worn off.

At Kian's suggestion, she curled up on the inside, snuggled down under her coat. The bed of boughs did in fact keep them off the worst of the wet, she discovered, and had more give than the wooden bench had.

Tolerably comfortable, certain that she was safe, she finally dropped off to sleep.

Shimai? Hey, where are you? And do you know where Fala is?

We're both in the library, Shimai said with a sigh. *She's working on law, I'm working on history. Why?* "Matt just called," she said out loud, quietly. "He wants to know where we are."

Fala looked up from the book open in front of her, at an angle so she could scribble notes on a sheet of paper. "What does he want? Although a better question might be why he isn't working on this law project too."

Fala says you should be doing law, Shimai dutifully added.

That can wait. I just saw Jori overhead, which means at least Kian's in the area which means he'll be here as soon as he can. With Jori, obviously.

Shimai smiled to herself. Matt's excitement bubbled up through his mindvoice even with distance thinning the contact—her range was so limited it was often frustrating, and he wasn't a strong telepath at all. Several ninedays of intimate physical and mental contact tipped the balance enough that they could reach each other anywhere on the College campus, even if sometimes it was only a shaky connection. "Judging from how he sounds, he's practically bouncing off the walls. He saw Jori and he's expecting a family visit at any moment."

"Well, that would do it. But depending on what's going on, they might be a while. Maybe he could pull us away from working once he actually knows what's going on?"

Shimai hesitated. She did need to finish reading this chapter and make sure she knew the material well enough to discuss it tomorrow in class, but on the other hand, Matt's high spirits tended to be contagious, and she liked being around him when he was in this kind of mood. As long as she made sure she and Matt were in separate beds overnight, she could if necessary sacrifice some sleep, and it would be worth it.

"Sorry, Fala." She laid a strip of ribbon, one she'd messed up while trying a new tablet-weaving pattern, in her book to mark her place and closed it. "I'm going to go find him. But I'll come back and tell you when they get here."

Fala sighed and shook her head. "For the girl who told me she wasn't going to let anything personal get in the way of learning, you spend a lot more time around Matt than's really good for your classwork." Her smile took the sting out of it. "At least he's good at helping you catch up, and you smile a lot more than you used to. If it's only Kian, don't be in too much of a hurry to come get me. I would like to meet Jori, but spending a lot of time around Kian, well, I'd rather spend it getting this done."

"You don't like him?" Shimai gathered up her books, but gave Fala a puzzled look.

"I don't think he's dangerous to be around or anything, and I know Matt loves him a lot. But I find him extremely hard to read, even though I'm usually pretty good with most people. I can't tell what he's thinking or how to take anything he says. I'm sure sometimes he's joking but I don't know when. I just find him rather uncomfortable to be around much. But you'll be fine. Maybe I'm just spoiled by spending so long around Matt, and I'm expecting them to be more alike instead of complete opposites. Don't worry about it, all right?"

Shimai nodded slowly. "All right." *Matt? Where are you? I can work on this later.*

Halfway to the library. I'll meet you out front.

I think we'd better let Fala work. She's putting a lot into this project.

Outside the front doors, she perched on one of the half-dozen wide steps down to the pathway, waiting.

She could identify Matt from a distance just by the way he moved, like all that energy was

constantly spilling out in every motion: he tended to walk fast, make broad dramatic gestures, couldn't seem to talk without his hands involved, and his expression mirrored his mood so clearly that it didn't take a telepath to read him effortlessly. That made it easy to see him coming, and she stood up and went to meet him.

He wrapped both arms around her for a fierce hug with her books squashed between them, and kissed her as well. "You're sure you'll be able to finish your work?"

"Yes. As long as no one's keeping me awake all night."

He sighed theatrically, then laughed. "Every night would be bad for you anyway, your body's not used to it. But I have that evening class today, remember? Since apparently the best available teacher for scrying is *alafir*. While I don't mind at all finding you by touch instead of sight, and you don't seem to mind either, I'll probably be tired. Look." One arm still around her, he pointed skywards.

Shimai squinted at the blue sky and drifting clouds. "There's a hawk or something circling. That happens all the time."

"That isn't a hawk, it's Jori. Jori being a hawk, I mean. Watch." With his free hand, he waved vigorously, completely ignoring the odd looks from passersby. But then, most of the College was used to Matt doing things that made no apparent sense.

The hawk circled lower with each pass, and within a few circuits was scarcely higher than the buildings. Instead of a further loop, it glided down and landed on the nearest perch, which was the lowest branch of a small tree.

Matt urged Shimai over to the tree and reached out with his free hand. The hawk rubbed one cheek against his hand, a strangely affectionate-looking gesture for such a fierce and beautiful bird, and Matt smiled.

"Human," he said.

Electric-pale light rippled over the hawk's barred feathers, and it hopped off the branch to the ground, its form blurring and shimmering.

Then the hawk was gone, and a girl who looked like she was in her mid teens was standing there instead.

The girl was so slim that a human of that build would probably be extremely frail; she was, however, emphatically not human, not really. Her skin had a peculiar pallor, lacking any hint of tanning or colour or even of pink showing through from beneath; the tousled hair falling just short of her shoulders was countless shades of stormy grey, cloud-like, with streaks of a very pale blonde. Though she was dressed, it was only a simple darker grey dress with sleeves that stopped above her elbows, narrower at the waist, the calf-length skirt flaring out somewhat, with her feet bare.

"Jori, Shimai," Matt said.

The grey girl tilted her head to one side inquisitively, then gave Matt a questioning look.

"I know, you've heard about Fala and Brylain and not Shimai," Matt said. "She just got to the College this year. Which I'm really glad about, 'cause that means I've been here long enough to help but not so long we missed each other. We've been, hm," he paused, considering words, then grinned at Shimai and used the mixed community noncommittal phrase, "keeping company a lot. And she's really important to me."

"All right," the grey girl said equably. "I was only curious." She smiled at Shimai. "Whether I was expecting it or not, I'm glad to meet you." Her voice was a clear light soprano, extremely precise and pronouncing every single sound with no slurring.

"Um, hello," Shimai said shyly.

"Kian?" Matt asked.

"Coming, of course," Jori said. "Lord Jordan needed someone in *Perifaithe* he could trust to

speak for him, and his first choice is always your parents and Kian's. Since it's to do with horse-trading and bargaining and not particularly dangerous, Lori's with them, and Kallima as well. They're all getting settled at the inn right now, but Kian asked me to come tell you they're here. He wants to come as soon as you'll have time."

"There's a part of the garden that has three relatively big trees, big for here anyway, in a triangle, on the campus but towards the city," Matt said. "It's a good place to stay more or less out of the sun and sit outside. He can meet us there as fast as he can get there, we'll go there now."

Jori nodded. "I'll tell him. Your parents and his and Kallima want to see you too, but they're expecting to be busy. Kalli is supposed to be observing at least some of the time, and staying with Kian the rest."

"Well, yes, Lord Jordan's eleven-year-old eldest daughter in Perifaithe, I would hope she'll never be alone." Matt held out his hand to Jori, who laid hers over it. "Hawk," he said.

Much the same as the previous change, like lightning gathered and contained in a single small space, fading to show a hawk who spread her wings and leaped upwards, beating heavily at the air as she gained height.

Shimai watched her as Matt urged her towards the triangle of trees he'd described; the hawk stayed above them until they'd reached their destination, maybe making sure she knew the right place, then swept off towards the city.

"Her mind feels like a thunderstorm," Shimai said. "Just the edges. I wasn't really trying to read her. Or maybe more like petting a cat on a very dry day, all static but not as intense as a storm."

"I'm staying away from telepathic contact," Matt admitted. "She's just too different. Mom asked Jori if she could try, and Jori agreed, but Mom says it's like being in a hurricane with too much noise and activity to make any sense of anything." He settled down with his back against one of the trees. "It might take a bit for Kian to get away and get here. What are you working on?"

"History," Shimai said with a sigh, sitting next to him. She couldn't resist the inviting pose, and snuggled herself against him to lean on his shoulder.

"Which history? That's a big subject."

"Magic history, or magic-user history anyway. That as near as anyone can tell, none of the races had anything we consider magic, on their own. Sirens had the usual projection, but there were no telepaths or sorcerers or lifewitches. Something in the crossing is what produced the gifts."

"Siren and human produced telepathy," Matt agreed. "At least, within the strictest definition of telepathy, but probably not the seers and telekinetics and the other unusual ones. Alasir and human produced sorcery. And siren and alasir produced the lifewitches, but they're less easily cross-fertile than humans with either and the lifewitch gift is less persistent. And the odd gifts probably came from the minor races."

"Which is why the South has so few magic-users of any kind," Shimai said. "They're pretty much entirely human. Even the Northerner fullbloods who are the most proud of being fullblood almost certainly have a little of the others in them, and if they're telepaths or sorcerers they certainly do. Specifically, we're supposed to be discussing the lifewitches tomorrow. I know their history was pretty bad and a lot of people still have prejudices against them, but I only just started reading the details."

Matt sighed. "Pretty bad doesn't begin to cover it. It was really horribly unfair. They can do some scary things, but so can a sorcerer. That's the whole point of the Oath, so people know what kind of ethical limits they can count on being enforced by everyone else with the same gifts."

"Someone being able to make changes to your body and turn you into something different or combine parts of your body with parts of an animal or things like that is more personal than someone being able to injure or kill you in a variety of ways or alter your property or create illusions

that alter your perceptions,” Shimai pointed out. “Although that someone can spy on you without you knowing can be a little creepy.”

“I’d rather be right there in the room with you than spying from somewhere out of reach,” Matt chuckled, then sobered. “I know, but what they can break, they can also fix. Now that they aren’t being hounded and killed on sight anymore, we’re finally realizing that lifewitches can heal injuries and illnesses that no one else can do anything at all about. And most of them are perfectly happy to, especially if they’re treated with some kind of basic respect and appreciation in return. They’re just people, with the same mix of good and bad. A few rogues, a few saints, and mostly somewhere between.”

“There is a theory that some kinds of gifts can affect someone’s mental stability. It isn’t being applied to lifewitches as often these days but there are still people who believe that no lifewitch can ever be entirely stable just because they’re lifewitches and it goes with the gift. The usual example given as evidence is the controllers. Especially the one your mom fought. Supposedly, the gift that allows someone to dominate another person’s mind and force them to obey absolutely anything is paired with mental instability that means anyone born with that gift will automatically be dangerous. And so we’re lucky they only turn up once a generation or so.”

“But we don’t really know anything about the controller gift,” Matt said. “For all we know, most of the controllers ever born were perfectly decent people. The ones who end up as the villains in scary bedtime stories are the worst of the worst, but they don’t always sound very plausible to me. Sometimes there’s just no obvious reason for the things they’re described as doing. So I can’t help wondering whether they didn’t do it, or they did it but they had some reason that no one bothered to pay attention to. After all, we were wrong about lifewitches.”

“You,” Shimai said fondly, “are so obsessed with being fair to everyone and making sure that everyone is treated with respect that you’d walk right up to a controller and ask how they are and you’d listen.”

“They’re people,” Matt said. “Of course I would. Unless the controller, or anyone else, was a threat to you or someone else I love. Then, they have to be stopped, no matter what.” He kissed her forehead, tightened his arm around her briefly. “I’ll always keep you safe, any time you ever need me I’ll be there.”

Shimai smiled, let her head rest against his shoulder. Fala was her friend and accepted her and was someone Shimai felt comfortable with, and her friendship with Brylain was growing warmer as Shimai let go of much of the nervousness she’d learned about males.

But with Matt, she never doubted that he loved her as she was. He knew her more deeply than anyone else, and far from rejecting or mocking her, only wanted to spend more time with her and learn more about her. She couldn’t remember ever in her life feeling like she mattered to someone, her personally as a unique and irreplaceable individual, not just someone who happened to be there. She didn’t need to weigh every word and watch her back and try to analyze what he wanted from her. She knew exactly what he wanted: for her to be her and not hide from him, and to accept him and his moods and his peculiar gift. And that was so easy to do.

“So how did the lifewitches get from being reviled and despised to being accepted, at least legally, with more and more people gradually learning that there’s more to them than those occasional rogues?” she asked, just because hearing Matt talk was always more pleasant than reading dry words on a page, and because it was the kind of subject that interested him so he was sure to know more than was in the book.

“They fought for it. They asked, over and over, to be recognized. A few were murdered while trying to negotiate some sort of peaceful solution. Others spent their entire lives struggling to convince people, specifically the Assembly but also the College as a whole, that they deserved to be

treated as people. It must have been exhausting and humiliating and discouraging for them to be repeatedly refused and told that they were a threat to the greater good. Some of them were remarkable folks, if you can believe the biographies, and they sound pretty plausible to me. Not saints, not monsters, just people who wanted desperately to be acknowledged and to have the freedom to be them. Or, in a few cases, for their loved ones to have the freedom to be themselves, because a few weren't lifewitches themselves. One was a siren whose daughter had been a lifewitch murdered by a mob and she devoted the rest of her life to trying to keep it from happening to anyone else. Even three of them teaming up with a couple of sorcerers to take down a renegade lifewitch who was kidnapping children from some of the more overcrowded temples as experimental subjects didn't help, they were told that the renegade was the reason why no lifewitch could ever be trusted. It took years, decades actually, of persistence and patience and passion before they finally got enough of the Telepath and Sorcerer Assemblies firmly in support to be able to sway the ones who were undecided."

"And that's when they restructured the Joint Assembly."

"That took a little longer, but more or less. There weren't, and aren't, enough lifewitches to need a formal Assembly of five senior members the way the others do. You could fit all the living lifewitches in one large hall, and the majority cluster around Perifaithe and the College where they're less misunderstood and less feared, but they're starting to spread gradually as people realize how useful they are to have around."

"But the Joint Assembly for all mages now includes three lifewitches along with five telepaths and five sorcerers, and one of the lifewitches is the Speaker who directs proceedings and votes last."

"Exactly. You should probably read what's actually in the book, just so you aren't missing anything specific tomorrow."

"I will." But it could wait. If necessary, she could get through the discussion using as much as she had and by reading her teacher's nonverbal cues, but she did intend to learn it. She wasn't going to be able to get the kind of job that made mixed blood not matter if she didn't pay attention to basic studies.

As much as she loved Matt, a lifetime of being just someone's shame, someone's responsibility, someone's inconvenience, or worse, convenience, lingered. Nothing in his mind, and he no longer held any shields against her, suggested that he had any plans to abandon her; in fact, everything said the opposite, that to him, they fit together perfectly on many levels and he liked that and loved her and wanted them together. But she couldn't count on that never changing. Even if it never did, even if they were together forever, she couldn't expect him to support her. His family connections and versatile upbringing even before the College would inevitably mean an excellent job despite the inconvenient aspects of his gift, but that didn't make it acceptable.

Right now, though, with his anticipation at being able to see his beloved family for the first time in months tingling warm and sparkling-bright against her mind, the only thing that mattered was being right here.

06

By the time they reached Eyrie, Kisea knew she was going to miss Kian's company the way she missed Shon's—though nothing quite matched missing Matt's.

It was her own fault. She'd woken up rested but feeling deeply lonely, probably because they'd

been talking about Matt and Shon. Sex was always the best way to drive off the human-side longing for a home and a family and re-assert her siren side's need for autonomy and independence. Kian's only protest had been that he expected nothing of her, and once assured that she knew that, he'd been delightfully responsive.

The loss of a mouthful of blood was an inevitable result of sex with alasis, one out of their control, and she sometimes her thought her body must be so accustomed to it that it expected it. The twinned marks on her throat from his blood-teeth breaking skin didn't bother her, since they neither itched nor hurt; those teeth being fine and sharp and retracted to keep them that way meant the marks themselves were very small and closed quickly.

As for the red-enameled gold rearing horse necklace, normally invisible under his clothes... that had made the feeling of loss both better and worse at once.

Sex wasn't in itself a problem. In human society, a woman's value was often linked to her sexual activity; the overlapped crossbreed and road cultures were typically far more flexible. However, it meant waking up cuddled against him with his arm over her protectively, which felt wonderful, especially after her recent near-miss; it meant little affectionate gestures that went beyond mere courtesy, of which she was guilty too, and she'd always found a kind of intimacy in the moment an alasis lover both climaxed inside her and fed from her, and well...

Well, she was actually sorry they'd slept only three times before reaching Eyrie.

Which didn't matter. It was far too dangerous to stay in his company.

So how had she been talked into sharing his bed in his friends' house, instead of getting herself a place at the inn?

Admittedly, her available coin needed to go towards food, but the mixed settlements were usually willing to trade a few hours of labour for a bed. That was nearly always in a common dormitory with four or more beds, and it was going to take more than a few days to stop being jumpy, but she could have endured it. This was, after all, the second mixed settlement, with multiple inns, and she knew the larger ones all had segregated dormitories for men and women. Of course, the larger ones were less likely to barter...

"Do you know of anyone who might be interested in buying woven trim?" Kisea asked her hostess Aivynne over breakfast, after the first night.

"Very likely," the woman, an alasis-human mix of some degree, said with interest. "May I see?"

While Aivynne's husband and Kian talked about a common acquaintance and his most recent ambitious plans, Kisea unrolled on the table the rectangle of threadbare wool she'd wrapped her finished work in before coming downstairs.

"Oh, those are lovely!" Her hostess picked up a length that was woven with red and blue and yellow flowers on a green background, and held it so she could see it better. "I'm sure someone will buy them. Probably not one of the seamstresses, there isn't enough of any one design for their needs, but there are at least two places in the market that sell mixed pretties for those of us who do a lot ourselves. Something like this would be beautiful on a festival blouse or to brighten up a plain woollen bodice."

"Keep it," Kisea said.

"I can't. You can sell this."

"Keep it," Kisea repeated. "As a guest-gift, if you like. Or just because it will make me happy."

Aivynne acquiesced, rolled the bright ribbon neatly and tucked it into a pocket of her skirt.

"Thank you. Do you know Eyrie well?"

Kisea shook her head. "I've been here a few times, but not for long, and not recently."

"Kian?" She waited until she had his attention. "Do you remember where the old fletcher's stall used to be, near the west edge of the market square?"

Kian nodded.

"Three, no, four stalls south from there, there's a stall that sells embroidery thread and fine yarns and small sorts of tools, along with some finished embroidery and decorative woven goods. That, I think, is the place Kisea will find the best price. If she isn't interested, or offers too little, there's another across the way and farther south, near the end. There are others, but they would pay little."

Kian nodded again. "I've a few things to see to in the market myself."

Which meant that, somehow, she still hadn't left, and they walked to the market together.

He brought neither staff nor bow, weapons larger than a knife being discouraged on the streets of any mixed settlement, but she had to admit she felt safer having him beside her. He left, as well, his armour, and had switched to a tunic not unlike hers but shorter and with laces at the throat, dyed an unremarkable soft warm ochre, but the colour was strong and even and she had no doubts about the quality of the weave.

Kian stopped at one stall they passed to buy feathers for arrow fletchings, since apparently several of his needed to be repaired; very clearly, the fletcher recognized him, and they spent a moment on what Kisea could only call shop talk.

He did find her the recommended stall, though. The proprietor had set an embroidery frame aside on a table that held thread of breathtaking colours, while she dealt with a customer. Possibly full human unless she had some trace of one of the less common races, though it was harder to tell with her hair almost entirely iron-grey, her full curves quite visible in chemise and bodice and a skirt that involved much less fabric than the traditional full-circle-or-more, all of it with gaily embroidered hems as contrast to the simple neutral base colours.

The goods she offered, Kisea thought, were all high quality, out of her own price range.

The proprietor, having finished a sale and bid her customer a cheery farewell, gave Kisea a questioning look.

"Are you buying as well as selling?" Kisea asked.

"Could be. What do you have?"

Kisea unrolled the length of wool, with care that the woven ribbons stay draped over her arm.

"Hm." The proprietor pursed her lips thoughtfully. "May I?"

"Of course."

The inspection was swift, but went through every piece she had.

"They're very pretty. Materials are medium-grade, but you've done a lot with them. The patterns and colours are nice, bright enough and detailed enough to be eye-catching without being so flashy they'd overwhelm everything else one is wearing." She considered for a moment, then named a price.

It was, of course, a lower price than she really expected Kisea to accept. After all, haggling was all part of the game.

When the proprietor's offer shifted to include less ready coin but she began to drop hanks of fine yarn dyed in gorgeous colours into a small basket as part of the deal, Kisea hesitated, then threw caution to the winds, tempted beyond endurance.

"Come by next time you're in Eyrie and have more to sell," the proprietor said in satisfaction, as coin, basket, and ribbons changed hands.

"I'll do that." She looked around for Kian, found him waiting patiently. "So, where in Eyrie can I get decently-priced travel food? I think it's very likely you know somewhere."

"I do," he agreed. "But are you leaving today or tomorrow, then?"

"I..." She started to say that she should, but stopped. How could she explain that? Without making it sound outright like she was trying to be rid of him? He deserved better than that. "I don't want to keep imposing on you or your friends."

He chuckled. "Aivynne is so happy with what you gave her you'd be welcome there for a nineday. You are not imposing. I like your company."

"Then no, not today or tomorrow. So I suppose it can wait."

They wandered around the market, and each made an occasional small purchase; Kian paused once to eye a men's tunic of a deep pine-needle green, but only briefly.

"My mother would be furious, were I to pay full price for such in Eyrie, when she can not only do it herself, but quite likely of better quality and made to my size."

"Which only makes sense. Why pay more to get less?"

"I know."

She made a point of offering her help to Aivynne for chores around the house or in the kitchen, though she confessed to being a less-than-adept cook; Aivynne gratefully put her to work shaking out the bedding and hanging it outside to air out, and then chopping vegetables for supper. Since she had the chance, she really should borrow the combined wash-house/bath-house at the back to wash all her clothing the next morning; maybe she could borrow something to wear so she could make sure absolutely everything was thoroughly clean. That would be a bit of an undertaking, but once she had hot water, she could offer to do Kian's as well, and probably there'd still be water left if Aivynne had anything to be done...

* * *

Kisea, in her own second-best chemise and an old skirt of Aivynne's, braced her back against the couch Kian was lounging on, the other end of her weaving hooked around one foot. Anywhere but a mixed settlement, she'd have been shockingly indecent, barefoot and without her bodice on, but for a quiet evening with Kian and Aivynne and her quarter-siren husband, it didn't matter. The lamp on the table at the end of the couch cast just the right light for her to see what she was doing, her hands following the familiar rhythm with only half her mind behind it, while she listened to the conversation above her with the other half. She knew little about farming, trader prices, or any of the people named, but she really didn't mind; if it occurred to her to ask something, someone would explain, but the warm peaceful camaraderie mattered more. That, and the soft yarns in their wonderful colours, more subtle shades than the strong basic ones she usually had available, which deserved her attention so she could put them to the best use.

A knock at the front door jolted her out of her semi-trance; Aivynne handed her a fringed shawl to cover herself, as her husband went to the door. After a brief exchange, he looked back. "Kian?" He beckoned the visitor inside.

Kian rose and went to greet the visitor; from the tone of his voice and the surface impression Kisea got from his mind, it was someone he'd met but didn't particularly know. Alasir-blood, hair going grey at the temples, well-dressed with subtle flashes of jewellery, but his job was active enough that he hadn't begun to gain visible weight. No, there were purplish-red glints in the dark hair, softening it from true black to blackberry. Alasir and siren both, possibly with human as well.

"I won't keep you long," the visitor said. "My brother's wife's sister, in Malachite, is going to take my oldest daughter as an apprentice. Pottery, of course, it being Malachite. We need to get her there safely, though. The last three possibilities that had personal recommendations from friends were all-male pairs or trios. I know my wife and daughter both would feel safer with a woman as well. Are you and your lady interested in the job?"

"Kisea?" Kian said, turning to her. "By the most direct route, Malachite is roughly a nineday from here, to the southeast. On the coast."

"You may have friends vouching for Kian, but none of them know me," Kisea pointed out.

"I think my word will do," Kian said, giving the visitor a questioning look; he nodded promptly.

She'd pretty much expected that. Everyone in the mixed-blood communities knew the Jordans

could be trusted absolutely, and with Kian verified as a Jordan, it went without saying he wouldn't accept a job based on Kisea's company unless he personally trusted her implicitly. And with a siren-blood daughter, who might be coming to an age when it would be tempting to try out new interests and abilities on a single male companion, having an adult female siren present would be all the more desirable.

Damn it, Kian, why do you keep trusting me so much? You don't know me! You're going on a few days and Shon's stories, and that's insane!

Malachite was, though, a sizable town, the pottery hub as Equals Village was for weaving and Eyrie for wine and wood. She could go off on her own from there just as well, and the coin from the trip would go a long way...

And Malachite was farther from Equals Village and the Jordan province, as well. Nowhere near anywhere Matt was likely to be.

"All right."

Their visitor's smile was nothing to the relief she could sense from him. "That's wonderful. Day or night's fine, she has enough of a mix from my wife and I to be comfortable with either."

"That road cuts close to alasir territory," Kian said. "Better to travel by day and camp overnight well off the road, and avoid encounters."

"I wouldn't suggest tomorrow even if I thought my wife wouldn't want a day to make sure all's ready ten times over. The morning after, then?"

"Is there anything else you need to do in Eyrie?" Kian asked Kisea.

She shook her head. "It's been a lovely break, but we've been here long enough for me to run out of things to do, other than buying travel food." Several days, in fact, much longer than she'd intended.

It was a substantial trip but not excessively long and there was no reason to expect complications, so haggling over pay was brief, almost perfunctory. Less typical was that their new employer did not add a condition that some significant percentage of it would be waiting once they'd delivered his daughter safely: that Jordan reputation, again.

Their visitor drew a small pouch that clinked heavily from under his tunic and handed it to Kian. "For expenses. I'll have the rest ready day after tomorrow."

Kian nodded as he accepted it. "Thank you. We'll be there around sunup."

All appropriate polite farewells were said, and their new employer left.

07

Matt never found it easy to sit still when he felt strongly about anything, and less so with the tangle of agitation and worry and protectiveness Shimai could feel pulsing and writhing inside.

She, on the other hand, preferred her spot on his bed, her back to the wall, her arms wrapped around her raised knees. Being a smaller target had never really helped much, but at least she could feel less exposed.

"You're going to have to tell them," Matt said.

"I can't do that," she said miserably. "Do you really think they're going to care whether I've ever done anything to hurt anyone? They're going to say that it's just a matter of time until I go crazy and start using it to manipulate people." At least she could be sure that she'd never done so accidentally: they'd discovered, through cautious testing that involved an insane degree of trust on

Matt's part, that it needed unbroken concentration and considerable effort. "Either the stories are wrong, because there's no possible way I could keep anyone under control constantly or multiple people at once even briefly, or I still have a very long way to go before I reach full strength. The first one makes more sense, but you know they're going to assume either that I'm lying or that I'm just not yet as strong as I will be."

"They have absolutely no reason to accuse you of doing anything wrong. I'm with you more than anyone, and Fala nearly as often, and you're obviously not messing with either of our minds."

"I really don't think they're going to care. People are afraid of controllers. If you want to tell a terrifying story, make sure it has a controller in it. No one is going to listen. Whether I found out all innocently while trying to help you with after-effects isn't going to matter. What I've done or intend to do isn't going to matter. No one will listen past the word 'controller.'" She bit her lip, feeling her voice sliding into siren compulsion register. She could keep the psychic aspect locked down firmly, that was always an early lesson for sirens here; controlling her voice was harder, though possible, but it was probably best if she said as little as possible right now. If her voice was trying to change, though, then she was almost certainly having the normal siren reaction to feeling stressed and threatened, and if she let it go, this conversation would end extremely quickly.

"In less than half a year, you're going to graduate and they're going to have you swear the Oath under truthspell, and the telepath version specifically includes not using any controller abilities. You'll never get through it without being caught, and then they have more grounds to be suspicious because you'd been hiding it for months. They might even catch on before then, some of your teachers are smart and observant. If you go to them now, practically as soon as you know, then you aren't hiding anything at all. They can't possibly be unfair enough to condemn one of their own students for asking them for help in dealing with a new gift that just manifested fully. The College isn't supposed to just teach us, it's supposed to help us find what we're best at and strengthen that so we can make the best use of it." He joined her on the bed, and slid an arm around her to draw her against him; she huddled close, wishing desperately that she could find any comfort or safety in it. "There's nothing wrong with your mind, you're a good person who wouldn't hurt anyone. We can make them see that. But it's going to work better if you tell them voluntarily instead of them finding out."

I can't tell them. I can't let anyone else find out. Ever.

He glanced down, briefly puzzled by the switch from vocal to mental, but he knew enough about sirens that she could see him figure it out within a couple of heartbeats.

I think that's a very bad idea.

I need to think about what to do. I don't think there are going to be any easy answers for this. I need time to decide.

Matt sighed. *All right. But you don't have forever. I really don't think you can hide that through taking the Oath. You aren't facing this alone. I'm right here beside you, no matter what.*

I know. It wasn't his fault she was a controller, or even his fault she'd found out. It would have surfaced anyway, sooner or later, and how could she *not* have tried everything she could to help stand off a particularly uncomfortable bout of after-effects after one of his less-sympathetic teachers put him through an especially gruelling workout? That she'd been able to do far more than she should have hadn't even really registered at the time, all her attention on Matt. Only afterwards had they both realized what she'd done.

And I'm not afraid of you. Not now. Not ever.

Then he was going to be the only one.

Because right now, of the two people who knew what she was, one of them was deathly afraid.

* * *

Shimai waited until Matt fell asleep, and as long afterwards as she could bear to, before using the kind of simple projection that many telepaths could do to push him deeper. He didn't wake while she squirmed carefully out of his arms and found her clothes.

She couldn't stay here.

Over and over, every time they were alone, they kept fighting over the same subject, with no ground between where they could find a compromise and neither prepared to back down. He was afraid for her safety, she knew that, knew he was trying his best, but she just didn't dare let the Assembly find out that her very existence broke the Oath every telepath and sorcerer and lifewitch had to take. And, eventually, Matt was going to graduate and take that same Oath, and then what?

She dared not wait any longer. Though it was fear for her behind it, not malice, the fact remained that Matt had cornered her. *"You have to tell them before they find out and can accuse you of hiding. And if you won't, then I'll do it on your behalf and tell them you wanted to but were afraid to. It's not as good, but it's better than the alternatives."*

To stop him, she'd have to destroy several ninedays of his memories, which she was fairly certain she could do but cringed from. How could she possibly do that to him?

It might be just as well. She'd been paralysed by her own fear—fear of being caught and accused of abusing her unwelcome gift, fear of abandoning Matt and her education and any hope for a future, fear whether they might be right and she would turn into a monster eventually. She didn't have Matt's faith in right and justice; in her experience, they were less powerful than fear and ignorance. Would they kill her? Would they Blind her, violently stripping her of her telepathy, at best leaving her locked in herself, at worst destroying substantial parts of her mind in the process?

She gathered up everything of hers that was here in Matt and Brylain's room, and cleaned the red hairs out of Matt's brush, leaving nothing that could be used to track her. She needed to be quick, Brylain might stay with his lover all night or might be back to sleep here and she didn't want to answer questions.

There was nothing she could do about the bedding where she so often slept, with Matt currently still asleep in it, but she could hope no one thought of that until after it no longer bore traces of her. Maybe Matt would have the sense to do one last thing for her and dump it in the laundry chute before anyone else realized she was gone.

She leaned down to kiss him, even knowing he'd never know. Was he going to think she'd run away from him, and not from the impossible trap she'd been dropped into when her gift showed itself? Was he going to hate her for choosing flight over the path he was so adamantly certain about?

With the campus active day and night, there was nothing unusual about going back to the girls' dorm at this hour. From the corridor, she reached inside to make sure Fala was asleep and would stay asleep, before opening the door.

Everything that was her own, she shoved into the simple pack she'd arrived here with. She stripped her bed and took it all to the laundry chute in the corridor, gathered up her books from class and made a trip to the library to replace them with the others. By the time anyone thought to check, any sense of her on them would be diluted and overwhelmed by the matching books on either side, all of them handled by many students over the years.

Back in her room, she did a last check to make sure nothing could be used to track her magically. Anti-scraying charms existed, and she'd have to acquire one somehow, as quickly as possible; she wasn't going to stay free long as a renegade if she could be found that way. There were other things she'd need, essentials for survival on the road that one way or another she had to have. There were enough siren-blood in the North that if she could keep from drawing attention to herself, changed her name and tried not to act identifiably like Shimai, she should be all right.

She'd be alive, anyway, and that was something.

She'd have liked to leave Fala a note, some way to tell her how much her friendship mattered to her, but that could be used as a focus for scrying, so she dared not. Maybe Matt would tell her. He knew. Unless, of course, Matt was so wrapped up in feeling hurt and betrayed that he didn't think of it. Either way, there was nothing she could do.

She slung her pack on her shoulder and left the room, left the girls' dormitory, and left the College campus walking northwards.

08

Vaelynne was thirteen, bright, curious, clever with her hands, and surprisingly pragmatic for her age. Her heritage was a jumbled blend of human and siren and alaisir thanks to multiple generations on both sides living in and finding mates within mixed-blood communities.

Her parents sent her with a small donkey to carry her belongings, which she took care of herself with quiet efficiency; the first night, she watched Kisea setting up camp while Kian went to scout the area and find fresh meat, and on the second began to ask questions and offer her inexperienced assistance. She was perfectly willing to add the travel-food her mother had sent, a generous amount of it for a teenager of moderate height and middling-sturdy build, to what Kian and Kisea had and what Kian provided.

She had questions, as well, about things she'd probably not felt comfortable asking her mother or any other siren-blood she'd grown up around; expecting that, Kisea gave her the most honest and complete answers she could—as gently as possible, for some of them, but better for her to know than to find out the hard way.

They delivered her safely to her aunt and uncle, who wanted a few days with her before turning her over to the sister of the former, and spent the night in a private room in an inn reasonable in both price and quality.

“What do you intend to do now?” Kian asked her, over breakfast in the common room.

They were near the coast, though not so near the wharf itself that the sounds and smells were intrusive. Kisea, her gaze dreamily on a ship raising its sails, the white canvas billowing in the wind, answered without thinking.

“Maybe I'll see if I can find a ship captain willing to be convinced to go see what's out there across the ocean. Maybe there's another land out there. One that doesn't have constant tension between fullbloods and all of them looking down on crossbreeds. One with no College or Oaths...” She realized with a start what she'd just said, and shook her head quickly. “Never mind, my mind was wandering.”

“It's an intriguing idea,” Kian said. “I must admit, I'd be tempted, were it not for the complete lack of forest I'd have to endure for an unknown length of time. And a similar period in the close company of a number of people. I like many people, but only for short periods. I would not like to be alone always, but I would prefer to spend the majority of my time either alone or only with the few whose presence does not chafe at all.”

“Then why, more than two ninedays later, are you keeping me around?” Kisea asked. “I've been looking after myself a long time.”

“Because I like your company. Since I have no other particular plans, it's easy enough to adjust my path to whatever might allow a little longer together.”

"People around me too long get hurt," she said wearily.

"People get hurt many ways. I'll take my chances. So. Were you alone, what would you do now?"

She sighed and surrendered. Why was it so hard to stand against Kian's calm reasonable honesty, anyway? "I'd find a way to let people know I'm a mindhealer and I'll be around for a few days and that I'm extremely flexible about what I ask in return. Usually I'm in smaller inns and just telling whoever's in charge of the common room gets word around quite effectively. While I was waiting to see if anyone wanted me, I'd wander around shopping, which for me means a lot of comparing prices and also seeing who might be willing to barter instead of wanting coin. My skills are mostly more useful in towns than between them."

"I would say you have skills that are quite useful between towns. You lack only combat skills, which tend to be uncommon in siren-blood beyond perhaps self-defence anyway. The sad truth is that those seeking to hire an escort look first for combat skills, for good reason, but once past that, what you know is certainly useful."

"Which helps only when I'm working with someone who has combat skills enough to make that not matter," Kisea pointed out. Spotting the amusement barely beneath the surface, she gave him her best stern look. "Stop that. I told you I never stay with anyone long."

"Now is not ever. Should I happen to find another escort job or the like, are you interested?"

Say no! You cannot stay with Kian, of all people! The longer you're around him, the higher the chance that you'll run into Matt! Is it worth your safety?

"Maybe."

"Better than no," he said philosophically. "As for the rest, paying for half our room is less than a bed in a common dormitory in any inn where you might feel safe."

"True," she admitted. "And there are a lot of ways to spread the word about healing that will still make sure the ones who can't afford a handful of coin hear about it."

"Your heart is much like my cousin's. What is wrong you want to set right?"

"And you don't, coming to a stranger's rescue alone against nine?"

He chuckled. "Perhaps it's contagious."

"Besides, it isn't entirely altruistic. Coin isn't always as useful as barter anyway, but a lot of healers won't barter. Sometimes barter means being paid in things I could never buy."

"That isn't why you do it."

"No," she admitted. "It feels good when it works. There's so much fear and sadness in the world already, and life can already be hard enough without something inside your own mind making it worse. Sometimes something small can make all the difference in the world. It did for me, a long time ago. Someone held out a hand when I was feeling alone and scared, and it changed everything. I like knowing I helped drive back the fear and sadness and pain a little." *In a way that only I can. Because it means I'm not a bad person because of my gift.*

"And it should be enough for anyone to know that they helped you do so," Kian said. "So, nothing that means leaving immediately, so that there is time to learn if you are needed and for you to do what you need to do. And I will commit to nothing without talking to you. Fair?"

"Yes. Very fair."

* * *

The very next day, a message turned up at the inn, asking for her help.

"You might wait for your man to go with you," the landlady cautioned, having told her how to reach the address given. "It's not a good part of the town for a woman alone."

"I can look after myself," Kisea assured her, but practicality forced her to add, "If he comes back before I do, he can come find me, though."

The address took her to a part of town where most buildings were broken into multiple units,

speckled with various services catering to those with limited facilities of their own: public bath-houses, hot food stalls, ale shops, bakeries, laundries. The mixed-blood communities tended to have milder extremes of wealth and poverty than fullblood cities, but there was still a range, and though motivation for criminal acts might be less likely to be racial, there were a host of others possible.

It was tricky to do the exact reverse of what her siren heritage considered natural, but she wrapped herself in a subtle psychic projection of unimportance—not invisibility, that wouldn't work, but one that would make anyone at close range who tried to focus on her feel that there was no reason to pay any attention to her, there was nothing at all to be gained. Now and then that actually drew the attention of a telepath, but usually siren-blood ones who picked up on and chose to investigate the faint discord she could never entirely eliminate, and siren-blood tended not to be physically violent.

Which wasn't to say they couldn't work with those who were.

Still, the odds of avoiding trouble were better when using it than not.

She found the right door, and knocked.

The woman who opened the door had silver in her sienna-red hair and deep lines at the corners of eyes and mouth; her clothes were rough but neatly mended and clean.

"I'm Kisea. I'm the mindhealer."

The woman's wariness vanished under a virtual flood of hope, swiftly checked by weariness and caution. "You came much more quickly than I expected. Come in."

Kisea scanned her immediate environment automatically as she crossed the threshold. Single room, small stone hearth, a couple of windows. A single bed in one corner, two chairs positioned under one window with a cluttered worktable and two baskets of clothing next to them, another table with two mismatched wooden chairs at it not far from the hearth.

In one chair was a much younger woman, her medium-brown hair strongly highlighted with red in the sunlight from the window, dressed much like the woman who was probably her mother. What Kisea saw there was neither caution nor hope, but apprehension.

"My daughter," the woman confirmed. "Rylina."

"I don't need help," Rylina said.

Nothing new in this: it was, more often than not, parents or spouses or other close family members who asked her to get involved, and it wasn't all that uncommon for the patient in question to insist they didn't need it.

Kisea crossed the room to the other chair and perched on the edge of it. "Since I'm here, will you tell me what your mother believes you need help with? Your version?"

Rylina shrugged. "I went too near the wharf. Four human men off one of the ships dragged me behind one of the buildings and raped me. I'm siren-blood, it happens. The ship left the next morning."

"Did you report them?"

Another shrug. "My mother talked me into it. I walked out halfway through. All the questions were about what I was doing there and whether I spoke to them and things that made it sound like it was my idea. You know the kinds of questions I mean."

"Yes, I do. And I know that living with them in a human or alasir settlement is one thing, but having them thrown at you by someone who should know better hurts much worse. So nothing was done?"

"An alasir-blood friend convinced me to try again, and talk to her brother who's one of the town watch. He made sure it was recorded, but they can't ban a whole ship, only watch for it to come in again and ask if I can identify them." She made a snorting noise. "I didn't get that clear a look at their faces. I can't."

"And now?"

"Now?" A heartfelt sigh. "Now I'm scared every time I hear a man laugh, especially multiple men, and I can't sleep right because of the nightmares. So I'm tired a lot, and it's hard to do a lot of mending when you can't keep your eyes open or concentrate."

"It would be," Kisea said gently. "How long ago did it happen?"

"Last autumn."

Most of a year. If Rylina was able to heal properly on her own, she'd be past the worst of it by now. Something in the normal process had definitely failed. She was often hesitant to do as much when someone was still working through the normal process of anger and grief, and preferred in that case only to give it some reinforcement, but when that process halted incomplete, it left broken spirits and minds with perpetually open wounds.

Still, the more she knew, the better. She kept asking questions, kept Rylina talking even when she balked, used her own experiences as much as her inner senses to find the words to gently nudge Rylina into opening up.

It all added up to the same kind of damage she'd healed before, and knew she could heal, and that only she could heal.

"Will you let me try to help?" she asked finally.

"We can't afford..."

"You don't need to pay me anything. One siren to another. Because we're all treated as toys and not people."

Rylina hesitated, studying her for a long moment.

Then she set aside the skirt she'd been working on without pause through the entire conversation, and slowly nodded.

"You need to understand," Kisea said softly. "I do this a bit differently than most. My way is fast, and it won't bother you ever again. But I can't make it so it never happened." Actually, she could, in a way, but not only was that wildly outside normal telepath abilities, it came with too many complications. "What I can do is this. The mind builds connections. That's how memory works. Have you ever smelled something and found yourself suddenly remembering a moment many years ago?"

"Yes."

"That's your mind perceiving a connection between that scent now and that moment when you smelled it long ago. It happens the most strongly with memories that are very emotionally intense. That can be good emotions or bad ones."

"So because I heard them laughing, my mind made a connection and does the same thing it does with smells?"

"Exactly. It's possible, without a telepath, to learn to change connections like that, but it can take a long time and a lot of hard work, and the stronger the connection the harder it can be to break. Because this was a single event, and not something that happened repeatedly or over a long period, it's going to be simpler to do. However, because it was so long ago, it's going to be harder to break it, because your mind has probably built other connections around that one, and I'm going to have to be very careful not to damage anything else. As for the nightmares... do you know how things feel like they make sense in a dream, even though they just flow from one thought to another? Because that memory is so strong, there are a lot of paths leading to it. Sometimes even right after a bad thing happens, it's impossible to get all the connections that work in dreams, and this has had a while."

"So I'll still have the nightmares?" She could see the newly-born hope start to wither.

"No, let me finish. What I can do is weaken the memory itself. It will feel far away, like it happened to someone else or like it was a dream, people describe it differently. That means you

won't feel very much about it anymore. You'll still feel something, but it won't make you feel all twisted up inside and scared anymore. However, you need to think about that. It will mean you'll remember it much less clearly. A telepath could help you find whatever you do know about them, possibly enough to identify them. I could do that right now. But we both know the value of that depends on them still being on that ship if it ever comes back, because no one will search for sailors who raped a siren, and even then whether it's heard fairly depends entirely on who hears it, and whether the ship's captain decides to honour Malachite's laws."

"Nothing's ever going to come of it. I don't want to remember it. I've lived through it too many times."

"It's probably going to make the inside of your head feel a bit odd for a few days. That's normal. It will fade. What you need to do, while you feel like that, is treat yourself gently. For a few days, listen to everything your mother tells you." Nothing suggested the mother had come looking for help because Rylina wasn't pulling her weight, rather than as a genuinely concerned and loving mother. "You may want to sleep a lot, and that's normal too and you shouldn't fight it. It's only for a few days, and it will help your mind finish the healing. You might find that you cry a lot, but that doesn't mean anything is wrong. Stay away from the wharfs entirely for the next nineday, and from anything that has been making you feel nervous, and then go slowly. Have you ever seen someone get injured and lose the use of an arm or leg for a few ninedays, and need to rebuild the strength in it?"

"Yes."

"Think of it that way. I'm going to make sure the bone is set properly and that it knits back together, but you need to gradually rebuild the strength by exposing yourself to things that have been making you nervous. They won't anymore, but you need to make sure that the first time you encounter each is a harmless or good memory."

"To build different connections?"

"Exactly. Now, this is going to take time to do. It's probably going to feel like a very long time, and some people find that very uncomfortable. So I want you to understand that if it feels like it's taking a long time, that doesn't mean something is wrong, it's just me being very careful. Try to trust me."

Rylina gave her a tentative smile. "I think I can do that."

Kisea smiled back. "Good." She glanced at Rylina's mother, who had seated herself at the table and was doing a remarkable job of being unobtrusive despite the fervent prayers and half-desperate hope radiating around her. "Please try not to let anyone interrupt. But if an alasis-blood called Kian comes looking for me, he's my friend."

She nodded silently.

Kisea dragged the chair closer to Rylina's so their knees touched. She unfastened the crystal from her throat, laid it in one palm, and offered both hands, the weight of her arms on her legs. "Just lay your hands over mine. Contact makes a stronger connection. If you pull away, I'll stop as quickly as I can."

Rylina, with only a moment's hesitation, obeyed.

Kisea closed her eyes, turned her awareness inward. Nudging Rylina into a half-trance, a relaxed and open state in which she wouldn't notice the passage of time so much or get anxious wondering what Kisea was doing, was something she'd done so often it took only a moment.

Most telepaths could only sense what was on the surface; those who made good mindhealers were able to read what lay below that, sometimes even right down below the conscious mind. Then they used what they found there to lead their patient to a new perception of events, which sometimes took multiple sessions over a long period but could be very effective. A few were able to

deliberately construct new associations by triggering pairs of memories together, which could be used to connect the details to other situations as well, diluting the power of the negative one. It didn't always work, though. Sometimes, though not often, it created a chain and made things worse.

Rarely, a telepath appeared who was able to *break* connections.

Kisea tracked down the most obvious connections, male laughter, male scents, the sounds and scents of the wharf, and delicately isolated each from all the other associations Rylina had with them, and cleanly severed only those ones, leaving everything else intact. Carefully, she circled around the memory of the event, seeking out the weaker links and doing the same with them.

A healer she'd talked to once had compared this kind of emotional trauma to a physical cancer, a growth that took root and kept growing and choking off other systems, keeping them from functioning properly. It was an analogy she liked. She could visualize this process as cutting it off from any source of nourishment, gradually separating it from everything else. That in itself made it shrivel and fade somewhat, and it would do so more and more as Rylina's chaotic emotions no longer fed it. Up to this point, she was still doing things that someone else could do, though very few and those few were in high demand.

Kisea alone could do something more.

If she chose, she could erase the memory forever, impossible for even her to recover, and to any other telepath it might just as well have never existed. She'd done it a handful of times, in desperation when nothing else worked against old deep crippling damage, or in fear for her life, and always questioned herself afterwards.

She didn't need to do that, though. She could just... dilute it. Take each sense and make it fainter, more blurred, a tiny bit each time but over and over, like running a tunic through so many washings that the colours faded.

One last thing: she tracked down the memory of Rylina's original humiliating attempt to report it, and linked it to the more sympathetic one with her friend's brother, so thoughts of the first led immediately to the second instead of dwelling on the former.

Gently, she untangled herself.

"Rylina," she said softly. "Open your eyes."

Rylina's eyelids fluttered a couple of times before she finally did. The smile she gave Kisea was peaceful and wondering at once. Kisea withdrew her hands, and fastened her crystal back into place with fingers trembling with fatigue. It never felt like long to her while she was intent on working, but the effects of ignoring her body, possibly for several hours, and of the considerable energy she'd used always lurked, always waited to pounce when she came back.

She could feel Kian's presence now, tranquil and steady, and found herself far more grateful for that than she should have allowed herself to be.

"It feels... the fear is gone."

Kisea nodded. "Remember what I told you about looking after yourself for the next few days."

"I'm certain my mother was listening just as closely. I'll do as you said." There were tears shimmering in the eyes she raised to Kisea's. "Thank you."

"Until we can make it safe for all sirens, we need to look out for each other."

"I wish there was some way I could pay you for this."

"Someday, when you get a chance, help out someone else who needs it."

"I will."

Kisea got to her feet, making a deliberate effort not to let her own shakiness show. Kian moved so smoothly that he had an arm around her waist before she'd realized what he was doing, and she let herself lean against him. "I'll be in Malachite a few days still, at the same inn, if anything happens that you need me. But I think you'll be all right now."

"I think so, too. You need to rest..."

"I'll get her back to the inn safely," Kian assured them. "Better if I can make sure she eats before she falls asleep, and once she sleeps, she may not wake until morning."

As much good as the thanks from Rylyna and her mother did her heart, right then Kisea badly wanted both meal and bed, and hoped she wasn't rude to them.

No more than a block away, Kian guided her to a seat at a hot food stall with a few stools in front of its counter. Over her rather halfhearted protests, he bought her one of the skewers being sold there, mostly root vegetables with an occasional bite of meat she hoped was something respectable. It was a better chance than at any stall selling meat pastries or meat pies, though.

The food helped, as did the maple sugar candy he bought her once they were far enough into a better part of town for such to be available. The treat was such an uncommon one she'd have preferred to linger over it, but her body wanted the sugar immediately.

That got her all the way back to the inn, where he found her a table and went to order a more substantial meal.

"This is too much," she complained, when she saw it all. "You're eating some of this, right?"

He slid into the chair beside her. "I am not. You are. From the reactions of the girl and her mother, you did a great deal, and I know it took a long time since you'd begun even before I arrived. I will pay for it, but you will eat it."

Were she less tired, she might have been better able to argue.

Of course, were she less tired, he wouldn't be acting this way.

Damn Kian and his unshakable reasoning!

Meekly, she ate.

Once she started, it wasn't so hard to do. She was used to being hungry afterwards, and used to the supply of food being considerably more limited.

"What would you have done, were I not there?" he asked her as she was winding down.

She shrugged. "Give the mother a penny or two and ask her to get me something to eat, and they probably wouldn't mind if I fell asleep on the bed as long as I left room for them. At that income level, people are flexible. But I'd rather not impose on them. Rylyna's probably started crying by now, probably will cry herself to sleep, and she needs to be alone with her mother." She gave him a smile that was only a little shaky. "And I'd rather be here with someone who knows how to deal with a worn-out telepath."

"I've dealt with a few," Kian said, with a hint of humour in his voice. "And one sorcerer repeatedly, which isn't so different. Are you done? Up to bed with you, then."

In their room, peeling off her tunic and unlacing her bodice, she bit her lower lip, wavering, and finally decided.

"Is there anything you wanted to do right away?"

"No."

"Would you... stay here with me? Her memories were... uncomfortably close to some of mine." *And I can't erase my own memories.*

His only reply was to unfasten and remove his boots so he could join her on the bed.

She nestled against him, his arm over her, and only then dared relax. Probably there would be no nightmares if she could feel him there, physically and psychically, and know that no one was going to be able to reach her.

Somehow, they left Malachite still together.

As jobs went, it was short and simple: deliver a sealed money pouch and letter to a farm two days outside of Malachite, which they got mainly on grounds of Kian being a Jordan. Since they'd already been in Malachite quite long enough to make both restless, they came prepared and simply kept travelling.

With no destination in mind, they took their time, choosing routes randomly but moving approximately in the direction of Eyrie. They stopped for three nights at a particularly pleasant site next to a quiet lake. They stayed in a village overnight when Kisea picked up on the fringes of someone's panic attack—she found phobias relatively easy to fix, and neatly severed all the associations linking heights and fear, with much milder effects than she'd experienced with Rylina. They got their trail food replenished generously, for that one.

Not a day passed that Kisea didn't remind herself that this had to stop... when they got close enough to Eyrie again.

She came back with a bowl filled with wild raspberries one afternoon, and found Kian watching the sky thoughtfully. Following his gaze, she saw only a hawk circling high above, visible through the partial gap where an old tree had died but not yet fallen.

"Is there open ground near here?" she asked.

"Hm?"

"For the hawk. I know they have excellent vision, but seeing right through dense trees and spotting prey through a few breaks in the forest seems unlikely. I assume it's hunting."

"Probably." He shrugged and returned to gathering deadwood for a fire, nipping at her fingers when she fed him a raspberry. "I imagine distance is very different for those with wings. Something near enough for it to see could be a long walk away for us."

Something felt out of place in his surface emotions, something vaguely troubled, but a tentative question about whether everything was all right got her only a shrug and a quick kiss. She let it go; being a telepath and a mindhealer didn't give her automatic license to probe behind every change of emotion. It was, otherwise, a normal evening and night.

She jolted sharply out of an extremely vivid dream about being at the College, found she was reaching out mentally and jerked her gift firmly back under control.

But Kian's mind wasn't the only one she'd brushed against.

No, that has to have been my dream...

Except that it wasn't; not far away, and coming closer, were two other minds she knew very well. She felt one begin to sense her, open to search, and fled back within her own shields, wrapping them tightly around her.

Have to go, have to run, I knew this was going to happen... leave everything, just run!

Kian caught her wrist before she got halfway up, pulled her back down.

"Let me go!" she demanded, heard how high her voice was, heard it crack on the last word as she tried to pull free. His hand reached all the way around her wrist, and he was stronger than her, but reason had no part in the frantic struggle.

"Why?" he asked gently. "Where are you going to go?"

She froze, staring at him in the moonlight. "You knew! You set me up! Oh, I should've known better..." *Betrayed by one, betrayed by the other, and both times because I let myself feel safe, I let myself care...*

"No. Matt sent Jori to find me earlier today. I know something must be wrong for them to come

looking for me, no more. I doubt Matt knows you're here. Whatever you've been using to block scrying presumably still works."

"Then let me go! I'm a renegade, he'll have to take me back or break his Oath! And I am *not* going back!"

"Do you think Shon or I would allow even Matt to do anything to hurt you?"

It was a ridiculous idea, that huntsman and swordsman could possibly stop a sorcerer, but Kian had always been the one person Matt most counted on, and the one person who could be a voice of reason that Matt would hear. But this wasn't about Matt's own choices. The Oath left no room for interpretation or personal feelings.

"I'm a controller," she flung at him. "Every story will tell you, controllers are always evil and selfish and heartless. That's why the Oath outlaws it, no exceptions. I can take over minds and make people do things. I can erase and change memories. This is where you get scared."

"You are one of the least evil or selfish or heartless people I know. You frighten me no more than Matt does."

Virtually anyone else of any race would have shrunk instantly from contact; it matched her usual luck that the one holding her was one of the very small handful who wouldn't. But then, he'd grown up with Matt and his then-uncontrolled gift.

The panic melted into despair. Where was she going to go? In a forest at night, with three *alasir*-blood who could see better than she could, one an expert tracker and one a sorcerer, plus a supernatural stormhawk? Even if Kian released her and didn't follow, either Shon would recognize her gear or Matt would start asking questions.

She curled herself into the tightest ball she could, felt Kian cautiously free her wrist.

"You have no idea what you've done to me or to Matt." She heard her voice break again, tears nearly closing her throat. "You should have told me..."

"Nothing is as bad as you think." He sat up, ran a hand over her hair. "Please. Trust me. Just a little."

"Trust was my biggest mistake ever!"

"You were both very young and made mistakes. That wasn't one of them."

"I'll kill myself before I go back."

"You will not need to."

Terrified as she was, there was a kind of relief under it. No more watching behind her, no more keeping secrets, no more running.

He brushed her hair back from her face, gently. Always gentle with her, this lover who had just destroyed her life again with the same good intentions his cousin had when doing the same. "I'd offer my word as a Jordan, but that, I think, would be no help. Will pride work better? Will you face my cousins half-dressed with your hair in your eyes?"

"Nothing they haven't both seen," she snapped, but as usual, he did have a point. She forced her fear-locked muscles to loosen, to go through the motions of finding and lacing her boots, finding and lacing her bodice, finding her comb. Kian, who bothered only with his boots, winced repeatedly as she dragged it roughly through her hair, but let it go when she ignored his offer to help. He'd done it before, and she'd found it wonderfully relaxing, the sensation of strong sure hands carefully untangling the knots that vigorous activity with him had created, but she wasn't currently feeling very receptive.

She sensed, on the very edges of her shields, telepathic contact that wasn't her own; Matt talking to Kian, obviously. It was extremely brief, quite possibly just establishing relative location.

Hands shaking, she braided her hair and tied it off, then tucked her comb neatly back into her pack. Putting everything away to keep from losing it had become reflex, and right now, only her

reflexes seemed to be working, because her mind had simply shut down. She sat down again on the edge of the blanket, the edge of the bed where only a few hours ago she'd fallen asleep feeling safe and sated, hugging her knees to her chest, her forehead resting on them. What else was there to do but wait, with her fate now in other hands than hers?

Motion, getting nearer, though less sound than there'd have been from two humans even in the day; two familiar minds other than Kian's, one stronger and brighter and no longer twisted with grief and guilt and despair, the other blazing brilliant as a glass prism in the Southern sun casting colour everywhere. Farther off, faintly, she could just barely sense the electric mind that was the stormhawk now called Jori.

"Kian, why can't you ever camp near the road like a normal person instead of miles from it?" She knew that voice, even knew the half-teasing, half-complaining tone, in *alasilan*.

"Because it's more private," Kian said, rising to greet each of his cousins with a rough embrace.

"Which you need why?"

Darkness meant she could see only shapes with scant detail, but darkness was no protection from *alasin* eyes.

Kisea forced herself to raise her head.

Dead silence for all of three thudding heartbeats, before Matt's disbelieving "Shimai?" and Shon, so close behind the sounds overlapped, "Kisea?"

Under just about any other circumstances, it might have been funny.

"Wait, how... *what*?" Matt said.

Kisea sighed. "Catch up, dear. We're obviously travelling together. And Kian obviously decided not to tell me you were coming, since I'm still here. Thus turning a rather pleasant trip into an absolute catastrophe. Good evening, Shon, it's nice to see that the selective messing about with your mind I did without technically asking your permission helped long-term."

"Apparently, she's evil, selfish, and heartless," Kian added.

"What, for keeping me from killing myself and eventually helping me not want to anymore?" Shon asked, perplexed.

"So she says."

"Part of the Oath," Kisea said, glaring in their general direction, "is to take any renegade back to the College, by force if necessary. *I'm* a renegade, *he* took the Oath. This is a problem."

"Less than you think," Matt said. "At least, I think it's less than you think. I've been working on it and I think I have a solution except that I couldn't find you. But it doesn't matter because even if I desperately wanted to instead of desperately *not* wanting to, I wouldn't have time right at the moment anyway. Kallima's been kidnapped, they're holding her hostage and making demands on my uncle Rob, and since he's really rather fond of his oldest daughter, very soon he's going to have to make a decision I wouldn't wish on anyone unless we find her first."

Kian swore softly. "Any idea where?"

"A fairly good idea, following more scrying than I really want to think about." Kisea heard the wince in his voice even though she couldn't see it. Not so much the scrying itself, as the equivalent hours he'd have spent blind afterwards. "Feelings aside, I can't let Lord Jordan be cornered into handing over concessions that would probably affect hundreds if not thousands of lives for the sake of trying to capture a renegade who has yet to even be charged with anything specific. Take whatever you need from Kian's gear and go. Sooner or later I'll find you again and we can try to sort everything out."

"Especially if I have anything from Kian's gear on me," she said drily. There was no way she was going to fall for that one.

"But a real telepath would probably be extremely useful in rescuing Kalli. My mother's too far

away, Rob's too personally involved, and this isn't the time to have someone along who might not be good enough or is going to complain if things get rough or is going to let us down."

"Let you..." Fear that had become despair bubbled back up, this time as rage. "Let you down?" She stood up, crossed her arms, glowering at him. "How *dare* you? Who in all the hells do you think you are, that you can threaten to betray something I only ever told you to the people who would never understand, destroy my life, and then expect to be able to count on me to help you?"

"Did you leave the horses by the road?" Kian asked quietly, and Shon answered affirmatively. "Help me pack?"

"I told you why," Matt protested. "I thought they were starting to figure it out! And they were, they have suspicions but no proof which is why there are no actual charges! If you'd stayed there and kept hiding, they would've worked it out!"

"What, so chasing me out of the damned College to survive on my own was a better option?"

"I didn't want that! Do you really think I did? Do you really think I wanted anything that happened?"

"Oh, you didn't want it. That's nice. That's been a comforting thought, in almost ten years of always moving and not daring to trust anyone! Except that I was stupid enough to feel safe with the one person I should have run from like a rabbit the minute I realized who he was, because where he is, you're bound to be before long. Stupid me, walking right into it a second time, letting myself trust a Jordan and letting myself believe a Jordan cares what happens to me!"

"What did you want me to do? Say nothing and stand there silently while they figured it out and accused you of hiding it because you were misusing it instead of because you were scared half to death? Go after you, and make absolutely sure they tracked us both down? There's absolutely no way they would've let me disappear without a massive all-out hunt, you know that! Kill myself or go live in some cave as a hermit or ask them to Blind me as some kind of penance?" The defensiveness faded, and his voice dropped, softened. "I didn't make the rules. If I'd had any way to fix everything, I would've done it, no matter what."

"I didn't *ask* you to fix anything! I needed to know that there was one person who knew everything and trusted and loved me anyway and would stand beside me no matter what!"

"You always had that! You're a thousand times the telepath I am, and I stopped holding any shields at all against you before we started sleeping together! How is there even any way you could not know that?"

"Great way to show it!"

"Call a truce," Kian said. Both turned on him for the interruption, but he kept right on calmly taking down the lean-to. "It was a terrible situation, and forced choices no one that young should face. Possibly you both handled it in less than the best way. Or not, there is no way now to know. You are both alive and largely intact, Matt may have a long-term solution which is better than no hope at all, and we have a highly urgent short-term goal. Are you coming with us to find Kallima?"

Self-preservation told her to take only her own things and run, get lost, change her name again and stop doing mindhealing and make sure there was no way they could track her.

But she'd break the resolution to avoid mindhealing the first time she met someone suffering, and that would eventually leave a trail, a way to identify her, a weakness they could use to find her again. And she had no doubt that as soon as Kallima was safe, at least one would be on her trail, relentlessly.

Could Matt really have come up with any kind of resolution to the dilemma? It was unlikely, to say the least. For anyone else, she'd have called it impossible. The Joint Assembly were more likely to listen to Matt than to most. Matt was very good at thinking in unconventional ways, and in almost ten years...

"Have you seriously been thinking all this time about ways to solve an unsolvable problem?" she asked, more quietly.

"Of course I have," Matt said, outrage and indignation strong in his voice. "I was hardly going to just shrug and forget everything. And it isn't unsolvable. Just difficult."

She sighed. "I wish I could do mindhealing on myself. I obviously have a very deep urge towards self-destruction. Nothing nearly as straightforward as wanting just to die."

"Which means you're coming?" Kian asked patiently.

"Which means I'm coming. I'm not leaving poor Kalli to you lot." That was bravado, and she knew it, and they almost certainly all did as well but she wasn't going to loosen her shields enough to find out. She turned her attention instead to gathering up the last few of her personal things and stowing them in her pack, pulling her tunic on and her coat because it was easier than carrying it. She glared at Shon when he made a gesture that looked like he was thinking of taking her pack himself, and he backed off quickly.

With the fire well-buried and everything else cleaned up, they turned back towards the road.

"Explain something for me," Shon said, holding a branch out of her way that she hadn't even seen. "How long ago did you realize Matt and I were coming?"

Kisea shrugged. "Half an hour?"

"Most telepaths could have put Kian to sleep in that time and run away. I assume a controller might have some trouble with Matt but not with forcing Kian or I to attack either Matt or each other, which would certainly be enough distraction to keep us all busy for some time. There are probably other possibilities I don't know. If you were expecting Matt to immediately force you to go face a situation likely to be very bad for you..." He left it hanging.

"It never crossed my mind," she admitted. "I wouldn't do that even if it had."

"Not even to protect yourself?"

"I've hurt people badly before. Effectively destroyed their minds. But only when I was attacked directly and was afraid for my life. I've taken over someone's mind and made him fight his friends and untie me when I had no other choice." She shrugged, sighed. "Is it wrong to do something to someone who likes raping sirens that will make him less of a threat? I've done that a few times. But mostly, I really don't like hurting people. You and Kian don't frighten me badly enough that I'd ever do that."

"I'm not fond of slicing people open and doing possibly lethal damage, but if they attack me or someone I'm protecting or someone important to me, I'll do it with no regrets," he pointed out. "I can't make anyone less of a threat other than hoping they've learned something or killing them, nothing in between. And a sword can't be turned to healing instead of combat. I'm reasonably certain being a swordsman by choice doesn't mean I'm evil. How does being born with an unusual and I suspect very misunderstood gift and using it occasionally in self-defence but primarily to heal make you evil?"

Kisea rolled her eyes. "You're as bad as Kian."

"I have to consider that a compliment."

"It's obviously some sort of magic-user logic that mere fighters are not privy to," Kian called back. "They must use some words in different ways."

"Keep it up," Kisea said. "I *will* make you believe you're a horse all day." She wasn't sure she could, especially without damage, but she wasn't feeling very logical just now.

"That might solve one problem," Shon reflected. "Matt has Jori and we have two real horses."

Kisea heaved a sigh. Riding behind one or another, however long it took to get to Kallima. Better by the moment.

At least it would probably not take long, with Matt highly motivated to hasten travel as much as

possible.

By the side of the road, with two taller horses, waited a medium-sized dappled-grey mare who, on seeing Kisea, snorted and flicked her ears back and forth, her flaxen tail twitching.

Kisea stroked her nose in greeting, let the mare snuffle at her inquisitively. She probably shouldn't be surprised that the stormhawk had recognized her immediately. She was, as before, wearing a saddle and a hackamore with the reins fastened to a loop on the pommel, but they were somewhat more elaborate now, the leather white that almost glowed in the moonlight with more shiny bits and decoration than she remembered.

Matt eyed Jori and the two other horses, one very dark and the other lighter-bodied with darker mane and tail, and then Kian and Kisea. "Lose as much weight as you can. Anything that isn't absolutely impossible to replace. I'm going to be stretching to get us there fast with extra weight. Repacking now will lose us less time than being slowed down while we move."

"It's only everything I own," Kisea muttered, but she'd had a feeling that was coming right from the mention of being one horse short. She let her pack slide off her shoulders and knelt beside it, pulling everything out of it and sorting through it hastily, more by touch than by sight with only the moonlight to go by.

"Can I help?" Shon asked quietly, kneeling across from her.

"The food goes, I suppose," she sighed. "That's a lot of it."

"Keep the pemmican and the jerky," Kian said, a short distance away, where Matt was similarly helping him go through his pack. "Hunting takes time, and with two of you possibly using a lot of power, we'll need it. The rest has less value for the weight."

The moonlight, she realized after a moment of extricating extra clothing and dumping it to one side, was definitely brighter than it had been when she started this. She glanced up sharply, found a tiny sphere hovering in the air a short way overhead, casting a glow very much like concentrated moonlight over the grass and her strewn possessions. Not bright enough to be a problem for alarir night-vision, apparently, since Shon showed no discomfort, but enough that she could see.

"Thank you," she said shortly. She hoped there weren't going to be consequences that would interfere with anything else he needed to do.

She refused to consider her weaving replaceable, but it didn't weigh much anyway, which was part of its appeal. Not for anything was she going to surrender her coat or small necessities like her fire piston and the waterproof box of dried mushroom tinder. Most of her extra clothing went on the discard pile, though, since it was summer and she didn't need it currently, along with all the food other than the pemmican and jerky, and the majority of her camping gear as well, including her blanket and her hatchet.

"Well, someone is going to have the windfall of a lifetime," Kisea sighed, regarding the double piles in the fading glow of the tiny light. Some of Kian's, in particular, was worth more than many travellers ever managed to acquire.

"Sorry," Shon said apologetically, flipping her pack over and slicing through the rock-solid knots securing it to the mostly-willow frame.

Without the frame, it could be lashed to Kian's also much-reduced pack to create something that could be secured across the back of a saddle, akin to the ones already on Jori's and one of the real horses'. All in all, it was extremely minimal for four people in the wilderness.

Shon hesitated before slinging it over the one that had none. "Who are you riding with?" He sounded wary, like he wasn't sure how she'd react to the question.

"Jori can carry two the most easily," Matt said, a distinct note of caution in his voice.

She'd have preferred Shon, actually, as the one of the trio who had never betrayed her, but she wasn't about to risk Kallima's safety or make this harder for either of the real horses because of that.

"Fine," she said coolly. "Maybe we should go? Tonight?" *Before I really think about the fact that I'm staying with them instead of bolting into the forest and hoping I get myself killed before they find me again.*

Kian unfastened the pack from Jori's saddle, including what was obviously a rolled-up cloak, and added it to the one already carried by the lighter horse, while Shon slung the improvised one over the back of the other's saddle. Matt swung himself into Jori's saddle, and Shon offered his own linked hands as a stirrup to boost Kisea up behind him.

The low cantle of the saddle made for very little distance between them. If this ride was going to be what she expected, she was going to have to hold onto him, not just hope she could keep her balance with minimal contact. And while Jori was very good at keeping Matt in the saddle under any conditions, if she could leave that to Kisea it would free her to concentrate on other things. She reached around either side of him, groped along the pommel until she found what she'd hoped was still there: a sturdy leather strap across it, that she could hold with both hands.

Jori, unasked, began to walk, and the other two fell in line behind her.

"All right," Matt said, taking a slow deep breath. "Let's see if I can get us across two hundred miles or so before either the horses or I drop from it. I'll increase their stamina as much as I can, but a straight gallop will still kill them so set whatever pace you need." Even with her shields closed, she could feel the shift in his mind, turning elsewhere, seizing hold of the energies of the world around them and twisting them. No dramatic gestures, no verbal mnemonics like some used, just his own will and imagination. As natural for Matt as manipulating a ball of soft clay, and presumably his skill had increased as much as hers had.

Still... two hundred miles? Her experience with horses was extremely limited, but she was certain that even the finest Jordan horses in the best possible condition couldn't readily cover a distance like that quickly.

Not that normal rules tended to apply once Matt started reshaping the world to his desires.

The moonlight rippled faintly, gained a stronger blue tint in front of them, but a faintly red one to either side and, when she glanced back, behind as well, except around Kian and Shon and their mounts. The trees themselves, to what extent she could see individual ones, blurred together, and the effect increased rapidly. What had been a fresh breeze picked up significantly, coming from directly ahead, though since Matt was still at least half a head taller than her, his body blocked most of it.

"They're fresh enough for a bit of a gallop," Shon said.

Jori flicked her ears backwards, and moved smoothly from a walk to a trot to a gallop.

That made the blurring effect worse—to say nothing of the wind. Kisea decided it really didn't matter whether she was watching or not, so she closed her eyes, made sure she had a secure grip on the leather strap, and braced herself to just go along with whatever happened.

And she was absolutely not going to admit just how many times, in the bad moments, she'd wanted desperately to be right here, feeling Matt's body against hers, and fantasized about Jori being able to take them somewhere Oaths didn't matter.

Kisea wasn't sure what it was that changed, but something prompted her to open her eyes for the first time in what felt like forever; she found that the red-and-blue-light and the blurring effect

were both fading.

Matt swore. "We're still short of what I was aiming for, but I'm losing it."

"We can't be that far short," Kian said. "The sun will be up soon. Let it go, you and the horses can rest. It will do Kalli no good for you to drain yourself past reason now."

You should've left me behind. Kisea bit off the words before they escaped. It was possible that the inclusion of a strong telepath in the party might make all the difference, more than the problems it created.

"Can't let go until we're wherever we're staying for a while. I pushed right up against limits hard. As soon as I release any one thing, it's all going to fall apart."

"Can I dismount and scout without throwing you off too badly?"

"Yes."

Kian loosened the lead-rope from his saddle and tossed the end to Shon, made sure the reins were safely knotted, and jumped off his mount's back without stopping. He vanished into the forest to one side of the road.

"What should I be expecting?" Kisea asked, forcing her voice to stay calm and practical.

"I'm combining that little bit of lifewitch healing with sorcery to give the horses extra stamina, which is going to leave me hypersensitive for a while. I don't just get lifewitch senses for a while when I do combinations, I get them ridiculously strongly and even at normal strength they're confusing and disorienting. Lightening weight all around, us and the horses and the gear, might give me a nosebleed since I'm playing with direct physical force and gravity. Playing with time and distance is complicated, I see and hear things that aren't here right now but were or will be, and I've just warped a *lot* of time and space all at once. More than in theory should've been possible, although most people can't layer in the stamina and reduced-mass effects to help. Definitely more than I've ever done all at once. The whole mess together is probably going to add up to serious disorientation and sensory distortion and confusion, which is possibly the scariest set of side-effects. I might panic, or at least get really agitated, it's happened before."

Keeping her shields adamantly closed took energy and concentration, and she'd let them loosen back to normal state somewhere on the ride; in contact, and with the tattered threads of an old deep rapport lingering between them, the exhaustion and resignation and apprehension were clear to her as primary colours in summer sun.

"I can probably help."

"In your hands," he said softly.

Kian reappeared before long, beckoned them off the road a short way to a cluster of cedar trees; nearby Kisea glimpsed open sky.

"There's a stream and a bit of open ground with grass over there," he told Shon, as Jori halted under the cedars. Shon nodded, swung off his own horse, and led them both in that direction.

Kisea felt Matt slump, the last of the spell he'd woven fraying and melting away; hastily, she slithered off, and she and Kian between them helped Matt slide down. He dropped to the ground there, too drained to even sit up under his own power.

Cold, she heard Matt say shakily, though she doubted any non-telepath would have heard it.

I forgot to mention the bit about being cold.

Not that he really needed to, since that was one of the most basic consequences. Kisea peeled her coat off and wrapped it around him, doubting it would do much good but at least it was something. Kian added his own, and left briefly, returning with a dark coat that was probably Shon's and a reversible cloak that was brilliant opalescent white on one side and dark on the other. The latter made her wince, since it was a visible symbol of a sorcerer and she'd been strenuously avoiding them for so long it had become a reflex. She helped Kian tuck first the coat, then the cloak around

the shivering sorcerer as well, shifting him to get some of the wool between him and the ground. She could feel muscles flex as he instinctively tried to help, thwarted by the weakness.

"Try to eat," Kian said gently, but he handed the bar of pemmican to Kisea, so she could shave off thin slices and feed them to him; there was no way he was going to be able to chew the gummy dense mixture of dried powdered meat and berries mixed with fat and, in these ones that had come from her healing of the phobia, a touch of honey as well. Far more concentrated than most foods, even a little would be some help in replacing what he'd used.

All most people saw and understood was that Matt could do things that went beyond the limits of even the most talented sorcerers, turning magic to new uses that no one had ever considered and usually couldn't replicate. He could take something others did, but do it to a degree that left even the strongest sorcerer speechless with envy.

This was what they seldom saw, and even more rarely grasped.

How, Oath or not, could he ever abuse his gift, when so often the aftermath was a forceful lesson in humility and dependence?

She felt his growing confusion, but held off on intervening until he'd finished the pemmican.

By which point there were definitely hallucinations, or what resembled hallucinations, creeping in as well. Under the circumstances, she figured they were echoes backwards or forwards in time, perceptible because he'd deliberately interfered with his own fixed location in time and space.

Remarkable how much theory she still remembered.

She laid aside her knife to clean later, and stroked a hand over his hair gently before flattening her palm against his forehead.

At her mental touch, all shields collapsed immediately, far too quickly for it to be deliberate choice. That was instinct, recognizing her as welcome and not a threat.

Trusted, in fact.

Damn it, Matt...

She shoved her own tangled feelings aside to deal with later.

Completely aside from being unpleasant, some sorts of side-effects also made it difficult or impossible to rest and recover, and others were emotionally exhausting. It was a given that they would need Matt functional to rescue Kallima, so the faster he recovered, the faster they could get her safely out of wherever she was.

Of course, once Kallima was safe, there was no longer any excuse for Matt not to take her to the College, and he was going to have to make a decision.

Kallima couldn't be more than twenty-two or so, and had more or less lived the sheltered life of a Lord's daughter despite her alasir-blood cousins. To leave her even an hour longer than necessary in the hands of anyone who saw her as a pawn would be unforgivable.

Hallucinations were always complicated, and Matt had senses she lacked, which made it that much harder to untangle what was around them here and now from what wasn't. Periods of blindness were so regularly an after-effect of anything involving extended senses of any sort that he hadn't mentioned that either. Though the blindness should be in full force by now, she compared what his mind was still insisting he could see when he opened his eyes against what was actually there in the present; it was immediately clear that he wasn't seeing the latter at all, only images coming via other channels.

She tried focusing on a lynx stalking through the underbrush, its gaze fixed on a small herd of deer browsing where Shon was currently caring for the horses, and with a touch popped it like a soap bubble. Another promptly replaced it, and this one was far more disturbing: staff cracking against staff, a man and a woman back to back ringed by half a dozen men in patched motley. She flicked that one away quickly, but obviously one at a time was going to be far too inefficient, and it

completely failed to do anything at all about the disconnected and bewildered thoughts running at the same time, or the bone-deep cold.

The only thing that was going to work was something only she could do.

Though it was far more intimate than she was really comfortable with right now.

Which didn't matter.

She wrapped her mind around his, cutting off anything his slight telepathy or lifewitch senses or the extended senses of a sorcerer might tell him, since she couldn't be sure they were any more reliable.

Then, carefully, she started on his material senses.

Since he already couldn't see, and he was so used to periods blind that there was nothing inherently frightening in seeing nothing anyway, she switched off his sight her way very firmly and deliberately. To her relief, the visual hallucinations went away.

Taste didn't matter either, and could be safely disabled for the moment as a precaution, though she picked up no hallucinations involving it.

Cutting off all senses entirely could have terrible consequences, though.

Alasir-blood tended to have a better-than-human sense of smell, in particular for people in close proximity and especially if the people in question were either frightened or sexually aroused; though Matt's was less acute than Kian's, she couldn't replicate that. It didn't matter, though. She could substitute her own awareness of the scent of the scaly cedar twigs under them, of the horsey scent of the coats wrapped around him, of a faint thread of woodsmoke on the breeze. She switched his off, gave him her own instead. The part of his mind that was unstuck in time balked, certain that it could smell recently-spilled blood and worse, but she insisted that he could smell only what she gave him, and it lost out.

She repeated it with sound, replacing the shrill cry of a dying hare and the crash of a falling tree and the sound of voices speaking unintelligibly with the sounds of Kian moving quietly nearby to set up a sketchy camp, of Shon and the horses not much farther away, of the soft burbling of the little stream and the whisper of the wind in the trees, but nothing else. She repeated that, and against resistance forced it to be real: *nothing else*, only what she gave him, the existence of anything from any other source was unacceptable and she would not allow it.

Most of the hallucinations being successfully banished, she felt the tension in him begin to loosen, felt the delirious confusion losing ground. She was still sensing thoughts that didn't belong, most of them involving a lack of differentiation between past and present and future, but she could get to that in a moment. There were still odd little sensations slipping through, cold and heat, wet and pressure and the crawling feet of insects, layered over the chill already present. She pondered that, trying to decide what to replace it with. The single most problematic aspect was awareness of temperature, and lacking that short-term wasn't dangerous, so she removed that. The bugs and the dampness she made go away individually, and she'd need to watch for anything new appearing, but that was at least feasible. Pressure, to some degree, actually matched the weight of three heavy long coats and a cloak.

Her memory offered up a scene from long ago, of holding a crimson-hearted golden flower cradled in her hands, like a small fragile piece of the sun, a gift she could reject simply by closing her hand and crushing it. It suggested a parallel: that she was currently holding Matt's mind in her hands in much the same way, and since she was already inside his shields, he was every bit as vulnerable.

Which meant only that she needed to handle this with just as light a touch.

Without the conflicting sensory info, the delirium was much weaker, and it was easier to follow each thought and delicately straighten out the tangle that it belonged to.

Without the disorientation and the understandable alarm that went with it, he relaxed past it into a semi-dozed, largely beyond thought, and the few that remained were mainly wordless ones of relief and safety and peace. That was a much more useful state, one that would let him rest and start to recover instead of wearing himself out emotionally and mentally.

If she let go, it would all start to build back up again. She needed to hold onto it, just as it was, until this passed. That was, in a way, harder to do: her mind kept wandering, with too much of her own pounding at the door and demanding to be at the forefront of her attention immediately.

So, she sang songs to herself, nursery rhymes and lullabies and popular ones that she liked.

Shimai? he said, still a bit fuzzily, but quite coherently. *I heard you singing.*

Shimai died when I walked away from the College. She swallowed her immediate response, and said, as gently as she could make herself, *That hasn't been my name for a long time.*

A sort of mental shrug, though no attempt at all to escape her hold—if anything, the impression she had was of him curled up, unafraid and comfortable, trusting her to have a reason for anything she did. *Always, to me. Thank you. I was expecting this to be very bad.*

We have to save Kallima.

That's all?

What do you expect? What happened, happened. I suppose it doesn't matter now. There are no options other than you keeping your Oath and taking me back and I would rather die, or breaking it far enough to let me run again, which is marginally better for me but it'll ruin you.

Shon did point out a third option.

Never. Not outright, and not all the nasty little ways I could get the three of you at odds. Not over me.

I really do have a fourth one that doesn't involve broken Oaths or Blinding or running away or anyone dying. It's taking a risk, I can't be absolutely certain that it will work, and if it doesn't, it would be bad. But I can promise that, no matter what, I'd be right beside you, and nobody would do anything to you without doing the same to me.

Damn it, that's not possible! Holding out something like that is just cruel!

It's quite possible. Obviously, you could grab it out of my mind right now and I can't stop you, but you might want to choose a moment when you're less likely to turn my mind into oatmeal if you react without thinking about it.

That's not fair! Gods, do you have any idea what you're actually asking?

Maybe too much. Probably too much. But since I'd never forgive myself for even letting them hurt you, let alone helping, and it doesn't take all that much to put together pieces and get some idea how you've been living and I don't like it and I'm pretty sure you don't either, I don't know what else to do that I can live with afterwards.

Why am I the only one who remembers that you swore an Oath?

Twice. Again when I got my Sixth. I do remember. I just consider the bit about justice more important than the bit about renegades.

You are insane.

According to half the people who have ever met me, I have been for years. According to the other half, I was born that way. A sudden flash of mischief. *Maybe I just need the right mindhealer.*

You aren't taking this seriously at all.

I'm taking it extremely seriously. Much more so than I can really explain right now. So much so that I badly need to look for the humour in it.

She didn't have an answer. What answer could she possibly give? She had very little left to lose. He meant every word, she could hear the truth under it, and he wasn't a strong enough telepath to

lie successfully to her. It was absolutely impossible. The facts were what they were. As a controller, she would be presumed guilty of everything she *could* do, regardless of whether she'd ever done it and under what circumstances. No loopholes.

But... could he? He'd done the apparently impossible before.

The physical laws of the world were more malleable than the Assembly.

There hadn't been a tactile manifestation of the out-of-time hallucinations for at least three songs. Experimentally, she gradually released her restraint of his temperature sense. A lingering chill, but it lacked the fierce intensity, and the conflicting heat was gone. One step at a time, she drew back, untangling her own senses from his, ready to step back in if anything tried to recur, but there were only faint ghosts now, easy to identify and ignore. Smell and then sound, and finally she released her hold on his sight.

Not until she broke first mental contact and then physical as well did he move at all. He was still shaky, and his eyes were still not focusing, but at least he could push himself up to a sitting position, the piled coats and cloak sliding away.

Kian handed each a bar of pemmican. "That was much faster than I expected."

"Me too." Matt coughed, clearing some of the hoarseness, wiping with the back of his hand at the dried blood that had trickled from his nose, and bit hungrily into the bar.

Kisea got up and walked away. For lack of any better direction, she went towards Shon and the horses.

He'd had long enough to give both a thorough rub-down; the brighter one was nuzzling at the remains of grain on a scrap of worn canvas, and Shon was just offering the darker a liberal handful similarly, murmuring to her softly. He had them tethered to separate trees, far enough apart that the ropes wouldn't cross, but near enough to be able to interact, and they were wearing only their halters now. The packs had been moved, but the saddles and pads and bridles were nearby.

"They're all right?" she asked.

He glanced up, smiled. "Yes. Matt's too much a Jordan to let any harm come to them. They're used to working hard and to magic. In theory, the chestnut is Kian's, but it's so often so difficult to get him to ride rather than walk that both tend to fall to me."

"What are their names?"

"The buckskin is Butterfly, since she moves so smoothly you'd think she's floating on the breeze. The chestnut is her half-sister Rose. She can be sweet, but watch her hind feet, she can be thorny. They've always been together, they don't like being separated."

"A good excuse for Kian to leave her behind when he goes off alone?"

"One of them," he agreed.

She shied away from what she most wanted to know, reluctant to linger any longer on the subject even though it dominated every second thought. At least there was another one available. "What exactly do we know about Kallima?"

She felt the shift in his mood, picked up on intense worry and anger and frustration. "Much less than we'd like. She went out riding with a visiting friend and an escort of two. They did not come back on schedule, and a search found both guards dead and the friend too injured to walk or catch any of the horses. One of the farm children showed up not long after with a note he'd been given a penny to deliver, stating that Kallima was alive and safe but would be held prisoner until her father agreed to demands that would be delivered soon. A warning, as well, that any attempt to find or rescue her would mean her death. Matt was the obvious person to contact, although we were in Hope-of-Luck at the time. He searched while I packed, and as soon as he had a location we left without waiting even for his sight to return. We were rather relieved to find Kian only a short detour from the path we needed. And more than a little surprised to find you as well, but you know that."

She pondered that, chewing on a bite, stroking Butterfly's velvety muzzle with her free hand; the buckskin nudged her inquisitively, snuffling at the bar of pemmican, but lost interest in it and settled for attention in place of food. Finally, she swallowed. "Then Matt's right, and having me with you might make a difference. I'm extremely vulnerable physically while I do it, but it's going to be hard for someone holding Kalli to hurt her, even with a knife at her throat, if I'm in his head."

"Anything that might keep her safer is an advantage we need badly."

Shon's father was an alasir Lord, and Shon had been raised to see things in terms of advantage and cost, though his surface emotions suggested less of rational evaluation, more of personal emotion. The Equals Village Jordan family seemed to be collecting lost children of two high Houses that, traditionally, were supposed to be at odds because of the difference in race.

"You're all right, living in the Village and Jordan Manor?" she asked abruptly.

"Yes. If anything, in many ways I like both better than Felorton. Less pretence, less political manoeuvring, less of treating others as counters or tools or status symbols. Some ways it's hard, sometimes very hard, and without a family to count on, I would likely by now have made all your work pointless. I think I'm less strong than you are, to survive alone. But I have a family, who welcomed me without a heartbeat's hesitation. I have a job to do that truly makes the world a better place. While Kian would do anything for Matt and I'd not care to be the one to threaten Matt in his sight, dealing with local politics and legal matters and paperwork is more within my skills and experience than that of either."

"Mm, yes. I've been wondering since I first heard, how Matt ended up with a job like that. He saw something wrong and just had to step in, didn't he?"

"Exactly. One of the usual siren-rape mockeries of hearings. He went to Rob, who was I gather not pleased that his instructions were being ignored. While investigating, it became clear just how often there were still situations like it, most commonly racial issues but sometimes of bias against women or those in some occupations or those who are poor. There is resistance to change, but less than I believe I would have faced trying to do the same in Telsea. Maybe Jordan can set an example for the world."

"And yet, because of other laws, you're officially a personal guard and everyone overlooks you."

"One can actually accomplish quite a lot while being overlooked. Especially when lurking behind someone that people tend to forget is a telepath." She picked up amusement shivering across the more dominant emotions of anxiety and tension—how much of that was for Kallima, and how much was for Kisea, anyway? "It works well enough. I already proved how little one can count on status for anything, and anyone who matters knows how things really are. I'm quite content with that."

"Good, I'm glad." *One less pointlessly-ruined life in the world.*

"I would not, however, have made it that far, without you."

She shrugged, and remembered to take another bite of pemmican and chew it, though Butterfly nudged her for more stroking. "If I'd realized who you're related to, I probably would have just told you immediately to go to the Village and then run the other way and changed my name again."

"While I was on the edge, every moment, of ending my own life because I saw no future at all? I'm less than sure of that."

Actually, so was she. Could she possibly have walked away from that kind of pain, even driven by her own fear?

She'd stayed with Kian for far less reason and at greater risk.

On some level, had she been hoping for an end to running and hiding, one she could pretend wasn't her choice? She found self-delusions too often as an integral function in minds with old scars to believe she had none; she certainly had worse emotional scars than many of those she healed,

with no one who could heal her in turn.

"The three people you most fear right now," Shon said softly, "are the three who least ever want you hurt, and who would face down anything to protect you."

"And that isn't something to be afraid of? Especially knowing that because of the laws Matt and I can't both walk away from this?" Wasn't it possible at all to stay off this subject right now? Everything led back to it.

"I would not say he is obsessed, but he does think of you often. He asked me a thousand questions, and both illusion and telepathy became involved, and once we were sure we meant the same person, he started asking questions of others. He has a list, with details, of at least twenty people you've healed of crippling mental hurts, many of whom will swear that either no one else cared enough to try or that others who tried failed or both. A year and some ago, when he got his Sixth, he came up with his idea for how to subvert the system so you can stop running, and what had been listening for rumours became a search in truth. I've seen him experiment with different approaches to scrying and spend hours in the College library and elsewhere trying to find ideas, but he's never been able to get past whatever way you found to hide. Which has been driving him half-mad with frustration."

"Then Kian knew me on sight and had ulterior motives for staying with me all along." Why did that thought hurt so much?

"Kian generally has multiple reasons for everything he does. He just doesn't discuss them readily. That doesn't make any of them less valid, or mean that he'd trick you into anything any more than I would."

Which was, she had to concede, probably true.

"Do you know what this plan of Matt's is?"

"Yes. As does Kian. There isn't all that much he doesn't tell us. We did, however, have to promise never to tell anyone, ever, until he talks to you about it."

Which meant she could, of course, find it in his mind or Kian's, probably quite easily, because under the circumstances it would be near the surface. She couldn't make herself even really consider it seriously, though.

Too much, this whole subject hurt too much.

"Where's Jori?"

"Kian changed her to hawk and she's scouting."

"Does she have enough specifics to be able to find the right place?"

"Matt did tell her and I both everything he'd been able to gather, while we were riding. It should be detail enough for her to make a very good guess, at least."

"What specifics?"

"I think Kian should probably hear those, too."

Kisea shrugged again. "All right." She helped him gather up the remaining horse gear and take it back to the clearing under the cedars.

Matt definitely looked more alert, though she could still see signs of fatigue, and his eyes were actually focusing now.

"We need to make sure we all know everything possible about the situation with Kallima," she said firmly. "After which, it probably would be a good idea to stay here for a few hours. You need to sleep, and Kian and I are operating on less than a full night's sleep. Mistakes could get Kallima killed."

No one argued.

Over a less-than-satisfying but nonetheless nourishing meal of pemmican and dried meat and water that at least was cool and fresh, Shon got Kisea and Kian caught up, with occasional help from

Matt.

Roads mostly led to fords across rivers, or to bridges, but sometimes neither was feasible and there was, instead, a ferry. On a busy road near a major town there might even be two, but more often it was a single ferry well away from any other signs of civilization. Kisea, in her travels, had found some ferrymen surly and unfriendly, and others who enjoyed having company for a night or two—and one who had decided to try to bully her into sex with him and discovered that she wasn't as helpless against one attacker as she was against nine.

Matt had tracked Kallima to one such, but there were defences around it that kept him from seeing inside. However, he knew which river and approximately where on it, and someone could easily have used that river and one of its tributaries to reach a point near the Jordan Manor. He hadn't watched it long, but had seen only one person outside it, a human man in his thirties or so with broad shoulders and rough commoner clothes, quite plausibly the ferryman.

The simple fact that anything was set up to block scrying was suspicious. Such charms weren't technically illegal, but weren't readily available and typically were expensive, and they did tend to prompt questions about why someone felt the need for the considerable extra effort and expense.

"Think one of you clever boys can do something about my pack that will make it look plausible again?" Kisea asked.

"Yes," Kian said. "But why?"

"Because we need to know what's inside. No matter how much digging these people might have done into the Jordan family and possible rescuers, I won't be on the list. I'm rather obviously not one of the runaway Jordans who might be looking for their brother's daughter and not alasir-blood at all. There should be nothing to make them suspicious about me walking up to the door looking for a place to sleep overnight before crossing the river. I've done it before, more times than I can count. They have to be expecting normal road traffic, and there's probably more of that around here than there is in some areas."

"Which could put you in danger," Shon said. "They're likely to be extremely nervous at present."

"What's the worst that happens? They attack me? They will probably seriously regret doing that. They throw me in with Kallima, wherever she is? That just gives Matt something to focus on that, at short range, nothing is going to block."

"Except that I couldn't focus on you with you holding my hand," Matt pointed out drily.

Kallima sighed. "I forgot about that." She picked up her knife from the ground near Matt, handed it to him. "Sterilize that for me, please."

He took it, but gave her a wary look. "Why?"

"Because if you do, I'll make sure you can find me from now on." Why not? It wasn't like it was going to do her any more good at this point.

"I don't think I'm going to like this."

"Just do it!"

He balanced it across both palms, stared at it fixedly; when he lowered his hands a couple of inches, the knife stayed where it was.

Kisea pulled off her tunic, untied her belt and laid it aside, unlaced her tooled leather bodice and removed it entirely, then her chemise. It was, as she'd said to Kian, nothing all three hadn't seen, and she couldn't afford to get blood all over them. The scar was easy enough to find by touch, lengthwise down the inner surface of her left breast, currently haloed by the yellow and red of a healing deep bruise.

"Oh, gods," Shon said, putting pieces together. "You didn't."

"Where else was I supposed to put it that it couldn't be stolen or lost and would always be in direct contact with me?" she asked shortly. "And where else on my body that I could reach alone and

it wouldn't be visible or interfere with muscle? Three alasis are going to be squeamish about blood?" Probing the area found it without difficulty, since she knew what she was looking for: a thin disc inserted edge-outwards under the skin.

"Not about blood," Kian said softly. "About pain. I think we have nothing with us to help with that."

"I can *after* it's out of contact," Matt said, his gaze still on the hovering knife; no trace of grease or pemmican fragments remained, presumably burned away by intense heat.

"Any of us can, after," Shon said. "The problem is before."

"Telepath," she reminded them. "I *can* reduce it."

And at least it's only physical pain. That kind, I've learned how to deal with.

Maybe I've learned to deal with the other kind too. Otherwise, why is it that even with psychic self-control, my proximity and my voice aren't making all three think only about sex with me? I am, after all, more than a little stressed.

The thought stirred intense interest from the more siren side of her mind, involving three lovers who were very different but all considerate and caring. The longer and stronger her stress, the harder that was going to be to fight—after all, not only would it relieve much of the stress, but the siren ability to fascinate could be very effective for self-defence under the right conditions.

Too many thoughts. Too many feelings she just didn't want to deal with right now. Or ever, given the choice, but she wasn't going to get that. The best she could hope for was to put it off a little longer.

Matt caught the knife and offered her the hilt, careful not to touch the blade. "It's clean. Do I want to know what you did before?"

"Campfire, the strongest wine I could get, and the glue healers use for some wounds." Several large swallows of the wine had, as she recalled, gone down her throat as well, but she couldn't drink enough to make her hands shaky. She moved so she was kneeling in front of Matt, her knees apart both for balance and so any blood that dripped would miss her. She would, right then, have preferred either of the others, but Matt recovering remained a priority. "Since it's probably going to bleed a lot, why waste it? Sorry the bruising might mess with the taste. Some people have strange ideas about foreplay."

He paused in pulling his cloak back around himself, his eyes seeking hers; rather than meet them, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then another, centring herself and setting up the mental tricks that would shunt much of the pain out of her conscious perception.

Something rippled against her inner senses, something that wasn't actual telepathic communication but still somehow felt unified. She felt Shon kneel behind her, a little to her left; his hand against her bare back was tentative, until she shifted her weight fractionally, leaning into the touch, acknowledging and accepting it. Kian knelt to her right, close enough that she could feel his knee against hers. Dominant in all three was frustration, helplessness that didn't sit well at all.

The three who least ever want you hurt...

This isn't the time for that!

Even with telepath tricks and silent support, it still took all the willpower she'd developed over the years walking the roads alone to slice through thin skin and the tissue beneath. She heard her own breath catch, tried to swallow the sound that came right behind it, but only partially succeeded. Less blood than she remembered, but still running freely. She pressed on both sides of the cut so that an onyx disc a bit larger than her thumbnail popped into sight, allowing her pull it out the rest of the way; she let Kian take both it and the knife, and gave Matt an expectant look. "Well?"

She didn't think that ever-so-brief hesitation had nearly as much to do with the blood as it did with unresolved emotions. Nonetheless, he took her up on it, wrapped an arm around her bare torso

to steady her or himself and ran his tongue along the cut.

Alasir bites never itched, never festered, and after the initial bite itself, never hurt; it had been established generations before that it was due to the properties of alasir saliva. For many people there was a mildly euphoric effect as well, though not for all, with a multitude of possible factors. For Kisea, sufficiently intense fear or anger could destroy any pleasant feelings.

Apparently, mere stress and conflicted feelings were less powerful.

It was probably just as well Shon was there to steady her, really.

She felt Matt's mind touch hers, testing surface emotions, but didn't bother to block him right then; only then did he lick away the blood that had already run.

Both being telepaths made telepathic contact stronger and clearer. Physical contact made telepathic contact stronger and clearer. For alasir, blood made telepathic contact stronger and clearer. Even though Matt's telepathy was extremely limited, with it enhanced by contact and blood, it was harder to keep shields up than it would have been to release them and let their minds twine together. No walls, no deception, no need for either...

She was certain her shields trembled more than once, but she resolutely held them in place. Over a third of her life spent in fear wasn't going away on the word of the one person she'd most feared. And whose touch, physical and mental, she'd most longed for when things got bad.

"You taste good," Matt told her, raising his head and licking blood meticulously from his lips and teeth.

She must be feeling less stressed: she was barely irritated with him for that. Or when she felt, rather than saw, the other two exchange glances before they agreed.

"Can you find me now?" she asked.

He looked thoughtful, forehead furrowing, and she felt that mental shift that meant magic, though only the briefest flicker of it. He nodded. "Perfectly. And would be able to through shields across half the length of Caalden, right now."

"Good. We need to sleep, I assume the horses need to rest, and I can't believably show up early in the day anyway." It finally occurred to her that she was still sitting here half-naked, though no longer blood-streaked, and looked for her clothes. Kian handed her, not only her chemise, but a folded strip of bandage smeared thinly on one side with thick greenish ointment. Rather gingerly, to keep from pulling the fresh cut open again, she pressed the bandage over it, and let Shon help her wriggle back into her chemise and bodice. Once the latter was laced, it offered enough support to keep everything in place, and she adjusted the drawstring neck of her chemise to make sure the bandage was covered securely.

"Once Jori comes back," Kian said, "we'll have some idea how long it will take to reach the river. If we plan to get back on the road at a time that will put us near it as it's beginning to get dark, we can rest here a little while."

"And replace the frame for my pack. No one carries a full pack far with no frame." She pulled her tunic back on over the rest.

"That won't be hard to do."

"I've improvised repairs before, but I've never had to build one from nothing."

"I can keep watch until Jori gets back," Shon said.

"And you can wake me, and we can work out the timing," Kian said. "We need you two as rested as possible."

Kisea wasn't entirely sure how she ended up lying down on Matt's spread cloak beside him, with her own coat over her and Shon's long split riding-coat over him, and with Kian's warm presence close on her other side. She didn't need to see Shon to feel his proximity, settling himself leaning against a tree close to them.

Despite everything, it felt... safe.

The three who least ever want you hurt...

Even though that includes the one who can most easily do so and if he doesn't he's going to destroy himself.

He'd rather break his Oath than take me back there. But I knew that, didn't I? At least, I should have. He hasn't changed, not really. Less than I have.

Kian and Shon will help him do it, too. I think they really would do everything they could to protect me from him if he actually decided to be sensible for a change.

He isn't my doom. I'm his.

And I can't let that happen. Too many people need him. He's barely started and he's going to change the world.

How? I'm just not strong enough, even for Matt, to face the Assembly and let them Blind me or kill me. I don't think I'm strong enough to deliberately kill myself, either. Maybe I'll just die helping to rescue Kallima and the whole problem will be solved forever.

She wanted to cry herself to sleep, but there was no way she could possibly explain why, so she ruthlessly locked it down and used telepath tricks to force herself to fall asleep.

II

Gentle psychic fingers stroking her shields roused Kisea.

She vaguely remembered her sleep starting out restless, before going deeper; presumably it was during the earlier phase that she'd moved so that she was cuddled close against Matt. In fact, she had her head on his shoulder, and he'd wrapped that arm around her.

He was awake, obviously, but she wasn't expecting to open her eyes to find him watching her. Sorcerer-grey eyes with flecks of the dark brown common to alasisir, with no masks behind them hiding emotions. She flinched.

I don't want to lose you ever again,* he whispered. *I've missed you. And I've been terrified you'd get yourself killed somehow before I could find you. And almost as terrified of what you might be going through.

I'm still alive,* she said wearily. *Even though the world has no place in it for a controller.

So we'll create one.

She just didn't have the will to fight right now.

She could ask him what this plan of his was.

But as long as she didn't know, she wouldn't have to look for the flaws it would have to have, the assumption that would shatter under reality or the price that would be intolerable. She could let herself pretend that just maybe, there really was a way.

**Kallima,* she reminded him.*

**Kalli,* he agreed, though it was extremely obvious he'd wanted to continue the conversation.*

No one on her other side now, so nothing to stop her from rolling away and getting to her feet.

"Well?" she said briskly. "How far?"

Shon and Kian and Jori, who looked no older than she had when Kisea had last seen her, shifted position to make room for her and Matt to join them in a circle.

"Maybe fifteen miles, no more than that," Jori said. "We can cover that in a couple of hours without magic. There are at least two men there, one that fits what Matt saw before and another one

who's wearing a quilted jerkin and has a staff. I hunted a mouse that was in the yard around the building and I got a glimpse in one window, I'm fairly sure there's at least one more around, but the one with the staff chased me off and I didn't dare go back. The road goes straight there, but there are two major curves before it gets there, and one other road that joins this one maybe a mile before the ferry. I think you're right, by yourself you could walk right up to the door without anyone thinking you're there for Kalli, but if there are at least three men around, that's going to be dangerous. How many can you protect yourself against, for how long, so we know how much time we'd have to get there to help?"

"It depends a lot on the situation. I've never been able to really explore everything I can do. If I'm just lashing out, I can put three to sleep for sure, possibly four, with a possibility of damage, especially if I'm trying to do it under pressure. I can definitely take over one and force him to do anything I want. I can't actually control more than one at a time, it takes too much concentration, and I can't do anything else while I do it, but I can leave what are basically commands and then try to take over a second. Doing it quickly and against resistance with no time for finesse, any commands are going to be extremely crude and he might realize that there's a massive inconsistency in his own actions and fight against it, but depending on the person and the circumstances, he may just go with it. Probably some damage but I'm not sure how much. Turning one or two against the rest can be really effective as long as there aren't so many others that they're hopelessly outnumbered."

At least they assumed it was a siren trick I used, and didn't figure out what I am, or I never would've gotten out alive.

"Which explains nine being too many," Kian murmured.

"Against that many, the only thing I could have done was get them angry enough to beat me instead, and I might not have survived that."

"Sorry?" Matt said, though she could feel protective anger stir.

Kisea shrugged. "I wandered off-course and too deep into human territory, and I was alone, and it was raining so I stopped in a human village. It was probably a given that some of the locals would come up with the usual ideas about sirens. I was lucky enough this time that Kian was there."

And if he hadn't been, they would have had their fun, and I would've limped off, and by now I'd be back to running the roads, alone or otherwise.

"Where?" Matt demanded, and there was a distinct growl in his voice.

"I don't remember what it was called, they didn't succeed, and it currently doesn't matter."

"I remember," Kian said. "It's within Jordan boundaries, barely. And I can identify them all. Later, though."

That village is in trouble. At least Matt will make sure it's only the ones involved who pay, not everyone. She was nice to me, she doesn't deserve it.

"Yes, later. So. How much danger depends on how many I'm up against."

Jori's forehead furrowed. "So we'd better try to be as close as possible."

"There's an uncomfortable amount we still don't know," Shon said. "Whether those shields are a sorcerer directly involved or a charm, since a sorcerer might have a chance of spotting us too early. Whether there's a telepath involved who might catch it if you and Matt are in contact. How many are actually present, and what sort of mood they're in. Even, for that matter, whether they've made specific demands yet and how that's progressing, which could play a part in how on-edge they are."

"The only way to get that information is for someone to get inside the shields," Kisea said. "And I'm the only one who can without it being read as an attack. However, yes, it would be lovely if you could make sure you're close in case things get messy."

"Close without being detected," Matt mused. "Kian, do you still have Kisea's charm?"

"Of course I do," Kian said, and fished it out of the pouch at his belt, dropping it onto Matt's palm.

Matt regarded it intently for a long moment, then grinned. "I can stretch that to cover us, although not the horses. And since most of it isn't going to be me, I might even be able to get away with no price on it. It's just tweaking the criteria it uses to something other than direct contact. I already know it's extremely broad coverage, not just specific to scrying, it's pretty much complete invisibility to anything but physical senses to the point of reducing incoming telepathic contact, so no one's going to see us magically."

"Can Kisea get through it to you if she needs to yell for help?" Jori asked pointedly.

Matt gave Kisea a questioning look.

The charm did create a sort of fuzzing effect that made it harder to focus, but with the tattered remains of their long-ago rapport, with recent contact, and knowing the feel of his mind as well as she did... *Can you hear me?*

Matt nodded. "I can hear you no problem. Will you be able to if you're distracted by anything else?"

She gave him a rather wan smile. "Of everyone in Caalden, I could find and reach you under any conditions." *And have been so tempted to, at moments when everything seemed hopeless.* "My distance range is no better than it used to be, though. Maybe half a mile or so at most, and even that only with you."

They discussed it a bit longer, but ultimately, there was little they could do to plan when they had such limited information.

Shon and Kian went to saddle the horses, and Kisea packed up the little gear they had out in the primitive camp. Jori stretched and moved closer to Matt, waiting.

"You're doing all right, carrying two?" Matt asked her.

Jori shrugged. "I'll be tired later. It's easier for me than Rose or Butterfly. Do it, already."

Matt laid a hand on her shoulder and said, "Horse."

Jori's shape melted briefly into nothing but a dense electric blur, then reformed as the dapple-grey with her white saddle and hackamore. She shook herself, more like a dog than a horse, and nuzzled Matt; he smiled and scritched around her forelock.

"I am so grateful for you. Kick me if I ever start to take you for granted."

She snorted air through her nose eloquently.

It was simpler to lead the horses back out to the road and mount there, Shon waiting again until after he'd helped Kisea up behind Matt.

She'd been on trotting horses before, and while she'd been told that it was comfortable and natural for the horse and more sustainable than a gallop, she found it a very uncomfortable ride. Apparently, a skilled rider could move with the horse and it was all good all around, but riding behind someone else, that would've been impossible even had she known how.

Jori, however, didn't trot; her gait was smooth, rocking a bit from side to side but lacking the staccato up-and-down extremes of a regular trot. She'd said once that it was a natural gait for some breeds of horses, but she lost interest when asked what breeds and where. She had, always, taken her commitment to help Matt seriously and usually beyond what Kisea was sure he'd expected, and a smoother gait that would make it easier on him just demonstrated that all over again.

Alternating walk and trot with occasional brief gallops, they covered a lot of ground rapidly.

Jori veered off the road at a point where they could, barely, see a second road join this one ahead and down a slope. Screened from the road by a bank of lilacs, she halted.

"The horses will be safe here for a little while," Matt said. "Worst comes to worst, they've both still got tracking charms braided into their tails, so they won't get far."

All four dismounted, Kisea trying her best to pretend to herself that she wasn't feeling deeply apprehensive about this. It was the best way to get Kallima out of whatever nightmare the poor girl was in, and risk to herself didn't matter.

While Shon removed saddles and bridles and tethered the mares to wait comfortably, Kian unstrapped Kisea's pack from his saddle. The frame he'd built, from a wishbone-shaped branch with others lashed to it, actually supported her much-lightened pack quite well.

She hefted it, and sighed. "Too light to be believable, so I guess I'm going to be claiming I was attacked and robbed. Being a properly helpless siren-blood, that wouldn't take a large enough group to worry them." She set it down and unfastened her crystal from around her neck, where it was simply too visible a sign that she was a telepath. Not that telepathy provided much defence for most, but it did normally offer some early warning, and besides, the more helpless she seemed, the better. "Two or three could do it."

"If you weren't with an alasisir companion who was killed, then at least one was alasisir," Shon pointed out. "Those are very fresh marks, and it's probably best not to assume that no one present will be able to recognize that."

Kisea bit her lower lip, considering that. "And we don't want them thinking of mixed-blood groups of any sort. We're a bit far from the border for an alasisir raiding party."

"It isn't impossible," Matt said. "They've happened even farther west."

"All right, then, let's go with that. I don't think I can pretend I was robbed by one person plausibly, and there's no reason only one would decide to take advantage of available prey, so I guess I need another set or two and I need to remember that I've presumably lost a significant amount of blood. How much?"

"Three, interested more in satisfying themselves than your wellbeing either way?" Shon considered that. "Certainly enough for you to feel it. The ones who persistently raid across the disputed lands and into human territory frequently do so because they have far too strong a taste for human blood over meat or animal blood, and causing trouble and stealing property are only excuses."

"That's seriously disturbed," Matt said.

Shon shrugged. "Worse happens, but it's not discussed. Like sex in human society. So, how much? Enough to kill you would be extremely unlikely. Enough for you to feel somewhat light-headed or nauseous or both, possibly somewhat anxious or restless. I'd expect you to be rather pale, breathing more rapidly and shallowly, with a faster heartbeat, and possibly sweating somewhat but cool to the touch."

"I don't intend to let anyone check how fast my heart is beating," Kisea said. "Although it's probably going to be fast anyway. Most of the rest I can fake. Being pale, not so much, but I'm in the sun a lot and it would show less, and unless there's any alasisir-blood in there, the light isn't likely to be enough for it to be obvious. That should actually make me look even more harmless. Not just one woman alone, but one who's unwell." She shrugged, tossed her braid back behind her shoulder, crossed the couple of steps to Shon, and slid a hand around the back of his neck to pull him in reach for a kiss. *Well?* she prompted him, silently.

She felt him kiss the side of her throat, not far from the marks Kian had left there the previous night, which felt like forever ago, and helpfully tilted her head, one hand still holding him. She did feel a little bad about putting him in that position, since alasisir culture tended to associate blood with intimacy—in fact, very much the way human culture viewed sex. About the best she could do, as she felt the familiar nudge of teeth just before the two needle-sharp ones broke skin, was give him her own genuine affection for him and her relief that he was content with his very changed life.

But then, his surface emotions screamed that right now, social taboos were a far lower priority

for him than her safety and Kallima's.

She thought he didn't actually take any blood at all, or maybe barely enough to make sure the bite was going to look real.

She stole another kiss when he raised his head. "Assuming we all live through this, let's see if we can make time to do that again, properly, as soon as possible."

"Sounds fun."

Some part of her mind, a part that had grown up in a rural human environment and accepted human values, gasped in shock, appalled that she'd even think, let alone say, such a thing with Kian and Matt right there. She dismissed it as stupid. All three knew exactly what her relationship with each of them was, and she wasn't human and belonged to no one, she was a siren and who she had sex with was her own choice.

Besides, Kian looked mostly amused and Matt only faintly wistful.

She turned to Matt, draped both arms around his neck, and kissed him, putting behind it every bit of almost a decade of fiercely missing him. Passion and hunger, but it had always been far more than that. He hugged her close, returned it eagerly.

"I don't think there's ever been a day I haven't missed you even when I was furious at you," she whispered.

"Likewise, only without the being furious part. Mostly. You're about to do something stupid and reckless."

"I'm going to do exactly what we talked about. That's just in case we've missed something and things get messy." She freed one hand, caught his, and pressed her crystal into it. "Hold onto that for me. Now, are going to bite me or not?"

"That's only a very small part of what I *want* to do with you," he grumbled.

Always different, or maybe to make sure it was more visible, or his way of staking a claim... there could be any number of reasons why he chose to mark the other side of her throat.

She could still taste her own blood when he kissed her; with his hand cupped around her cheek, he drew back enough to meet her eyes.

"I mean it. Don't do anything stupid. You dying is not a useful solution."

It's the only possible solution.

"Of course not. You worry too much." She scooped up her pack and settled it in place with the ease of practice, stole a quick kiss from Kian to keep from leaving him out, and headed for the road.

And if a few tears escaped to streak her cheeks, well, there was no one close enough to see them now.

* * *

Behind her, Matt muttered a curse.

"I don't think she has any intention of living through this. She doesn't believe me, and there hasn't been time to explain."

"That's asking an unreasonable amount, after she's had years of believing that there is no way things can be different," Shon said. "Hope is a frightening thing when you have none. More frightening than death, by far."

"So we make sure she and Kalli are both safe," Kian said, settling his quiver in place and strapping the leather bracer on his arm to protect against the bowstring. He laid a hand on Jori's shoulder. "Hawk."

Jori's form dissolved, coalesced as a red-tailed hawk; he offered his leather-protected arm for her to sidle onto so he could toss her upwards.

Kian gave his bow a cursory examination, checking the string; that bow was among the best in existence, laminated of multiple kinds of wood to make best use of their varying properties. Though

bow was the chosen weapon of maybe twice as many women as men, thus often and illogically associated with women, Kian's had a heavier draw than most women could manage. Matt had long ago added a bit of magical waterproofing to protect bow and string from moisture, about all he could usefully do.

Shon retrieved his own weapon from his gear. Kian's father, who had originally learned sword-play but abandoned it for staff after moving to the Village, had declared Shon too gifted a swordsman to do the same, yet a normal sword both made him a visible target and was impractical on the road. Alina and her brothers and husband had conspired to find an alternative, and had found one in a form that was uncommon but did have its enthusiasts within the road culture in particular. Shon had taken to it with alacrity and finesse.

It *looked* like a fairly standard metal-bound hawthorn staff, a little shorter than most but its more notable peculiarity being an oval metal disc embedded into it a foot or so from one end. However, it hid a single-edged inch-wide blade the length of Shon's arm, the best and strongest steel Lord Jordan had been able to arrange. Matt would, honestly, not have wanted to be up against him with it, blade in one hand and the staff-scabbard in the other, even with Kian's help and all his own magic.

Matt fastened the crystal around his own throat, by far the safest place for it; it resonated like his Shimai, something that tended to happen after heavy use. He wasn't a master at staff, but he picked up Kian's anyway, since he'd had more motivation than many sorcerers to learn to defend himself in other ways. His cloak was hardly subtle, but the moment of hesitation as someone realized they were facing a sorcerer was sometimes useful; he pulled it on, but dark side out.

Kallima in danger, certainly scared and possibly hurt, was bad enough.

That his Shimai, who had been alone when he'd met her and alone since everything had gone horribly wrong and who was hiding the deep scars behind those green eyes much less well than she thought, was walking into the situation believing that it was a choice between her own safety or his, made it far worse.

He cupped the onyx charm in one hand, the charm his beloved had gotten somewhere and somehow that probably didn't bear thinking about, and had hidden inside her own flesh, all in fear of being tracked by a sorcerer—which mostly meant by him. He'd have preferred to turn it into a small pile of black dust.

Instead, because it might let him be close enough to help both women, he focused on it, working himself into the spell on it, and then changing one small part of that. Now, rather than protecting what it was touching, or even a small area which might be suspicious if someone noticed, it would specifically protect the three related alasir-blood who had all tasted the blood this had been in contact with for so long. The world around them would look the way it was, but they would be missing from it.

"Let's go."

12

At the top of a small rise from which she could see glimpses of the river, though not yet of the ferry, Kisea stopped to make a few small adjustments. She stripped off her tunic and shoved it in her pack, and unhooked her water-skin. A bit of water splashed into her palms, used to streak her hair and make sure a few tendrils hung down damp and lank, and to add wet areas to her chemise and

bodice that should pass for sweat, should help her story. The latter she re-laced to emphasize her curves as much as possible—pretty young siren-blood, weak from blood-loss, no telepath crystal around her neck, absolutely harmless and probably grateful for any kindness, and everyone knew how sirens showed gratitude.

If seducing one or more inside looked like the best option, she'd take it. The three cousins and Jori had failed to notice she'd left something out while discussing how she could defend herself: she was, before all else, half siren. While she couldn't drive men into enough of a frenzy to cause hearts to fail, she could certainly make brains do so under the right conditions. She rather suspected at least one would have tried to forbid her to do so, if she'd mentioned it, which would be endearing if pointless.

She replaced her water-skin, shouldered her pack again, and resumed walking.

The ferry station looked like they generally did: just a sturdy wooden cottage, this one a bit larger than average but otherwise unremarkable. Usually the inside was a single room with a loft under the peaked roof for the ferryman and his family, if any, to sleep. A shed closer to the water offered shelter for those waiting on this side as well as, probably, repair and maintenance tools; she could just make out a similar structure on the far side. A rope was strung between the two buildings, attached to a brass bell on the outside of the nearer building, a way for travellers from the far side to announce their presence, and was probably attached to a matching bell on the far side in case he was over there when someone on this side wished to cross. The kitchen garden near the house looked a bit untended and overgrown, but that could happen for any number of reasons.

She added a bit more of a stumble to her step, and hunched more as though the weight even of her stripped pack felt like a lot, head down, pretending to be unaware of the ferry crossing until she was close to the water.

"Hoy, girl!" someone hailed her roughly in human.

She turned, staggered slightly, and blinked at the man striding towards her. Could be the ferryman: he had the visible upper-body strength and was wearing practical woollen work clothes, and he was definitely human.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"I... I suppose I need to cross the river. But I don't have any money left, they took it all..."

"They, who?" He eyed her suspiciously, but less aggressively.

"Alasir raiders, three of them." She touched her throat, winced. "They took a lot of my gear and... attacked me." Humans were typically rather uncomfortable with the idea of being a food source, and tried to talk around it. Like that changed anything. "Last night. I... oh, I'm tired. Is there anywhere I could sleep overnight?"

The look he gave her was frankly appraising, but she pretended not to notice, and kept her expression hopeful and a bit vague.

"I have some friends here just now, but I think we can arrange to make space for a pretty little siren in distress."

Right. I've just been elected as the entertainment. They are, I hope, keeping their hands off Kallima, since that might make her less valuable, but one lone siren-blood has no value except to amuse them.

"Where are you headed?" he asked, taking her arm to steer her towards the house.

"My man threw me out. My half-sister lives in..." *Where? Not anywhere specifically Jordan, so the capital, then.* "... in Calton, I'm trying to get to her. She told me she could get me a job with her."

Let him wonder, siren half or human half. I know there are siren-blood making a good living in fullblood towns selling sex and related sorts of things.

"Maybe you just need to find a man who can appreciate you."

"I thought I had," she sighed.

Far overhead, she saw a hawk circling lazily. Normal behaviour for a hawk, especially with the amount of open ground in the immediate area, but she didn't doubt for an instant that it was Jori back in hawk-form, watching her as the ferryman escorted her to the door of the cottage.

Those shields were extremely comprehensive ones: even a step outside, she could sense no one inside. He opened the door, waved her in, and she smiled at him and stepped across the threshold.

People.

She blinked, pushed aside the overwhelming sense of being suddenly among a substantial group. In a typical cottage room, with hearth and table and chairs, foodstuffs hanging from beams mainly in one corner, she could see only two men besides the ferryman. Not a crowd, and no sign of Kallima.

Without knowing whether there was a telepath present, she dared not reach out to check, but she could loosen her shields a little more and let information trickle in passively. A pulsing tangle of fear and discomfort with a thread of anger, that had to be Kallima, but where was she? Where were the others she could sense? Not many could possibly lurk in the loft, and she heard no motion.

Both men fit Jori's description, men in quilted armour, a staff leaning against the wall in reach of each. Both clearly human, in their prime but perhaps edging towards the end of it.

"What are you doing?" demanded one.

"She's looking for a place to sleep," the ferryman said. "She got attacked by alasir raiders, looks like she's short a lot of blood. She's harmless."

Helpless, you mean. But be careful not to spook the bunny too fast. All the tears and begging and struggling is just so inconvenient.

Why does it feel sometimes like the entire male population of the North is interested mainly in getting me out of my trousers and themselves between my legs?

Oh, right, I'm half siren.

Both fighters studied her narrowly; she looked at the floor, kept herself physically drawn in as tightly as she could, but raised her eyes just enough to give them a tentative smile. *None of my business why a fighter's making the decisions in a cottage that presumably belongs to the ferryman...*

"Give her some food," the one that had already spoken said finally. "Come have a seat. We certainly can't just leave you to sleep outside."

She let her smile widen, relieved. "Thank you so much."

The ferryman guided her to a chair, helped her drop her pack, and left her to sit down while he fetched a wooden bowl and filled it from the pot hanging at the hearth. She groped for her spoon in the side of her pack, deliberately clumsily, found it and dropped it.

As her fingers brushed the floor, she realized where at least most of the others she could feel were: underneath.

She scooped up her spoon with a stammered apology, and dug into the food. Inevitably, pottage, with more than passing acquaintance with meat. Well, fish, mostly.

She had to repeat her story, and elaborate on it, while she ate, but nothing she sensed suggested any suspicion; very early on, they discarded the idea that she was anything but what she looked like, and their interest turned to her potential as entertainment. While her inner senses fed her tatters and fragments of information, she spun a story. Her husband had tired of her and thrown her out; she hinted that perhaps it was her excessive fondness for sex that had finally disgusted him, but danced around it as carefully as she would if she were modestly ashamed. She had a half-sister who worked in Calton as a barmaid and had promised to find her a job if she ever needed one. Delicately, she dropped a hint that she was much less than half siren, and sighed about how much better off she'd be if she had telepath gifts along with her red hair.

Twelve, in total, she decided finally, most below but there was a sense of presence in the loft too.

More worryingly, two felt like sorcerers. Though she doubted there was a sorcerer alive Matt couldn't beat one-on-one or even two-on-one, it would leave him tied up with that. It made sense, if they'd done any research at all before doing this, since if anyone was a threat to their plot, it was Matt. There'd been sorcerers who resented Matt even when he was in the middle of learning to use his gift, and she was sure there must be more, and more venomous, now.

Carefully, she relaxed the shields she kept up against siren projection and let that begin to leak through. It wasn't hard at all to ramp up her feeling of being under intense pressure and in serious danger: she only had to let herself contemplate how many ways this could go horribly wrong. She felt the subtle change in her voice that went with siren fascination; she couldn't tell directly whether the pheromone effect was active, but judging by the increasingly intent attention all three paid to her, it almost certainly was. Inner senses, even passively, noted rising arousal, and the talkative one was working at establishing himself as alpha, presumably to make it clear that she was his either first or exclusively.

Motion in the loft, footsteps on the steep ladder-like stairs, and she turned to look.

Oops.

The siren strode across the floor and slapped her across the face, then stood glaring down at her, arms crossed.

It was, as usual with siren-blood, impossible to judge her age clearly; she'd reached full maturity and there was no silver in her hair, but that left a broad window. Those clothes cost more than Kisea saw in ready coin in several years: a full-circle skirt that shaded from dark greenish-blue at the top to a paler tint at the bottom, a brocade bodice that matched in colour, over a perfectly-tailored blouse of bleached linen embroidered with an elaborate sinuous blue-green design. Fiery-red hair was gathered into two ribbon-threaded braids coiled into a crown, rather than the more modest net, but who expected modesty from sirens?

She looked drastically out of place in an environment like this: a high-level telepath with a well-paid job or some very rich man's kept woman, or possibly an uncommonly wealthy and ostentatious woman from a mixed community.

"Stop it now," she snarled at Kisea.

"Stop... stop what? Oh! Was I...?" Kisea widened her eyes, buried her face in her hands. "Oh no, I didn't mean..." She hunched inwards, making herself as small as she could. Already emotionally on edge for almost a full day, heart aching with the certainty of what came after Kallima was safe, it was all too easy to burst into tears. "I'm sorry," she whimpered.

She felt the other siren's mind against hers, and braced herself. One slip now could give everything away.

I don't care how strong you are, you are no match for me. My gift might be the bane of my life, but I can damned well make sure that it means Kallima gets out of this building safely.

She kept her shields loose, sending a low-level projection of shame and fear, and watched the other siren.

She had a sure and practised touch, Kisea had to admit. In fact, she was good enough to catch the currents underneath that didn't match.

Before she could draw back, Kisea grabbed hold of her.

"Surprise," she said sweetly. "You don't need that memory, we're going to make a little change to it, just... like... that." She erased the heartbeats of time in which the other siren had realized Kisea was pretending, substituted a conviction that she'd found nothing inconsistent under the surface. "You know I'm not a telepath, you are quite certain of that, because if I was, you'd have seen some trace of it. There was absolutely nothing except the typical low-level siren projection, and even that isn't very strong. Probably I'm only a quarter or an eighth siren, and not one of the strong ones,

basically just a human with a high sex drive and just enough siren fascination to make men like me. That's all.* In images, words, bits of thought, she wove the information into a natural conclusion.

The other siren made a dismissive gesture and turned away. "Stupid little bitch. Keep pulling that trick here and you'll get what you ask for. Go ahead, keep her to play with, she'll probably love it. She's the kind that make people think the rest of us are all ripe fruit to pick." The hard soles of her narrow-toed boots thumped against the stairs back up to the loft.

If the two sorcerers are in case Matt shows up... the siren's not here primarily as a telepath, she's here to make sure that every male wanting to rescue Kallima gets fatally distracted.

But siren fascination isn't selective. She'd catch her own allies.

Oh gods. I need to see what's downstairs, I need to see what she's planning, but I can't get caught doing it.

The ferryman brought her a mug of weak bland ale to sip while she fought her sobs back under control and calmed down, no longer under the glower of the other siren.

"Trinai's like that," the beta fighter murmured. "Don't mind her. She's not really going to hurt you." In flagrant contradiction to Kisea's aching cheek. "You can stay here overnight."

"And if you don't have very much control, well, we can live with that," the ferryman said. "We'll forgive you."

Oh, I bet you will.

She murmured broken thanks, clutching the mug with shaking hands.

She needed an opening to do some proper telepathic work, without anyone wondering why she was so distracted. The excuse, given her professed state of weakness, offered itself readily.

She blinked rapidly a couple of times, gazing into the mug, and tried to stifle an enormous yawn. Hastily, she stammered apologies and protests that it wasn't the company.

"Take a nap," the alpha fighter said abruptly, standing up. "Find her a blanket. Trinai's claimed the loft, but you can sleep by the hearth."

"Oh, I... well, I don't like feeling too tired to pay attention, but..." Stammering uncertainly, she let the ferryman find her a couple of blankets and even a roll of unidentified fabric she could use as a pillow.

All three had every intention of sex with her, willing or otherwise, but at least they were patient enough to wait a little, maybe with the intention of having their new toy last a bit longer.

She curled up on the hard wooden floor between the two less-than-clean blankets and closed her eyes, letting her breathing slow, her body gradually relax, to all appearances asleep.

And now, you have a controller loose in your hidey-hole, one that you don't suspect at all. Big mistake.

Cautiously, she chanced snaking an exploratory touch outwards, ready to draw back instantly if she encountered another telepath beyond Trinai.

She didn't, but the minds she found were, universally, female. Including the sorcerers.

If they're all strictly heterosexual, then any fascination Trinai throws would have very little effect on them. Only these three would really be slowed down by it.

And so would Matt and his cousins.

Which, at a crucial moment, could be lethal.

Protective anger stirred. *You can't have them!*

Wait. Being ready for a potential threat from your target's ridiculously powerful sorcerer cousin is one thing, but something about this set-up smells funny. It's too elaborate.

One mind she knew she could reach with minimal noise for any other telepath to pick up, and she needed to. Right now.

Matt!

He was much less than half a mile away, for the connection to snap into place that strongly, as he acknowledged it.

Do not, under any circumstances, come near this building unless I tell you to.

What? But...

I'm still looking for information, but there's something not right about this. Six fighters in the basement guarding Kalli all being female might be just to make sure no one rapes her, but two sorceresses and a high-level siren telepath also all being female is odd. They're in the loft. I think there's a chance this is designed specifically for you and your known bodyguard. I'm not sure how the two male fighters and the ferryman fit in, they're on the main floor. I need to find out exactly what's happening here so the three of you don't walk right into a trap. The very thought stirred protective anger. *You can't have them.*

If you can get the siren out of the picture...

I will, but I'm going to have to do it carefully. She's strong and smart and very good, she's going to catch me if I push it. Kalli's still vulnerable, there are six fighters who could kill her before I can possibly do anything. I need you to stay right where you are. I really need to know you aren't going to anything until I tell you it's all clear. She heard the anger sneak into her mindvoice, twisting it into an almost animal snarl. *I'm not letting this condescending nose-in-the-air overdressed bitch and her friends have any of you.*

Be careful. Please. I want you out of this in one piece so we can get married.

What? Which would do what, other than making you responsible for all my presumed crimes?

Exactly. He sounded rather pleased with himself.

She started to tell him he was insane, but paused. It was, just barely, possible that the Assembly might consider it. Which didn't make it less insane, because there were a host of consequences to consider, but did mean that it wasn't entirely impossible there was a way out of the tangle. Shon, who probably knew more about law and politics both than her and Matt combined, obviously thought it had a chance of success.

And bringing it up now, suddenly, meant he knew she'd intended to not live through this.

I'll make sure I live long enough to think about it and actually answer. I promise.

We're so close that we can see the building. Kian could hit the next person to step out the door from here. Relief and reassurance, twined together, coloured it vividly. *You call, we're there, but we won't move one step closer or do anything to give away our presence until then.*

Far too many men she'd met would have assumed that they knew better and charged in whenever they thought it was the right time or they felt they'd waited long enough. She had, however, met Matt's mother, and knew Matt loved and respected her, and the thought had never in Matt's life crossed his mind that being female meant being less competent. She doubted it had ever crossed Kian's, either. If he said they'd wait, she could count on that.

She had to, because if they did anything to trigger suspicion, she and Kallima were probably both dead.

The first priority was to get Kallima out of this building. Once Trinai was no longer a factor and Kallima was safe, she was sure sorcerer and huntsman and swordsman and stormhawk could deal with the remainder.

In the loft, with Trinai, were two sparkling presences that were sorcerers, one of which had the low steady rhythm of sleep. Trinai, from the impressions Kisea got, was sitting with her legs crossed and her back straight—searching, Kisea decided after observing her psychic activity for a moment. Scanning the immediate area for intrusive minds.

The onyx charm worked moderately well against telepathic scans, but just in case, Kisea eased back into Trinai's mind. From there, she neatly brushed away even the faintest of traces of three

minds lurking outside, and created a psychic image of that area being vacant no matter how many times Trinai looked.

If she tried to force something that would make Trinai question her own actions, she was going to have a battle on her hands; the other siren was too observant, too good a telepath, to fail to notice that something untoward was happening. Kisea would win, but it could take a lot more time and tire her badly.

Tentatively, she dropped into the flow of Trinai's thoughts fleeting ideas that could be easily dismissed, and finally hit on material she could build on.

They've got that little tart downstairs all comfortable by the fire to rest. She's going to need it, they're going to screw out what brains she has, but she gets to rest and I'm sitting here awake and scanning an empty forest. They could show up any time, and it's more likely to be in the deep part of the night when they can see better, and I need to be alert. Although it doesn't really take that much concentration to turn male brains into mush. It does take some energy, though, to do it properly against resistance. It's early evening now, I can sleep for a little while and then I'll be more alert and stronger when night comes. I don't even need to guard against the men, they're too distracted with their clawless fangless little toy to go after someone who can defend herself.

"I'm going to sleep for an hour or two," Trinai said abruptly. "I'll be no use when they come if I'm tired, and I'm not sensing anyone for quite a long way. Have you?"

"Two horses alone in the woods just past the crossroads," the alert sorceress said shortly. "I'm trying to find who they belong to."

Oops.

Kisea switched focus from Trinai's mind to the sorceress', which was actually easier to work in since the sorceress couldn't directly sense her—but she might nonetheless question any suddenly conflicting impulses. Delicately, she created an image of two travellers she'd met long ago, a married pair, who did in fact have horses, and inserted them into the sorceress' mental image so that she saw it appear in the shallow silver bowl of water on the floor in front of her.

"Never mind, it's a human man, probably Southern blood to be that blonde, and a human woman, both dressed for the road, setting up camp for the night. I suppose they prefer some privacy over asking for space here, which is just as well. They're scouting around separately, easy to miss. Go ahead and sleep. I'm watching, and I'll wake Melienne to take over soon."

Hm, Melienne's a high alasir form, not the slurred ending mixed-bloods usually use. I wonder if she's actually full alasir. It isn't impossible for fullbloods to be extremely strong sorcerers, just less likely.

Kisea watched in satisfaction while Trinai gradually fell asleep—with just a little help. Unfortunately, she did have a variety of mental defences that snapped into place as she lost consciousness, something stronger telepaths frequently developed to prevent exactly what Kisea had hoped to do: slipping into her mind like a thief.

Like most telepaths, though, who depended on their gift the way they depended on their eyes and ears, she didn't close herself off entirely. Doing that would be like sleeping inside a box with a blindfold on and ears stopped up. One level of her mind continued to monitor her surroundings, passively and all but invisibly unless someone was watching for and hoping for exactly that. Kisea couldn't get inside that way, but she could use it to wrap Trinai in a bubble of ever-deepening sleep, spinning *drowsy lazy safe* around her.

She couldn't be absolutely sure Trinai wouldn't wake up under sufficient stimulus, but it would take a lot, and Kisea poking around in other minds wasn't going to do it.

Who was the next most urgent threat? She wouldn't be able to put eleven more people to sleep before she was too drained to do more, though if she continued to be able to do it by stealth with no direct resistance, it would help. Five more? Six?

Or would it be more effective to dominate one totally and work through her? One of the sorceresses, maybe?

She needed to know exactly what the situation was downstairs.

She sought out Kallima's mind, and whispered, *Don't react, sweetheart, but you aren't alone any more.*

She felt Kallima start physically, but she was clever enough that when one of the fighters glanced at her, she muttered resentfully, "A bug ran over my hand."

Shh. I know, it's a surprise. You're going to be okay.

Who...? The thought formed, quite clearly, and unafraid of the contact. But then, Kallima's father was, she gathered, a respectably strong telepath in his own right—and her aunt was Alina Jordan.

Shimai. *No point confusing her with another name right now.*

Shi... but you've been missing for years!

Stories later. We need to get you out of here.

*Where are you? I think they *want* Matt to come, they talk in circles a lot but I've been listening to everything I can.*

Matt and Shon and Kian are close but they're safe, and I'm not going to let them get caught in a trap, I promise. The thought of Trinai enthralled *her* trio of alasir-blood while her minions and allies killed them gave Kisea another anger-fed surge of adrenaline. *Mine. Hands off.* *I need to see what's going on down there. Can I borrow your eyes and ears? It won't hurt if you don't fight me, but it might feel strange.*

You can do anything you want, if it'll get me out of here without my family getting hurt!

Kisea stretched farther, found the part of Kallima's mind processing images, the part processing sound, and connected herself to both.

As cellars went, there was more headroom than she'd expect. Wooden beams supporting the ceiling, which was the floor of the cottage. The walls were only bare earth, though, pounded hard into a solid dense mass, and the floor likewise, so each pillar supporting the ceiling beams had a stone foundation. It was almost as large as the cottage, and fairly brightly lit by fist-sized glowing spheres of light spaced out as necessary to dispel the gloom. A ladder led upwards to a broken square outline, presumably a trap door to the cottage above. Six rough wooden cots, which would at least get the fighters up off the probably damp and insect-inhabited floor, were arranged along the walls. Around a table four female fighters, all human or close to it, all in padded leather jerkins but the quality varied, were playing a game with dice. Two more women, visibly alasir-blood, were motionless on cots, so presumably they slept in shifts.

They would've done better to have at least one more sorcerer so they could rest more, and at least a second siren telepath. But maybe you couldn't find any others willing to go along with this, hm?

Ten women on the premises, and probably all of them off-limits or at least more assertive and self-possessed than she suspected these men cared for, must be frustrating. No wonder they were so eager to have her around. Would any of them, Kallima aside, care if a hapless siren-blood was raped right in front of them? Odds were against it making any difference, even if one or two voiced an objection.

Uncharacteristically, she saw six staves along with two bows and quivers. Well, it was no more unheard-of for women to learn staff than for men to learn bow, just less common, and even less so outside of the mixed-blood community. It certainly made more sense under the circumstances.

More importantly, Kallima was confined—a heavy-looking chain ran towards her neck from a bolt in a stone that she couldn't possibly move. Kisea added tactile sensation to sight and sound, and decided it was a metal collar, one that clinked every time Kallima moved. She was still dressed, and

had a bucket to use as a chamberpot; Kisea saw a half-full wooden bowl of, probably, the same fishy pottage Kisea had eaten and an empty mug, so they were feeding her, but sensation included internal messages and Kallima's digestive tract was not dealing comfortably with the abrupt change in diet.

Because it was faster, she borrowed Kallima's right hand long enough to explore the collar by touch. Just a metal band with rings in the ends, the chain welded to it, and a padlock through the rings holding it closed.

That felt odd, Kallima observed, unfazed.

Sorry. I promise, I will never do you any harm, no matter what, and I'm going to make sure you're safe. But things might get a bit peculiar.

Telepaths can't usually do things like that.

No, not usually. I'm a controller. That's why I ran away, I was scared.

She felt Kallima consider that, then shrug. *Matt knows?*

Yes.

Matt wouldn't love you like I know he still does if you were a bad person. I trust you a lot more than I trust the people who brought me here and want to hurt my family. A brief flash of humour.

Besides, I'm used to peculiar, I've known Matt my whole life.

Good girl. Keep thinking that way. This is going to be over very soon now, I'm just working out the best way.

All right. I can't do much chained up, but if I can, I'm ready.

Sensible, with no lady-like hysterics. Kallima had grown up wonderfully in the past decade, maybe under the influence of her formidable aunts in the Village.

Sensation that confused Kisea briefly, it wasn't Kallima's body, it was her own... a rough male hand stroking her arm, then her throat where the bite-marks showed.

Kisea dropped the connection with Kallima, and returned her attention to her own body.

The ferryman had apparently decided he'd waited long enough. Even as she opened her eyes, he leaned down to press his mouth over hers, fumbling at the laces of her bodice.

Bad breath. And a beard. Maybe that's part of the appeal of alasis-blood, no scratchy facial hair, and no matter who says what about carnivore breath, it's better than stale ale and no attempt at keeping teeth clean.

So, do I fight, or just let them wear themselves out and, with any luck, fall asleep afterwards?

Fighting could draw attention. I need to keep an eye on the sorceresses and make sure they keep seeing people to match Rose and Butterfly.

She sighed to herself, but made a questioning sleepy sound, feigning drowsy confusion.

"The other two are out doing a quick check on the area," he murmured. "Let's have a little fun."

She giggled, reached up to wrap both arms around his neck, pausing just long enough to undo her bodice laces herself before he could break them. "All right."

Matt! Both fighters are out scouting!

I know, we can see them. I can hide us.

Kalli's all right, I told her we're here. Basement, they've got a collar on her chained to a rock. I haven't seen the keys. Can you use me as a bridge inside to find them?

Yes.

Busy, will get back to you in a minute.

Does being bored and disgusted count as enough stress to start the pheromones again? She cooed happy encouragement in his ear, felt the shift in her voice at least, and projected arousal as strongly as she could. She helped him untie her trousers and jerk them off, followed by her drawers, and let her unfastened bodice slide off her shoulders out of her way.

At least siren physiology meant that any suggestion of sex was promptly accompanied by some degree of physical response: she wasn't dry when he thrust inside her, though it still made her grunt in mild pain.

Instead of letting her mind go somewhere else, she used every trick she knew to make sure he finished as quickly as possible.

She made a sulky sound of disappointment as he began to soften and slide out of her.

"It's been too long," he grumbled. "But I'll want another taste of that soon."

"Any time," she purred.

The door made them both twist around.

The alpha fighter's face clouded as he strode across the room. "Who said you could have her?"

"I brought her in," the ferryman protested.

"I'm in charge," the alpha fighter snarled.

"I get a say in this too," the beta fighter said angrily. "I thought we were going to share her."

Hm, this is promising. Fighting each other, with very little help from me.

"Oh, please, don't fight," she entreated them. "You're all wonderful, there's no way I could choose..."

Which, of course, only fed the fires.

She drew herself back against the wall, to stay out of the way as the alpha fighter slung a punch at the beta one.

Just to make sure it continued, she thought about as many grim outcomes to all this as she could, everything that could go wrong, to ramp up her stress level as much as possible. This kind of projection took little effort, really, and throwing in pleas to stop provided the vocal aspect nicely.

It was hard not to feel a certain amount of glee, watching them thump on each other with increasing savagery.

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"Remind me to castrate the ferryman," Matt muttered. "Painfully."

"She can handle herself," Kian said. "Keep your attention where it belongs."

"I am. Mostly. It's hard not to get glimpses while I'm scanning the whole building with her as my anchor."

The connection with Shimai that she'd opened up to him was strong enough to give him a clear doorway into the heavily shielded cottage, right past sorcery-created traps that were watching for any attempt to probe for weaknesses.

As much as he wanted to flay the ferryman's hide off in one blast of icy magical fire, he knew now exactly what sirens faced even when they had relatively sheltered lives, and his beloved's life had never been that; he had to trust that she knew what she was doing and was making her own choices about what she could tolerate to make this work.

With that doorway in, he could use shared blood and familiarity to find Kallima, which led him to the metal collar, and from there he could search for the other metal that matched it via the powerful connection linking them. Lock and key were so perfect an example of that law that they were commonly used for early lessons.

He found the key in the loft, hanging on a nail driven into the side of a slanted beam.

He wrapped his mind around it and gave the world a little twist, changing one detail, just the

location of a single piece of worked iron, dropping it down twenty feet or so and nudging it maybe five feet to the west. That was all, such a trivial alteration to the world.

He wasn't a strong enough telepath to talk to his cousin, but he saw her spot the key's appearance instantly. Casually, she shifted position, hiding it under a fold of her badly-soiled divided riding skirt. (What was his sensible cousin doing in a riding skirt instead of the scandalous but practical trousers she generally wore for anything involving horses? It must have been one of the more conventional highborn girls she'd been riding with.) She was too smart to grab it and immediately start fumbling with the lock, with her jailors right there, but at least now she had it. That was a good place to start.

He'd promised to stay away, and he would, but was there something he could do from here that would be subtle and not arouse immediate suspicion? After all, getting Kallima past her guards was going to be difficult: only a trap door for access, which would leave anyone going downwards entirely vulnerable while doing so, and there was no way for Kian to possibly get a shot at any of the guards. Which meant needing to drive them up out of that cellar. They were probably not going to go willingly, since they didn't have Kallima's key and presumably were supposed to keep an eye on her, but there must be a way.

The cottage was built no more than fifty feet from the river's edge.

He grinned to himself. Kallima would forgive him, under the circumstances, especially if it gave her a chance to get that collar off and get out of the cellar herself.

He dug downwards, seeking the water table. The cottage was on a rise, but the level of the water in the ground wasn't all that far below the floor of the cellar. There were multiple ways he could do this. A more traditional sorcerer would forcibly channel water upwards in an eruption that would form a temporary cold-water geyser, or possibly create a point of attraction in the cellar that would draw water towards it. The former would be a dead giveaway, and the latter could be readily identified by another sorcerer and might trigger alarms.

Instead, he spread his awareness farther, testing the structures of the ground, where there was soil, where there was rock, and how the water moved among them.

Then he created waterproof shields, here and here and there, that would block the natural flow and cause the water to seek out new paths. Unable to reach the river so easily, it began to build up beneath the cellar floor. He added more barriers, channelling more water into the limited area he was creating, and reinforced the ones that were holding it back from running down towards the river. It rather pleased him that once they dissolved, everything would be able to go back to the way it should be with no permanent damage, only a brief disturbance. An elegant solution, requiring much less power than a more traditional approach and causing less disruption, but he expected the result to be dramatic.

The pounded-earth floor of the cellar started to show damp areas where water was seeping through, and before much longer, the damp areas were shallow puddles.

Kallima, sitting on the floor, was the first one aware of it. He saw her look thoughtfully at the nearest puddle, reach out to probe it with a finger; the floor was too hard-packed to turn spongy easily, but judging by her expression, something suggested to her that it was more significant than it seemed superficially. Just a hint of a smile crossed her face, under the streaks of dirt and tears.

She knows I'm doing something.

And she knows Shimai's with her.

And she knows there are a lot of people involved and we have a lot to do, which means she'll probably come up with a way to use the water and the key to get herself out of that cellar, if I know Kalli.

"Kalli has the key, she hid it," he reported to his cousins, careful to keep enough magic just

active enough to postpone any prices—if he couldn't function, then very probably, his cousins and his beloved would all die. “I've got something set up that's going to gradually make the cellar a very wet place to be. It will probably flood fairly deep, actually.”

“Good,” Shon said. “Bring them out where we can reach them.”

“That's the idea. But we still have a pair of sorceresses and a couple of other fighters to consider, even if the telepath's safely asleep.”

“We have a new problem,” Kian said, positioned where he could keep watch on the building easily. “A small river flatboat just docked. Two people, one staying with the boat. The other is male, and certainly siren, and I think I see a crystal. Going towards the cottage. I could take him, but it'll announce that we're here. As soon as no one will notice, I'll take the one at the boat.” That was one reason they'd chosen this as a place to lurk: the river's edge lay within the best range of Kian and his bow, some three hundred yards.

“Can you reach Kisea to warn her?” Shon demanded.

Matt shook his head, more in uncertainty than negation. “I can try, but she's distracted, I'm not very strong, and drawing attention is going to be too dangerous to be worth the warning.”

He turned his attention inwards again, gathering magic and his extremely limited telepathy to reach back through the shields along the same pathway.

A cautious attempt at making contact with Shimai failed: she didn't notice, too busy trying to stay out of the way while the ferryman and the two fighters fought, the no-holds-barred bare-handed struggle of animals competing for a mate. All three were bruised and battered, but by this point were much too far gone in both fury and lust to think about what they were doing.

Exactly what the siren telepath who was now asleep had intended for him and his cousins, actually, but she was no match for his brave brilliant Shimai.

The cellar, he noticed, now had a definite layer of water across the entire floor, creeping higher. Kallima was working herself up into full-blown aristocratic hysterics, swearing vehemently that her father had lost the entire contents of a cellar in a river-side property when the water level had begun to rise this way, that much of the ground-floor contents had been damaged because the water reached up through the floor, and alternately pleading and demanding that they not leave her chained here to drown. One snapped at her to settle down, but all four that were awake looked uneasy, and the sleeping pair were stirring in response to the noise. If she could panic them into flight, she could unlock herself and follow, and once out of the cellar, well... she was much less helpless than the typical gently-reared highborn maiden.

Sudden change in the rhythms above, and he checked quickly.

Melienne?

Ursula?

What are those two doing involved in this? Together? And what possible reason could they have for risking their lives and breaking their Oaths in order to make demands on one human Lord, especially when Melienne isn't human at all?

Shimai's right. There's something more going on here than we thought.

“The two sorceresses,” he said, “I know them. One human, one alaisir, Ursula and Melienne, both fullblood, from secondary branches of highborn families, and both with independent and substantial incomes. I'm pretty sure they don't like each other. And they're breaking the Oath by being involved in this.”

“I recognize those names,” Kian said. “Haven't you had incidents with both?”

“Yes, but nothing big. A servant tripped and spilled wine on Melienne at a formal event at the College, she was going to retaliate hugely out of proportion and I stopped her because no one else was going to.”

"Thus causing her to lose face, not only from the initial embarrassment but from being thwarted," Shon said with a sigh. "Do not, ever, cause a highborn alasis woman to lose face publicly. They take it very deeply personally. What about the other?"

"I don't remember. It probably wasn't anything important. Does it matter?"

"Quite possibly, she thinks it was important," Shon said grimly. "I think Kisea is right, and this is not what it seems. Do you know the telepath?"

He checked. "Trinai? Her father's the third son of Lord, um, Hamond I think, her mother's half siren and was theoretically his secretary and personal relay telepath at the time. Trinai managed to trade on blood connections and being an excellent telepath to get a place in the current Lord's household. I did catch her multiple times playing nasty siren mind-games, which aren't technically breaking her Oath, on her personal employees and on College staff, and after a few repetitions of it I reported her. All she got was a warning."

"What about the other telepath?" Kian asked. "I didn't get a good look at his face, and siren-blood tend to move much the same way, so I've no idea whether I've seen him before. He's gone inside, you won't have to lose your current focus to see him. Check. Now."

"I think," Shon said, "our own siren saved our lives. I think Kalli was bait. This was a trap."

* * *

"What is going on down there?" Human language, but with a strong alasis accent.

The other sorceress is awake. Not good.

On the other hand, they aren't going to be doing any scrying. That's good.

But they might wonder why Trinai isn't waking up. Less good.

An alasis woman in vibrant purplish-red that must have cost more than a small farm, a diamond-shaped silver and opal medallion against her chest etched with a four-armed star, descended the steep stairs with quite remarkable elegance, and all three men, the ferryman in particular rather the worse for wear, were jerked forcibly apart by invisible hands.

Behind her came a human woman, dressed just as extravagantly in salmon-pink, deep brown hair caught in a matching net that glittered with threads of gold like those in her clothes. Among the gold jewellery, the five-sided silver-and-opal medallion was very visible.

The human sorceress threw an uneasy glance behind her that was probably at the still-sleeping Trinai, as she stepped off the stairs. Kisea spared a moment to reinforce the sleep that Trinai was in—that siren was the most dangerous of the lot, able to catch Kisea as a telepath, able to fascinate her alasis. Keeping her out of this was worth some risk.

"What are you doing?" demanded the alasis sorceress Melienne.

"Trinai said we could keep her, she's not a telepath or anything," the alpha fighter said, and paused to spit out a mouthful of blood, heedless of where it landed. "Hugh got ahead of himself."

"I'm sure you will survive," Melienne said acidly. She turned her dark-eyed glare on Kisea, who cringed back against the wall.

"I'm sorry, my lady," she stammered. "I didn't mean for anyone to get hurt, I asked them not to fight over me, really..." She projected fear and shame, not so strongly it was obvious she was doing so, but enough to reinforce her acting job.

Melienne strode over, leaned down to seize her chin and tilt it up so she could see her throat.

"Encountered alasis recently, have you?"

"Thr... three of them, my lady, on the road, they robbed me and..." Kisea reached up to cover the bites with her hand, looking down. "I was feeling all dizzy and weak when I got here, and they were kind enough to give me something to eat and let me sleep a little... I wanted to show them I'm grateful, that's all."

"Which does not explain why Trinai does not wake," a new voice added lazily from the doorway.

Kisea snuck a look in that direction, and cursed in the privacy of her own head. Male, slender, his hair pure vivid copper-red, and a telepath crystal glittered at his throat. He was expensively-dressed in highly-tailored close-fitting short jacket and knee-length breeches, rich blue brocade glinting with gilt thread and gold buttons, slashed to display the dyed and embroidered layers beneath.

Given the way he moved, graceful and sensual, she'd have been willing to bet a lot that he was more than half siren, though probably not full if he was a strong telepath.

And he was certainly that, enough so that she was certain he had siren fascination under deliberate control, unless some quirk of nature had left his active all the time.

She didn't miss the way regal Melienne eyed him, visibly contemplating how he'd taste and what else might happen in the process, or the way the human sorceress shifted position a bit as he brushed past her, her legs pressed together under her heavy skirts.

"Oh, good, Alfeo, you're back," Melienne said. "Trinai wanted to rest, but won't wake up. She did say this one shows no telepathy at all, but..."

He held up a hand, and she fell silent. "I'll take care of it."

He stopped directly in front of Kisea, who kept her eyes down. She tried to breathe as shallowly as she could, but she could feel heat stirring between her legs despite the lingering soreness there, could feel fantasies struggling to get through her self-control. Siren blood didn't mean complete immunity, only resistance.

"Now, what've we here," Alfeo said thoughtfully. *Siren name, that, not a human one.* "Stand up."

She did, one hand on the wall for balance. Other than her chemise falling to mid-thigh, she was naked, and she licked dry lips, far more acutely aware of her own vulnerability—and accessibility—than she otherwise would have been. Meekly, she stood still, doing her best to keep her eyes down even when he tilted her chin up with one hand.

"You have a lot of siren blood in you, don't you," he murmured, not really a question.

How much do you want me to have?

She strangled the thought ruthlessly. "I have some, obviously, but not enough to be much use."

His mind touched hers, testing and probing; she slithered out of the way, as she had with Trinai, and readied herself to make sure he forgot anything he found.

Naughty girl, he chided, deflecting her effortlessly, but he sounded far more amused than upset. *That's why Trinai is still asleep, is it? She almost caught you, didn't she, and she's a threat to you. Now what is a pretty little controller doing here, hm? There are none associated with the Jordans, certainly.*

She stared at him in utter shock. *How did you... you can't...*

Only a controller can block a controller, naughty girl. Did you really believe the Assembly that there are none born beyond a very occasional freak? The gift appears, rarely. They do their best to kill us or Blind us, out of fear and their own weakness, but some of us escape. His hand slipped from her chin around to seize her braided hair, looping it around a couple of times to hold her securely.

I'm going to cut my damned hair this time, I swear...

Let's find out just what you're doing here, pretending to be all helpless, shall we? Are you going to let me in, or am I going to have to hurt you?

Nononono... oh, now what do I do? Please, please, let Matt be watching, because I don't dare reach...

I don't even know you, and you expect me to open up my mind to you? she asked flirtatiously.

You were willing to open up those pretty legs for someone one short step above an animal.

Yes, well, you do what you have to, for a hot meal and a bed when you need one.

*And why do you need one so badly, hm? Lovely marks on your throat. Weakness for alasir-

blood?*

I'm not stupid enough to invite three alasis to feed all at once, she snapped. *Look, I run the roads, I have no home.* She backed it up with a couple of random memories, carefully well over a month old, from before she encountered Kian. She felt him seize on them, following them. His touch in her mind made her feel far more soiled than any sex with any degree of willingness ever had; she shivered, but let him look, let him see the worst gang-rape she'd found herself in, let him see sleeping outside in the cool autumn rain while she tried to find a place to spend the winter. *I'll do whatever I have to, to survive and stay out of the Assembly's hands. Sometimes it's worse than others. Quick sex with a trio of humans, well, briefly boring and a bit smelly, but nothing that really matters, you know?*

Maybe, he mused. *Certainly none of the Jordans would tolerate an ally living that way, and those memories are real.*

Jordans again. I knew one when I was at the College. He threatened to turn me in. I ran away. Jordans are the last people you're ever going to see me voluntarily around. Since he was going to find it anyway, she let him see that last fight with Matt.

And that one in particular. How interesting. How do you feel about him?

How do you think I feel about him? He was the only one who knew, and I used it to help him deal with his own weird gift, and then he turned on me! Sure, I'm going to run right to him with hugs and kisses on sight!

Hm. So why won't you let me get at your most recent memories? What are you hiding in there?

Alfeo circled around them, stroking her shields with a sensuality that made her shudder to her core. *Are you going to make me break these open, naughty girl?*

I let you have my whole life, and you want the one bit I'd like to keep private because even I find it embarrassing?

There's nothing you need to be embarrassed about. The way Caalden treats sirens, we all suffer, and we've all done things we wish we hadn't. You don't need to run the roads anymore, unless you're hiding something from me that's particularly naughty. You can have a home and not have to be afraid of the Assembly ever again, and have other controllers you can learn from. Hm, and teach as well, you have an interesting knack for healing minds. I hadn't thought of using it that way. His mindvoice dropped to a purr. *Teach me, and you can have someone else heal you, the way you've healed others.*

She hesitated, genuinely tempted. He was living proof she wasn't the only one, and where there were two, there could certainly be more. It was a far more likely route out of her life on the road than Matt's mad idea, and it would take away the chance of dragging Matt down with her.

Even if there's something particularly naughty you're hiding, he murmured, *tell me what it is, and I'm sure we can work around it.* She felt his breath against her lips, then his lips against hers, and hers parted instinctively under what was possibly the most skilled and sensuous kiss she'd ever experienced. She couldn't quite keep her knees from trembling, her whole body from wanting to sag against his and surrender everything. *That abomination of a sorcerer who betrayed you, we're just waiting for him to show up to rescue his precious highborn cousin. Then you can have any revenge you choose, as long as he dies.*

What do you have against him?

Unnatural whelp, with sorcery beyond any sane limits and telepathy and the lifewitch-gift as well. He should've been drowned at birth. Or at least when it became clear how much of a freak he is. Contempt vibrated through his mindvoice. *And yet he acts like he owns the world and has every right to impose his own will anywhere he pleases, and those in authority in most places have too much fear of Lord Jordan and too much awe for that stunt his parents pulled off to question him. I

sent two of my employees after a runaway, a girl who belonged to me, one much like you were pretending to be just now, barely siren enough to be appealing to men, and he stole her without even pretending otherwise. To add insult to injury, he used information from her to try to have me charged with a list of crimes, and it cost me a lot of favours and coin and effort to get out of it. Trinai and Melienne and Ursula have complaints of their own. It all adds up to the conclusion that he's running wild, with no checks on his power or his authority, and he needs to be stopped. It's a wonder he hasn't tracked you down yet. I imagine he's trying. You'll never have to hide from him again.*

This is no choice at all.

Wonderfully, blessedly, she felt another mind brush against hers, a hand offered.

She gave Alfeo her best inviting smile, leaned closer for another kiss, and put everything she had behind it, making sure all his attention was on that alone.

I'm keeping a very big secret, she whispered.

Yes? He still sounded amused, but there was anticipation there, too. He really didn't want to fight with her directly. That gave her hope.

*I made a decision that I was willing to give my life to keep someone unique and special from ruining his. I think it might be more useful to live and look after him instead. Matt is a thousand times the man you are, and *you can't have him!** Psychic claws extended, she lunged at him mentally; simultaneously, she curved her hand around the back of his neck and dug in with her nails to make sure he couldn't break physical contact, feeling wet trickles under her fingertips, as she tangled the other hand in the fabric of his expensive doublet. *Matt! I'll hold him! You'll have to do the rest!*

On it, Matt answered instantly.

Oh, you stupid little bitch, Alfeo spat, green eyes blazing as they locked on hers. She had no time for pointless games and symbolism, and closed her own eyes to shut out the sudden flurry of activity around them. Above all else, she had to make sure he had no attention to spare for Matt and his cousins.

Psychic blows pounded her shields with all the power of offended fury behind them.

She struck back, choosing openings coolly, thinking of Shon and the silvery-steel dance of his sword in a fight, deflecting smoothly and precisely, flickering out to draw blood and return to parrying without missing a beat, thinking of Kian stalking hares with stealth and patience and choosing the right moment to take aim with his bow for a swift clean kill.

Despite that, the rage feeding her was at least the equal of his.

You're fighting your own kind for the man who betrayed you, stupid bitch, Alfeo snarled.

All your life, you must have seen people hurting, and you never thought to heal it? What were you doing to that poor girl Matt rescued that wasn't as bad as humans and alasis do to us all? You are not my kind. I'm nothing like you!

Once he's done with you here, what do you expect? He's sworn to hand you right over to the Assembly! He's your enemy!

*Oh, I think I'll marry him. And then I'll keep an eye on him and his cousins to make sure people like you stay away from them. *All three are mine. Hands off!**

With the suddenness of a slamming door, the pressure against her mind vanished completely.

Kisea swayed, barely kept her balance and enough presence of mind to let go as Alfeo dropped to her feet and didn't move.

Kallima squealed as two of the female fighters turned on her, one wrenching the pottage cauldron out of her hand, the other pinning her arms. The pottage that was slopped all over Alfeo, and some on Kisea, and liberally all over the floor in a wide arc, told the story.

Panting, aching all over from the tension of her body while she'd been locked in the psychic

contest, and certain she knew how laundry felt after it had been violently stirred and then wrung out through a pair of rollers, Kisea took a deep breath. Not done yet, enemies remained, though they were eyeing her warily and keeping a careful distance from her. No sign of the sorceresses. She looked around, trying to think of what was in reach that she could possibly use as a weapon—one that wasn't in the hands of any of the fighters who, oddly, were all dripping wet to the waist. Although, actually, not one of them was holding anything more than a knife. Kallima had managed to get rid of not only the collar but her riding skirt, which on reflection made sense since as a sodden weight it would only have tripped and slowed her, but it was a startlingly practical and immodest thing for a highborn girl to do under any circumstances. Kallima kicked at the fighter holding her, and the heel of her riding boot impacted with a low thud against leather-faced quilted armour.

"Give me a hand, here," the woman holding her snapped. "She's slippery as a damned cat! And she has claws!" That last she added as Kallima lashed out at her face, nails going right for her eyes, the fighter barely ducking aside in time.

The walls around them quivered, and with a low eerie groaning, wood began to warp and twist, boards pulling away from each other, gaps appearing that let in the fresh evening air and widened rapidly.

"Oh, what now," moaned another fighter, one of the *alasir*. "Out! Everyone!"

"Orders were..." the one holding Kallima objected.

"There's about to be no building to hold her in!"

Eight women fled, not only through the door but through whatever spaces were wide enough to pass a body. The one holding Kallima, nonetheless, kept a grip on her wrist with what might under other circumstances be admirable dedication. Kallima snatched for one of the contorting boards, maybe to use as a weapon, but was jerked roughly off-balance and through before she could.

Nine women. Trinai stumbled through the door, her expensive skirt snagging on a board; to get free she had to give it a yank that tore a long rent in the fabric, then it caught again at the hem, and needed another pull before she could escape entirely.

The tortured wood groaned again, a long sliding note, and the entire building collapsed inwards with a rather unexpected and violent splash.

Trinai screamed and dropped to her knees, clutching at the arrow that had just glided out of the twilight and driven itself into her upper chest to one side—not a killing shot, but one that was going to keep her far too busy to be a threat.

The only other controller I've ever met was still in there.

Oh well.

So were my clothes. And my boots. And my pack with what was left of what I own.

Damn it.

The fighters spun to track the source of the arrow, though exactly what use any of them expected a knife to be, Kisea had no idea.

"Drop them and lie down." Kian's voice, with that cold iron tone Kisea had heard when he'd rescued her before. "Let her go. Now." He had another arrow in place already, bow raised, sighting directly on the fighter holding Kallima.

Loyalty to an employer was one thing, but one didn't live long as a fighter if one made stupid gestures. The one holding Kallima released her, and Kallima ran to Kisea, who pulled her protectively behind her, keeping her own body between the younger girl and the six fighters.

Shon, two strides ahead of Kian, had a sword like nothing Kisea had ever seen, the blade the length of his arm and the point asymmetrical, and in his other hand what might have been a short staff or might have been the sheath. Both the male fighters were down, one in such a wide dark puddle she doubted he'd be alive long, the other moaning and writhing but staying flat with a hawk

perched on top of him. The ferryman was down, too, with arrows in both legs, apparently in mid-flight towards the river. Closer still to the water was a motionless shape that might have been a person once, but she picked up no sense of life.

More worrying was that Matt was still facing both sorceresses, in a duel moving too quickly and on too arcane a level for non-sorcerer senses to follow it readily.

The fighter women, one at a time, let knives fall to the ground and laid down.

Shon, keeping an eye somehow on everything at once, beckoned to Kisea and Kallima.

Oh, what a pair we are, Kisea thought wryly, neither of them terribly steady as they supported each other across the open ground as rapidly as they could to the safe spot behind Kian.

Except that it wasn't entirely safe, not while the sorcery battle remained unfinished.

Kisea sat down where she was, wriggling the end of her chemise under her bare bottom, straightened her back, and closed her eyes.

Matt had taken time from his own duel to get her and Kalli out of the cottage where they were isolated and vulnerable, out to where Kian and Shon could act.

She had to help him, in turn.

And besides, if Matt lost, what was the point of surviving?

Fatigue made her tremble, made her psychic touch much less steady and sure than it should have been. The magic being flung around created interference of a sort, which made it that much harder to get through. She had no idea which of the two sorceresses she'd seized on, just whichever offered a better grip for her to dig in mental fingernails and hang onto while she laboriously wormed her way deeper and deeper.

* * *

With Kallima and Shimai safe with Kian and Shon and Jori, who could certainly handle the fighters now they'd broken cover, it was easier for Matt to concentrate on his own battle.

He really hated duelling. There was no goal other than someone getting hurt, and little room for finesse or elegance, only making sure not to be the one who got hurt. Against two who were both respectably strong and more practised at this kind of magic, it took everything he had to keep blocking attacks from different directions and of different kinds. He was sure he could think of something that would defeat one or the other, but with everything moving and changing this fast, it was far more likely to be an instant's decision based on a fleeting opportunity, rather than anything he could actually plan.

All those poetic sorcery battles in the sagas were, as near as he could tell, purely romanticized, because the hero planning some kind of strategy and luring an opponent into it sounded a lot better than the hero having quick reflexes, good shields, obstinacy, and luck. But maybe that was just his own limited experience. He avoided duels as often as possible, after all.

Melienne gathered what he was sure was another of those nerve-wracking percussive blows that, if one ever connected, he suspected would shatter every bone in his body; Ursula began to spin something new.

Gestures might have little to do with magic, but it was still instinct to fling both hands up in warding as Melienne's blow crashed down. He did listen to his cousins, and knew better than to meet force head-on with force; he deflected it sideways, and winced as the ground trembled with the impact only inches from him.

Ursula held out a hand, her fingers curled in what was probably a mnemonic pattern, and light gathered around them, crackling and flickering.

Not light, electricity.

Meanwhile, Melienne was readying her own next attack.

With a piercing shriek, a small shape stooped on Ursula's handful of electricity, sharp talons

binding into the sorceress' well-kept flesh. Ursula's scream climbed nearly as high as that of her attacker, though she struggled despite the pain to keep from losing control of the spell entirely.

In the aura of the surging, barely-contained lightning, the raptor no longer looked like a red-tailed hawk. The wings she spread for balance were far too long and graceful, the crest she raised belonged to no mortal bird, and tiny sparks danced along feathers of a thousand shades of grey and silver. Heart-stopping beauty that didn't really belong to the mortal world, as wild as the wind and fierce as a storm and out of reach as the sky.

What were we thinking, even trying to capture that, instead of just being forever grateful to see it?

Glowing eyes fixed on Ursula's as the stormhawk shrieked again, a note that climbed up past what human or alasiir ears could hear.

Ursula froze.

The lightning slipped free, and grounded itself via the nearest channel: Ursula herself.

She crumpled; Jori kicked free and took to the sky, suddenly just a red-tailed hawk again, that reminder of her true nature gone.

Matt dismissed Ursula, with considerable relief, as being no longer immediately relevant, and spun back to see what Melienne was about to lash out with, readying an attack of his own that just might get through if Jori had left her sufficiently unsettled.

Melienne knelt on the bare ground, purple-red skirts a puddle around her, hands spread palm-down. "Fight's over, dear," she said. Melienne's voice, even Melienne's accent, but not Melienne's words. "Don't hit her while I'm in her head, please, I'm having enough trouble holding her. Jori distracted her enough to give me an opening. I think this one and the male siren were the ones who started the whole thing, and he's dead, so best if she survives so we can get answers."

What he'd have liked to do is release all the energies he was holding and collapse where he was, and whatever price he was going to pay, well, so be it. Or, at the very least, release most of it and check that his family were all safe, though he could see Kallima with Kian, and Shimai sitting on the ground with them motionless... except, of course, that Shimai was currently behind Melienne's eyes. Shon was tying the wrists of the fighter women and checking them for hidden weapons, quietly efficient, and none dared to protest with Kian watching them; they should, Matt thought, be grateful that Shon's hands wouldn't wander opportunistically like those of many would. Trinai who was supposed to make all the difference was just a sobbing huddle of pain, close to the ruins of the cottage. The male fighters were no threat: before the sorceresses had commandeered his attention, he'd seen them try to reach Kian, who was at that moment dropping the ferryman before he could reach the water and escape. Shon, with cool efficiency, had cut down both, untouched by either staff, before they got anywhere near Kian.

Instead, Matt stayed ready, just in case. After all, the chance did exist that Melienne might wriggle free, with Shimai already tired.

He saw Jori dip downwards, far enough away across the river that she was quickly out of sight behind the trees. Good. Lord Jordan should be waiting—probably not very patiently—across the river and far enough away to be undetected. His uncle would recognize Jori and follow her, and he'd have enough people with him to clean up now that his beloved eldest daughter was no longer being held hostage.

"There, that will inhibit any use of magic at all." Melienne's dark eyes met his with a weary sort of mischief in them. "So, are you interested in this soft pretty body of hers? It might be interesting, experiencing sex through alasiir senses. Oh my, that made her scream. Where did such a fine lady learn language like that?" A smile and a wink, and Melienne's body language changed in a heartbeat: she leaped to her feet, her expression twisted into pure rage.

"I wouldn't," Matt said quietly. "You're completely alone, and now you don't even have magic left

to use. My family and I are all still standing.” Barely, in Kallima's case and his own, and technically not at all in Shimai's, but near enough. “I have no idea what this was all about, but it's over.”

“No idea what it's about?” Melienne's fists clenched until her knuckles whitened. “You self-centred uppity whelp! You interfere with the lives of your betters...”

“By which I assume you mean fullbloods. I've heard you rant before about crossbreeds being exterminated as vermin instead of trained to use our gifts, and that the idea of crossing producing the gifts is propaganda.”

“... and you can't even be bothered to notice the consequences of what you're so blithely doing!”

“The consequences of rescuing one poor teenaged siren-blood from Alfeo led to nine others held prisoner in a whorehouse being released. The consequences of stopping you from a disproportionate punishment on someone who just made a mistake was that she went home to her family after work intact. You could have been gracious and forgiving lady and risen above it instead of acting like a spoiled child who just dropped her candy. Don't expect me to feel guilty, ever, for standing up for someone who has no one else willing to defend them.”

He could feel his grip on the gathered energies slipping; he could do something more with them, put off the coming collapse just a little longer at the cost of making it a little worse, but he couldn't do it forever.

“Of course not,” Shimai said wearily. Barefoot and barely dressed, on her feet only on sheer determination and leaning on Kian's staff, she halted where she could see both him and Melienne. Matt fumbled quickly with the throat-clasp of his cloak, and swung it around Shimai's shoulders; she gave him a quick smile of thanks, despite Melienne's strangled noise of outrage, and settled it comfortably so she could slide her arms through the slits. “You wouldn't be you, otherwise, dear. You, move. Over with the others where Kian can keep an eye on you.”

“Mindraping crossbreed slut,” Melienne hissed. “I could have stopped your heart when I had you in my hands.”

“You were too relieved to have a toy to keep the men distracted from you,” Shimai said acidly, and smacked the staff smartly across Melienne's bottom—not hard enough for any damage other than maybe bruises, but Matt figured it hurt, and the indignity was worse. “I said move.”

Mercilessly, she drove Melienne over to Shon and abandoned her to his care.

That was a relief, because the world was tilting alarmingly. He actually had no idea what the combination of magics he'd used would demand as a price. This was almost certainly going to be very bad.

Shimai's arm wrapped around his waist, steadying him against her as she helped him sit down safely.

“I'm not going to be able to help this time,” she said softly. “I just have nothing left. I'm sorry.”

“I know. But we're all alive because of you.” He blinked, realized his vision was gone again. *Of course, after all that watching and tracking along with everything else.* “Stay here?”

He heard her move, felt her presence shift position. “Lie down,” she said, her hands guiding him. A bit surprisingly, he found himself with his head on her crossed legs, but her fingers running through his hair felt nice. “I'll be right here. I promise. I won't disappear on you.”

That was something to hold onto, as the world twisted inside out.

Kisea watched, emotions dulled by exhaustion, as a considerable number of horses drew up at the far side of the river. After a brief bit of activity, Jori fluttered across to perch on the ferryboat, letting out an imperative cry; Kallima went to her. Since Kisea saw, in the light of the rising greater moon, the ferry moving across the river on its own, she figured Jori must have brought the end of a rope across for Kallima to tie to the boat.

She closed her eyes, stroking Matt's hair automatically, a reminder that she was there—about all she could do, right now.

He threw an arm across his eyes, moaned softly.

"Light?" she asked, trying to at least pick up enough from the surface that she'd know if she could help. He made a noise that sounded affirmative, so she tucked a fold of his cloak across his head and shoulders, supported still by her own body so it wouldn't interfere with his rapid breathing. She felt him relax somewhat, at least for the moment.

By the river, she saw shapes she figured were Kallima and her father, in a tight embrace, and he wrapped his own long riding-coat around her. Another figure with them, one with a clearly female outline in rather loose-cut trousers but definitely not a divided skirt, who hugged Kallima at least as tightly... her mother? Hm, there might be a clue there about Kallima's uncommon lack of highborn flightiness. Others, too, men who, from the outlines, were wearing armour of some sort, most of them with staves, and one woman who *was* wearing a divided riding skirt and who leaned over the injured captives to check them.

Good. They could take care of everything from here on.

She saw a number of glances turned in her direction, and several towards the collapsed cottage, but no one came close to them. She heard Shon, in passable human, and Kian explaining; that was punctuated by questions in an educated male voice and an equally educated female one, with occasional comments added by Kallima. Then things grew quiet, only the sound of the male voice and Shon's both giving instructions. She let her eyes close again, let herself just drift. She'd endured worse, for less reason, than sitting here with Matt through this. These prices that conflicted and combined and dragged him into chaotic internal realities, she liked much less than the simpler ones she remembered; she hoped they were only because he'd been making dramatic efforts over the past day, rather than this now being normal.

"Kisea." That was that educated female voice, very close.

She opened her eyes and looked up; the woman who had embraced Kallima so tightly crouched next to her, arms across her knees. She had her dark hair in two long braids that glinted with metallic cord, Kisea noticed irrelevantly, but a chain woven into them held a glittering pendant in the centre of her forehead.

"Kian and Shon gave us a very brief summary. Enough to suggest just how much we owe you, for the safety not only of our daughter but our nephews."

'Our' nephews, Kisea thought. *Not 'my husband's nephews', distancing herself from them.*

She shrugged. "I suppose. It was more luck than anything. I didn't exactly plan to get involved." Probably she should be more formal and respectful, but Lady Jordan betrayed no hint of offence.

"No, but you could have stayed out of it, and you chose not to. Once Matt's able to move, my house is yours. Our men are taking those responsible back there now, to be confined until they can be tried. Those able to walk, at least. A wagon is on the way to remove those too injured to walk. I'm taking Kalli back as well. She's had some rough treatment."

"You should be proud of her." That was more than a bit presumptuous, to a Lady, but she didn't

care anymore. “She’s smart and she keeps her head in a crisis. She used an iron pot to knock out the telepath I was fighting, I’m not sure whether I was going to win or not. The fighter who was trying to hold her had her hands full, she almost lost an eye or two. The fighter, I mean.”

Lady Jordan chuckled. “Oh, I am very proud of her, for many reasons. I wasn’t raised to be helpless, and I see no reason my daughters should, and I’m blessed with a husband who agrees. With the exception of the previous Lord, the Jordan men appreciate strong and independent women.”

“I’m not so strong,” Kisea sighed. “It looks very much like the only way I can have a better life is to let Matt rescue me and take an enormous risk doing it.”

“And who told you that needing help means being not strong? Kalli could do nothing with a collar around her neck, but freed from that, she did her best to help with her own rescue. There are other sorts of collars that one can’t remove alone, and they don’t mean being weak, only being trapped. Oh, thank you.” She accepted a handful of something from a silent man, passed it to Kisea. “Pemmican for Matt, and also dried fruit and grain bars for you. Please try to eat.”

There was a knife with a finger-length blade, too, wrapped in the thick paper. Kisea nodded.

“I’ll see what I can get Matt to eat.”

“Good. Kalli wants Kian to come with her, but Shon is going to stay here, and Jori of course, and four of the men just in case. They’re accustomed to taking orders from Shon.” Lady Jordan rose. “I will likely not see you until tomorrow. I hope Matt recovers quickly and you both rest well.”

“Thank you.”

She took a bite of one of the fruit-and-grain bars, chewed it thoughtfully. Pemmican helped. One thing helped alasiir-blood more, and she could spare it.

She tested the little knife against the pemmican, and concluded that it was extremely sharp. Such a small thing, she could ignore that much pain after what she’d done earlier to get rid of the onyx charm. She used the point to make two very small cuts in the underside of her wrist, about as far apart as the twin marks she was used to, deep enough to draw blood; then she moved the cloak aside just enough that she could hold her wrist over Matt’s mouth, right where he’d smell it and taste any that dripped.

She smiled to herself as he groped for her wrist to hold it steady and pressed his mouth hard over the cuts. Yes, instinct was waking up at least, she could feel his blood-teeth extend—which weren’t hollow like some people thought, but did have a deep groove up the back starting about a third of the way up, which meant the lower third opened the tiny wounds and then blood could be drawn through the space created by the grooves.

And, of course, no hurting, no itching, no festering, and that lovely gentle euphoric feeling that was as much knowledge of what she was offering as it was anything biological.

She picked up the bar of fruit again in her free hand, and took another bite. If anything could help speed up the process, this was it.

“Very bad this time?” Shon asked softly in alasiiran, sinking down next to her.

“All the usual, cold and exhaustion. I’m picking up the edges of a really terrible headache that I can’t do anything about. And he had a nosebleed, but it didn’t last long. And the moonlight’s uncomfortable somehow. At least, I think it’s the moonlight, but obviously he can’t see it. I thought hypersensitivity went with linking in lifewitch abilities, but I suppose he might have been using absolutely anything in this mess. None of the delirium and sensory distortion he had after the ride, at least, but he’s too drained to even really be conscious.”

He rearranged himself so that she could lean against him, if she chose; she decided to take him up on it. There was nothing weak in borrowing the strength of someone who cared, when your own was at an end, was there?

He said nothing more, which was actually a relief. She no more had the energy to deal with

emotional issues or the future than she did to drive back Matt's nightmare.

Matt kept ahold of her hand, under the cloak, and though he really didn't take all that much, she did feel him now and then. She wondered how much was the ability of blood to replenish, and how much of it was simply comfort, but it didn't matter. She finished the fruit-and-grain bars, and one of the pemmican ones as well.

"Is there anything around to drink, other than river water?" she asked finally.

"Wine?" Shon suggested. "It isn't Eyrian, but it's bearable."

"Yes, please," Matt mumbled. "Lots to drink."

"Let me up, I'll get it."

Kisea sat forward and peeked under the cloak. "How are you feeling?"

"Terrible, but alive." It was still a bit slurred, but coherent. "Probably being dead doesn't feel terrible. Maybe. I don't want to find out soon. Don't you try, either, I don't care that much."

She smiled, ran her fingers through his hair. "You can rest properly, as soon as we get to the Manor."

"Kalli's okay?" He pushed the cloak aside, though his eyes still weren't focusing. Well, that was one of the more persistent effects. It would pass, too.

Though long ago, he'd confided his fears to her, that someday it wouldn't be temporary, that blindness or some other price would linger indefinitely.

"Yes, but she wanted Kian to come with her. Who taught her to defend herself?"

"My mother, mostly. Same sort of build, not very big but quick. Kian helped her practice, then Shon too. She probably has Kian right in her room with her with absolutely no concern for propriety, like when she was little and had bad dreams. But if it makes her feel safe, who cares? Her parents don't."

"She's lucky. I can't see her father trying to arrange a marriage for her without asking her opinion."

"Never, and not because his wife and his sister would never forgive him." Carefully, he sat up, though he winced a few times. "I'm only ever this achy after being intensely cold." He licked his lips. "That's not all yours... mine too? Right, the pressure thing, so, nosebleed." He rubbed at his lower face with one arm, and sighed. "I still have a headache, but I can ride with that. Let's get to the Manor so you can stop sitting on the hard ground wearing mostly just my cloak waiting for me."

Shon came back with a small skin of, presumably, wine, and handed it to Kisea; she took a drink, then made sure Matt had a solid grip on it the right way around before letting go.

"Horses?" she asked Shon.

"Kian took Rose, of course, and Butterfly and Jori are here. We're no more than two hours from the Manor at an easy pace by the road, I gather."

"Arrogant," Matt muttered, lowering the skin after a long gulp. "Although since the ultimate motive appears to have been for me to find them, I suppose not." He heaved another sigh. "How did I make enemies that hate me that much, just by trying to protect people?"

Kisea traded glances with Shon, who understood the answer as well as she did.

"Does it matter?" Shon asked gently. "You would have, and will continue to, protect those in need of it regardless of whom it offends or angers or inconveniences."

"That's just who you are," Kisea agreed. "The people who understand you know and love that about you. You even take it to absurd lengths like offering to marry a renegade to try to keep her safe."

Matt tilted his head quizzically. "You're joking, right? You know that's not why? Well, not all of why? Please tell me you know that and you're joking."

"Yes, dear, I know that and I'm teasing you."

"I realize these haven't been the best conditions for actually thinking..."

"No. They haven't," she said firmly. There were just too many ramifications to the whole idea that she needed to work through. "For the moment, you're not getting rid of me, however. I no longer own even a complete set of clothes, and you promised you'd replace my gear that was left behind two hundred miles from here and you can replace what's now under a collapsed building too. Not that you can replace two ninedays of weaving in some really lovely yarn I traded for, or the things with sentimental value. I suppose it's a reasonable sacrifice, though." Too many years of needing to protect what little she did own were hard to shake. It gave her an uncomfortable feeling of vulnerability to lack even bare essentials along with a strong regret over the loss of beautiful well-made things that held memories.

"I'm sorry. Flooding the cellar and then tearing the building down might have been too much."

"Kallima and I are alive. We might not be if you hadn't. I'm just sulking. Do you think you can get up?"

He took another mouthful of wine first, held the skin out to Shon, and let both help him to his feet. He wasn't entirely steady, but then, neither was she.

"Jori?" he said.

"Kian changed her before he left," Shon said. "She's with Butterfly pretending to be a real horse. I'll get them." He gave Kisea back the wine, and left them again.

"That wasn't how I'd planned to bring up the idea of getting married, but it's better than never getting the chance." He found her by touch, cupped a hand around her cheek. "I would never try to put chains on you. Just give you a home to come back to. If running the roads with my cousins makes you happy, well, at least I'd know you were safe."

She stole a kiss. "Let me answer you, before you start thinking up ways to get vacations from my company."

"I'm not!"

"That was a joke. This isn't. You don't know me anymore."

"I know a lot more than you think I know. I know everything that really matters. For anything else, I just get the fun of learning about you all over again."

"You absolutely will not let any logic sway you, will you?"

"Not the slightest chance," he said cheerfully. "I've had over a year to think about it. I know what the risks are and I think they're worth it. The only thing still in question is what you want. And I can wait while you decide. Even if you said yes right now, we'll be doing well to get to the Manor, let alone interrupting my uncle to ask him to marry us and heading for the College. Actually, I doubt Shon would let us. Or Kian. Or Jori."

"Which just proves they have more sense," she said tartly, and took a last swallow of wine before closing it tightly.

"Who has more sense than whom?" Shon asked, leading Jori and Butterfly over to them.

"You have more sense than Matt," Kisea said.

"I thought that was understood." At least Jori could be trusted to stand, rock-solid and four-square, while Shon laced both hands together to boost his exhausted cousin into the saddle, and repeated it with Kisea. He gathered up Butterfly's reins and mounted smoothly. "Two are coming with us, two are staying here to watch the site. More are to come, early in the morning, to remove the dead and make other arrangements for travellers for the short term."

Kisea's sense of safety had less to do with the two mounted fighters who fell into place, one ahead of them and one behind, and more to do with Shon beside her and Matt, that peculiar sword slung through rings on his saddle like any staff. Even her fatigue-dulled and overextended inner senses could pick up the protectiveness/alertness—as if they needed to.

Probably their human escort wouldn't speak *alasaran*, and were even less likely to know mixed-village creole, which Kisea guessed Shon must have picked up at least somewhat by now, but there was nothing urgent to say. They rode quietly, Shon urging a trot now and then to get them to their destination more quickly.

The huge manor house should probably have been imposing, if not terrifying, but after that last leg of travelling, she was too numb to care. She was aware of Shon giving orders that everyone hastened to obey even though he never raised his voice, of someone young and female and briskly competent urging her and Matt through a bewildering number of corridors to, finally, a pleasant room with a long table against one wall and an armoire and, more important than anything, a bed that looked like paradise. She stopped paying any attention to what the young female person was saying, got Matt and herself stripped to the skin with some fumbling help from him, barely even flinching from the silver medallion that had been tucked under his shirt, and they both sprawled on the bed.

Vaguely, she felt gentle hands draw a soft quilt up over them, and then she fell asleep.

15

Conscious returned slowly; Kisea battled the haziness, experience insisting that it was dangerous.

Clearing her thoughts still didn't help immediately, since she had no idea where they were other than a shred of memory suggesting the manor house.

"Jordan Manor," Matt confirmed sleepily. "My room. Mm. Bath. Real food. Clean clothes. In some order. Then maybe I'll feel like facing the world."

"It will take a lot more than that for me to feel ready," Kisea muttered, but she rearranged herself so she could lean over him and kiss him. She could taste lingering traces of blood, her own mostly, and ignored them. A weakness for *alasar* meant accepting some quirks of nature.

Matt wrapped both arms around her, returned it with considerable enthusiasm, and surprising energy given the condition he'd been in the previous night. At least he still recovered quickly and completely.

His mind against hers made her wince and stifle a yelp; he drew back instantly, both mentally and physically, grey eyes searching hers in concern.

"Oh... you pushed too far?"

"Without my crystal, I was fighting the only other controller I've ever met, who did have one."

"So, yes, then." He let his arms fall, shifted sideways towards the edge of the bed.

She moved in turn, swung a leg over his to straddle him, and gave him a more fierce kiss. "I didn't say stop."

He linked his hands loosely at the small of her back, but against the raw edges of her mind, she could feel the conflict, wanting to respond, worry for her.

"I don't want you hurt any more," he said softly. "Least of all by me. Not ever."

That would have been laughable, had he not meant it so honestly and literally. She considered answers, evasions, and settled for the simplest, the truth. "I don't care. Gentle and sweet and romantic and special can wait. Hurting doesn't matter. I want you, now."

"Sirens," he sighed theatrically, but he didn't mean it any more than she really minded losing a little blood. One hand ran up her spine, curved around the back of her neck to bring her down for

another kiss; the other traced the lines of her waist and hip and bottom. Harder now than the last time he'd touched her, more muscle under the siren curves that were less pronounced than before thanks to too many missed meals, her skin roughened by time outdoors and marked by scars here and there.

Matt, as far she could tell, didn't mind.

Neither really had the stamina—or patience—right then for anything particularly long or strenuous, but nonetheless, Kisea snuggled against him contentedly. Far too many nights of longing to be right here. Whatever came next, at least there was no more bleeding from that particular never-healing wound. Matt hugged her close, in no hurry to move, and for a change with nothing to say.

Until he finally broke the silence. “Bath?” he suggested.

“Probably good,” she admitted. “The last one I had was in a lake, and that was a couple of days before being abducted and hauled around on horseback—although at least Jori doesn't smell as horsey—and tackling extremely nasty people and left with absolutely nothing except my own body and what used to be my second-best chemise.” What she most wanted to wash was the inside of her head, anywhere Alfeo's fingerprints might linger.

“You do have something more than that,” he pointed out.

“Oh?” She wriggled away, pushing back the quilt, and sat up.

“The gratitude of Lord and Lady Jordan. And, incidentally, my heart. And body. And everything I own.”

She favoured him with a look of pure exasperation; he only gazed back innocently, until she gave up, rolled her eyes, and got out of bed entirely.

“For the record, though,” he added appreciatively. “That body you own is a very very nice one.”

“No complaints about yours, lover,” she purred. Less muscular than either of his cousins, he nonetheless hadn't gone soft the way some mages did; of course, as perpetually active as he was, and she figured he probably still spent time on the road with his cousins, that made sense.

“Do you want your crystal back?”

“Hold onto it. I'm staying strictly in my own mind for the moment.”

The room they were in was a pleasant one, comfortable and pleasing with expensive-looking furnishings that were nonetheless subdued rather than ostentatious. The bed had curtains to draw around it in the winter, currently tied back, plain weave but in soft warm yellows and browns that matched those of the curtains on the two large glazed windows and the dominant colours of the quilt and the braided rag rugs on the floor. Under one window was a reading couch, a small table near it bearing a haphazard stack of books; under the other was a long table, two carved chairs along the long side and a third at one end, with ample paper mixed with more books in a chaotic pile at the opposite end. A set of shelves held yet more books and more paper, but other things as well, odds and ends that might be decorative or sentimental but in a sorcerer's quarters might have more practical uses. Near it was an armoire, the same deep reddish-toned wood as the rest and carved with similar designs, and next to that a carved stand with wide wooden hooks projecting tree-like on all sides, several of them with items of clothing hanging from them.

Draped neatly over the back of one of the hard chairs was a collection of fabric that, even at a glance, included a skirt.

Lying on the table was a coil of heavy silver chain, the links flattened, attached to a medallion. Not quite round, but six-sided, and bearing a deeply engraved six-sided star with a heart of sparkling white opal. She flinched instinctively from the physical symbol of the Oath.

“Your room?” she said, confirming his earlier identification, but it screamed to her of his personality anyway.

"Yes. Kian's on one side, Shon's on the other."

"A bit understated for Lord Jordan's High Warden of the Peace, isn't it? I'd expect that to come with a private suite and your own staff."

To her amusement, he actually blushed. "It's just a job. I could've done without the title, but it's a means to an end. I mean, to accomplish anything, I suppose I really do need the amount of authority he gave me, and it helps when people have symbols to make things more visible and easier to grasp. Everything works better all around when people just cooperate instead of my having to coax, bribe, and threaten."

No, the title does it for you this way. And it isn't just a job, not for you.

"Rob told me ages ago I could hire whoever I need to help," he added thoughtfully. "I haven't, because I was still figuring out how things need to work and I didn't have anyone in mind that I thought I could trust in every sense. But going through every legal decision in Jordan takes forever. And if I'm away, there's really no one who knows what's been going on to handle things. And I plan to have time to spend with you. I think I have someone perfect in mind, she's probably not going to want to stay in the town she's in right now after what she's been through, but first she has to be able to get out of bed and travel. I did ask a mutual friend to bring it up if it looks like she's going to disappear before I can get back to talk to her. But the Manor staff handle everything else perfectly well. And what would I do with more rooms?"

The clothes, she discovered, were a complete set, and even included a pair of soft slippers that wouldn't last an hour outside. "Someone was very thoughtful," Kisea observed.

"You've probably barely begun to see people being thoughtful. The rest of this hall is the rooms kept for my parents and Kian's parents, one other guest room that isn't used often although I suppose they'd let you have it if you wanted your own, a bathing room just for the rooms in this hall, and a small sitting room that's rarely used. So we aren't likely to run into anyone, least of all anyone who cares how dressed you are. Still, just in case there are any servants around..." He took something of a mellow green from the rack and draped it around her shoulders—it turned out to be a short cape that reached to her knees but was probably hip-length on Matt, with arm-slits and carved buttons down the front, thick soft plushy wool that would be wonderful for keeping warm while reading in cold weather. One-handed, he pulled a longer robe of undyed wool around himself, and gestured towards the door.

The bathroom was large and bright and very clean, with a deep tub of heavy carved wood lined with copper, and a large copper boiler with a low fire under it to provide hot water, along with cold water from another one in the opposite corner. The only windows were small and high and thickly glazed, keeping out chills.

Obviously, if you had enough money and power, getting clean in lukewarm or cool water while shivering in drafts wasn't an inevitable fact of life anymore.

Getting cleaned up hadn't felt like this in a long time. Even the soap was gentle and sweet-scented, with a bottle of a liquid soap that smelled different to use on hair. Matt helped her scrub herself all over, including her hair, taking tender care of the cut on her breast and the small ones on her wrist, the shallow bruises on her other wrist that she hadn't noticed from fighting Kian's hold on her and the deeper bruise on her cheek from Trinai's slap, and she felt a tightly-controlled little ripple of protective anger over every scar.

Then, despite her protests, he let the water drain and refilled it and helped her do it all over again. He was right: after that second washing she finally felt truly clean, an uncommon state lately.

"There," he said in satisfaction, wrapping her in a huge towel of something thick and absorbent. "I like it when you smell like you and like outside, but it still feels good to get properly clean."

"But if I used all the hot water..."

He rolled his eyes. “I can do some things without being useless for hours afterwards. If there isn't enough hot water, then being cold for the length of time it takes to get it hot is relatively easy to take if I can be in hot water through it. And heating water doesn't take very long.”

Rather than getting dressed, she helped him in turn, though since his life had involved more contact with soap and hot water lately, it was a much simpler task.

Back in his room, Matt swung open the armoire doors, revealing a set of drawers and shelves down one side and an open section for hanging things up on the other, and bent down to rummage in the upper of the two full-width drawers underneath, collecting items over one bare arm.

Kisea decided that the clothes that had been left for her definitely had some thought behind them. Rather than a more fitted blouse, there was a loose chemise of a comfortable size similar to her own that had disappeared, but this one was of extremely high-quality bleached linen. The bodice to go over it was sturdy and quilted, woven of fine wool in a pleasant mossy green, and though she couldn't lace it quite together across her chest and it was a trifle loose at her waist and lacked the extra adjustment options leather ones usually had, it was a better fit than she could have hoped under the circumstances. The skirt was a full-circle one, a darker green but there was a leafy pattern on it that was a much paler green, a rather pretty effect, and the wool was like that of the bodice, very soft. Drawstring drawers to go under it, of similarly fine linen, and the slippers with their thin quilted soles.

“I like you in anything or nothing, but you look gorgeous in green,” Matt said. “It makes your hair that much more red.”

“There've been a lot of times I've wanted to cut most of it off and dye whatever's left any colour *except* red.”

“I know.” He gave her a quick, one-armed hug, before pulling a wheat-gold tunic over his head over his shirt and tugging it straight over darker brownish-gold trousers. That figured: where he could have had high fashion like Alfeo's, he chose comfortable and practical—even if that tunic alone was probably worth more than many people saw in a year. “I'll help with your hair.”

She perched obediently on one of the hard chairs while he carefully worked the knots out.

“Are you sure you aren't using magic?” she teased. “You never pull.”

“No magic.”

Through the window ahead, she could see a long way out over fenced pastureland and cropland, much of the former home to what could only be horses. But then, that was what the Jordan House had been known for, for generations, until the most recent generations became notorious for their refusal to accept the dominant racial distrust—and, apparently, extending it to refusal to accept that a woman's place was inevitably secondary even in the North. Would that new tradition last and spread, she wondered, or would it be forgotten and lost in a few generations, swept under by the tide of fear and hatred and ignorance?

Matt tossed her hair, now neatly braided and tied with a green ribbon, forward over her shoulder. “See, I haven't forgotten since you taught me.”

She smiled, ran a finger along the braid, found it smooth and tight. “No, you haven't.” Presumably there had been other lovers in between, who might well have enjoyed that extra personal attention; it didn't matter. It was unlikely, knowing Matt, that there'd been even half as many as the lovers she'd chosen willingly.

“It's about time you two were up and about,” Shon said in *alasaran* from the open door. “Would you like to join Kian and Kalli and I for lunch?”

Kisea's stomach rumbled at the mention of food.

“I guess so,” Matt chuckled, offering her his hand to help her up.

He left his medallion on the table, she noticed, rather than putting it on.

Shon eyed Kisea admiringly. "You look good in that."

"Everyone wants me dressed like a lady," she complained halfheartedly.

"What's wrong with that, if you aren't out on the road?"

She didn't really have an answer.

"Where?" Matt asked.

"Kalli's sitting room. She isn't feeling up to facing the dining room yet, and thought you might feel the same."

"She's right," Kisea said.

Both clearly knew where they were going, and she had to admit to a certain guilty pleasure both in the sensual soft fabrics and the heavy sway of the unfamiliar full skirt, and in her escort, though she found the building highly confusing and more than a little intimidating.

Shon tapped on a door with a carved and highly polished frame and pushed it open without waiting for an invitation.

The room beyond was an odd mix of the ladylike and the practical. Furniture of rich deep golden wood, upholstered in creamy white, had blankets tossed over it that were a mix of sometimes jarring colours; paintings on the walls were mostly of horse imagery, but the curtains on the windows were woven with delicate flowers in soft pastels. A roll-top desk in one corner held what looked like a substantial leather-bound ledger of some sort along with several neat folders of paper and, incongruously, a length of leather that Kisea thought was from a horse's tack being used as a paperweight. A closed door probably led to a bedroom.

There was a round table as well, which probably was about the right size for three chairs with four starting to get a little crowded, currently with five surrounding it. Kian was already in one chair, Kallima beside him. The girl looked much better for having gotten thoroughly clean; there were bruises and abrasions around her neck from the collar, and she still looked pale underneath skin that had more colour than most ladies, but she greeted them with a dazzling smile and rose from her chair to come meet them. Her brown-blond hair was in a single braid with a rosy ribbon threaded through it, matching the flowers embroidered on her blouse and one shade in the finely-patterned bodice, but rather than a skirt, she was in the kind of loose trousers Kisea vaguely recalled her mother wearing the night before—thought they were rose-patterned brocade.

"I don't think I've ever been so grateful to be home," she said fervently. "And I wouldn't be without you." She held out both hands to Kisea, and when she accepted them, she drew the telepath into an unexpected tight embrace. "I suppose they might have let me go in the end, but it's unlikely. I owe you my life. And my cousins' and Shon's."

Kisea shrugged. "A lot of it was just luck."

"For me, very good luck, then. And I hope it turns out that way for you, too." Gently, she brushed the bruise on Kisea's cheek with her fingertips. "The healer already went over all of my scrapes and bruises. I think we need to get her to see you, too."

"There's nothing that won't heal on its own before long." She'd been in worse condition with no healer available.

Kallima smiled. "I'm afraid you're going to have to bear with my parents and I wanting to treat you like a queen. Try to indulge us. I'm supposed to pass on their gratitude and so on and so forth, and make certain you know how welcome you are, but that can wait until after we eat, can't it? Come sit down. I'm sure you need a good meal. I swear, the head cook uses my cousins being around as an excuse to get creative with as many meat dishes as possible, but they're usually good. I know it's a little crowded, but there really isn't room for a larger table and right now, I feel much safer in my own rooms than anywhere else, so I hope you'll forgive me."

There were so many things in that to answer that Kisea just went with the last one, following

her to the table. "Crowded doesn't bother me nearly as much as formality does."

"Oh, me too," Kallima said with a heartfelt sigh, dropping back into her chair between Kian and Shon. "I can do it when I must, and I try not to be ungrateful because I know how lucky I am, but as my father says, formality is usually the obsession of those with nothing better to do. Oh, thank you." That last was as she was served a steaming bowl by a young woman in rose madder red and goldenrod that matched, at least in colour, various servants Kisea had glimpsed in the halls.

Despite her comments about the meat, Kallima herself had soup—healer's orders, she admitted, to let her stomach recover from the recent stresses. She encouraged Kisea and the three cousins to eat well, though.

Kian had news about the various captives: that the six fighter women and the surviving man and the ferryman were to be tried by Lord Jordan personally; that the two sorceresses and the telepath were all alive and facing trial not only by him for their crimes but, following his verdict, also trial by the Assembly for Oath-breaking; that the human men had gotten involved with genuine demands to make against her father, the four mages had been behind the trap for Matt, and the six female fighters had been hired outright, though it remained unclear so far how the two plots had become one.

Kallima let him get through the summary uninterrupted, then tactfully but firmly turned the conversation to harmless subjects carrying no stress or discomfort: weather, music, travel. Kisea had to revise her assumptions several times over. Kallima, despite her privileged life, was clearly well-travelled and road-savvy, much of it from outright road-running in the disputed lands where a princess with a maid and half a dozen guards would be greeted with disdain if not hostility. Kisea suspected, as well, that even with the College not an option and despite her sex, no expense was spared on Kallima's education.

"If you decide you want to get outside later," Kallima said, walking them to her sitting room door, "I'll be down in the stables. I feel safe there, too, and I can show you around and make it interesting even for someone not obsessed with horses, truly. But if you'd prefer to be alone and rest, that's understandable, and no one will interrupt. Ask the first servant you find for anything you need, including dinner in your own room."

"You recovered very quickly," Kisea said.

Kallima smiled and shrugged. "It was very bad, and I'm going to be having nightmares, but it was less than two full days and I never doubted for an instant that with a family like mine, I'd be rescued."

"I can recommend the greatest mindhealer ever, if you need it," Shon said.

"I'll be all right. I think it will help to be back with my horses and doing something ordinary."

"It probably will," Kisea agreed. "But being afraid after bad things happen is normal, and trying to pretend you aren't will only make it worse. Don't try to lock it inside. Talk to someone, anyone, that you trust. Believe me, that's the most important thing you can do right now."

"I will. You have enough to worry about, and I have plenty of people around me that I can count on." She gave all three alasir-blood a stern look. "You look after her."

"That, *shalis*, is the plan," Shon said, using the alasiran version of *my lady* and sweeping her a dramatic courtly bow. Kallima giggled and shooed them all out the door.

"Is she as balanced as she's acting?" Kisea asked Kian quietly, once the door was closed and they were walking, she assumed, back towards their rooms.

Kian nodded. "We talked a great deal last night, and she cried quite a lot, but since she woke this morning, she seems to have her feet back under her. For her, this is a unique event, not part of a pattern of abuse, and she is not alone and never has been. There is no need to fear for her, and there are others to watch over her."

"Good. She's sweet, I'd hate to see this leave bad scars." She hesitated. "Please don't take this wrong..."

"We can't take anything any way until you tell us," Matt pointed out.

"I need to be alone for a while. There is entirely too much going on in my mind right now, and you've dropped a major decision in my lap, and I just need to think."

"My room?" Matt suggested. "I can annoy Kian or Shon or possibly even go make myself useful. But all that matters as far as that decision is what you want."

"It's more complicated than that. Trying to turn formal marriage vows and mutual legal responsibility for some forms of offences around backwards to claim that your Oath therefore includes me as well sounds lovely in theory but it's horribly risky. They could rule against it, they could decide that I arranged the whole situation, they could decide to accept it and then rule that I'm guilty of punishable crimes that you would then also suffer for..."

"Or," Matt said softly, "they could accept my reasoning and my evidence, and go along with it."

"Matt," Shon said. "You're asking her to make a choice that will risk two lives that matter to her based on incomplete information. That's not fair. Kalli is safe, the crisis is past. Now is the time to explain the rest."

Matt hesitated, then heaved a sigh. "My room, everyone, now."

Kisea eyed him warily. "Just what aren't you telling me?"

"I did plan to," he said. "Honestly. I'm not sure I agree that it's relevant as far as making a decision, but if Shon is that sure it is, then all right. But there are three, no, four things that need to be very clearly established before anything else."

Kian opened the second door down a corridor, which did prove to be Matt's room, and closed it firmly once they were all inside. Matt smoothed out the chaos left of the bedding by earlier activities and sat on the edge, leaving Kisea plenty of room to join him; Shon drew over one of the chairs from the table and reversed it to straddle it, arms across the back, and Kian simply dropped to sit with crossed legs on a thick braided rug.

"What things?" Kisea asked.

"The reasons for suggesting a formalized marriage specifically are not at all the same as the reasons for wanting you back in my life. I've missed you very badly, and I would like to think that if things hadn't gone so wrong, we could've just stayed together in the first place. There's wanting to make things fair and safer for everyone, but there's also wanting you, specifically, safe and happy, and that's not the same. I would not, ever, do anything I thought was going to be bad for you."

She knew that one already.

"And?"

"Risks to me and my future are my choice to make. You hate other people trying to make decisions on your behalf. You don't get to make them on mine. I've had a long time to think and a long time to work out where my priorities are."

"Risks you take on my behalf are on my conscience."

"Risks I take on your behalf are because I think they're worth taking. Your happiness and safety are, ultimately, something I need in order to be happy. So, my choices to make. Clear?"

"Clear," she said with a sigh. "What's the third thing?"

"If you don't want to marry me and challenge the Assembly, we'll think of something. Nothing in Caalden could make me take you back there and hand you over to them." There was a grim undertone that startled her, just for being so out of character.

"And the fourth?"

"I promise, no matter what, anyone who tries to hurt you, up to and including the Joint Assembly collectively, will go through me to do it. And we have yet to find any real limits to what I

can do when I'm motivated enough and don't care about the prices afterwards."

"And a fifth thing," Shon said quietly. "The laws being what they are, there is nothing Kian or I can do directly, but we will always be right behind you."

"It's not only Matt anyone who means you harm would have to get past," Kian agreed.

Kisea pulled her legs up onto the bed and crossed them, planted her elbows on her knees so she could rest her head in her hands. "You three make my head hurt. I haven't done anything to deserve that."

"You are you, and we choose to," Kian said simply.

"You chose to take a risk to help Kallima," Shon said. "You have repeatedly avoided ways of protecting yourself that would be bad for any or all of the three of us. Your priorities are much less self-serving than you want us and the rest of the world to believe, or maybe than you want to believe yourself. We all choose what matters to us. A part of what matters to all three of us is you, even if that means some risk. Much the way what matters to you means allowing some risk to yourself to keep us safe."

"All right, I surrender," Kisea pleaded. "You're all big boys who make your own decisions, I understand. What is it that I so badly need to know?"

"When I started helping Rob five years ago," Matt said, "it didn't take all that long to start turning over rocks and discovering just how bad things are. Some of the rocks I turned over, though, came up with odd finds that weren't directly connected to Jordan justice. Three years ago, when Shon came and we managed to establish that my Shimai and his Kisea were the same person, I started to specifically look for rumours about a siren-blood mindhealer who was doing improbable cures."

"You what? Why not just fly a banner for the Assembly to see?"

"I did it carefully," he protested. "A few friends and family who travel a lot or are spread out in the mixed villages have been listening and they're all people I trust to keep it to themselves. It never got into the relays."

"Then how did you hear anything? It can take months or years for word to travel without using the relays."

"There, he was extremely clever," Shon said. "And did devise something apparently untraceable."

"Paper with two glyphs on it," Matt said. "When it's folded so the two glyphs come into contact the right way, it disappears from where it was and reappears in the locked box that's over on the shelf. No trail."

Kisea considered that. "That really is clever."

"You sound so surprised. I do have good ideas once in a while. I give it to a bunch of people so they can get ahold of me if they hear about anything I'd want to know, particularly if they hear of anything happening in Jordan, but there are a very few who have been listening for other things as well. Two are people you healed. It has, nearly always, taken me a long time to convince your patients and their loved ones that I truly did not mean you any harm, and there are a number of people I'm fairly sure you helped who never would talk to me. Anyway, I get rumours, and the next time I get a lull in dealing with Jordan problems, we go spend a few days paying visits. Somewhere in there, other people started hearing that I was asking questions, and started asking me questions."

"They heard," Shon said, "that he was asking about siren-blood telepaths, and some found that of great interest, because they had siren-blood family members who went to the College and, generally in their second or third year, their families were told they'd died through accident or sudden illness."

"That does happen," Kisea said. "A large number of teenagers with a limited number of adults supervising them, all learning new uses for gifts the nearest adults may not share and growing

stronger all the time with practice, accidents occur, and illness occurs, especially in dense groups.”

“I know of nine,” Matt said, very gently, “who were specifically described as being uncommonly strong projective telepaths, unusually good at making two-way contact with non-telepaths, but with quite a limited distance range.”

He could have slapped her and given her less of a shock. “Like me, while I was still learning how...” She trailed off.

Matt nodded. “I don’t have any proof that the Assembly has even made the connection. Maybe it’s random, maybe they suicided when they realized what they were, maybe what makes you special isn’t your gift, it’s your gift plus not having some vulnerability most have, I don’t know. Maybe none of them actually had your gift. But within twenty-five years, nine that I know of, with that particular set of traits, dying at the College...”

“Which no one else would pay any attention to at all, unless they happened by some very slight chance to know what the early manifestations of controlling look like. And almost no one knows anything except popular and usually exaggerated stories about renegades at the height of their power. Almost no one even knows what a controller really is, the only thing they hear about is one very extreme use for it. Even the name reflects it.”

“Which is why I can’t prove that there’s anything malicious going on. Probably negligence, at the very least inaccuracy in the facts given in the library because the evidence does clearly suggest that controllers are *not* born as rarely as we’re taught. There are some odd little things, though. One of the ones who was reported dead sounded familiar, so I re-checked the renegades list. He’s on it, as of a date after his family were told he was dead. That might be a mistake either on their part or whoever recorded it, though. Out of twenty-three listed renegade telepaths, not one is officially called a controller, but three other than you do have warnings noted about uncommonly strong projective telepathy. I don’t know what to make of it, except that clearly, there’s more to this. Unfortunately I can’t just truthspell anyone who might actually have answers.”

“The second siren who was there... he was a controller too,” Kisea said slowly, her mind racing as all this new information tried to fit into her worldview.

“He what?” Shon said, startled.

“I didn’t really have time to talk after I got that particular confirmation,” Matt said. “He’s the one I had suspicions about, remember? Because of the way those poor kids he had in the whorehouse were acting?”

“I remember,” Kian said grimly.

“And he’s on the renegade list. One of the three with the same warning as you.”

Kisea nodded. “He was strong, too. He said there are controllers born, but the Assembly makes sure we’re killed or Blinded before anyone finds out.”

“He was,” Matt said, “a very very bad man.”

“I got that, from what he said about you interfering with his business. But that doesn’t mean that was a lie. Especially combined with what you know. I didn’t get the sense that he believed it was a lie.”

“What people believe is not always the truth,” Kian pointed out. “People often project their own values onto others. A ruthless man might more easily believe that others are the same.”

“There is that. But it makes all the difference in the world. If they already know all this and are behind it, then they’ll probably be quite willing to sacrifice both of us to keep it quiet. If they don’t and it’s all just coincidence and negligence, then maybe they’ll listen. I don’t know. If it was only my safety, that’s one thing, but...”

“We covered that,” Matt reminded her. “And, seriously, do you think I’m going to stay quiet about this forever? I’d challenge them to make sure you’re safe from them anyway. But this needs to

be dragged out into the open.”

“You’re needed right here!”

“Dealing with justice issues on Jordan lands, while letting a Caalden-wide issue that might be affecting every controller born and might have been doing so for a long time continue to do so indefinitely without anyone noticing? And just hope that sooner or later someone else puts the pieces together and decides to actually pursue it? Do you really think I could ever forgive myself for that?”

“Given my experiences,” Shon said drily, “you can be sure we’ve spent a considerable amount of time talking about it. As little as I like it, he’s right.”

“Sometimes,” Kian said quietly, “something matters too much to not do it.”

“You’re all insane,” Kisea moaned, burying her face in her hands again. “Between you, you have a life most crossbreeds—and exiles—can only dream of, and you’re making the world better in the part of it you have some power over. And you want to toss it all to the winds because there are probably, but not definitely, people being born with a gift that, to most people, is the stuff of scary stories to tell late at night, and they are possibly, but not necessarily, conveniently disappearing.”

“Because there are almost certainly people being born that no one understands and everyone fears, including themselves,” Matt corrected, still gently. “And because as a result, through malice or neglect I don’t know, they are not getting a chance to live the lives they should have, they’re dying or they’re disappearing and living the way you have been or worse. Or they’re turning out like the worst everyone fears about controllers, but they might not if they had better options. I would like to try to keep that separate from making sure you’re safe, but I’m not sure whether that will be possible.”

“Oh good gods, Matt, of course it isn’t going to be possible to keep them separate. This changes everything from it being just about me and you to it being a direct challenge to the Assembly!”

“It might be,” Shon agreed.

“All right, I need to think, and I can’t do that with distractions. And if my stress levels get much higher, things are going to get extremely distracting all around. I seriously don’t know why they aren’t already. The psychic part I can control, I’ve caught myself on the first syllable or two starting to do the voice part and stopped myself, but there’s nothing I can do about the pheromone part.”

Kian chuckled. “Some people, when they want something, seek first to possess it. For some, however, their first instinct is not to claim it, it is to protect it.”

“You told me yourself that different individuals react in different ways to siren fascination, and under different circumstances,” Shon said. “While someone who holds mistaken ideas about sirens and has no interest in you beyond the moment might consider only how to get between those beautiful legs as quickly as possible by any means, those of us who understand sirens generally and care deeply about you specifically find your ongoing well-being a higher priority. Which doesn’t necessarily rule out being able to think clearly. Nor are you manipulating us, since wanting to look after you persists whether you’re present or not.”

“Perhaps more emphatically,” Kian said thoughtfully. “And only at the moments you begin to feel threatened again. But, I think, not enough to interfere with judgement.”

“Enough to occasionally trigger some rather impulsive thoughts,” Matt reflected. “About half of them being fantasies of massive earthquakes under the Assembly Hall at a time when the entire Joint Assembly is meeting, oops all dead, let’s start fresh. Which I would never do for real, obviously. The other half are mostly fantasies of wanting to hug you for about a nineday and then find or create a place where I could hide you and protect you and keep you safe from everything and everyone, but I’m not really so stupid that I’d try. I know where it’s coming from and it’s not a problem. Collecting information and making plans started a long time ago, and hasn’t changed

substantially.”

All of which neatly disarmed her immediate panicky thoughts about unintentionally forcing them to do what was best for her against their own best interests.

“Right, well, that's something. However, I need to think. Alone, please.”

“Not so surprising,” Shon said, getting up from the chair. Kian rose in a single smooth motion she'd seen before, legacy of spending as much time as possible in the wilderness, and Matt slithered off the bed. “An immense amount has changed very quickly where no change seemed possible, and it has stopped being only your own safety at stake. Kian's room is to the left, mine is to the right. Someone will be in one or the other in case you need us. No one will bother you until you come to us.”

Remarkable how Shon could have these moments of suddenly being all the highborn lord, completely in control.

Better still, though, was that he let himself and that Matt and Kian accepted it rather than seeing it as a threat.

She got up to kiss Shon, just for understanding, and Matt and Kian, just for being them.

For just a single mad instant, as she closed the door behind them, she considered the possibility of flight, but she discarded it as quickly as it came. She no longer had the onyx charm, and with crystal, blood, sex, and telepathic contact, there was absolutely no way Matt could not find her immediately. If he let her go, it would get him in worse trouble; either way, it would hurt him that she'd tried.

Who needed anything as crude as physical chains?

Hadn't Lady Jordan said something about that, though? That some chains were less physical, and couldn't be escaped from inside, only with outside assistance? Or something like that.

There was always the option of removing herself, irrevocably and beyond any question, from the whole mess and from the need to make an impossible decision. Then there'd not only be no more hiding and watching behind her, no more having to listen to horrible 'jokes' about sirens and horror stories about controllers, no more abuse and no more going without essentials, but also one less major risk for Matt to take and no risk of accusations of his being under her power. Challenging the Assembly with an impersonal question of justice was very different from challenging them with a controller wife as part of the situation. But he'd bring her up even if she was dead, she knew it, as evidence that not all controllers were psychopaths who dominated everyone around them and to explain how he knew so much, opening himself to accusations of bias anyway. For that matter, in a way he *was* biased, just by their relationship, even without considering what effect her proximity and stress might be having. He'd be safe from the claim that he was under her control, though, and he could make plans without having to consider what they meant for her.

It was still making a decision.

Even if the College just didn't know, how many controllers ended their own lives because they were alone and afraid and had no real information? How many turned to the bad because they were trying to survive, or learned to hate themselves and everyone else? How many were surviving in ways that made them the victims, beyond even most sirens, because it was the most bearable path of the few they could find? How many were being murdered just for existing?

How many more would?

How many other lives damaged because of what happened to a controller child, sibling, lover, friend?

She settled herself on the bed, legs crossed.

And turned all the self-discipline she'd ever developed to trying to sort out the chaos of her thoughts and feelings.

* * *

The sky was darkening to twilight by the time she went looking for them. Her still-raw inner senses nonetheless suggested going towards Kian's room, and she tapped on the door with her nails. Shon opened it, beckoned her inside.

Kian turned away from a table similar to Matt's, but strewn with arrow shafts and feathers and sundry such paraphernalia, where he was working on the fletching of an arrow. Matt was on a reading couch under the other window, his feet tucked up beside him, with a book he was now closing, and probably hadn't even noticed the low light level. In front of a square cushion on the floor were several knives and daggers, along with what she thought were oil and a whetstone and other things. It all suggested an easy camaraderie, together and individual at once.

Which, ultimately, she was being invited into, assuming this worked.

None asked; the question was too obvious for there to be any point.

She crossed the room towards Matt, and he got up to meet her, grey eyes searching hers.

She took a deep breath. "I think somehow I've become just as mad as you are. And I think you're as brilliant and as brave as you are mad. And somehow the one bit of really good luck in my life is having you decide that you care. I am more terrified than I think I've ever been, which is saying a lot, and after a childhood spent trying to be invisible and ten years of running constantly, not running makes it even more scary. If it was only about us... I don't know. I'm not sure I could live with what I'd have to do to get clear without you being accused of helping me, but I'm not sure I could live with any of the other options, either. But it isn't just us, and there's no other controller who has you. I never seem to be able to walk away from pain, and if there are other controllers being born but there's no sign of them, that's a lot of pain. Yes, I'll marry you, and face the Assembly with you, and hope that we both make it through it intact so we can actually have a life afterwards and I can help Kian and Shon and Jori try to keep you alive."

Matt wrapped both arms around her, hugged her tight, and she buried her face in his shoulder, letting herself lean for the moment on his strength because hers seemed to be at a low ebb.

"We'll make everything right," he said.

"But I need one promise from all three of you."

"What?"

"If things go very wrong and they manage, somehow, to Blind me, you'll kill me. Preferably before, but at the very least, I don't want to live like that. And it's less than certain whether I'd have enough of a mind left to do it myself."

"I'd have to be dead or very close to it myself for that to happen," Matt said.

"Promise me."

"I promise," Kian said quietly. "You will not live Blinded."

"So do I," Shon said, after only a brief pause. "I would, obviously, prefer almost any other possibility, but if all else fails, then yes."

Kisea looked up at Matt, waiting.

He sighed, nodded. "Me too. But it won't happen."

"Even you have limits. Since the two things that frighten me most are living Blinded and you ruining your life over me, and I can stop worrying about the one and you won't listen to reason about the other, I suppose I can live with whatever comes."

Matt ran a hand over her hair, pressed a kiss to her forehead. "How are you feeling, physically? Able to leave tomorrow?"

"I can do anything that needs to be done, dear. Why so fast?"

"One reason is that not knowing what's going to happen is a ghastly feeling that I'd rather make as short as possible for all of us."

"And?"

"And." He sighed, released her. "Word gets around at the speed of thought, and nothing Rob orders can completely stop that. We don't know whether others were involved in this hostage mess who are going to be investigating. I would much prefer that we show up in front of the Assembly voluntarily and challenge them ourselves, than have the Assembly act first."

"The College is days from here."

"No, the College is many miles from here. The time it takes to cover those miles, and for that matter how long those miles are, those are more flexible."

"I'm in no condition to help afterwards!"

"Any idea how long until you are?" Shon asked her.

"I'm not exactly hurt, it's more like the equivalent of muscle strain from doing too much. Three days?"

"That's too long," Matt said. "I always survive."

"How long to reach the College with no help at all from Kisea?" Shon asked Matt.

Matt pondered, his eyes losing focus as he worked out variables. "It's nine to ten days at regular speed, maybe as little as six with remounts if you push them hard. There are multiple broken fields between here and there that will interfere. Four days? Remounts are no help, since I'd have to interrupt the spell to stop and switch horses."

"And how long for you to recover afterwards?"

"Completely," Kian added. "Which I do not believe you are now or would be by tomorrow."

"I'll be almost full-strength by tomorrow," Matt said. "Less than two days at the other end to recover."

"Completely? Physically and mentally as well as magically? Because you cannot protect Kisea properly if you're at less than full strength. You would not allow excessive haste to put her at even the slightest further risk, correct?"

"This isn't being hasty, this is wanting the strategic high ground!" Matt sighed. "Fine, call it two days, but I could probably do it in less."

"I know it's a guess," Shon said, "but evidence seems to suggest that it would be substantially reduced by Kisea being able to help you when we stop. Any estimate as to how much?"

"Yes, evidence does. At a guess, a day less to recover, since I'd be less drained. Maybe faster and farther each day, if I'm resting better."

"Nine to ten days," Shon said, "is for riders who can stay in the saddle and moving all day. Jori carrying double all the way is out of the question. I'm sure we can arrange a horse for Kisea..."

"I'm no good at riding," Kisea protested.

Shon nodded. "It isn't a skill you've had much chance to learn. Nine to ten days is a reasonable time for riders who are accustomed to being in the saddle all day, repeatedly. If we do that to you for even one day, with or without Matt playing games with time and space, you'll be unable to even get on the horse the next. I very much doubt Matt's healing abilities are strong enough to counter that more than partially."

Matt looked abashed. "I forgot about that."

"We will get there as quickly as we can, but unless you've devised a way to move us collectively the way you make the paper move into the box, then it is going to take several days."

"Interesting idea, but not something I'm going to be able to work out quickly enough for it to be useful."

"We cannot reasonably leave earlier than tomorrow evening," Kian said. "You two have very limited camping gear, most of my gear and virtually all of Kisea's is lost, she lacks even clothes, and none of that will materialize overnight."

"Admittedly, it would be good to leave as soon as we can," Shon said. "Rob is, technically, a sworn relay telepath. We left out a few details in our telling, more for his sake than any belief he would act against you. What he doesn't officially know, he can deny even under truthspell. What he may suspect, or what Kallima might have said while exhausted after an ordeal, are another matter entirely."

"Through human lands, a night-ride will mean less chance of encountering others," Kian mused. "It is not necessary for magic to be involved immediately, either, we can ride straight for a time." He looked at Shon. "Leave tomorrow evening, which will mean we're out of the Manor and moving, no magic for at least the first night's travel, which will allow time for Kisea to learn and to heal further, and on the next we can decide whether we need another night of riding straight or not?"

Shon considered that, and nodded slowly. "That will work."

"Will it?" Matt said drily. "Well, that's nice to know."

"You do what you do, cousin, and let us do what we do," Shon said patiently. "Which is look after you despite yourself and make sure things get done. We do need to let Rob and Kara know as soon as possible, and it would likely be just as well to take care of the formalities so we can focus on getting ready."

Matt sighed. "All right, I know when to surrender." Kisea felt a flicker of telepathy against her overly-sensitized senses. "Family sitting room," he reported. "They're just finishing dinner and going there. I didn't realize it was that late. We can come now. Am I really that often, that crazy, that asking him to marry us right now doesn't get any reaction of surprise at all?"

"In part," Shon laughed. "And, in part, your uncle is a highly observant man."

Kisea got completely lost again on the way there.

The door was open; the room turned out to be larger than Kallima's sitting room, with the same level of high-quality furnishings that were everywhere here, but upholstered chairs and couches were arranged in an arc around the hearth, and the table across the room had two different game boards on it shoved to one side, and the floor was covered heavily with braided rag rugs in gay colours. This was, emphatically, a space for a loving couple and their children and family to spend time together.

Lady Jordan was wearing a skirt this time, and looking altogether proper and elegant even if the colours and embroidery were more muted than they could have been, her hair in two braids again. She was on one couch with a boy in his mid or late teens.

Lord Jordan—in a blueberry-coloured tunic with elaborate embroidery around the edges—was on the other couch with a girl who might be just edging into her teens. Kisea hadn't really seen him last night: the lines of his face reminded her of Kian, in particular, though that sandy-brown hair and tanned skin were very different, and he had the build of a man who stayed active rather than letting those around him do everything. Hadn't Matt told her once that he spent as much time as he could arrange in the stables and horse-pastures personally? A telepath crystal glittered at his throat, above the familiar red-and-gold horse on a second chain.

"We need to get married, formally and officially, as quickly as possible," Matt said to Lord Jordan. "Would you? Please?"

Lady Jordan sighed. "I should have known I'd never get a chance to plan a proper wedding celebration for you."

"Once we're sure we'll be able to celebrate. After a very large issue of justice that unfortunately is not under Jordan jurisdiction is corrected."

Lord Jordan only nodded. "Kalli's gone to get a contract from my office. I can personally verify lack of duress. Rather than disturb Elric purely for that, of course, and we don't need him to have enough witnesses, with Kalli and Kara and Shon and Kian—sorry Tobin, Adelia, you aren't legal age

yet.”

Matt echoed the nod. “Thank you.”

“Does this much haste mean you're leaving just as quickly?” Lady Jordan asked.

“Tomorrow evening. We're going to ride at night, apparently. I need to discuss something with the Assembly and I would rather go to them before they come looking for me.”

“High ground is a better position all around,” Lord Jordan said, rising and offering his wife a hand to her feet. He stretched, and stepped around the arc of seats so his back was to them, facing Kisea and the three alasir-blood. “I'm not going to ask, it's your own business, but I hope you know I trust you and you have my full support, on or off Jordan lands.”

“I know,” Matt said. “And thank you. But I don't think you can help with this one. Other than marrying us and maybe lending us a horse so Jori doesn't have to carry double.”

“Oh, I think we can probably find a horse somewhere, there are one or two about.”

Kallima darted back in the room with a sheet of heavy paper in her hand. “I found it.”

Lord Jordan held out a hand to Matt and one to Kisea; both laid their hands in his. “Let's see if I can remember all the words. I haven't done this often or recently.”

“You can leave out the line about monogamy, at least on her part,” Matt said as an afterthought. “That's a lot like having a line in mine about vegetarianism.”

The thought of only a single lover was actually a rather pleasant one, at least in theory, but she had to admit that he was probably right. Siren-blood notoriously had difficulty with marriage as an exclusive sexual relationship, regardless of intimacy and commitment. It was all too likely her siren side would start to chafe at that.

“I think under the circumstances we can skip the question of whether there is any reason to question the validity of this,” Lord Jordan said. “I assume you know what you're doing and there are no special terms to be spelled out at this point. So, the important part.”

The words blurred a bit for Kisea, though she echoed them back faithfully. He could, right then, have inserted a line with a promise to stay at home and have babies and cook every day, and she wouldn't have noticed. Well, probably not.

Matt repeated each line right after her, his voice absolutely steady.

Lord Jordan joined their hands together, wrapped his own around them. “The law recognizes and confirms the union that binds you already in heart and spirit. I devoutly hope everything works out as well as you both deserve and you can come back quickly so we can celebrate properly.”

As soon as his uncle let go, Matt pulled her closer, both arms around her, and gave her a kiss that did quite a lot to dispel the dazed feeling. Laws and vows were only symbols, after all; as Lord Jordan had said, they were already bound in the way that mattered most.

Lady Jordan unfastened her own red-and-gold necklace, twin to the ones the alasir-blood cousins all wore, and handed it to Matt; he turned Kisea with a hand on her shoulder so he could clasp it in place for her.

“Welcome to the family,” Lady Jordan said, smiling.

Kisea and Matt had to sign the contract first, then Lord Jordan, then all four witnesses.

“My seal is in my office,” Lord Jordan said. “Will you leave this in my hands until tomorrow?”

Matt nodded. “Thanks. And I will get back to work soon.”

“Everything else can wait. Consider yourself officially on leave for as long as you need.”

“Leaving tomorrow allows very little time to get ready,” Lady Jordan said briskly. “Clothes that you can ride in, at the very least.”

“If I know you,” Kallima added, “you won't be stopping at inns to sleep, at least partially because they won't be right where you need them when you wear yourself out. If it rains, that will be absolutely miserable with minimal or no gear.”

Her mother nodded. "And you won't want to get there so exhausted you can barely think coherently. We'll see what we can arrange. Off you go and get some rest, all four of you."

* * *

Once the quartet were gone, Rob traded sober glances with his wife.

"Alina," she said, and he nodded.

"Alina needs to know."

"Is Matt going to be all right?" Adelia asked worriedly.

"Of course he will," Kallima said, hugging her sister close reassuringly. "You know Matt. He's always getting into trouble and he always gets through it." Her expression, though, said that she was less sure, and Adelia was telepath enough to pick up on that and be less than convinced.

"And he has Shon watching his back now too, not just Kian," Tobin said. Both the younger children were fascinated by their alasis almost-cousin; Rob and Kara had concluded that they approved without reservation. Tobin could certainly have chosen a worse role model, or Adelia a worse infatuation. And their elder daughter's relationship with him, well, that was between them to work out without interference.

At the mention of Shon's name, Adelia relaxed visibly. "That's true. They'll be fine."

All right, Kalli, what aren't you telling?

The same thing Kian and Shon left out, for the same reason. Because there's a potential conflict of interest there for you.

Rob picked up the marriage contract. "Keep me company to my office, Kalli? This is likely to get lost or damaged here, and if I don't add the seal now, it'll get forgotten tomorrow." He gave Kara a quick kiss. "We'll be right back."

Kallima fell into step with him, not asking, along the corridor and down a flight of stairs to his own office. Matt's was only a few doors down, along with Kara's and those of several Manor employees who handled a great deal of paperwork. No one was likely to be around at this hour.

Rob closed the door firmly, leaned against it.

"My Oath as a telepath matters," he said quietly. "But responsibility to my people and my family comes before all else. If worst comes to worst, Tobin knows nothing and your mother can act as regent until he comes of age. Let me guess. Kisea is Shimai, who is legally a renegade and ran away from the College for reasons unknown. At least, unknown to anyone but her and Matt."

"And Kian and Shon and Jori, I'd say," Kallima said. "Now, if not then. She told me she's a controller. I believe her, she can do things I've never seen a telepath do. But you know Matt wouldn't trust her if she were even remotely capable of being like the ones in the stories. My cousins are still definitely themselves, and is it even possible for anyone to influence Jori?"

"No, probably not."

"So everything suggests that she is exactly what she looks like, only hiding a gift that probably no one really understands. And Matt knew all along why she ran away."

"A siren mindhealer who does improbable cures," Rob murmured thoughtfully. "That's what he asked his parents and Kian's to listen for rumours about, and to do it very discreetly. If a controller can tear a mind apart, maybe a controller could put one back together. But the Oath explicitly forbids all manifestations and uses of the controller gift."

"And how's Matt going to react to a blanket condemnation like that? Judging anyone born with a particular gift, however rare, without giving them any chance to demonstrate how they'll use it?"

"Poorly," Rob sighed. "Even in the abstract, let alone with the safety of someone he still feels strongly about on the line. I'm inclined to agree with him."

"Why the formalized marriage, though?"

"It would certainly be less easy for the Assembly to condemn out-of-hand a renegade who

happens to be the documented and recognized wife of not only a well-known sorcerer in good standing but one with an office as powerful as Matt's. They can't make her disappear the way they might someone with no family and no influence."

"Could he argue that his Oath covers her as well?"

"That's probably what he intends. Whether the Assembly will agree, however, is another matter. Especially for a controller. Well. Matt is family, and now so is Kisea, by any name. They can use all the support available. I can tell Alina now and they can start for the College."

"Depending on where they are, we might be able to have someone meet them with fresh horses and remounts and supplies."

"A good thought. Kisea needs a horse. One of yours, maybe?"

"Honey," she said, after brief consideration. "She'll do fine with an inexperienced rider but she'll be able to keep up with Rose and Butterfly."

"It might help if I'm there to back Matt up. I imagine they'll protest and try to find a way around it, however."

Kallima grinned at him. "I don't care if Matt's using magic, you and I with a remount each can get to the College almost as quickly. Especially since they'll have to slow down with a new rider."

"Sweetheart, you were just..."

"I just went through something that was very bad, but it wasn't just my cousins that got me out of it, it was Kisea too, at least as much. I'm all right, really. And you aren't leaving me behind. Just try."

Rob had seen that gleam in his sister's eyes a thousand times, and had learned when to surrender—because to continue objecting was an invitation for her to do something on her own, and if she was with him, at least he'd know she was safe. "All right. What else can we do?"

"Gear. We can at least make certain they get there in reasonable condition. Kisea and Kian dropped most of what they had when Matt and Shon turned up, apparently so Matt could adjust for Kisea's weight as well or something. In Kian's case, that's annoying, but I'm not hearing anything about Kisea having a home anywhere—before now—so probably that was most of what she owned. Mama always says clothes are a tool. Kisea confronting the Assembly in crimson brocade layered skirts is going to be less comfortable and also less sympathetic than Kisea confronting them in the kinds of clothes someone who lives on the road is used to. She's taller than Alina or I and curvier than Lori but I'll see what I can do." She thought again. "Maybe a riding lesson. Shon's good and he can help a lot, but women are built differently and have a different centre of balance."

"All good thoughts," Rob agreed. It was Jordan's loss that his eldest child couldn't inherit while her brother was able to, but with any luck Tobin would have enough sense to listen to her. Besides, she'd probably be happier as the head of the stables and breeding program, in which Tobin had limited interest, and helping her brother when he needed it—and it was a role that would give her far more freedom in her personal life than a title would have.

"Keep watch for me, and I'll get a message started to Alina?" he asked, and she nodded, moving over to stand in front of the door. He settled himself in his chair comfortably, back straight, and closed his eyes. One deep breath, two, and he reached outwards, searching.

Before his own brother had decided that they'd both be happier with Rob holding the title, he'd been not only Chris' extra hands and eyes but also his own personal relay telepath, something they'd expected would be a permanent arrangement—even when it became clear that the sister several years younger than Rob was an even stronger telepath.

As it was, it helped enormously with maintaining communications, that he and Alina could both use the relays.

He brushed against the mind of his own house relay telepath Elric, who acknowledged him

without surprise. While Elric handled the bulk of the messages in and out of Jordan Manor and relayed messages through, Rob still took care of his own personal communications. That meant reaching out, covering as much ground as possible, and connecting himself to the web of telepath minds that linked all of Caalden. Messages could race from the remote South to the farthest North in a matter of hours or less, depending only on the links that were active at that particular moment. With thousands of telepaths who had reasonably strong gifts and reasonable range all trained and many of them employed primarily or at least secondarily in that capacity, there were many possible routes for any message to follow.

Well, good evening, my lord, came the saucy reply from a telepath he recognized immediately, a woman who lived in a town elsewhere in the Jordan province. She being the closest relay telepath outside the Manor, he encountered her most of the time when he did this from home. *Looking for your sister?*

Yes. I'm not sure where she is. The last I heard was in the vicinity of Blackwood in Guarin heading towards Sleeping Bear in the disputed lands.

We'll find her. What's the message?

Matt is headed for the College fast and may need us against the Assembly. Situation is complicated. Tell me if we can arrange horses and supplies.

Oh my, she whispered, all humour gone. *He's challenging the Assembly? I know I shouldn't ask, but... over what?*

What matters most to Matt, of course. Justice and honesty, understanding and compassion, and any trespass against them. Up against Assembly politics, he needs all the support he can get.

16

"Aha, there you are," Kallima said, striding into the dining room, a large sun-bright room with rich tapestries and paintings on the walls and a long polished table surrounded by chairs. Kisea and all three alasis-blood were finishing what was, for them, more dinner than the breakfast the rest of the Manor had recently enjoyed. "You know, the kitchen makes a lot more of those meat pastries when you lot are around, they almost never do when you aren't. My current theory is that pastries are a meat-heavy food they can easily keep warm until whatever odd hours you remember to eat."

"Since they're very good, and the contents even vary enough to not be monotonous, I see no problem," Shon said.

"Only an observation." She dropped into the empty chair beside Shon, and helped herself to a piece of gravy-smeared pastry left on his plate. "I imagine you're going to bed soon, but Kisea, I'd like to borrow you, first, for a riding lesson. I won't keep you long, but it's a horse I trained and I know her better than anyone, and I'd like to make sure you both get off on the right foot."

"I'm probably going to be a terrible student," Kisea warned her.

"I'm a very patient teacher," Kallima said cheerfully. "I found you something to wear, since you can't ride in a skirt. It's in my rooms. Mama and I have people working on collecting the rest of what you'll need, including more clothes. The workmen are clearing the wreckage at the ferry, and Papa sent as many as possible who aren't busy with the harvesting so it's going quickly, and Joanna's helping. She's the Manor sorceress. All the water is gone, which I'm sure they appreciate."

"There was nothing to keep it there once I stopped holding barriers," Matt said.

"Joanna's impressed, but she says she's used to being impressed by you doing things in

unconventional ways.”

“Did they manage to confirm that the other telepath is dead?”

“Yes. They asked me to identify him, which wasn't very nice.”

“I could have,” Kisea said. “And I'm used to not nice.”

“Yes, but you were unavailable in Matt's room and, well, the quicker the better, and I'm not as fragile as I might look. In a way, it's good to see for myself. Now I know for sure that everyone involved is either in a cell or dead. That's sort of comforting. Anyway. It's fairly clear who all the expensive clothes and such belong to. Honestly, why they would keep dressing like that under conditions like that is beyond me. At least change to something sensible for a few days. Mama's trying to decide whether to rip them up for cleaning rags or donate them to the temple. Under that they found some things I think are probably yours. It's all spread out in one of the gardens to dry, but I asked Joanna to make sure that your boots and your bodice—and that is beautiful work, who did it? I can get away with leather when I run off to the Village and I think I want one—that they dried properly immediately with no damage.”

“Oh, really?” Kisea smiled in pure delighted relief. “That would be wonderful! They aren't just things, or necessary things, or very-well-made necessary things. Some of it was given to me as thanks-gifts by people that I helped or people very close to them. The boots, the bodice, my coat... most of the things I was reluctant to just discard, actually.”

“Everything got extremely wet, but I don't think there's much that's damaged beyond repair.” Kallima looked pleased by her reaction.

Matt smiled, too. “I'm glad you didn't lose them. There are too many stories there. The bodice, by the way, came from Hope-of-Luck, I believe.”

“We'll take you there to talk to him once we have time,” Shon agreed.

“You know just too much about what I've been doing,” Kisea told Matt.

He just grinned at her, unabashed. “What I've been doing is more or less public knowledge. Fair's fair.”

“All done?” Kallima asked. “I'm sure the boys can keep themselves out of trouble for a little while.”

“You are?” Kisea muttered. “I'm not.” Still, she went with Kallima, who was in very practical wool trousers of plain grey and a grey-and-yellowish-green bodice, her hair in a single neat braid, though that bleached linen blouse was a giveaway.

Kallima presented her with equally sensible trousers of a yellowish-brown and her own well-broken-in boots with knit socks of unbleached wool tucked inside. “If you want to, you can use my bedroom, but don't for my sake.”

Kisea shimmied out of the skirt and slippers, switched with some relief to the trousers and perched on a chair to lace her boots. “She did a wonderful job with these.”

“She's very good.”

Kisea looked up, met Kallima's eyes. “Thank you.”

Kallima blinked, looked puzzled. “For what?”

“For being very patient and understanding while I'm feeling like a fish tossed into a tree, at a time when you've just had a bad fright yourself. For not being afraid of me. For everything you're doing to help.”

“Papa told me once that there are some sorts of thoughts that do more harm than good and you just chase your own tail around and around until you exhaust yourself, and that the best way to stop those sorts of thoughts is to do things that will help other people. I think he's right. But also, how could I be afraid of you? Or not be patient? The Manor is huge and complicated, I know that. Why do you think I love running off to the Village so much, other than having to leave my horses?”

She laughed. "And you're my cousin now, remember? So, let's go introduce you to Honey. Which isn't just her colour, it's also her personality and how smooth her gaits are." She held out a hand to urge Kisea to her feet. "Papa and I decided together to breed her parents, and I trained her myself, mostly, with the horsemaster's advice. Her line are chosen mainly for being smart and calm, but she'll be able to keep up with Rose and Butterfly under any remotely normal circumstances. Mostly they go to healers and to people who are otherwise often house-bound for various reasons, but also to mages who need to know that their mount won't bolt the first time they're distracted."

"She sounds like maybe I can stay on her," Kisea said wryly.

They went down to a back door, and past an herb garden and across a grassy area to a corral made of split rails, the gate open.

Tied to one rail was a patiently-waiting horse.

Not as tall as Rose and Butterfly, her coat gleamed like brass in the sun, and her mane and tail were a few shades paler. An irregular thin white stripe ran down her face, broken in the middle, and she had three mismatched white feet, in one case the white not touching the hoof at all; she wasn't sure markings like that were normally considered a good thing in fancy horses, but to Kisea, they were charmingly distinctive. She was already wearing tack much the same as Butterfly and Rose's.

"Come say hello," Kallima urged, as she untied the rope from the rail and fastened it to a ring on the saddle. The younger woman crooned to the mare, rubbing around her forelock and under the bridle affectionately.

Kisea approached a bit more cautiously, let the golden mare nuzzle her hand inquisitively.

"Hello, beautiful. I hope we can be friends."

"That's the whole point of this lesson," Kallima said. "For the moment, it's probably easier to let Shon deal with getting her tack on and off, but I'll teach you that later if he doesn't first. The most important thing now is for you and her to be able to cooperate on a long ride. You aren't used to riding, so you're going to be sore."

"I'll survive, I suppose."

"Muscles you don't know you have are going to hurt. I'll make sure you have something for that and just in case there's any chafing. Neither of those happen much once you're used to riding. They happen less on a saddle like this that's designed to make everything as easy as possible for you and Honey both."

Lessons started with mounting, progressed to how to sit—which was certainly not just passively in the saddle—and finally to Kallima turning them loose in the corral.

A red-tailed hawk fluttered down to perch on the railing beside Kallima and watch; Honey snorted at her but otherwise ignored her.

Trotting was harder than walking, but once Kallima showed her the trick of moving in time with Honey so they weren't bobbing up and down in opposite directions and meeting uncomfortably in the middle, it was much better.

"I'll make a proper rider of you yet," Kallima laughed, steadying her as she swung off.

"Anything is possible, I suppose. Thank you. That helps."

"Since it looks like you and Honey *are* going to be friends, she's yours."

"What? I can't," Kisea protested. "I don't know anything about looking after a horse, and she must be worth..."

"She's worth less than my life, I'd like to think," Kallima said. "Consider her a thanks-gift, a wedding gift, or whatever will let you accept her. Papa knows and approves, if that's any part of what worries you. I'd really like you to have her."

But I don't know if I can keep her.

Kisea swallowed the words, made a mental note to ask Shon and Kian to make sure that if worst

came to worst Honey came back to Kallima, and surrendered. "Thank you. She's gorgeous. I seem to be thanking you a lot."

"I'm trying not to thank you about every third thought for taking a big risk to save me. So let's just not worry about it, all right? I'm going to look after Honey and make sure she'll get a good rest before tonight. Come on back to the stable, and I'll find someone to show you the way. Unless you want to just look and I'll show you."

"I can't," Kisea confessed, falling in step beside her towards the nearest building. "The telepath I was fighting didn't do any damage that I can find, but I did over-extend myself. Right now, even Matt touching my mind hurts."

"Ouch."

"It will heal in a few days. I don't much like feeling defenceless, but I'm not likely to be in much immediate danger." *Nothing I can defend against.*

"Not with Matt and Kian and Shon all being protective."

"It would have been worse if you hadn't hit him. See, you saved me, too."

In a broad aisle between large boxes, each home to a horse, Kallima tied Honey's rope to a very short horizontal bar and moved around to her side. "Maybe we can just call it even." As she began to loosen Honey's saddle, she gave Kisea a conspiratorial grin over her shoulder. "Speaking of the boys being protective, though, have you seen Shon with a sword? Especially his new one? I know the ultimate point is to fight, but it's like watching one of the barn cats hunting, or Jori flying, or one of the courier horses running just for the love of running. It's, um, really fascinating to watch."

"Not recently," Kisea said, amused. She rather suspected that *fascinating* might not be precisely the right word, given the hint of a blush she saw, and that fit with other subtle hints she'd picked up. By Kallima's age, she'd already had more lovers than she could quickly count; life was very different here, and it was quite possible Kallima had never had even one, but it sounded like the interest was there, both generally and specifically. "But I do remember from before, when he had his old sword."

"You were the mindhealer he met that sent him to the Village?"

"Yes. Although I didn't know at the time who he's related to."

"I'm glad you helped him. It's hard to imagine what it was like without him. He is so patient. He makes time a lot to come on rides with me when he's not away with Matt, and he's wonderful company." She heaved the saddle and blanket off Honey and onto a nearby beam, and took a coarse rag from a nail just above it, which she ran over Honey's back where the saddle had been. "My sister is positively infatuated with him, and she's just recently started to get interested in flirting and she keeps trying it out on him. He just treats her like a great lady, all high courtesy, and the rest of the time is more like another brother. My brother really looks up to him, and Shon takes time to talk to him about anything from swordplay to politics to history, and anything Tobin doesn't know he explains without making a fuss about it. Like Tobin's an equal. They almost were, I suppose, but the stupid part is that before Shon was disinherited, we were supposedly enemies, or at least not friends, just over him being *alasir* and us being human."

"How do your parents feel about how your sister and brother act?" *And how will they feel about the way you see him? And how does Shon see you?* Though, remembering some of what she'd picked up from Shon on the way to rescue Kallima, she suspected she had an answer to that last already.

"They like Shon, and they trust him. What happened to him wasn't fair, and I'm sorry he went through it, but I think he's reasonably happy here, and I know a lot of people are glad he's here."

"I think he's happy, too. This is a much more natural environment for him than on the road. If I'm a fish tossed into a tree, Shon out on the road alone is more like an owl splashing around in a lake!"

Kallima laughed. "Which would make Kian, what, an otter because he can go back and forth?"

What would Matt be, then?"

"Probably some odd hybrid thing that is spectacularly successful despite all logic, like a bird with scales."

"Probably!"

Nearly all the meaningful relationships in my life longer than a day or so have been with men, except Fala. It might be really wonderful to be able to have a woman for a friend again.

If I live through this, and can ever actually come back here.

Suddenly tired, she said, "You mentioned finding someone to show me the way back? I'm sorry, I'm just..."

"No, you're right. You need to sleep. I'll..."

"I'll take you."

Kisea blinked in surprise at Jori as the stormhawk, in human form, strolled up to pet Honey.

"Jori? Oh... is Matt looking for me?"

Jori grinned at her. "Matt would be happy if he had you directly where he could see you every instant, after this long trying to find you. He doesn't think you'll run away or anything, but possibly at moments he thinks he's dreaming or hallucinating." She patted the side of Honey's neck. "She's nice, Kalli. I can carry two, but it's harder, and Matt has to work harder too. Rose and Butterfly will like her."

"I hope so," Kallima said. "I imagine they, and you, will be spending a lot of time together. Sleep well, Kisea. Mama and I will have everything ready for you by the time you leave. And no more saying thank you, remember?"

Jori was clearly not inclined to talk, but did show Kisea how to get back to Matt's room. Which, she supposed, was now technically hers as well, but that was an idea it would take time to get used to. Just being married was an idea that would take time to get used to.

He glanced back as she opened the door, and greeted her with a warm smile; he was at the table, with a considerable amount of paper arranged in piles, or being arranged into piles at least. "How'd your riding lesson go?"

"I'm never going to be a great rider," she said, "but with lessons like that, and the sweet horse Kalli decided to give me, I think I'll be able to keep up."

"It just takes practice." He abandoned the table, came to her for a hug and a kiss.

"Most things do. No, I smell like horse..."

"So?" He gave her another loving kiss, but let her go and turned back to the table. "We should get some sleep."

"What's all the paper?"

"Everything I've managed to collect about you and about possible other controllers." He gathered it all up and dropped it in a rectangular box with symbols carved into it. "I was just sorting it out and making sure it's all there. The box is spelled to destroy the contents if anyone tries to force it open, but any time you like, I'll open it and you can read it." He fitted the lid back on and laid his fingertips against the box for a couple of heartbeats.

"Thus losing you several years of research."

"Oh, there's another copy. I gave it to Jori and asked her to hide it somewhere that no one else could possibly reach it but she could retrieve it if anything happens to this one. I haven't the faintest idea where she put it, and no one can get the information from her or make her get it." He tucked the box into a flat leather satchel, and added a much smaller box, no wider than her palm and perhaps twice that long and quite thin. "That's the one that paper marked with that glyph appears in, before you ask. It only opens for me." He left the satchel on one of the chairs, and went to the window to close the curtains, leaving the room in twilight for them to both shed clothes and nestle

into bed.

17

Kisea woke up tangled cozily with Matt, no haziness left in her mind, only a vague sense of surreality: somehow, in only two days or so, she'd gone from hiding from Matt and the Assembly to marrying Matt and preparing to challenge the Assembly.

It was insane, of course, but for herself, for Matt, for every controller out there hiding or who would in the future, it had to be done.

Matt opened his eyes and gave her a happy, sleepy smile. "Ha. Mine. Gotcha."

She rolled her eyes, kissed him, and got up.

Judging by the angle of the light, it was late afternoon. There were clothes draped over the chair again. Were the servants around here supernatural, that they could slip in and out without waking her after so many years staying alert even in her sleep?

She had no idea how Lady Jordan and Kallima had found or arranged these ones, but she was intensely grateful: unbleached chemise and drawers of somewhat sturdier linen than yesterday's, though still fine and soft and with no stains from use like her old ones; trousers of strong wool twill dyed a pleasant but unremarkable deep brown, with an additional layer of leather covering the seat and inner thighs. Her own leather bodice was draped neatly over them, though with new cords threaded through it.

She cleaned up quickly in the bathroom before getting dressed, not sure when she'd next have access to hot water.

Matt, she had to admit, looked positively delicious, in muted grey-blue. But she still couldn't quite control a flinch as he dropped the chain of his medallion over his head and tucked it under his shirt. He picked up the flat leather satchel, a larger pack that was obviously designed to fit behind a saddle, and his cloak. "Ready?" He offered his free hand.

She took a deep breath to steady herself, nodded, and slid her hand into his.

"I am never going to be able to find my way around this place," she sighed, a moment later.

"I don't think about it much. I've been in and out of here all my life, and I've been mostly living here the past five years or so."

"And therefore your loyal shadows as well. I can't see Kian caring much for that."

"He wanders off sometimes to get back out where he'd rather be for a while. Much more now, since he trusts Shon to keep an eye on me, and Shon's good at the job and seems to like it. Other than the day-night thing being a bit of a nuisance. Of course, I forget to go to bed so often when I'm busy with something that it isn't that unusual for us to be up most of the night anyway. Everyone's used to it."

Oh, I'm so surprised.

He led her back to the dining room.

Lord Jordan was in one of the chairs, with a bronze goblet of something, and he was cutting an apple into neat slices and eating each as it came free; he looked extremely casual, leaning back in the chair with his feet stretched out under the table.

Kian was beside him, and Shon directly across the table, each working on a bowlful of something dark and rich-looking and meaty-smelling. The two children Kisea had met briefly were on either side of Shon; even without Kallima's description of how her siblings felt, it was quite

obvious that Shon had most of their attention. Shon, in turn, seemed more indulgent and amused than discomfited by it.

Kisea tried to remember whether Shon had ever mentioned having siblings. Surely they couldn't have disowned the only child of an only remaining child with the inheritance of a high House at stake, could they? Or would they be willing to let the title go to a cadet branch of the family, or disappear, for the sake of being rid of an Heir with inconvenient and deeply held values? She remembered part of his grief being over the enforced dissolution of his marriage: despite it having been more political than personal, genuine affection had developed there. They'd had no children that Shon knew of after some two years together, so the title couldn't be simply transferred to an infant son or daughter—alasir being more flexible about sex when it came to inheritance. Surely he had younger brothers or sisters?

“Good evening,” Lord Jordan greeted them. “Kara's checking that nothing has been left out, and Kallima's getting Jori and the horses ready. Have a seat. Not everything is entirely carnivore-feed, although it may not be precisely traditional for breakfast.”

“I'm not fussy,” Kisea said, a bit nervous still. *Ten years of running from authority and the law, and I'm at a table with one of the most powerful men in Caalden and married to his High Warden of the Peace.* “I don't remember ever eating as well as here.”

“There are some perks that go with responsibilities. A good cook with a generous food budget is high on the list.”

Rather like his daughter the previous day, he kept the conversation deftly away from the sorts of subjects that would be sensitive or awkward. Instead, he described for them the most outrageous wedding stories he'd ever heard and speculated about what his wife and daughter would devise in revenge for having to do it apart from their actual vows, especially once Kian's mother got involved, interspersed with reflections on what his sister was going to do to him for conducting a formal marriage for her only child without her present.

The meal could only last so long, though.

To Kisea's utter astonishment, before they could leave the dining room, Lord Jordan pushed back his chair and circled around the table to catch both her hands in his. She dropped her gaze automatically, made herself look up into telepath-green eyes.

“You deserve better than the world has allowed so far,” he said gently. “Anything I can do to help make that right, I will do. The more mad my nephew's ideas look, the more often they seem to succeed. Once this one does, come back and help me make sure that at least under Jordan jurisdiction, being born with siren blood does not mean anyone is treated as public property.”

She blinked, both at the sympathy and the rather blunt phrasing, then had to smile. “That's a lovely thought.”

“Good. Hold onto it.” He gave her a chaste kiss on her cheek, turned to pull Matt into a rough embrace. “Watch your step and get through this intact, please. You matter to a great many people. And your mother would be devastated if anything happened to you.”

“My parents understand about some things being so important that you have to do them no matter what,” Matt said.

“More deeply than almost anyone, but understanding isn't much consolation.” Lord Jordan let him go, looked at Kian and Shon. “Try to keep them out of trouble.”

“I've been trying a long time,” Kian said, accepting a similar embrace. “I'm unsure how successful I've been, but Matt's still alive, so I must not be doing too badly.”

“We will continue to do our best,” Shon said; he shared, instead, a nonetheless warmly affectionate arm-clasp with his not-really-uncle.

Lord Jordan retrieved a familiar sheet of heavy paper from a sideboard cabinet, gave it to Matt,

who tucked it into the leather satchel. "Off you go."

Kian and Shon, she noticed, were both in only unbleached short-sleeved linen shirts and wool trousers the colour of goldenrod. Interestingly, the jerkins both picked up and shrugged into were rose madder red, and on one front panel of each, a rearing horse had been embossed into the leather in drab gold.

"Technically, I'm doing this on my own, not as part of my job," Matt pointed out to them. "So why the house colours?"

Kian shrugged; Shon tilted his head towards Lord Jordan.

"Because," Lord Jordan said, resting his weight against the sideboard, "whether this is on your own or not, it will do no harm for people to have a reminder that you hold, for very good reason, a highly trusted office. If they remember what that is and can make the connection, so much the better. I don't need details. I trust you."

You know more than you're saying, Kisea thought. More than you should know. More than you're safe knowing.

But you don't care, do you? Not for your sister's son.

"Thank you," Matt said quietly.

Lord Jordan smiled and made a shooing gesture.

Outside the front door, Jori was waiting patiently in horse-form beside Butterfly and Rose and Honey and another horse, this one about Honey's height but a deep brown with yellowish highlights, mane and tail virtually the same shade. Other than the new one, all had small but bulging packs strapped to the backs of the saddles, including rolls that might have been blankets or canvas or coats or some combination; other things, like waterskins, were hanging farther forward. The new one had a very different sort of saddle, which supported several leather packs that might be personal gear, as well as large baskets on either side and several rolls that might be blankets or canvas or both.

Kallima was waiting for them, checking over the fit of the tack and the balance of the packs, but she left off when she saw them.

"You should have plenty of road food and everything for at least a basic camp, but there's money too so you can buy food if you happen to pass an inn and can stop that long. There are pastries in the front bags on all four, so you can eat them first." She patted the neck of the brown horse affectionately, while Shon took Matt's pack and added it to its load, apparently with some care for where and how. "Bear will make sure no one's carrying too much, and he and Rose and Butterfly are used to each other. So, enough wasting time. You're all going to come back safely as soon as possible, so there's no need for farewells, right?"

"Right," Matt agreed.

There were more hugs, first, though—even though Kallima hugging Shon, a technically unrelated male, would have been scandalous in many places. Kisea, watching, thought it was actually more intense on both sides than even relatively liberal propriety would approve of.

I wonder how Lord and Lady Jordan would feel about a half-alaris grandchild or two? Race and politics aside, I think they'd be better matched than many couples.

And I'd rather see Shon happy than reserve the right to toss him in bed now and then.

Kisea, thanks to her lessons, mounted without Shon's help, though Kallima was at Honey's head and knotted the lead-rope to the saddle for her. Shon untied Bear and fastened his rope to a ring on Butterfly's saddle before mounting, himself.

"Honey's used to being around other horses and they're herd animals, so she'd rather stay with the others than wander off alone," Kallima said. She patted Honey's neck, and backed away, up onto the broad front steps of the manor.

Kisea was aware of all of her companions keeping an eye on her as they started out to the road.

"Relax," Shon said. "Try less hard. Feel the way she moves, and then let her lead, while you match her rhythm."

"Think of it like sex," Matt said mischievously.

It got easier as she and Honey grew more accustomed to one another.

After a while, more to give Kisea a break than the horses, all dismounted and walked for a while, leading the horses. That was far more the kind of exercise Kisea's body knew, although she was usually carrying her own gear instead of having an accommodating animal do it, and it helped quite a lot. Another stretch riding, then a briefer walk just so she didn't stiffen up, and a pause to let the horses drink from a stream and graze a bit while the two-legged members of the party had a meal of cold, but still delicious, meat pastries.

They kept alternating until the sky began to grey in the east.

Kian halted Rose, dismounted, handed Shon her rope, and headed into the dense greenery that flanked the relatively bare verge of the road.

The others dismounted but Shon insisted that they not halt immediately and that they walk while waiting for Kian.

It took him some time, but he returned to beckon to them.

"It isn't ideal, but for us to rest and eat, it will do."

What he'd found turned out to be one of the small cottages that dotted the wilderness, homes permanent or seasonal to those whose occupation or personality took them outside settlement life. It was in good repair, though currently no one was there. The usual resident might be less than welcoming to a group of intruders. Still, there was a stream, and some open ground where the horses could graze, so they decided to stay there but sleep outside at the edge of the trees.

Kisea left any security precautions to her companions; she ached too much to care.

"Come on, out of the clothes," Matt said, flipping a magically-thin canvas sheet so it spread flat on the ground. "From the waist down, at least."

"Now?" she complained, a halfhearted attempt at a joke. "That's all anyone wants me for."

"Muscle liniment," he said patiently. "I'll help."

She needed assistance even with getting undressed, rather embarrassingly.

He had her lie down on her front so he could rub something thin into her lower back, bottom, hips, and thighs. It felt cold at first, then warm, but it soaked in and took the edge off the pain wonderfully. She rather suspected he was adding whatever magical healing he could do, but the prices on that were mild ones, and probably easier for him than feeling helpless.

She fell asleep snuggled cozily between Matt and Shon, with Kian on Matt's far side.

* * *

They didn't get moving again until early dusk, in part because it took Kisea some time after waking, and more liniment, to even consider getting back on Honey.

Still, alternating the previous day had probably helped quite a lot—she couldn't imagine how bad it would be if she'd been on Honey all night. Walking for a while helped loosen her up, and before the sky was completely dark, she was back astride.

"There's a stretch of road ahead that's good for playing with time and space," Matt said, late in the night. "I won't hold it long, so the effects shouldn't be all that bad or last all that long. We can cover more ground with less effort along that stretch than most other areas."

"And we can make up lost time?" Kisea sighed.

"You're hurting and not used to this. It's not your fault. Doing a short section tonight will also give us a chance to see how Honey handles it and give her a chance to get used to it before anything longer."

"I might be able to help, especially if it's mild, but I can't promise."

Matt shrugged. "Don't push yourself. I'd rather you had time to heal. I'll survive, and it won't be as bad. I've done worse lots of times so we'd have time to get to places like Malachite and back without being gone too long."

Which you went through to track me.

The one positive thing about the physical discomfort was that it was distraction from the emotional issues.

The peculiar blue-ahead-red-behind lighting effect made Honey skittish at first, and Shon stayed close, but the golden mare decided that it wasn't hurting her, and by the time Matt called an early warning, she was ignoring it. Bear, clearly, was too used to it to care.

As usual, it was Kian who scouted around and found them a campsite, and Shon who looked after the horses.

This time, Kisea shoved all thought of her complaining muscles aside to sit down heavily on the ground next to Matt. Cautious testing of her gifts had reassured her that she was in fact healing with comfortable speed, and though not at full strength, she should be able to help.

Matt curled up next to her, shivering, despite coats and cloak.

He was right, though: it wasn't even remotely as intense.

And once she got him through that, he gave her another thorough rub-down with the liniment.

"You look after me, I'll look after you," he chuckled, pressing a kiss to one bare shoulder.

"While Kian and Shon look after us both. And we'll get to the College eventually."

"We're moving as fast as we reasonably can. We'll get there."

* * *

It feels like we've been on this road forever.

We've camped, what, seven times now? Matt's tricks are more than compensating for my being dead weight, and we're making better time than most. I can keep the side effects from being so severe, especially since he's not pushing himself as hard as to reach Kalli, so I don't feel quite as bad.

While we're riding, I can not think about where we're going, and just enjoy the company. The three of them are so different, and they make such a wonderful team, and I don't think I could stand the pain if anything broke them up or anything happened to any of them.

They'd fallen into a comfortable routine, always walking for a while at the end of the ride to let the horses cool down and prevent muscles from stiffening—mostly Kisea's. Kian found a campsite and began to set things up, while Shon took care of the horses; once Matt was down, Kian changed Jori to her hawk-form to scout the area, and sometimes she returned with small prey as fresh food. Kisea would help later with the camp, but first, she stayed with Matt while the prices of playing with time and space came and passed, doing everything in her power to protect him from them.

How could I ever let go of you? Matt said, tired but his tone still cheerful, effectively helpless in her hands. *Your gift makes you the only thing anywhere in the world that can do anything about the consequences of mine.*

The College isn't much farther, she said quietly. *No more than three hours riding straight, Jori told Kian.*

That sounds about right, and it's roughly what I was aiming for. Far enough for no one to trip over us, close enough that we can get there easily with no more magic. Make sure you're as rested as possible before we get back on the road, because things are going to get interesting as soon as we get there.

Within sight of the College, they paused.

Kisea gazed at the no-longer-familiar buildings, her fingers twined into Honey's mane as she fought down her own instinctive fear. Honey shifted restively under her, maybe sensing her mood.

Shon unhooked a skin of watered wine from his saddle, took a swallow and passed it around.

"Anything they want to do to you, they'll have to do to me first," Matt said quietly. "And I won't be cooperative." He pulled his medallion out from under his shirt, where she suspected he'd been keeping it largely so she didn't have to look at it, and let it rest against his chest in plain sight against the dark wool. He unstrapped his cloak from behind him, tossed it around his shoulders white-side-out, and fastened the throat-clasp.

That easily, he changed from her lover—no, her husband, that was still hard to really grasp—to a Sixth-level sorcerer.

"Stay by Matt," Kian said. "Being officially Matt's private guards allows us a rather broad scope for being protective without repercussions."

"And I'm currently Matt's responsibility," Kisea said wryly. *With anyone else, I'd be a prisoner.*

"One I like more than most of my responsibilities," Matt said. "Please trust me that I know what I'm doing."

"I'm here," she pointed out.

Trust didn't stop her stomach from twisting into painful knots as they rode past the ornate sign declaring this to be the College.

I will not throw up. I will not.

Honey fell obligingly into step with her head level with Matt's leg; Kian and Shon flanked them alertly, Kian on Kisea's other side but a little farther away, Shon immediately behind but towards Matt's side, with Bear trailing amiably.

The College was as much alasisir as it was human, so day or night made little difference in the number of people active—though perhaps sirens tilted it somewhat towards daylight. No one really paid any attention to them, though. Alasisir-blood sorcerer, siren-blood telepath, and a couple of guards were too ordinary to create a stir.

Matt stopped in front of a large building she didn't immediately recognize, but the ornate crest carved into the double doors was indication enough. He swung off Jori's back, moved over to help Kisea down—she landed a bit stiffly, still not entirely accustomed to all this riding instead of walking, but his hand steadied her until she caught her balance.

I'm right here, I love you, and I will keep you safe, his thoughts whispered in hers.

Is it that obvious that I'm terrified half out of my mind?

He kept ahold of her hand, led her to the door and through it.

The room beyond was large, the walls lined with benches, on which a number of people were waiting, and in the centre was an imposingly elaborate desk with a single man behind it.

Matt made directly for the latter, who raised his head and gave him a questioning look that was threaded with boredom and disdain.

"I need," Matt said, "to address at least one representative of each Assembly. Immediately."

"Do you, now," the alasisir-blood man behind the desk said, his tone clearly calculated to remind importunate upstarts of their place. "Those waiting need a variety of things, as well, and they're all more likely to happen." A telepath crystal glittered at his throat, almost invisible behind the ostentatious jewellery.

"No." Matt didn't raise his voice, but somehow, everything in his body language simply screamed

that he was someone who had both power and authority and that he *would* be heard. Had he learned that from Shon, maybe? "I'm Matthian Jordan, I'm Lord Jordan's High Warden of the Peace, and the lady beside me is both my wife and in need of the Assembly giving an accounting of its treatment of her as born with the controller gift. I will see Assembly representatives. Right now."

He didn't threaten to get their attention personally.

He didn't have to.

Oh, I do hope you know what you're doing, being this aggressive...

The man behind the desk actually, physically, turned pale even for an alasis, and Kisea caught the fringes of telepathic contact, as every other sound in the room drowned in the sudden total silence. She wasn't sure which part of the statement it was that prompted that response, although maybe it was the combination.

Awareness of Shon's proximity was intensely comforting, because the utter stillness behind them made her back itch, waiting for an attack.

"I've, uhm, passed on the message to the appropriate people."

"Thank you."

"I can find you somewhere to wait."

"To get us out of sight?"

"Somewhere more comfortable, I mean."

"This isn't going to take that long." There was no compromise at all in his voice.

"It will be arranged as quickly as possible, but most are involved in other business at the moment."

"None of which has waited for almost ten years to be resolved, I assume."

A period of quiet that felt like it lasted forever, while the crystal of the telepath behind the desk shimmered and flickered, telepathic messages darting back and forth rapidly.

"One representative from each is willing to see you immediately," the extremely nervous telepath said. "I'll show you where."

"Which room?" Matt asked.

"The blue meeting room."

"Thank you, I know the way." Matt glanced at Kisea, gave her hand a squeeze. "The archway to the left."

The broad, stone-floored halls were lined with portraits, men and woman, a mingling of races, though universally shown in expensive clothing and aristocratic settings: past Assembly members, those not born accustomed to highborn life adopting it as soon as possible, at least in image and frequently in spirit. The whole place positively reeked of complacent self-satisfied luxury.

Matt paused, tapped on an open door, and urged her inside. Shon stayed with them, to her relief, closing the door and placing himself silently near it with his staff-sword grounded on the floor and his hands around it. It rather reminded her of Kian's pose when he'd rescued her from her would-be rapists.

The room was dominated by a large table polished to a high gloss, surrounded by great carved chairs, though the blatant wealth didn't end with that.

Two other fighters were present, interestingly, both in the white-and-red uniform of the College, but like Shon, they were making themselves unobtrusive.

Not so the other two people present. One was a woman with creamy-white hair neatly caught in a golden net, her rounded body garbed in an elegant skirt and bodice of deeply-dyed intricate brocade highlighted with gold jewellery, her face marked by deep creases from age but, Kisea thought, little from exposure to the elements. A golden medallion rested against her chest on a heavy chain, one with no star at all and the opal-set disc was circular: First, the highest level for a

sorcerer, and gold for the Assembly. The other was a man whose copper hair was silvering, in plainer though still expensive clothes and a few pieces of gold jewellery, none of which detracted from the crystal at his throat or the medallion he wore: gold as well, and a circle, but set instead with a star-ruby. Only telepaths who sat in the Assembly had those as symbols of office.

The sorceress had seated herself at the table, though the telepath remained on his feet.

"This is all extremely dramatic and not at all like you, Matt," the sorceress said. "What's this about?"

"Honora Drazen, Chimo Efisu, my wife Kisea, who was Shimai some years ago when she was a student here." Matt drew her gently over to the table, pulled out a chair for her across from the sorceress, and took the one beside her; the other telepath sat down as well.

"Well?" the sorceress, Honora, prompted.

"This is going to take some explaining," Matt said. "And I know the Assembly isn't going to be comfortable having to deal with it."

"Which won't stop you," Chimo said.

"Not given the alternative, no."

"You have us for as long as necessary," Honora said. "Explain."

"There are two related issues, one personal and one broader, but I think the easiest approach is chronological. Kisea and I were extremely close when we were both at the College as students. While she was trying to help me with the after-effects of magic use, we discovered that she has what's generally called the controller gift, although that really doesn't describe it well. Current laws and public perception being what they are, she ran away before graduating, and has been hiding since then. That technically makes her a renegade, but taking the Oath would have meant the Assembly learning about her gift. We were unclear what the consequences would be of coming forward then, but nothing suggested that anyone would be particularly impartial about what we thought was a unique gift, despite her never misusing it. Obviously, we lost contact."

"Illegal, but I suppose understandable," Honora conceded.

Chimo's expression stayed utterly neutral, though attentive; while Kisea picked up fragments of thought from Honora that reassured her the older woman was receptive, his shields were up so tightly she could sense nothing at all. Fear because he was in the same room with a controller? Honora showed no particular nervousness, though.

"Approximately five years ago, I went to Lord Jordan, my mother's brother, because I was concerned about a situation I'd encountered on Jordan lands that involved a legal verdict made more on race than evidence, and asked his permission to investigate. In the process it became clear that despite Lord Jordan's standing edicts, there remain serious inconsistencies in the way justice is handled. He hired me to look into it and gave me authority of summary justice and superior justice."

"Yes, we're aware of that," Chimo said, with a hint of a sigh.

"For the past five years, I've been investigating, not laws as such, but their effects on individuals and how they're applied. Along the edge of Jordan lands and into the disputed territories, I started hearing about a mindhealer who helped those that other mindhealers had been unable to cure, and I started asking questions. I have a substantial collection of sworn accounts, under truthspell, from people who were healed personally and from their loved ones, from all over the disputed lands and along the borders, collected whenever I could arrange time off from my primary responsibilities. They all described the same woman, who frequently refused payment or accepted it only in barter-goods that could be spared. Even though I was digging for it, I found no suggestion at all of a controller gift being misused in the same places and times."

He paused, took a deep breath. "What I did find, however, is evidence of other controllers. Some of them clearly abused their gifts, although in some cases I have to question the degree to which

they were forced to for lack of any other options. I also talked to families of College students who were told that they had died by accident or illness, siren-human halfbreeds or close to it, and in several cases, they mentioned details that I recognized from Kisea before her gift fully manifested. I don't know how to interpret that, but I do think it needs to be investigated."

Honora frowned. "Yes, and I'd like to take a much closer look at everything you found. You have it here?"

"One copy of it, yes, and you're welcome to make as many copies of it as you like."

Chimo's silence and complete lack of perceptible reaction, in contrast to Honora's apparently genuine concern, worried Kisea. She wondered whether she could get away with reading him, but concluded that it would be a bad idea to even try. He'd be watching for that, and no telepath made it to the Assembly without a high level of skill and experience; being caught would only look terrible.

"In more recent developments," Matt said, "a few days ago, Lord Jordan's daughter Kallima was kidnapped."

"We heard," Chimo said noncommittally.

"It appears that it was actually a trap set for me. Kisea and I crossed paths by chance while I was on the way there, and she agreed to help in the interests of keeping Kallima safe. Despite the risk to her own safety, both from me and from the people holding Kallima."

"Noted," Honora said.

"As things turned out, without her, Kallima and I would almost certainly both be dead. One of those involved was a telepath I had a history with. He was operating an unlicensed brothel in Perifaithe with siren-blood girls and boys both who were not there by choice. Their behaviour when released was odd enough to make me wonder, but I had no evidence. I was right, he was a controller. Kisea fought him directly, among other things. Lord and Lady Jordan are extremely grateful. So am I."

"Noted," Honora repeated. "And yet now you're here together?"

"We are married, fully and formally, by Lord Jordan's hand. It is an extremely long-standing precedent that formal marriage includes some forms of shared legal responsibility for criminal acts. Conversely, therefore, it can and should include the opposite. She is, therefore, no longer in any sense a renegade, unless someone has grounds to question my Oath, and the Assembly needs to recognize this publicly and formally."

The room was quiet for a moment.

"You're certainly correct about this being something it would be more comfortable to sweep aside," Honora said finally. "You won't settle for persuading the Assembly to make a single-case exception and just quietly acknowledge your wife without making a precedent of it, will you?" She didn't sound like she really expected it.

"No." Matt's tone left no question about whether he'd even consider it.

"Of course not. This evidence that you've collected..."

Matt glanced towards Shon, who crossed the room to hand him the leather satchel of paper.

"These aren't leaving my hands," Matt said firmly, opening the satchel and taking out the larger box. "You are, however, quite welcome to copy it, and now that we're no longer on the road I'll work on doing further copies for others in the Assembly."

"You're very quiet," Honora said to Kisea. "Do you have anything to add?"

"Not really. I don't want to spend the rest of my life running and hiding all because of something I was born with and have only ever used to heal or in self-defence. I just want to have an ordinary life, badly enough for it to be worth taking some risks. Or letting Matt take them." Kisea shrugged. "Well, as ordinary a life as being married to Matt allows."

She saw just the briefest flicker of sympathy and humour in Honora's eyes. "Hm, yes. All right.

Properly speaking, you should be in a shielded cell..."

"No," Matt said flatly.

"... but, as I was about to say, I think we can make other arrangements. It will take time to gather the entire Joint Assembly, and for everyone to have a chance to assess the evidence you're offering. There may be some further investigation into both the immediate situation and these findings of other controllers, and there will probably be further questions. Although it won't be in a cell, I do think it might be best if the two of you were to not wander around the College and city."

"Understood," Matt said. "But both my cousins stay with us."

Honora's eyebrows rose. "You expect to be in danger?"

"I don't know what to expect right now. If nothing else, I'll feel safer, I know Kisea will, and you won't have to find somewhere else to put them."

"True. Stay here, please. I'll send one of the clerks to copy that, and make arrangements for somewhere for you to stay until we can convene the full Assembly."

"Thank you," Matt said. "For the record, we have every intention of cooperating, as long as this is treated honestly and honourably."

"I expected as much from you. Chimo? Have you anything to add?"

"Not currently," the telepath said. "I'll be very interested to read this evidence, however."

Both Assembly representatives left the room.

Matt closed a hand around hers again for another brief squeeze, gave her a quick smile, and opened the box to start sorting through the thick stack of paper.

A lot of that is my life, Kisea thought. Personal histories from a lot of people whose paths crossed mine and, I hope, were better afterwards, or at least no worse for it. Far more information about me than I thought anyone knew. And we're handing it over to the Assembly. Willingly.

Oh, I hope you're right about all this... and that it all turns out to be an oversight, a blind spot, nothing worse.

A young alasis-blood man with a seven-sided silver opal medallion came in the room, a considerable stack of paper cradled in the crook of one arm; Matt greeted him with a smile, gestured invitingly to the paper. "Help yourself."

"Thank you." The younger sorcerer sat at the end of the table, set down the stack of what turned out to be blank paper, and drew the nearest pile into reach.

As he flipped through each page, slowly and deliberately, an exact duplicate appeared on the next blank sheet, which he then moved aside with one hand while turning to the next page with the other. It was, Kisea thought, not a task requiring a high degree of power, but it did need meticulous attention to keep errors from creeping in. So, she watched, distantly, concentrating on keeping her breathing slow.

A woman whose black hair was white at the temples, neatly but not extravagantly dressed, with a telepath crystal at her throat, came in while the sorcerer was still working, but waited quietly until he finished and gathered up his own copy.

"We can work from this one," he said. "But of course working from copies of copies..."

"Send me paper," Matt said. "I'll do more copies from the originals."

"Thanks."

"If you'll come with me," the woman said, "we have quarters ready for you."

"Thank you," Matt said. "The horses?"

"Already taken to the stables, and your belongings are waiting for you."

Whatever else one could say about the College and the related administration, in some things you could hardly fault the efficiency.

There was no sign of Kian, but presumably he'd gone with the horses.

The woman showed them to another building, up two flights of stairs, and opened a wide door. "There's a rope just inside to pull if you need anything. Three alasir-blood and a siren-blood, as far as meals? Nocturnal schedule?"

"Yes, probably," Matt said. "The schedule might change, but that's fine for now."

The woman nodded and closed the door behind her.

Kisea looked around at the luxuriously-appointed sitting room. "I should be in a cell, but they put us in a highborn suite?"

"They're shielded," Matt pointed out. "As far as living quarters, the suites and the cells have the strongest shields in the College. As long as they know we're in here, they don't need to wonder what we're doing, so they can concentrate on the actual issue. The shielding goes both ways, so at least we know we can have some privacy."

"Even if the door isn't locked," Shon said, "I have no doubt someone will be watching."

"Several, I would think, some of them via scrying or seeing."

"Any individual or minority group that seeks to simplify the problem by removing you two will have no hope of being unobserved. Not that they could get past your loyal guards, but a deterrent to try is better yet."

"I don't think anyone's likely to try to kill us in our beds," Matt objected.

Shon shrugged. "Exactly, for many reasons."

Their gear was in a pile a short way from the door; it was generally not a good idea to start opening bags and baskets belonging to a sorcerer, since they might bite.

Flanking the sitting room were two sumptuous bedrooms, against the outer wall, and two smaller plainer ones that lacked windows, clearly for personal servants the occupants wanted nearby, and even a private bathroom complete with a copper boiler.

"At least we'll be comfortable, waiting for the sentence," Kisea murmured to Shon, who had come up behind her in one of the larger rooms, carrying the packs Kallima and her mother had put together so thoughtfully for Kisea.

"Try not to think that way," Shon said gently. "There is quite a lot in your favour."

"And generations of fear and ignorance, to say nothing of the Assembly's convenience and pride, against me."

"Have hope. Sometimes, right really does win."

"The three of you are probably going to regret being in a confined space for days with a scared and anxious half-siren."

"Anything that helps you get through this."

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"Sorry to interrupt..." Matt said from the doorway of the bedroom.

Kisea, who currently had Kian pinned on the bed under her, looked up and behind her. "More questions?" They'd been visited a few times by Assembly members or chosen experts in search of further information: Kisea had spent several hours talking to a pair of senior mindhealers about exactly what she did and more time with a telepath discussing how her gift had developed and how it worked, there were questions for them all about the trap, and all three alasir-blood had been questioned privately about her.

"Not this time. We've been asked to come to a meeting, as soon as possible."

"What?" She scrambled off Kian and the bed, throttling the conflicting urge to deal with the sudden spike of panic the opposite way. "They didn't give us much warning!"

"I suppose they assumed you'd be available," Kian said, sitting up and moving towards the edge of the bed.

"This isn't the time for jokes!"

"It's exactly the time for jokes," Matt said, catching her hands to pull her close for a kiss.

"Everything's going to be all right. They're taking it seriously, otherwise we wouldn't have had so many people through here for the past few days. And if they're actually looking at everything, how can they not see how this has to be? But this isn't the actual hearing, it's something less formal, which is definitely unexpected."

"Hoping to bargain to keep what you found quiet?" Kian suggested.

"Could be, I suppose, but that's not an acceptable option."

"No one who knows you would really expect it to be."

"The only way we'll find out is to go."

Kisea took a deep breath, and nodded. "Clothes would be helpful."

Kian ran his gaze along the length of her naked body. "That depends on whether you want them able to think or not, but yes, I suppose so."

Thanks to the efficient College laundry, all their clothes were clean; with hot water readily available, Kisea had been using baths as an intermittent substitute for sex in distracting herself and keeping her stress levels manageable, and knew all three of her companions were keeping clean, so at least the lack of time for bathing wasn't an issue.

Chemise, bodice, trousers from Kallima or her mother—these ones oak-green—and her boots, and she brushed and braided her hair with hands that trembled.

The Jordan colours, she had to admit, suited alasir-blood colouring: Shon and Kian, both in their red jerkins and dark gold trousers, looked wonderful. Matt, in dark grey trousers and a deep blue tunic, his medallion brightly visible, looked every inch the sorcerer as he swung his cloak around him.

An impression he then thoroughly destroyed by grumbling half under his breath about the latter being twice as much fabric as really necessary.

All in all, though, Kisea figured they actually looked reasonably respectable.

In the corridor, a male human guard in College white and red waited. Kisea sensed nothing in particular from him, just a practicality and focus that suggested that he was simply doing his job as ordered with minimal effort to think about it.

He showed them down to the ground floor, but not out of the building. There were, Kisea knew, several rooms for the use of highborn guests, and one of them was a meeting room similar to the one in which she and Matt had met with the two Assembly representatives, though this one was in shades of cream and brown. The great polished table, ringed by ornate chairs, was much like the other, though. Unlike the other, this room had large crystals spaced precisely along the walls in ornate brass settings, creating an energy field that disrupted all telepathy and empathy.

She'd have liked to be able to feel Matt and Shon and Kian, their presence comforting against her inner senses, but resigned herself to being effectively not a telepath. At least it was only temporary, when it was done this way, and left no secondary damage.

The sorceress Honora was there, and the telepath Chimo, flanking the woman who sat at the end of the table. The berry-purple sheen to her dark burgundy-wine hair gave away mixed siren and alasir blood. That was clue enough that she was a lifewitch even without the round star-less gold medallion that showed an oval of clear greenish amber with a leaf frozen forever inside: First Level, the lifewitch version, which used amber rather than opal but otherwise paralleled the sorcerer

system. It was hard to judge lifewitch ages, since they could make at least minor alterations to their own bodies and their gifts generally kept them healthy, but Kisea thought she remembered her being active around the College when she was a student here. She was dressed fairly sensibly, but then, lifewitches tended to spend much of their lives active and busy, and elaborate finery would be more inconvenient than it was worth.

The Telepath and Sorcerer Assemblies were each comprised of five people; the lifewitches were so uncommon they lacked their own, but when the Joint Assembly sat, three lifewitches were now always included, and one of them was the Speaker, who took charge of proceedings and could cast the tie-breaking vote. Was this the Speaker?

Along one side of the table were a mismatched trio: a girl in her late teens, her hair deep red, in chemise and leather bodice though her lower body was obscured; another siren-alasir woman, in buttery yellow and a muted blue along with a triangular silver-and-yellow-amber medallion, sharing with the other both dark berry-burgundy hair and those long lean alasir limbs combined with siren curves; a human man with greying hair and lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth, his build rounded enough to suggest his physical activity was limited, but the elaborate dying and embroidery of his clothes drew attention from what Kisea suspected was a practical cut, a telepath crystal at his throat.

At the far end was an alasir-blood woman, no silver in her hair, in drab-coloured sensible clothes that served as a form of camouflage, with writing materials arranged neatly in front of her.

"I'm Etanynne," said the lifewitch at the head of the table. "I'm the current Speaker for the Joint Assembly. One other person requested to be included in anything involving this issue, and I'm sure he'll be joining us in a moment."

Kisea shivered, groped for Matt's hand. Something very odd was clearly afoot.

"My apologies." She knew that voice, but even if she didn't, Matt twisting in his chair in surprise would have been a clue. Lord Jordan invited himself into the seat beside Kisea. "Thank you for waiting."

"You aren't supposed to be here," Matt said. "This is something I brought to the Assembly on my own, not on your behalf."

"Hush, nephew. You and your wife are both Jordan residents, and anything off my lands involving you, I have every right to monitor." Lord Jordan crossed his arms casually on the table, looked at the Speaker. "Milady?"

"Thank you." Kisea got the distinct impression that the Speaker was amused by the exchange. "I'm sorry for the short notice, but we have a complex situation and your presence was specifically requested." The Speaker inclined her head to Matt and Kisea. "Which, all things considered, I would have done myself. Everyone present is aware that Matt handed the Assembly a mass of evidence that is difficult to accept and which has left us scrambling to collect enough additional information to make an informed decision. You have both been very patient with the repeated and sometimes invasive questioning, and we appreciate that."

"It's in our best interests for you to have accurate information," Matt said.

"I would say we now have more accurate information about how the controller gift works and about the erroneous belief that controllers are born only once per generation or so than we have had in a very long time, if ever. We had planned to keep the information restricted to the Assembly and those acting on our behalf and directly interested parties until we could reach conclusions to share. However, three days ago, copies of the entire collection of evidence originally presented were released to the student body of the College and to the relay telepath network. No one is accusing you of anything. We currently have no idea who released it, and tracking the source is a low priority. Of much higher priority is that the student body is currently refusing to attend classes along with

causing significant disruption on the campus and in the city, and the relay telepaths are refusing to work, in both cases until their concerns are addressed. This, therefore, is an informal chance to discuss those concerns, though everything said will be officially recorded.”

Kisea traded quick glances with Matt. Someone released the information? They certainly couldn't have done it themselves.

“The lifewitches collectively,” the Speaker added, “have taken an interest in this and wish to be heard officially as well. So. Which of you would like to begin?”

The trio across the table looked at each other; the lifewitch gestured invitingly.

“Go ahead,” the man said.

The young siren nodded. “I'm Nitarai. To make this as brief as possible, we as students, telepath and sorcerer and lifewitch, accept that accidents and illness happen, and that there is not always a lifewitch nearby and that some things lie beyond even lifewitches. However, even the possibility that the people who are supposed to be teaching and guiding us might be culling us like livestock in secret is making us all feel much less than safe. We're left wondering what sets of criteria might add up to a covert death sentence for any of us. We feel, strongly, that we should be able to trust our teachers to encourage and guide us no matter what gifts we might manifest, and that no student should ever feel so threatened that life as a renegade becomes the safer option.”

Kisea tightened her hand around Matt's, and he squeezed back. *Oh, what have we started?*

“And the students are asking...?” Etanyne prompted.

“That the entire Joint Assembly, publicly and under truthspell cast by someone not directly affiliated with the Assembly, answer a negotiable list of questions specifying whether students are being murdered in secret. We also want future assurances that all students will be treated equally and judged on their behaviour, not what gift they were born with. Specific assurances are negotiable, but have to include addressing the current Oath being incompatible with some gifts.”

“Those appear to be quite reasonable terms to address quite understandable concerns,” the Speaker said thoughtfully. “Thank you, Nitarai.”

Yes, they are understandable, under the circumstances anyone would feel threatened, but who released all that information to the entire student body?

And who would have thought of a thousand or so teenagers as having the power to make themselves heard and force an accommodation?

“Garrick?” the Speaker said.

“Garrick Thorsten,” said the man. Thorsten was one of the smaller human Lordships; a younger son or a cousin, presumably. “I'm one of Perifaithe's primary relay telepaths. I can't claim that the relays are unanimous, but we do have an overwhelming majority as far as three key concerns. One is much like that of the students. We are not comfortable sending our children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, their playmates and friends, or any other child, into a situation where they might be in danger from the people we're entrusting their safety to.”

“Indeed,” Lord Jordan murmured. “My younger daughter, as well.”

“Exactly.” Garrick nodded. “Highborn or low, we won't be sending our children to a place they might be tried and executed in secret. However, it isn't solely about the students. We'll concede it might be negligence rather than malice, that there seem to be far more controllers than we were told but they aren't acknowledged, but that leaves them to survive or not in a world where they will feel like everyone is against them. That opens the way to criminal activity based around a gift not even acknowledged to exist, which means no useful countermeasures. This, we feel, is a highly dangerous state of affairs. We also would like to know for sure whether the Assembly considers itself to have the right and authority to pass sentence of death in secret, without trial, based on highly questionable standards, in which case no telepath and possibly no sorcerer or lifewitch is safe. If

there is question whether our children are expendable for showing signs of a particular gift, how can we trust that anyone who is inconvenient is not at risk?"

Oh we really stirred things up badly.

A part of Kisea's mind danced gleefully.

"Obviously the relays are of vital importance to all Caalden," Etanyne said. "What action would reassure you?"

"There, I'll second the students again. Questioning under truthspell would be, at least, an excellent beginning. If no one on the Assembly has anything to hide on this subject, that should be a quick and easy solution."

Oh gods, they're going to keep the relays shut down until the Assembly is questioned. The students are bad enough, if they're running wild through the College and the city, but without the relays, Caalden will start to collapse in a matter of days...

They've left the Assembly absolutely no choice.

"Thank you, Garrick. Olisai?"

The Third-level lifewitch inclined her head. "I'm Olisai Liriu, and I speak on behalf of the lifewitches collectively. Until no more than fifty years ago, lifewitches were renegades, seen as monsters interested only in experimenting on the innocent. It cost blood and tears and lives to gain recognition that only a small minority behave in antisocial ways and that the rest of us prefer to live in peace with our neighbours or even devote our lives and our gifts to healing. We see an alarming similarity between our own history and the present situation of anyone born with the controller gift, and we find that deeply troubling. Evidence suggests that they can do for minds what we can do for bodies, which only strengthens the parallel. Any gift can be used for good or ill, the difference being in the choices of the gifted. We do not accept that any gift has an inevitable effect on the mental stability of the gifted, as it has been claimed about us falsely and there is no reliable evidence supporting the idea in regards to any other gift. We feel very strongly that controllers should have the same opportunity any other mage does to demonstrate what choices they will make before being judged, and that they be offered the same support and guidance in youth to help them make those choices without fear. We have, currently, no demands, but we do want our position on the issue to be clear and officially noted."

Kisea clutched Matt's hand more tightly. She hadn't even thought of the lifewitches as being similar, let alone that they would care. Her own experience with any form of prejudice was that being the target didn't mean one wasn't prone to inflicting other forms of prejudice on others, often even more savagely. That the lifewitches had decided to support her left her too astonished to even formulate a reaction in her own head; it was just too unexpected, and after so long hiding, somehow deeply touching.

She took a slow deep breath, then another. Breaking into tears now would not help. Nor would running to Olisai to hug her and babble her gratitude.

Matt looked sideways at her, smiled, and gave her hand a squeeze.

"So noted," the Speaker said. "Lord Jordan? You look extremely thoughtful. May we ask the direction of those thoughts?"

"I am thinking," Lord Jordan said, "of the balance of power within, for example, human lands, where the King and the Lords hold one another in check to some degree. The same occurs in alasis lands, and within each Southern city the ruling families provide the same mutual function. I am thinking that power unchecked leads to unpleasant, if not devastating, consequences, as we've seen every time the balance between King and Lords has failed. And I am wondering what check there is on the power of the Assembly."

"In theory," Etanyne said, "the various parts of the Joint Assembly provide balance. In practice,

you are correct, in many ways the separate Assemblies are autonomous unless an issue comes before the Joint Assembly. And the Joint Assembly is entirely autonomous.”

“Which means that when accused of wrongdoing, there is no one to point to and say, ‘They would know if we did, and would intervene.’”

“That is true.”

Lord Jordan nodded. “I’m unsure whether everyone present is aware of the attack on my elder daughter approximately two ninedays ago, in which she was, ostensibly, held hostage to make demands on me. It turned out to be a trap set for Matt, set up by two supposedly respectable and Oath-bound sorceresses, one supposedly respectable and Oath-bound telepath, and a controller and criminal who was listed as a renegade but was somehow released by the Assembly and by Perifaithe when Matt brought him to their attention. The controller died during the rescue, in which, I cannot emphasize enough, Kisea played a vital role, but the other three remain in my custody. As of my departure, all three had refused to speak, but not long before the relays were closed, my wife sent me a message that I consider highly relevant. One of the three confessed, and confirmed under truthspell, that she had been assured there would be no risk of being condemned as an Oath-breaker. That there was someone on the Assembly who saw Matt as a threat because of the direction of his research and who wanted him dead before it could continue, and they would be not only gaining personal vengeance but performing an act for the greater good and would be protected accordingly.”

Kisea shivered. If that was the case, they had not only generalized resistance against them, but a specific and unnamed and powerful enemy.

Etanyne actually blanched, which was something for someone with fairly light skin to begin with. “Oh my. That’s... disturbing.”

“Very much so,” Honora said, frowning.

“That’s hardly evidence,” Chimo said dismissively. “Someone was told what would manipulate her into doing what she wanted to do anyway, and believed it.”

“Granted,” Lord Jordan said, his tone still mild. “However, I would like to ask that the questions proposed include knowledge of or involvement in the attack on my family.”

Whoever that is, if they don't piss themselves when they find out he knows that, they're stronger than I am. There's no hole deep enough and no place far enough away to hide.

“I can’t see that being a problem,” Honora said. “One extra question, which should be of no fear to anyone honest.”

“We cannot accede to these requests on behalf of the entire Assembly,” Chimo said. “We can, however, present it to them and consider it.”

“The other alternatives being what?” the Speaker asked drily. “Armed force against our own students? Which leaves what against the relays? And how long do you believe it will take for our collective reputation in Caalden to wilt beyond reviving? Or we all answer a few questions under truthspell, clear our collective name, the tension is dispelled, and we can get to work looking at changes for the future.”

“I can think of no grounds to decline other than having something to hide,” Honora said.

“No?” Chimo said. “I can. I believe it’s possible our collective reputation is already irreparably tarnished by gossip and rumour, and that after the questioning vindicates us, there will be accusations still of the results being fraudulent. Thanks to this material, much of which can be interpreted in several ways, being released to the public indiscriminately, the Telepath Assembly in particular has already been tried in the popular mind and found guilty beyond appeal. Given that, what is the point of subjecting ourselves to further humiliation? The only way we can preserve any dignity in this comedy may be to step down and retire somewhere out of sight.”

Kisea saw Nitarai and Garrick each take a breath to speak, but Lord Jordan beat them to it.

"I doubt that would be acceptable to anyone. It leaves all activity thus far in doubt, does not establish whether the trust of the students and their families has been violated, and would mean that any individual on the Assembly who is guilty could use the same reasoning to escape being held to account for criminal acts. Rank should not confer immunity, and sometimes personal dignity takes second place to responsibility to the greater good."

Well, if the students or the relay telepaths were going to accept that argument, they certainly won't now.

Although what it comes down to is that it would allow someone to escape being held to account for attacking his daughter and nephews.

"I believe the Joint Assembly needs to have a long discussion about priorities and goals," Honora said, and there was a grim undertone that would have worried Kisea had it been directed at her. "Other than the Assembly response, is there anything else to be said?" She turned her gaze to Matt and Kisea. "You are allowed to speak up. I don't think I've ever heard you stay quiet this long with others talking, Matt."

"There is really nothing I can add," Matt said. "I didn't intend for it to become public knowledge until there was some further information available, but I did always plan to make sure that the existence of controllers and the degree of misinformation about them was spread as far as possible." He was, Kisea noticed in relief, tactful enough to not add, *and why there appear to be so few*. "I think being concerned about it is extremely valid, because it affects everyone, not just controllers. Everyone needs reassurance, but I'll be the first to support anyone who can verify under truthspell that they weren't involved."

Of course you will.

"But I don't know that any of that is particularly important right now."

"Kisea?" Lord Jordan said. "This is all more relevant to you than to anyone else."

"Which might be why I'm finding it a bit hard to process," she admitted. "After this long trying to be invisible, drawing attention to myself makes me extremely uncomfortable, and Caalden-wide disruptions that all point right back to Matt and I..." She trailed off, shrugged. "I *am* extremely grateful to the lifewitches for the support, and probably more surprised than I should be. I'm sorry so many people are having their lives upset over this, though. My first inclination is generally to make pain *less*, not add to it."

"Sometimes, things do go through an acutely uncomfortable phase before they can heal," Olisai said gently. "You've done nothing but make a reasonable request to the Assembly, to be judged by your acts and not your gift, and ask that others with the same gift be granted the same. Several lifewitches died tragically in fighting for the same right, and others spent their entire lives on the struggle. We don't know how many controllers have already died or how, but it's more than enough." She sighed. "And I cannot begin to tell you how many lives lifewitches have fought for and lost that might have been saved with the help of a mindhealer with your skills, which only increases the count of lives lost unnecessarily. As frightening as it is, it is past time this came out in the open to be resolved."

"One of my classmates," Nitarai said quietly, "and I'm not saying who, fits that description of the early manifestations of your gift. That classmate is a good person always ready to help friends, and 'friends' sometimes means someone just met, and right now that classmate is terrified, realizing what could have happened in the next year or so and what choices might have come up. But now it will not, and that classmate knows we know and will still be friends. One life already has been saved because of your choices. The older sorcerer students think the description fits a telepath student who was declared to have fallen down the stairs and broken her neck, and it has been pointed out

that a telekinetic or a sorcerer could arrange that easily. Whether it's ignorance or malice driving controller students into a corner, it will stop, now. Please don't feel guilty."

"We're all responsible for our own actions, not you," Garrick said. "I'm grateful, and I'm not alone in that, to the pair of you for putting the pieces together and having the courage to do the right thing with it."

But I didn't do any of it, Matt did everything.

All right, so he did it for my sake, and I chose to come with him, but I wasn't the one who gathered all that information and saw the pattern, I wasn't the one who decided to challenge the Assembly with it... I just wanted to survive and maybe stop running. I'm just inspiration and his primary example and his source of real information about controllers.

"Thank you," she said. "I just hope this gets sorted out quickly for everyone. And well for your classmate."

"I think that's what everyone wants," the Speaker said. "I certainly hope it is. So we'll arrange for it to happen, together. Does anyone else have anything to say?"

"We need, among the broader issues," Lord Jordan said, "to not lose sight of the more personal one. Kisea has been waiting several days for others to decide her fate, which would be nerve-wracking for anyone."

"Agreed," the Speaker said. "And I'm sorry. All information gathered so far, to the best of my knowledge, supports granting at the very least the original request of her husband's Oath extending in spirit to her, but I'm afraid I can't give you a formal ruling on that yet. We'll need a full session very soon in which to address all the relevant issues, personal and broader both. I suggest we declare an end to this meeting, and all return to discuss it with those we represent, so we can hasten that hearing as much as possible. We'll see to it that everyone is notified as soon as we have it arranged."

Chairs were pushed back, and people began to rise.

"You can't have gotten here that fast with any kind of company to speak of," Matt said to his uncle. "Maybe it would be better if Kian or Shon stayed with you?"

Lord Jordan chuckled. "I think your parents and other uncle are enough protection for Kalli and I, and your cousins are better off with you."

"What are my parents doing here?"

"I told them, of course. I'd have thought that was obvious." He offered Kisea a hand to her feet.

With his hand holding hers, she heard him even past the telepathic disruptors, faster than any spoken word: *Whoever released that information has placed the Assembly in a position with as few choices as you've had. Perifaithe is at a near standstill, the relays are completely at a halt, and the students and telepaths appear to be passing on what they know to everyone possible. No one would dare rule against you with all of Caalden watching, and they have to rule quickly before grumbling becomes something more. The worst of this will be over soon, and we can all go home and celebrate.* He released her, all one smooth courteous gesture.

"Lori is probably at the Manor by now and planning a proper wedding celebration with Kara," he added to Matt, perfectly casually, as though he hadn't just circumvented what was supposed to be heavy security with no trace of effort. "I hope I can afford it." He sounded more amused than worried. "Off you go and I'll see you soon."

Kisea stayed silent until they were back in their own suite.

"Your mother is a stronger telepath than your uncle?" she asked Matt, once the door was shut.

Puzzled, he nodded. "Why?"

"Even with physical contact, even to another strong telepath, being able to make contact in close proximity to disruptors shouldn't be possible."

Matt shrugged. "That's more from their mother's side than their father's, there've been some

very strong telepaths in that line, and only relatively weak ones in the Jordan line. Some recent siren blood in there, probably. What did he say?"

She repeated it.

"Whoever released that information," Shon said, "is brilliant."

"I was hoping for less chaos and more order," Matt said, "but I can't argue. It looks like at least some of the Assembly are going to try to weasel out of questioning under truthspell, and pressure on all sides might make the difference. If nothing else, with all of Caalden watching, they certainly can't hide any of this. Every possibly-controller student from now on who disappears will be noticed by thousands of people who will want explanations. This is wonderful."

Kisea sank down on the nearest sofa. "*Wonderful?* The whole world is in complete upheaval right now, because of us!"

"No," Kian said. "Because of the actions of others, which needed to be recognized and evaluated." He sat down beside her, an arm around her, and she leaned against him. "And now are, finally."

"Rob's right," Matt said, taking her other side. "This will be over soon. They can't delay. Try to rest, because I don't think it will take all that long for them to arrange that full hearing."

"Rest?" Kisea said in disbelief. "Now?"

"Even if we need to help you work off some of that adrenaline first."

20

The summons found Kisea curled up asleep between Matt and Shon.

They had an hour to get ready, instead of rushing, but that actually made it worse, having extra time to wait.

This time, they were joined by a second white-and-red-clad guard at the outer door, and taken to another building altogether.

The College campus was eerily quiet, the air filled with a tension that was all but palpable. Fewer people were visible than she expected, and they all seemed to be in their mid to late teens, and all were watching them. Kisea's small group picked up an additional escort, in fact, though all stayed well back, only watching.

Oddly, the sense she got was protective, not hostile.

They don't trust the Assembly, she told Matt. *I think they're trying to watch out for us.*

That's rather kind of them, when they're already worrying about their own safety.

None of this bothers you at all, does it?

I'm absolutely certain that everything will work out fine in the end, even if it's rocky going for a while. There's only one resolution that has any justice at all, and that will win.

I don't know whether that faith is infuriatingly naive or one of the most charming and lovable things about you.

There was a much larger cluster of students outside the Assembly Hall: Kisea guessed wildly that there must be at least a hundred, all combinations of race and sex and probably gifts, sitting on the grassy area in front of the Hall. Though there was no indication of aggression at all, eight nervous white-and-red-clad guards were positioned between them and the doors.

As though you could do anything even if there weren't telepaths and sorcerers and lifewitches involved, eight against so many, Kisea thought scornfully.

But then, that was how the Assembly thought, wasn't it? That a few could control the many, and didn't need the compliance of the many to do so.

Some of them, at least. She was sure the Speaker Etanyne and the sorceress Honora knew better, though she was less confident about the telepath Chimo.

As they stepped through the ornate stone archway, the double doors opening to admit them, Kisea felt shields brush past them as well like a curtain, dividing inside from outside, and worse but not unexpected, the distinctive feel of telepathic disruptors.

The Assembly Hall should more properly have been called the Assembly Halls, since there were in fact three: the Telepath and Sorcerer Assemblies each had a chamber where they heard matters relevant only to their own discipline and witnessed Oaths. Each had limited space for spectators, though there was some.

The Joint Assembly Hall, however, was immense.

A two-tiered arc, currently vacant, provided seats for the Assembly members, with an oval area of bare stone floor in front of them, though it did have two curved wooden benches. Much of the rest of the room was tiered seats for spectators, though a railing behind the first tier made it clear that the front rows were reserved.

At least they were coming in from the side and so didn't have to walk through the spectators, because there were a *lot* of them.

Shon and Kian were pointed firmly to one end of the first tier; properly, neither could give her or Matt any last good wishes, but Kian met Kisea's gaze and flashed her a quick reassuring smile, and Shon managed a surreptitious wink.

After which, it was just her and Matt. She groped for his hand, and he gave hers a squeeze, drawing her towards the oval area.

"Sit," he murmured. "Stand when they come in, but then we can sit again." With a rather dramatic flip of his cloak, he seated himself on the curved bench, and she had to either let go of his hand or join him.

"I love you," she whispered.

He looked sideways at her, smiled. "I know. I love you too. And I'll be right beside you, no matter what."

There were a handful of other people getting themselves efficiently arranged—the alasir woman they'd seen before, once again taking notes, seated just below the two raised tiers; a red-headed telepath who settled herself to one side in a raised seat that gave her a clear line of sight of the entire room, the only location that allowed contact outside so she could relay events; several people, among them one of the mindhealers she'd spoken to and a telepath who had asked for further information on her gift, taking seats on the first tier; enough guards around the periphery to make at least a fair attempt at quelling a riot, she was certain.

Nitarai and Garrick settled themselves on the other curved bench, Nitarai smiling at Kisea and inclining her head in greeting.

"Right beside Rob," Matt murmured. "Second tier up, behind us. My parents and Kian's father and Kallima are here too."

Kisea twisted to look; Kallima caught her eye and smiled at her. She was next to her father, and on her other side was a woman about her size with much darker brown hair silvering in locks; beside her was a male alasir-blood of similar age. Beside Lord Jordan was another man who more than passingly resembled him.

Alina had battled a controller, and won at a price; another had plans to kill her son and niece and nephews. Kisea wondered how she felt about her son taking risks to protect one.

Then the Assembly members themselves came in, and she rose quickly beside Matt, unsure just

how respectful she felt but unwilling to antagonize. All were in full formal cloaks—opalescent white for the sorcerers, metallic red for the telepaths, warm gold that shimmered green for the lifewitches, all colours no dyer or weaver could ever produce without considerable magic. Medallions showed, all of them gold which only the Assembly had, round with no engraved star, set with white opal and star-ruby and green amber with a leaf inside.

Everyone settled themselves again.

One of the telepaths, a siren-blood woman, was one Kisea recognized as one of her teachers, who had been recently appointed to the Assembly at the time.

“Thank you,” the Speaker said. “We have had a complicated issue presented to us, approximately a nineday ago. I expect everyone present is aware of its nature, but in the interests of clarity and completeness, allow me to summarize.”

Kisea listened quietly while Etanyinne, using notes in front of her, neatly and concisely went through all the relevant events, including the informal meeting and the concerns of students and relay telepaths and the position of the lifewitches and Lord Jordan's thoughts on balances—and the confession from one of the conspirators, which sent a low rumble through the spectators.

“Which brings us to the present, in which we need to regain your trust, make a binding ruling regarding the status of those born with the controller gift, and specifically rule on the legal standing of Kisea Jordan.”

Hearing her name phrased that way made her start. Naming conventions could be complex, but since she lacked a surname at all, taking her husband's was unarguably the most common option.

“Still my Shimai to me,” Matt whispered in her ear.

She smiled, felt herself relax a bit.

“In order for the latter two to be resolved beyond doubt, we need to first take care of the former. Unfortunately,” Etanyinne said with a sigh, “we have a difference of opinion within the Assembly. Olisai Liriu for the lifewitches, Garrick Thorsten for the relay telepaths, Nitarai for the student body, and Lord Jordan have devised a carefully-worded brief list of questions for the Assembly to answer under truthspell. All three lifewitches and three of the sorcerers are quite amenable to this, as a simple way to reassure everyone. However, two sorcerers and all five telepaths have another perspective. They feel that even if proven innocent this way, we, and especially the telepaths, will be viewed as guilty and that fraud will be assumed. They feel as well that it is a dangerous precedent to set, that the Assembly must vindicate ourselves rather than everyone trusting in the additional Oath we swear to, that we will place our responsibilities ahead of personal gain or feelings. Thus they believe their only viable course of action, given the pressures being placed on us, is to resign their posts immediately.”

“No,” Nitarai said, completely out of turn, but her tone left no room for compromise. “The student body will not return to class. We will continue to obstruct the daily business of city and College until all Assembly members are questioned, publicly, under truthspell. That is not negotiable.”

“The relays stay down until all thirteen individuals who comprised the Assembly when this issue was brought forward have been questioned,” Garrick seconded.

“Resign if you wish,” Lord Jordan said, “but those questions need to be answered, publicly, under truthspell.”

“By law, no one can be questioned under truthspell without consent,” Chimo said.

“That is true. However, there is a long and solid precedent for refusal being considered supporting evidence in favour of a guilty verdict.”

“The relays will pass on no messages,” Garrick said, “but we can answer all complaints with the names and likenesses of those who are responsible and why. No pricing and availability messages

from merchants, no urgent summons to a loved one in poor health, no job offers, no bargaining, no remote contact while loved ones are away from home, no news to family of a new birth, no rulings from higher authority on complicated local issues.”

“If your Oath is to responsibility over personal gain or feelings,” Matt said, “then it seems straightforward. Your responsibility is to reassure the relay telepaths and students as swiftly as possible of your innocence so normal operations can resume. Meeting reasonable demands towards that end would therefore be necessary for the sake of keeping your Oath. To step down without satisfying their demands would also be violation of that Oath. Oath-breakers are, by definition, renegades.”

“You be silent,” one of the male sorcerers, an alasis-blood, spat. “This whole mess is your fault, for getting so fixated on that siren tart instead of just finding yourself another one.”

“I beg your pardon?” the Speaker said frostily. “Gossethien, that was inappropriate.”

A mouthful like that was high alasis, Kisea noted. Fullblood or at least probably acknowledged by an alasis family.

“If all I did was correct mistaken information,” Matt said, his voice tightly controlled, “then while I can see not being grateful, I don’t see that I did anything anyone should take issue with. If what I did has brought institutionalized covert murder into view, then I’m not the one who created the situation. Either way, I would appreciate it if you were more respectful of my wife and every other siren-blood. Including those sitting on the Assembly with you, though I can’t imagine why they aren’t taking exception.”

“Oh, we are,” Kisea’s once-teacher Biserai, a woman with faded copper-and-white-mingled hair, muttered, glowering at Gossethien.

“I believe,” the Speaker said thoughtfully, “Matt might be correct and there might be grounds for considering a refusal to verify innocence under truthspell to be a violation of Assembly Oath.”

“Oh, enough already,” groaned one woman on the telepath side. Her hair was so white the original colour could no longer be guessed, and her wizened body within her rich clothing was no clue. “We’ll be here until the ice comes back down from the far north, going on like this, and I don’t have that long. No one is going to leave a way out gracefully, but allowing truthspell means guilt confirmed by our own words rather than by assumption, which is why those objecting will never consent.”

“I don’t know if that’s senility or madness,” Chimo began, drowning out her further words.

“Be still,” Etanyne said sharply. “Doria is entitled to speak without being interrupted.”

“Not if she is going to accuse other Assembly members of crimes!”

“Especially then, I should think,” a male sorcerer who was probably human, or at least mostly, said drily.

“Continue, please, Doria,” Etanyne said. “Any further interruptions will lead to those responsible being silenced.” She caught the eye of two of the guards, nodded towards the telepath side; they stepped forward, though did nothing more. Not that they needed to. Chimo and the other three telepaths all gave Doria baleful looks, as did two sorcerers, aggressive Gossethien one of them and the other an alasis-blood woman, but none interrupted her again.

“In our defence,” elderly Doria said wearily, “malice has never been a factor. Every time Caalden has suffered through a controller, it has been demanded of all telepaths why we did not prevent it or at least stop it once it had begun. The simple fact is that we can do neither where an adult controller is concerned. All telepaths are ultimately as vulnerable to controllers as anyone else. Thus, in the interests of safety, it was decided long ago that the only option was to do everything possible to make certain there would be no threat, at the regrettable cost of a few lives, and to do it quietly so as not to burden anyone else with the knowledge. It has never been a perfect system, a few always slip

through and some do engage in antisocial behaviours, but typically at a lower level than they might otherwise.”

“You knew,” Kisea whispered, as the meaning of the old woman's words seeped through her half-numb shock. “You really knew all along that controllers are born more often!” All the resentment and anger that she'd been dismissing as useless for so long bubbled up somewhere inside, and spilled over. “*You knew!* You were one of my teachers, Biserai Gevinu, and you would have knowingly let me be killed and the whole thing called an accident, just because of my gift? You don't understand anything about controlling or how it works or what it can actually do. But instead of making any effort to understand, you would have let me be killed.” She realized she'd bolted to her feet, taken two steps close to the Telepath Assembly, was aware of Matt a step behind her but not trying to stop her, just being there and watching her back.

“And because of that, because of *your* ignorance and *your* fear and *your* refusal to look at what you were doing, I've spent the past ten years with no home, terrified to trust and carrying literally everything I owned, I've been beaten and raped repeatedly, I've slept outside in dangerous weather and I've eaten things you wouldn't consider food and I've done things that I hate to even remember doing in order to survive. I had an anti-scriving charm inside my own flesh to hide me! You forced Matt and I into a situation that should have meant the destruction of one or the other of us.” The room looked blurry... no, she was crying, both hands clenched so tightly she could feel her nails digging into her palms. Matt's hand was against her upper back, silent support and reassurance. “All over a gift I was born with and have tried never to abuse!”

“And yet,” Matt said quietly, “the Assembly has the nerve to demand that we all swear an Oath that includes the word *justice* in it.”

She backed up a step towards him, and he let his hand fall so he could wrap his arm around her waist and steady her against him, halfway enfolding her in opalescent white. She turned to bury her face in his shoulder, shaking. No matter what, no matter she'd seen enough to know that any terrible thing could be rationalized, she'd never really believed deep down that the Assembly was deliberately killing students who might be controllers.

“We've all had a recent reminder about what a controller can do,” another telepath protested. “There was almost a war between human and alasisir because of one!”

“The Jordans,” Matt's mother Alina said drily, “are rather aware of that. Thanks to your strategy, what a controller or two like Kisea could probably have put a stop to easily nearly became a bloodbath and did cost lives. Matt's rather odd gift is probably a result of that, which puts him in a rather unique position where controllers are concerned, don't you think? If he can tell the difference between the one he loves and the one responsible for the prices he pays when he uses magic, why can't you?”

I guess that answers what she thinks of Matt protecting a controller.

“There have also been rogue lifewitches,” the male of the lifewitch trio pointed out acidly. “And, for that matter, rogue telepaths of all sorts, rogue sorcerers, and a wide range of criminal behaviour with no gifts involved at all.”

“It was done for a reason,” Gossethien snapped. “A reason that still stands as a valid one. One whelp with a defective version of the sorcerer gift decides that it's his place to pass judgement on decisions made and upheld for generations...”

“There is nothing remotely defective about Matt's gift,” Honora said. “Nor is he alone in passing judgement. I am appalled that my colleagues and friends would behave this way and try to justify the murder of children entrusted to our care!”

Even without access to her gift here, Kisea had been paranoid for too long to be entirely oblivious to her surroundings, and the sounds she was picking up from the spectator's side of the

hall worried her more than a little.

"They're going to riot," she whispered. "Most people didn't truly believe it any more than I did, they just wanted to be sure. Now they're scared and angry."

"The controller gift," Chimo said, "cannot be monitored the way any other gift can. They have a particularly insidious ability to change memories and manipulate people without those people even knowing it."

"And people get hurt in riots," Matt muttered. "I'd rather they weren't lynched or torn apart before we can get the full story, either. All right, how do we stop a riot?" It wasn't really directed at her, just thinking out loud.

"Non-telepaths," the Speaker said, and there was winter chill in her carefully measured voice, "have no way of knowing whether any telepath is taking a walk through our minds, though we are expected to trust to telepath ethics and courtesy. By that logic, all telepaths should be executed for being telepaths as young as possible."

"This is ridiculous," Gossethien snarled. "You've destroyed more than you can understand, whelp! I can't fix it but I can stop you from doing any more!" He rose from his upper-tier seat and made a flicking gesture in Matt's direction.

Matt turned in place enough to shelter Kisea behind him, and held out a hand palm-out, fingers spread.

The fist-sized ball of livid red light froze in midair a finger's breadth from touching his palm, suddenly clearly visible; the rapid whirling slowed and stilled in the space of a couple of rapid heartbeats, and when he closed his hand, it vanished.

The utter silence in the Hall wasn't so much fear as profound shock.

And maybe, for those who understood sorcery, some degree of amazement that Matt had not deflected the attack, which would have been quicker and easier to do, but had effortlessly caught and dispelled it.

Matt would never deflect something if anyone innocent could be hurt by it. That's so much a part of him that his reflexes even act that way without thought.

"If you want that badly to fight," Matt said, with all the ice of the far northern winter in his voice, "then at least extend your pretence of caring about others as far as not including the defenceless in it."

"Goss!" The probably-human male sorcerer who had spoken earlier looked horrified. "You're involved in this too?"

"Sorceress, lower tier," Kisea said urgently, spotting one whose white-streaked black hair had faintly golden highlights—some odd mix of races, there—making surreptitious gestures with her fingers. She was sure that one had been glaring at Doria.

Matt, rather than trying to catch the bluish streak of crackling light, split it before it reached them, and bounced it upwards.

It grounded itself through the crystals that disrupted telepath activity in the Hall; at least two fractured, the sound sharp as the crack of a whip, but all of them burned out simultaneously. Having her gift snap back to full force so abruptly made Kisea shake her head hard, briefly dazed.

"It's too dangerous in here," Matt said. "Too many bystanders." She felt power gather, felt him wrapping his mind around it and shaping it to his desires.

She'd rarely even seen Matt truly angry.

All she could sense from him right now was rage. Not hot and blind, though; superlatively lucid, so frigid it burned.

Everything that matters to him, everything he loves, everything he believes in, they've desecrated and threatened and injured.

The Hall, between one breath and the next, felt much emptier.

Kisea glanced around. The full Assembly remained, and the two of them.

Everyone else, including Kian and Shon, Nitarai and Garrick, even the recorder and the relay observer, was simply no longer there.

The sheer disbelief, not that Matt would do such a thing but that he *could* do what should have been impossible at all and do it quickly, cleanly, and still on his feet, froze friend and foe alike.

That anyone had any doubts at all who was responsible, Kisea thought highly unlikely.

"That's better," Matt said to Gossethien. "Nobody else to get hurt. The doors are sealed, so nobody leaves and no one interrupts." He unfastened the clasp of his cloak, let it slither off his shoulders, and kicked it aside, never entirely letting go of Kisea. Apologetically, he looked at the lifewitches. "Sorry. Too close to the others for me to get you out too. Keep yourselves safe. So, my love, think you can handle five telepaths long enough for me to deal with the sorcerers? There are only two, it shouldn't take long."

"Telepaths who would have sentenced me to death, in my teens, just for existing? Oh, I think so." Unfortunately, she wasn't going to be able to stay on her feet; she retreated towards the bench, and Matt kept pace with her, his gaze never leaving the two hostile sorcerers. He caught and dispelled a second ball of light, this one a sickly rot-green she was just as happy not to come into contact with, as readily as the fire. Did they really think he could only do that trick a limited number of times, or only with limited types of attacks? It would be true of anyone else, but if they assumed it about Matt, then they no more understood his gift than they did hers.

"Four," elderly Doria said. "I will not fight."

"Traitor," one of the other telepaths, a human woman, said furiously. "You think anyone will be any gentler with you for confessing?"

"Parvynne," pleaded one of the other sorcerers—a man who might be human or might be a mer who kept his hair cropped short to hide the coloured tips because his hands looked like they might be webbed—of the alasir-blood sorceress. "Please..."

She hissed a curse and flung a spell at him. Though Matt cried a warning, the other sorcerer crumpled and slid off his seat bonelessly.

Etanynne bolted from her own to kneel beside the fallen possibly-mer sorcerer.

The human woman who had called Doria a traitor glowered at them, and any object not bolted down or absurdly heavy began to tremble. The other three shifted position to bring themselves close enough together, hand clasping hand, which would let them communicate faster than words and unite their abilities. Kisea deflected a cautious exploratory touch easily, her own shields constructed over long years of fear and much too strong to yield readily even without conscious reinforcement, and began to turn her awareness inwards and more focused so she could retaliate.

"Get over by Etanynne," she heard Honora say quietly, probably to the other two lifewitches. "I'll protect us all."

She does know Matt, she knows very well he'd rather have her keeping the vulnerable safe than actively helping him.

And she knows he doesn't need anyone's help.

Except maybe mine.

"Baldwin," Honora added. "I suggest you see what you can do about Idella."

"This is insanity," human Baldwin muttered.

"It is," the human woman, presumably Idella, agreed sweetly. "So why don't you stay out of it? Or better still, help Goss and Parvynne put the whelp in his place?"

Kisea could feel Matt weaving shields around them both, barriers to protect her from sorcery even if he was distracted. Through her eyelids, she saw a flash of light.

"I'll stay out of it if you will," Baldwin said.

Kisea felt the shift in power just before something crashed from the direction of Baldwin's voice.

"Not a good enough offer," Idella said.

To Kisea's inner senses, her opponents, Chimo and Biserai and a human man she didn't know but guessed as a Southerner since he was blonde and tanned, were all armoured in mirror-bright plates of steel from head to toe, leaving nothing exposed to the world. Positioned back-to-back and guarding all directions, they were busy adding rows of barriers around themselves.

She prowled around the perimeter, allowing them to see her. No turtle-like armour for her; her defences were constructed mainly from instinct and fear and need, and made her think more of something organic, built up from bone and horn and leather around herself, extra layers added to reinforce places that had been damaged or weak.

Their defences were strong ones, she had to admit, well-crafted and sturdy. She might be able to hammer her way through, but it would take time and it would mean a risk of causing damage to her opponents, and she wanted them alive with memories intact.

Had they read the information she'd offered her interviewers? Did they think that a few words could really measure and define her abilities?

She laid a mental hand against the outermost barrier and shoved experimentally; she might have been trying to push against a stone wall, for all it yielded.

She circled around them a few more times, eyeing the outer barrier, testing it here and there. This bit had a dominant feel of Chimo, that bit of Biserai, this other bit was unfamiliar.

Stone walls generally had doors of some sort, though, if you knew where to look and how to open them.

Around, and around, probing... even though the barriers, she had a faint sense that they were getting nervous, a trio of hares smelling a lynx in the darkness and knowing they had nowhere to run.

Even hares could kick or bite viciously; telepaths generally didn't fight directly, because most lacked offensive gifts of any kind, but she knew Biserai was a strong projective, knew nothing about the others, and there were crude blunt attacks that any reasonably strong telepath could attempt that might do damage if they got very lucky. And hares could kick hard enough, in a panic, to break their own spines, which she couldn't allow.

She chose the spot she wanted, but kept going, around once more, gathering herself.

Shon and Kian, sparring with staves, on the way here: sitting and watching them, she'd been impressed and delighted by Shon's graceful control and by Kian's speed and precision. She needed both right now, to hit exactly the right spot too quickly for them to reinforce it and do it with enough power to break through but enough control to go no further. Like a staff in her hands, and she needed to snap the metal-capped end hard and fast right... *there*.

Before they could seal the hole she'd made, she darted through it.

The psychic equivalent of a second staff swung in her direction, and she recognized Biserai as the driving force behind it; she blocked it, deflecting it away, and retaliated with the follow-through though she really didn't expect to connect.

Biserai parried and retreated, back inside the layers of shields, and the apprehension Kisea had sensed was clearer now.

The second layer of protection was more like a flexible tough membrane that yielded to some degree under her touch. Her previous approach would simply be absorbed and bounce back harmlessly.

Shon, years ago, driven away from everything he'd ever known because he stood up for someone even in the face of the King's disapproval, against his father and Lord's orders.... he still had his

sword, though, his father had left him that, and she'd watched enthralled as he poured all the despair and grief into a mixture of improvised shadow-sparring and the ritualized patterns of moves that had begun as a way to teach and become an art of their own.

She visualized his old sword, the hilt long enough for two hands but the whole sword light enough for one, the blade always kept shining-bright and razor-sharp, as she circled back around to the point that felt thinnest.

One swift slash upwards at an angle tore through the membrane, left a gaping hole she stepped through.

This time, the attack crashed down on her the instant she was through, and she barely had time to deflect it; it struck her glancingly, slid off her armour without damage beyond an instant's alarm and discomfort.

I need to be more careful.

She didn't bother striking back, just turned to the next barrier.

They did learn, she had to give them that. This one was a precariously balanced composition that her inner senses translated as leaning outwards at the top, looming over her as she circled it and tested it. It was prickly, too, not enough to really hurt but enough to sting when she touched it.

That was almost amusing, given the analogies she'd found inspiring thus far. Bring it down from far enough back that she wouldn't be injured—or, more accurately, so distracted that she'd be vulnerable to a real threat—as it fell?

She ignored the prickly feeling as trivial and irrelevant, searching for the right spot. Once she had it, she spiralled outwards, still circling but putting a bit of psychic distance between them. They were too canny to relax, though that might have made this easier.

Kian with his bow, careful to never loose until he was certain of a clean kill, except when his family had been threatened and he wanted nonlethal damage. With a static target for practice, loosing arrow after arrow in a smooth rapid rhythm and placing them all close together in a tight cluster, making it look effortless and as natural as breathing.

A small and tightly focused ranged attack at a single spot in the barrier might not bring it down in a single shot, but a series of them would, she was sure.

She visualized Kian's bow, his arrows with the drab fletching and the bright red-and-yellow bands on the shaft, colours that should have told her how closely his life was tied up with the Jordan House if she'd actually allowed herself to think about it. Around, and around, and at the right spot she aimed and loosed. Another arrow appeared the instant the first was away, and she sent it off as well, and a third and a fourth...

She lost count, didn't really care, intent only on repeating it as quickly as possible to bring it down before they could repair it. She had a sense of some attempt at that, but they couldn't keep up. The whole thing crumbled and collapsed into a jumble that melted away.

She abandoned the image of the bow and ran across the space, just before they slammed a replacement barrier, a simple one like the original outermost one, in its place.

There were three of them, but all these elaborate and complex shields took energy to build and energy to maintain. How many more lay ahead?

Not that it mattered. Nothing they threw at her could do more than slow her. With her own emotional energy and Matt's feeding her, adrenaline and fury pulsing with every heartbeat, her awareness that she could keep going even exhausted and injured for less reason than her life and Matt's both, she would not be the one to falter first—even if they *were* fighting for their lives.

So many years afraid of them.

They don't scare me now.

But they always feared me.

We could have been on the same side. Because of their choices, we can never be.

So I'm going to show them why they should fear me.

Now that's an interesting barrier.

It translated as a broad shallow ditch coated with ice, strewn liberally with knife-like ridges that she had no doubt were sharp enough to cut painfully, even if the damage was minimal. The sheer depth of the cold was of more concern. It might not be technically an offensive attack, but a barrier that could drain all the energy from her would leave her helpless.

She circled it, thoughtfully, looking for the narrowest spot.

She'd met people who had been drained of the strength to keep fighting a war they felt doomed to lose, of the drive to keep trying, of hope.

And she'd helped them, she'd given them back their lives.

She glanced down, not just visualizing her boots but remembering the grateful cobbler who had given them to her, calling up the memory of the tormented brother of the leather-worker who had made her bodice, the weaver who had her beloved husband back and had given her a warm coat that had saved Kisea's life multiple times. Others who had nothing to give but thanks, like Ryline and her mother; some who had offered hospitality, coin, much-needed provisions, things that made it possible for her to keep going but were ultimately symbols. Each time, she'd faced down their fear, their pain, felt it herself in the process but each time she'd won against it.

All with the gift that these three had wanted her to die just for having.

She wrapped herself, not just in the memory of her coat and boots, but a cloak woven of all the other memories, and simply walked across the ice-field.

She could feel the bitter chill beyond, feel it trying to reach her, trying to sap her of energy and will and motivation, to turn her into a hollow shell, but against her confidence that she had battled emptiness repeatedly and won, it failed.

She stepped out of the barrier.

Biserai's attack had the force of desperation behind it, a projection of raw emotion, rage at and terror of multiple things all braided together into a whip that snapped against Kisea's armour and skated across it, tearing loose fragments.

Oh, please, Kisea flung at them. *I've lived with anger and fear every day for the last decade. You think those are going to stop me? That isn't even worth the effort to counter.*

You are exactly what we killed controllers to try to prevent, Chimo said bitterly.

You are, I suppose, what we made you, Biserai said, in much the same tone.

How dare you claim any credit for what I am?

 Kisea snapped. *What you almost created was a corpse. What you could have created was another self-serving twisted parasite like that bogslime that attacked Matt. What I am, I am because even after I ran, I knew what trust and love and gentleness felt like, and even if you tried to make sure I could never have them again, I could at least try to help others reach solid ground to look for them. What I am is because of Matt and my own choices, *despite* you, not because of you. I've done things I'm not proud of, but I have *never* tried to rationalize it as having some exalted purpose.*

And you don't think, said the third telepath, *your whole superior attitude is any different from any other controller? What *you* want, the world has to roll over on its back and give you. What *you* think is right is what's going to happen. No matter how many lives you destroy in the process.*

I don't destroy lives. I save them. Unless I'm attacked first.

And just what makes your life so valuable?

Ask anyone I've healed after their hearts and souls have been torn apart by people who think like you.

*Oh, yes, we read that. A bunch of crossbreeds, mainly, most of them not even able to pay what

a healer normally earns. Siren sluts wailing about being raped when it was their own fault, villagers whining about being afraid of the dark, one stupid alar who tossed aside a title for no good reason.*

She hadn't realized she could be more angry.

It cost every one of them more than you'll ever understand just to keep going day after day!

*And Caalden would be so much poorer a place for losing them, wouldn't it? *

I'd rather share the world with them than you!

I'd rather, Chimo mocked. *Because what you want is all that matters, isn't it? Because that's what controllers are. Twist the world and everyone around them into what *they* want, and what others want doesn't matter.*

All these people you supposedly healed, Biserai said contemptuously. *Did a little rearranging while you were at it, did you? Convince them that you've created a miracle, and that you'd done something no one else could? Just to make sure that they're grateful enough to satisfy your ego and give you things that you want, whether they otherwise would or not?*

Her visualized combat zone trembled, the ground under them shaking with her fury.

I'm going to kill them. Horribly, and listen to them scream, and wring a hundred tears from them for every one I've shed because of them.

No. I can't. That would make me what they think I am. How could I ever ask even Matt to trust me after that?

How many lives, the Southerner said, *of good men with families have you ruined because those men had inaccurate information about sirens and you threw a tantrum? It isn't like you haven't had plenty of men between your legs if you're like any other siren. You're oh-so-noble, but you'd rather rip their minds apart?*

Are you seriously telling me that fighting back against being raped is unethical?

Kisea said in disbelief. *Right. Man, and Southerner. No clue about anything outside your own monochrome little reality. How many sirens have you raped? You have a quarter-siren bedroom toy, one with no gift to help her fight back? Or are you just hoping for one? The world will be so much poorer a place without another overly-privileged bigot with a small mind and smaller heart.*

Which, of course, is your right to decide, unilaterally, Chimo mocked.

What are they doing? They aren't attacking, don't have much left by the way of defences, they can't really think that words are going to make me turn tail and run!

You want me angry, she said slowly. *You want me to lose control and kill you or wipe your minds. That's it, isn't it? You know that you have absolutely no escape. There's nowhere for you to run or hide. But if I kill you, then you get to look justified in at least a few eyes. That isn't going to happen. Unless you can kill or disable me first, I'm going to strip you defenceless and hand you back to the part of the Assembly that values life.*

She began to circle around them again, examining the barrier in front of her. Every instinct told her it was the only one left, that on the other side they had at most their personal shields.

Matt wants you alive and intact because he believes in justice. He believes that no one should do you any harm until you've had a fair trial and if you're guilty then someone with the legal authority to do it gets to decide what to do with you.

This barrier was simply... darkness. A dense roiling darkness so thick she could all but feel it, so bitter it stung her skin like acid. She kept circling, contemplating the best approach.

*I want you alive because I don't want you to get out of the consequences of your actions that easily. I want you to pay. I want to ram everything down your throats until you choke on it. Every parent and sibling and friend who cried because someone who should have had a bright future never came home. Every controller who's been living on scraps in the shadows and kicked like a Southern

street mongrel. Everyone hurt by a controller who believed the whole world hates them and that they must be monsters and so they acted the part. If there was a way to name all the people who could have been mindhealed by someone like me and give you all the pain and fear and despair they could have been spared, and their loved ones, I'd do it. I'm a much less nice person than Matt is, and what I believe in is much less abstract. But then, his life has been relatively sheltered and safe. Something like yours, but there's an enormous difference: he doesn't think he's entitled to it and somehow innately superior because of it. He thinks absolutely *everyone* deserves safety from violence and want and injustice.*

Somehow fitting, that this final barrier should be vulnerable to imagery drawn from Matt.

In the dark, when he and Kian and Shon could see, he still created light for her. Because her biology was different, but different didn't mean inferior, just something to acknowledge and accommodate. If he could do the mirror version for Shon during the day, he would.

But light wasn't just light. Fear had driven her to flee from Matt as much as from the College and Assembly; fear had kept her in hiding, had guided her hand as she hid the onyx charm in her own body. In her first few months alone, she'd been too blinded by fear to be entirely rational, and the fear had urged her into actions she'd come to regret deeply. Fear clouded the mind and wrapped the spirit in darkness, shutting out everything in order to stay safe but at the same time shutting out the light that could break down the fear itself.

That light, Matt and his cousins were doing everything they could to spread.

She held up her hands, thought of long ago, when he was still learning, creating fanciful illusory flowers for her that glowed with their own radiance to make her smile. She thought of being out on the road, on the way here, and Matt holding in his hands a tiny version of the blue larger moon before setting it free to shed its light gently over the night.

Neither was as bright as his spirit.

Nor was either as bright as the light in Rylina's eyes when she realized the fear was gone, the same light she'd seen so often. She'd tried, the first time, with a siren-blood boy much her own age who had been raped and even his human family refused to believe that he hadn't initiated it, and he was beginning to believe it himself but the conflict was tearing him apart. It hadn't been a smooth job, not like she'd learned to do later, but she'd broken the spiral, at least, and they'd left that village together. She'd seen him once, in Malachite, but had made sure he didn't see her; he'd been with a siren-alasir woman, the two obviously very close, and he'd shown every indication that he was prospering.

She'd only done it at all because when she'd felt alone and lost, Matt had held out a hand to her. Once she'd seen that light come back to pain-darkened eyes the first time, she'd known she'd do it again.

There was light in Matt's, too, often coloured by a mischievous satisfaction, when he found a way to make her laugh even in her most despondent moments.

The small moon in her hands strengthened and grew, dazzlingly brilliant, scintillating with countless colours.

She held it up, let its rays dance across the murk, which melted away under it, ice under summer sun.

The gloom was deep, a thick wall wrapped around the three telepaths, far more than just a few steps as the outer barriers had been, broader even than the icy ditch. Tentacles of it reached towards her, but always drew back, unable to penetrate the light she cradled in her hands.

Between one step and the next, she was out of the murk.

The light in her hands still glowed, though, and by it, she saw the three telepaths cringing away from her.

Three adults in shiny armour, reflecting the light away from them instead of allowing it to reach them, empty-handed because all their defences had failed and what they had for weapons had always been bluff and show.

And, at the same time, three terrified children.

Terrified of what they don't understand.

So terrified they never allowed themselves to even look at what they don't understand. They just hide from it, and if it's forced in front of them, they lash out blindly in fear. Throwing rocks into the darkness and hoping it will all go away.

I can hate choices, and actions, and consequences, and refusal to face the consequences.

I can't hate anyone for being afraid. I can only hate the fear itself.

She balanced the light in one hand, offered the other palm-up and open. *The world is a scary place sometimes,* she said gently. *No one should have to live in fear all the time. Hiding from it and denying it only feeds it. Let me help. It would be more harm than good to just make it all go away, but I can fix the connections that are damaged and I can show you the way out of the fear.*

Then what? Chimo spat. *We go free, now reformed and acceptable and forgiven, different people?*

No. I can forgive you, because I understand fear. But not everyone will, and there's nothing I can do, nothing it would be right for me to do, about facing the results of your own choices.

Then what's the point?

Understanding why it was wrong and why it had to stop. I don't know whether it's mercy or not to even offer a way to see what you've done without the fear to filter it through. That might be the worst punishment of all.

Stay out of my head, mindraper, snarled the Southerner. *Enough with the mind-games. I'm not letting you in. Anything you want, you can show the world what kind of monster you are and take it.*

Kisea sighed, paced towards him. *If you insist.*

He struggled, trying to deflect her with mirror-metalled arms, but she could still see the other image, the frightened child, and reached past to lay her palm against his forehead.

He slumped in place, briefly, and his psychic presence faded away.

He's only asleep, Kisea said, tossing the light upwards to hover above her, protecting her still from the murk.

Biserai lunged to her feet, gathering all her projective power into what Kisea's mind translated as a club, raising it to bring it crashing down.

Kisea stepped to the side, gave the blow a further nudge towards the side with her re-summoned image of a staff. Two more strikes she blocked and bounced aside before she could touch Biserai's forehead and push her into sleep despite Biserai's frantic resistance against the loss of consciousness.

Only you left, Kisea said to Chimo. *You knew right from that first meeting that you'd been caught. You didn't run then, although you could have gotten away clean.*

And abandon everything to live like an animal somewhere? If it had stayed within the Assembly like it was supposed to, it could have been dealt with. You should have died like the other monsters, and then that other nuisance either would never have started asking questions or would at least have died like he was supposed to. We still could have salvaged everything and continued to keep Caalden safe if someone hadn't decided to tell everyone! And the sheep have no idea that they're asking wolves to protect them from the shepherd.

Shepherds, Kisea pointed out, *manage flocks for their own purposes, not the good of the sheep. Shepherds wear wool and sheepskin and eat mutton and lamb. People deserve better.* Though

he flinched away from her, there was nowhere to go, and like his partners, he collapsed.

Wearily, Kisea looked around at the setting that was already fading as her mind stopped trying to visualize anything.

Matt. I need to make sure Matt is safe.

She pulled her attention back into her own body, wishing for time to rest and catch her breath, and opened her eyes.

Honora was protecting a tight cluster still—Doria had been included in it somehow as well, and the second limp body, next to the unconscious possibly-mer sorcerer, looked like telekinetic Idella. The sorcerer Baldwin who had been fighting Idella was now closer to the three fallen telepaths, all his attention on them. For good reason, because the telepathic battle would have ended in universal casualties without protection from the sorcerous battle. Too many attacks, many of them with lingering effects, and Matt no longer had the luxury of dispelling each when he was doing well just to keep himself and her safe from rapid-fire and highly-varied spells. Ice coated walls and furniture here and there; other places showed scorch-marks and scars that made her think the target had partly liquefied and melted, and some looked like they'd been struck with immense force. Several patches glowed with luminous dust or ooze of varied colours and qualities.

Despite that, the Speaker had already abandoned her sanctuary to work her way around the tier towards the fallen telepaths. Kisea held her breath, hoping she'd make it. Etanyne ducked out of the path of a yellowish streak of light that glanced off an invisible obstacle uncomfortably close to her and into the wall above her, leaving a melted and bubbling welt, but she kept going. Once she reached the telepaths, Kisea let herself breathe. Baldwin could shield her there.

Which still left Matt alone against two. A single Sixth-level sorcerer against two First-level sorcerers should have been insane; even Ursula and Melienne had only been Fifth and Fourth.

But since when did Matt or his gift pay any attention to what should be possible?

"Done," she said quietly.

"I saw them go down," he said without turning to look at her, a bit breathlessly, but nothing suggested real distress. "This is turning out harder than I expected. They know some really nasty tricks."

Given what that streak of light would probably have done to a person instead of a wall, she couldn't even remotely imagine Matt being willing to use such a thing.

"I got one good shot in on her and she's weakening, like blood loss. So I think..." He broke off, and pale light shimmered into a wide oval disc in front of his raised hands; something gooey with a lot of flailing tendrils smacked into it, and he wrapped the pale light around it and heaved it over their heads backwards into the vacant spectator area. "Don't even want to know what that..." He yelped, dropped to his knees and pulled her down with him, shielding her with his own body while the other hand made a sweeping gesture of warding. She could feel the tension of every muscle as he fought to hold off whatever-it-was; she dared not move, since that might be the miniscule distraction that made all the difference. What she should be doing was trying to get to Honora or join Etanyne, let one of the other sorcerers shield her so Matt could focus on the duel instead of trying to keep her safe. From there, well, she was tired but sorcerers had fewer defences against her than telepaths did, as Melienne had demonstrated previously, and if she could make sure one of them was out of the fight, Matt could finish the other, she was sure.

"Felt that. Stay." The strain was audible in every word.

"That's stupid," she hissed.

"Trust me." He met her eyes, gave her a quick smile and a quicker kiss, and twisted in place so he could face the attack more directly.

No time to explain didn't mean there was no reason.

She drew her knees against her chest and wrapped her arms around them, scrunching herself into the smallest target she could. Even from here, she could still...

He was still close enough against her that she felt the physical shudder run through him the same instant her inner senses picked up the flash of searing pain that ran from his fingertips up towards his shoulder, spreading swiftly.

She abandoned her preliminary testing of the two sorcerers' defences, reached through the familiar connection and seized hold of the pain, shunting it away from his conscious mind.

Still linked to him, she knew as soon as he did that his opponents knew they'd landed a blow and expected an opening, and that they were pressing the attack hard.

To Matt's extended senses, the other sorcerers in the room glowed with brilliant and vividly-coloured auras. The inner hues were harder to make out, swirling together and overlapping, but the outermost of each was a wide clear band. Honora's was a dazzling blue, deeper than the sky, and Baldwin's a more greenish blue; the collapsed sorcerer was violet but it was narrow and much less bright. Gossethien's was pure yellow, and Parvynne's was orange. The light around Matt himself, though, was radiant white. There was probably some kind of important information in that, if she had any idea what it meant.

Both opponents, believing him vulnerable, were pouring immense power into their separate attacks, and they were different enough that no single defence should work against them simultaneously. The air around them pressed inward, squeezing with steadily increasing force, turning every breath into a battle; at the same time, it was warming even more rapidly, passing the hottest day she'd ever experienced at the College and still climbing.

She could feel the strain as he fought the multiple distractions, both physical discomfort and apprehension, to twist power into what he needed. The convulsive magical effort was mirrored in a physical spasm, as he did the equivalent of digging his fingernails into the middle of the smothering mass and tearing a hole immediately around them. That eased the pressure and heat, but left them with air too thin to breathe, and only growing more so as Matt forced it back, making the bubble around them larger.

"Goss, Parvynne, stop!" Honora cried. "That's a dangerous combination even if it implodes, and when Matt breaks it..."

"When?" Gossethien said contemptuously. "Don't be..."

"Idiots! Baldwin, you need stronger shields! Kisea, if you can, warn anyone in range outside!"

Dizzy though she was from scant air and excessive heat, the alarm in Honora's voice still reached Kisea. Unsure what she was warning them about, she reached outwards, flinging a wordless sense of impending danger at everyone she could readily make contact with.

Something for which she had no name shattered around them, giving her a fleeting impression of pottery flung with wall-shaking force in all directions at once, and cool air rushed in to fill the space around them, wind surging through an opened door. Someone shrieked, and she heard a sustained crash that reminded her of thunder, but the only thing that mattered right now was being able to breathe. She took a couple of shallow, gasping breaths, then forced herself to take slower and deeper ones; beside her, she could hear and feel Matt panting hard.

It took a moment for it to sink in that no one was attacking them.

She raised her head, looked around.

Honora and Baldwin and their respective groups looked intact, though to Matt's senses, Honora was now haloed by a much more greenish shade of blue and Baldwin's was emphatically green edging towards yellow.

Parvynne was lying on the floor, outlined in red, and it was only thin and not very bright.

Gossethien was on his knees, his aura showing orange, and deepening as she watched towards

dull red.

Every wooden object was, at best, scorched black; much of it was only splintered and burned wreckage. The light pouring down was neither sorcery nor firelight, but sunlight: most of the slate-shingled roof was missing, and directly ahead, all the stone blocks in one corner had collapsed outward, leaving a massive V-shaped gap.

Oh gods!

She reached frantically for Kian and Shon, found them both safe, but before she could make a proper connection, Lord Jordan stepped in and seized the other side.

No one is badly hurt, thanks to your warning. If Matt is able to, would you tell him to remove the seal on the doors? She could feel anger from him, but had no idea what the target was; in her experience, anger was frequently at her, but she was too tired for that to feel as worrying as it probably should.

He was trying to keep everyone else safe, she said, a bit fuzzily. *It's over. I think.* She tried to say Matt's name out loud, found her throat painfully dry, and coughed. *Matt, open the doors.*

Doors. Right. He sounded as dazed as she felt, but she sensed the mental shift of him shaping power. Shakily, he got to his feet, offered her a hand up.

Etanyne pushed them both down to sit on the bench, which was somehow relatively unscathed, maybe because it was so close to them. "Stay there, let me see what I can do. Gods, the injuries if there'd been anyone present unshielded..." She looked over her shoulder. "Olisai! Come help me!"

Kisea held meekly still while Etanyne ran sure light hands, only her fingertips making contact, from her head down her torso and along each limb. Instinctively, she groped for Matt's hand, holding it tight. They were both still alive. His family were safe. So everything would be all right—at least, for them. Wouldn't it?

"Nothing too bad, I'll have everything fixed but the tiredness in no time," the lifewitch said reassuringly. "Olisai?"

"Some nerve damage, right arm," Olisai said. "I wish someone would ban that spell. The beginnings of heat exhaustion and asphyxiation both?"

"Yes," Etanyne said. "Do what you can fast before all that magic use catches up, because it's probably not going to be over quickly or easily this time."

"I can help," Kisea said hoarsely, and coughed again, painfully. "I'm not so bad."

"You just fought three telepaths alone."

"They wanted me to win. Wanted me to kill them or wipe their minds. I didn't hurt them."

"I know," Etanyne said gently, and sighed. "This whole situation is a horrible one."

"I'm sorry."

"What for?" Olisai asked.

"It's all my fault. If I'd just kept running..."

"Then more students would die," Etanyne said. "And the spirits of Assembly members would continue to be warped into murderers of children. Healing sometimes hurts. Now, close your eyes and try to lower as many shields as you can so I don't need to work around them, please. No reaching to Matt just yet, or you'll interfere with Olisai and I."

Kisea obeyed, though every nerve itched to check on Matt and get ready to hold off what might be the worst she'd seen yet. She could feel him shivering against her, though, the chill setting in, and figured it was a given that his sight was already gone.

"Out of time," Olisai said.

"Floor's safer," Etanyne said, letting her hands drop. "It's harder to fall off."

Honora handed Etanyne an opalescent white cloak folded into a makeshift cushion, which the

lifewitch tucked underneath Kisea so her bottom came down on it and not the bare stone as she slithered to the floor. The two lifewitches helped steady Matt as he moved forward to kneel, then curled up with his head on Kisea's lap.

Honora tucked over him not only another white cloak but a golden one that shimmered green as well, and wrapped a second golden one around Kisea.

"Look after Matt," the sorceress said. "We'll take care of everything else. I imagine this will be bad, since much of it would have been outright impossible for anyone else."

Kisea nodded, stroking Matt's hair reassuringly as he grabbed for her hand. *I'm right here. I always will be.*

21

The instant the doors came open, Olisai ducked past everyone and bolted inside. No one even tried to stop her.

Rob would have liked to follow, and knew his family felt the same, but it would ultimately be more helpful to Matt and Kisea to keep the interior of the half-ruined building from being mobbed by the curious and the over-eager who had no useful role to fulfil at the moment. With no orders from the Assembly and no idea what to do, the white-and-red-clad guards were perfectly willing to follow the instructions of someone who was a recognized authority figure and stopped to tell them what to do; Rob had them set up a perimeter, and, unasked, Chris and Alina and Jai spread out to make sure that it actually reached all the way around the building and that all the guards understood the same orders.

Sometimes, when his brother and sister and brother-in-law were around, it was almost as good as being able to be in multiple places at once.

Kian and Shon got through anyway, a combination of Shon knowing how to be his own voice of authority and the two of them invoking their responsibilities as Matt's personal guards.

Kallima, and Jori who was in her human form, and the mer-woman sorceress with the webbed fingers and the blue-and-blond hair who had introduced herself as Fala, waited with visible impatience while Rob's siblings rejoined them. The guards had enough sense to stay out of the way of the Jordans.

The wreckage was even more obvious from inside the Joint Assembly Hall. Rob wasn't at all sure it was ever going to be structurally sound again; they might well have to construct a whole new building.

And in the middle, on the floor, was a siren-blood woman with paprika-red hair straggling loose from its previously neat braid in damp tendrils, a golden lifewitch cloak around her, all her attention on the figure curled up in front of her and using her crossed legs as a pillow, covered by a similar cloak.

Right then, Rob thought, nothing else in the world existed for either of them.

Alina started towards them, but Kian laid a hand on her arm.

"Let them be," he said quietly.

"But..."

"She can help more than anyone else. More than I would have believed anything ever could."

"It will be over much more quickly," Shon seconded.

"There's an odd sort of symmetry, there," Jai said. "He won't even know we're there at this point

anyway. Let her do whatever she does, love.”

Alina sighed, watching her son, his fingers laced tightly through Kisea's on her leg, her other hand smoothing his hair gently. “I'm grateful for anything that makes it easier, but...”

But he was her son, and though Alina had never been the domestic maternal type, she loved Matt and Kian both with the protective ferocity of a wildcat with kittens.

“Let's see if we can find out what happened,” Rob suggested, catching his sister's hand and urging her towards the cluster in front of what had been the tiered seats of the Assembly. They were the only people still standing; a number of others were down and motionless.

Etanyne welcomed them over with a nod and a slightly shaky smile.

“The brief version,” she said, unasked, “is that no one is dead or likely to be, though I do not envy Zayn the headache he'll have when he wakes up from Parvynne's strike. Kisea defeated three telepaths without harming them, Baldwin and Honora mostly just kept everyone other than Matt and Kisea and Gossethien and Parvynne shielded, although Baldwin took down Idella who's telekinetic.”

“Trying to help him directly,” Honora said softly, “would only have hindered him.”

“And worrying about bystanders would have crippled him completely,” Jai sighed. “As proud as I am of him for caring about others, he does take it to extremes at times.”

“He moved several hundred people far enough away to put a thick stone wall between them and the battlefield,” Baldwin said. “That isn't extreme, it's impossible. Or should have been. But if he hadn't... well, the shields we had up were among the strongest I've ever built or needed to, and they barely held at the end. Anyone in this Hall at that time with any lesser shields would probably be dead as of then, if not badly injured or killed before that. Parvynne and Gossethien were using some very unpleasant types of magic.”

“They're both all right?” Kallima asked anxiously. “Matt and Kisea?”

“They're both fine,” Etanyne assured her. “Olisai and I checked them over and did what we could, and we can finish later, but there was nothing serious.” She sighed. “Now we get to try to pick up the pieces. I confess, it's a task that frightens me more than a little. Do you suppose we can find someone to send for food? I know Zayn will have to sleep it off, and I doubt we can wake Gossethien or Parvynne or the telepaths to get them to eat. I suppose we should see about having them moved to cells, for their own protection as much as ours. But Matt and Kisea need to eat something as soon as possible and it would be a very good idea for Honora and Baldwin to as well.”

“I'll go,” Fala said. “For the food, at least. I'm not sure there are enough guards to keep people out of here and move people to the cells.”

“Try asking Nitarai to rally the students to help,” Rob suggested. “I imagine she'll be able to suggest a few reliable classmates in particular.”

“A good idea, that,” Etanyne said.

Fala nodded. “I'll be back soon.”

* * *

There were people moving around them, and voices, some of them quite close by, but even with all her attention on Matt, Kisea recognized Kian and Shon, and left anything immediate to them. At some point, the motion and the proximity of other people faded considerably, down into quiet.

It might have been hours or days before it passed, or much less; her own fatigue made any attempt to judge futile.

She opened her eyes, blinked at the room around them. No sunlight now, only twilight, the pale violet crescent of the smaller moon creeping into sight past the ruined ceiling, enhanced by sorcery to a comfortable level.

Kian and Shon were on either side of them, watchful and patient.

Matt uncurled, but groaned. "Ow. No more magic duels. It's like getting thrown by a dozen horses and then trampled by them."

"Show some gratitude," Kian chided. "Kisea fought too and has been helping you instead of resting."

"Thump me for real if I ever really forget, not just moaning." He sat up partway, braced on one arm. "Still can't see," he sighed, and used his other hand to find her by touch for a kiss. "You know I'm not complaining about you, right? And how much I appreciate it?"

"Yes, I know. And my fight was less extreme, I think. They wanted me to win. They were only fighting hoping I'd effectively destroy them and look bad." She didn't think it was only exhaustion that drained much of her earlier anger of its force, not with the glimpse she'd had of them as terrified children hiding from the world. Truly forgiving them for the way they'd handled that fear wasn't quite so easy, but the fear itself she understood. "They were as afraid of me as I ever was of them."

"You've never committed murder out of displaced fear," Shon said flatly. "They are responsible for their own choices."

"Alina!" Kian called.

"Oh gods, my mother." Matt dropped back to his previous position, curled into a ball. "I'll be doing every possible chore for the rest of my natural life and she'll invent more. Or she'll make Rob put me on stable duty or something."

"And put the stable-hands out of work?" Kian sounded amused. "He wouldn't allow that."

The woman who joined them was perhaps Kallima's height, though more curvy. Her hair, other than the individual locks that were going white in streaks, was such a dark brown that in poor light it could probably pass for black, though she'd have to be a head taller before she could be taken even for an alasis-blood crossbreed rather than a human. Though she was, at a glance, dressed for the road, her trousers were a dark red and the leather of her bodice a warm light gold, an interesting reflection of House colours, and the materials were finer quality and in better condition than they really should be for rough use. A telepath crystal glittered in the hollow of her throat, and just below it rested the familiar rearing horse pendant.

She knelt beside Matt and, without a word, gathered him up for a fierce hug. She knew exactly how to work around his blindness, Kisea observed, hands guiding him subtly. Matt hugged her back, just as tightly.

The man who looked a lot like Lord Jordan sat down on the bare floor next to Kian, whom he resembled at least as strongly despite the tanned skin and silvering sun-bleached hair. He was dressed similarly, though with a short-sleeved wheat-gold tunic replacing the leather bodice—not quite a uniform, but enough to suggest one, especially with that Jordan necklace in sight. He handed Kisea an oval-shaped bread-roll, the same kind the kitchen produced in abundance for the students, stuffed liberally with cold sliced meat and vegetables and cheese. "Here, eat, there's plenty more. Lifewitch orders. Etanyinne's concerned that you haven't been eating enough to compensate for recent conditions."

Well, that was a tactful way to say, *for being a highly stressed siren isolated with three sympathetic and accommodating alasis-blood, with the inevitable blood loss despite all attempts on their part to minimize it.*

"My father Chris," Kian said. "I think you met him and Alina once or twice, a long time ago."

"Very briefly," Kisea said. "Thanks." She bit hungrily into the sandwich, and with the first mouthful, her overstressed body latched onto the idea of it as something to replace lost energy and demanded that she finish it as quickly as possible. She forced herself to eat it one bite at a time and chew each thoroughly; throwing up was bad enough any time, worse when already exhausted.

Alina finally let go, only to start scolding Matt for taking reckless chances without letting his family know so they could be there to help, and more along similar lines. Chris adroitly caught Matt's hand and give him a second sandwich, one that even at a glance had a much higher proportion of meat; Matt's occasional attempts at interjection between bites gained only commands from her to stop talking and eat, so he gave up and listened meekly.

"Please don't take it as ignoring you," Chris said softly. "Just give her a moment."

"Alina, of all people, complaining about risks that need to be taken and wanting to keep others out of it?" Kian muttered. "The pot calling the kettle black, there."

"And she knows how near the misses she's had a time or two were," Chris said. "Why do you think she's been so scared? Deciding to sneak off alone to confront a renegade controller, with the intention of keeping the rest of us out of harm's way, came within a hair's breadth of being the last mistake she ever made. We were all worried, but you two and Jori generally keep your heads no matter what Matt's doing, and I couldn't see any reason to think this was an exception."

"It was a unique situation," Kian said. "One in which even otherwise reckless behaviour would have been appropriate, if there was no other way."

"That's exactly what I mean. Some things matter so much you do them no matter what, but doing them deliberately and aware of the risks is very different from charging in headlong."

"This time," Shon said quietly, "no matter how it looks, Matt did have a plan and did know exactly what he was doing."

"I know. What we couldn't put together ourselves, Jori told us."

"You left Jori as a hawk," Kisea said to Kian, confused.

"She appears not to have stayed that way," Kian said.

Maybe that would make sense once she was less tired.

Once Matt finished his sandwich, Chris intervened. "Lina, let it go. It was a reasonable decision, and we've both made worse ones. Everyone's alive, and we have plenty to celebrate. Right now, maybe we should get these two to bed while there's still any hope of walking there, hm?"

That worked.

But they didn't have to walk the whole way. Jori joined them, in human form, while they were getting up—in some cases with assistance—and gave Kian an expectant look as she held out a hand; he closed his around it and said, "Horse."

"Good idea," Chris said. "You're a lot steadier on your feet than either of our heroes here."

Once Shon helped her up behind Matt, Kisea reached around him to grope for the strap for support, pressed as close against his back as possible.

Jori picked her way delicately around wreckage and through the doors, which were high enough that they didn't need to duck, and back in the direction of the guest suites.

"We've got this," she heard Kian say quietly. "After all, it's our job. There are a lot of very frightened and confused people around with no idea what to do now, and you could probably be more help here. You know where we'll be."

She didn't hear the reply, but it was only Kian and Shon who caught up with them, and who helped them off Jori outside the guest quarters, and who made sure the two of them got safely to their own soft and welcoming bed.

* * *

Waking up in bed, psychically drained and physically aching, was unfortunately not an uncommon occurrence in Kisea's life, but doing so in a luxurious bed was. That was Matt curled up next to her, though, she knew instantly.

Emotionally, she still felt numb, which the rational part of her mind considered quite reasonable, all things considered. Eventually that would wear off and she'd need to actually look at and process

a couple of ninedays' worth of tumultuous feelings, but there was no hurry, that could happen in its own time.

Matt was still asleep; she kissed his cheek gently, and slid out of bed as stealthily as she could. Tired or not, she needed to use the privy.

She did a quick proximity test, to see how many people were within range, which meant within the shielded suite; Kian, but not Shon, oddly, and two unfamiliar presences.

Who? she asked Kian.

My father and Matt's mother.

She'd met them yesterday, she was fairly sure, the calm practical man who looked like Kian and the small dark-haired woman... who had ranted at Matt about taking chances, hadn't she?

Where's Shon?

Rob made Kalli promise not to go anywhere alone. Shon went with her to the stables. Rob is being helpful, since there is a great deal of chaos and confusion still, and Jai is with him. The undertone suggested that he wanted her reassured as much as he wanted to pass on information.

All is well. Is Matt awake too?

Not yet, but it feels like shallow sleep, he'll probably wake up soon.

A good time to request food, then, since you both need to eat.

Kisea found no sign of her clothes from the hearing, so she rummaged around for something else. *Will anyone care how completely I'm dressed?*

Your own family, who have called Equals Village home for over three decades? No.

The idea of having a family is still going to take a while to get used to.

I know. But your family finds it much easier.

Chemise and drawers and trousers meant she was at least minimally decent, and she didn't feel like the extra effort of bodice or boots right now, so she left it at that.

Privy first, then, feeling oddly shy, she went to the sitting room. There was room on the sofa next to Kian, so she joined him; he wrapped an arm around her in a one-armed hug, and she sighed and leaned against him. Would part of her, she wondered, always associate Kian with safety? Not the sort of association she had any desire to break.

"There's food on the way," Chris said. He and Alina shared a nearby sofa, both of them still in suggestive but not emphatic Jordan red and gold.

"You look exhausted still," Alina said sympathetically. "I promise, nothing serious until you feel up to facing it."

"The students? And the relays?"

"The relays are back up, and busier than ever, because quite a large number of people are demanding to know the whole story and want frequent updates along with the message backlog. I took a turn earlier and promised to again until things get back to more normal levels, and the relay students are helping in quarter-length and half-length shifts. The students in general are back in class in some fashion, although some of the faculty is busy with other things and those left are trying to help the students work through what exactly happened and why and what it means for the future. Which is difficult when they don't really know themselves."

Well, it's better than before.

"No one was hurt?"

"There were a few minor injuries when the Hall was destroyed," Chris said. "Enough of us heard your warning to at least be alert for something, and there were enough sorcerers in reach with quick reflexes to contain the worst of it. The lifewitches have that well under control."

Matt's going to be upset, but that could have been much worse.

"The Assembly?"

"The three lifewitches and two sorcerers verified, publicly and under truthspell to everyone's satisfaction, that they had no idea even that there were more controllers than commonly thought, let alone what was being done to you or about the plan to kill Matt. One other sorcerer will be questioned once he regains consciousness, but he's probably innocent. Doria, publicly and under truthspell, confessed everything. In the cells, one telepath is still unconscious, both sorcerers Matt fought are awake but injured physically and magically both, and the three telepaths you fought are awake and completely unharmed but refusing to speak to anyone."

Someone tapped on the door, and Chris got up to answer it.

"Despite everything," Alina said, "the College housekeeping and kitchens have continued to function perfectly. While the world as we know it changes, we'll still have clean laundry and fresh food."

Chris came back with a platter he set on the nearest table, then he handed Kisea a bowl with a spoon in it and a bread-roll. The bread was the same light wheat that the College kitchens produced in vast quantities; the bowl turned out to hold vegetables stewed in thick poultry gravy with generous bites of meat.

She picked up Matt's presence a few heartbeats before she heard him yawn. "I smell food."

"Come eat," Alina said.

Kian moved farther towards the corner so Kisea could make room for Matt on her other side, while Chris retrieved the other bowl from the tray and another bread-roll.

Matt dug into it hungrily, pausing only long enough to ask, "Situation?"

Chris and Alina between them repeated much the same account.

"Has anyone figured out yet who released all that information to everyone?"

"Yes," Kian said. "But the two involved want to talk to you personally."

"Friend or foe?"

"Unquestionably friend. There's no hurry."

"Good. I really hate duels. I've never even heard of half of what they were throwing at me. Without my whole weird all-magic-is-one thing, I wouldn't have lasted any time at all against either of them."

"Possibly, moving several hundred people to the other side of a stone wall could also be considered tiring," Chris said, in a dry tone that reminded Kisea sharply of Kian.

"What? Oh. I have no idea how I did that. It was one of those things that I needed to do and I just did it without really thinking about it. I doubt I could do it again. I don't think it was that, though, as much as it was trying to deal with a lot of magic that can't possibly have any purpose other than hurting and killing living things. Why anyone would spend a lot of time learning that stuff instead of practical or protective types is beyond me, and how they got good at it doesn't lead to very pleasant sorts of thoughts."

"So much for justice automatically winning the day," Kisea said.

Matt gave her a puzzled look. "But it did. So far, at least, and what's left of the Assembly should be able to make a decision about your official status and then we can go home and know that no one else is going to have to die or run away just for being born a controller. How is that not winning?"

"It wasn't a matter of good outweighing bad, or what's fair being recognized on its own merits. It took a battle that, as I recall, physically ruined a stone building hundreds of years old and caused some significant injuries and came close to more injuries or even deaths, including yours and mine."

"I never said that justice and right don't need a little help sometimes."

At least Kisea wasn't the only one who stared at him in astonishment, though it took Matt a couple more bites to realize it. "What?" he asked.

"When did you actually grow up?" Kisea demanded.

"I..." He started to answer, looked at his startled mother and uncle, and gave Kian a mournful look past Kisea. "Seriously, has nobody been paying any attention? Just before the mess with Kalli and the trap, Shon and I spent five days in Elmford explaining that it is not self-defence for five men to beat a siren-blood woman unconscious just because four of them are married, and neither is her repeatedly turning one of them down—one of the married ones, who also has a new baby at home. We barely got back to the Manor before we had to go the other direction to Owl Hill because a human man died and left everything split evenly between his three children, two of them by his quarter-alasir hand-fast wife of four decades and the third by a human woman he never lived with but he acknowledged her son and guess which one of the three decided he deserved all of it and the local magistrate was going to go along with it? I stopped believing that justice wins all by itself when Shimai ran away from the College and I couldn't come up with any better options. I just still believe it can and will ultimately win as long as someone tries to make sure it does. Which is why I spend mind-numbingly boring hours reading every damned legal decision in Jordan and frequently racing off at no notice to intervene before the damage is too bad, and why Rob dumped authority on me that keeps me awake every time I use it. If I actually thought justice would just automatically win without any help at all, I'd get more sleep and spend a lot less time eating in the saddle and even less time second-guessing myself. Why is this such a surprise? I thought it was rather obvious."

"No one is used to you actually being serious and sensible," Kian chuckled, leaning over to steal a bread-roll from the table and tearing it in half to take a bite of it.

"I'm with Kisea," Chris said. "At some point you grew up, and we missed it. Well, some of us did. I rather doubt Rob did."

"I tried to tell you," Kian said, snaking an arm around Kisea so he could lean past her to dip the bread in Matt's much-meatier stew. "Moving quickly does not necessarily mean moving recklessly. Not even for Matt."

"Thanks, I think," Matt said, with a roll of his eyes. "And quit stealing my food unless you're going to go get more!"

"I think a lot of it has probably been in the past few years," Alina said, and she sounded distinctly abashed. "And we've seen much less of you. Mostly just when we can drop by the Manor, and second-hand news from Kian. Not much of an excuse, however."

"Oh, I'm not that worried about it," Matt said. "It's not like the subject tends to come up when I do see you. Just, well, I'm crazy, not stupid. Incidentally, you," he tapped the end of Kisea's nose with one finger, "are in no position to talk about growing up. You did too, my love, under much worse conditions. Which are now and forever over, since you are no longer and never again have to be on your own."

Kian, Alina, and Chris all chimed in with agreement, over top of one another.

"That's going to take time to adjust to," Kisea said quietly. "I didn't have much of a family even before the College. Being the one siren-blood child in the middle of four entirely human ones, and eventually abandoned at the nearest temple and sent to the College as soon as possible, doesn't create much experience at being part of a family." *I'm much more broken than many of the people I've healed, and have been for much longer. How long can anyone put up with that?*

"You understand the important parts," Kian said. "You'll get the rest."

Kisea finished her stew and bread, and Kian took the empty bowl to pass it to the table. She sat back, let herself lean sideways against Kian since Matt was still eating, and looked down at her own hands. Empty, idle hands.

"Is the market back to normal?" she asked abruptly. "And do you think anyone would mind if I went out for a little while?"

They kept up with the subject change more easily than she really expected in retrospect, but

then, being used to Matt could do that.

"The market never entirely shut down," Chris said. "People need to eat. What's left of the Assembly is all friendly towards you, so there should be no problem, though I would suggest not going alone. Why?"

"I ran out of yarn for weaving trim and belts days ago, and it isn't something I could really ask a random servant to go buy for me. Since we're back to waiting, well, it helps if I have something to do with my hands." *Other than throwing Matt and Kian and Shon into bed as frequently as my body can tolerate it. I wonder how well they understand siren-blood? Or how well Kallima does? I don't want to mess up whatever's growing between her and Shon.*

"That should be easy enough," Alina said. "Why don't you get cleaned up and dressed, and we'll stop by the stables to collect Kalli, and we'll go visit the market? I'm sure the daughters of the current and previous Lords Jordan should count as a sufficiently respectable escort, in case anyone protests."

Someone knocked on the door.

"Take Shon too," Chris said, rising to answer it. "Just in... ah. Come back to that plan later, I think this takes priority." He backed up a couple of steps, gestured a gracious invitation.

The woman who came in was very lean, her build almost boyish, though the orange-red brocade bodice and skirt did their best to add curves and the laces at the neck of her blouse were tied loosely enough to give a glimpse of what cleavage nature and the tight lacing of the bodice could offer. Blonde hair mingled with blue was caught in a net of the same colour, secured by silver pins adorned with carnelian; the silver was counterpoint to the silver-and-opal six-sided medallion that showed bright against the vivid colour.

"Fala?" Matt said in disbelief.

Their guest laughed and spread web-fingered hands. "In the flesh." She held out one hand to Kisea as she came farther into the room. "Come here, you, I've been trying to decide whether I wanted to swat you for disappearing and leaving me absolutely frantic or hug you enough to make up for a decade."

Kisea met her halfway, her doubts about whether she was hallucinating dispelled by the cool solidity of Fala's arms.

"More people cared about you than just Matt," Fala chided. "Although I don't know what we could have done. Brylain and I certainly would have both tried. Now the relays are back up, I'm supposed to give you a hug from him too, until he can actually manage to see you personally."

"You're supposed to be in Fenishe," Matt said, abandoning the last of his food to steal a hug from Fala himself.

"Fenishe?" Kisea echoed. A Southern city?

"I work for the Port Authority," Fala said cheerfully. "Having an amphibious sorcerer and her human seer husband who can work very well together and have made a very large impact on the attempted smuggling and contraband near Fenishe is worth enough that they'll put up with having to treat me as a person and not Lenart's property."

"But what are you doing here?" Matt demanded, catching her hand and Kisea's and drawing both towards the furniture where they could all sit down.

"Ask your stormhawk. She showed up out of nowhere and told me she needed help for your sakes and I was the only one who could and who would listen to her. I told the Port Authority it was a family emergency, the next few days were spent on the road in varying states of discomfort with Jori visibly twitching every time we had to stop—and while I couldn't identify anything specifically, I'm quite certain the trip should have been significantly longer than it was. Once we got here, she handed me a stack of paper and asked me to start copying it so we could share it with as many

people as possible. Once I read it, I agreed.”

“That’s how it got out,” Matt said. “I hadn’t planned to do that yet.”

“You were buying into the secrecy game.” That wasn’t Fala; it came from over by the now-closed door.

Jori, human-form, was leaning against the wall, though Kisea would have sworn she hadn’t seen her come in with Fala.

“I know you didn’t want anyone to look bad who didn’t deserve it, but playing the game by their rules put you at a disadvantage. So the rules had to be changed.”

“How, though? Kian left you as a hawk!” Matt said.

Jori laughed. “We made a bargain, which is a lot like an Oath. I just decided that looking out for your best interests was a more important part of it than any of the specific details.” She pulled the door open just far enough to slip out and closed it behind her.

“She said breaking the terms of the bargain would get her in trouble,” Matt said, mostly to Kian. “At best, it would mean she’d have to go home and wouldn’t be able to come back. How is she still here? Or are we about to lose her?”

“She says,” Kian said, “it’s all a matter of knowing how to explain and who to explain to, and that she had enough support for her decision that she’s in no trouble. Beyond that, I doubt we’ll ever get another word from her on the subject, she’s been unwilling to discuss it.”

“How are you going to get home?” Kisea asked Fala. “Travelling with Jori would be safe enough, but I don’t like the thought of you in danger between here and Fenishe.”

“We’ll arrange something,” Chris said. “We certainly wouldn’t leave any family friend that loyal stranded alone hundreds of miles from home.”

“Trying to get rid of me already?” Fala chuckled. “I’m not going anywhere until I know the Assembly has officially dragged itself out of the muck and recognizes that not only are you not a renegade, the entire College universally and collectively owes you and every other controller that has ever come here and the families of all the ones who never came home an apology the size of the ocean. There are still a few walking piles of eel droppings out there who think the Assembly was in the right, and a larger number who are having trouble believing that the Assembly could act this way, which means a few who think it’s all faked and meant to undermine rightful authority. Public opinion is overwhelmingly on your side, though. Killing teenagers, any authority killing in secret, killing on assumption of guilt on circumstantial evidence with no trial or appeal, people in power mercilessly murdering individuals who never have a chance or driving them into barely surviving... there’s a lot of material there for people to be outraged by, and there’s probably more disagreement over what was the most appalling aspect than there is over whether the whole situation was hideous. There are actually more people questioning Matt’s motivations and priorities than there are yours, and wondering what he’s getting out of it that made it worth taking a risk. Hm, and a few who are rather worried about a Sixth-Level sorcerer being able to pull most of what you did yesterday. So, people are talking, quite a lot, but they aren’t rioting in the streets and life is beginning to go back to normal, at least for most people.”

“Feel up to a shopping trip?” Alina asked her. “We were going to get Kalli and Shon and drop by the market. Unfortunately, I have a limited amount of time before I’m expected elsewhere, so it would be best to go soon if we’re still going.”

“Shopping? Any day,” Fala said.

“Just let me finish getting dressed,” Kisea said. Having something to occupy her hands even while talking always made her feel better, and she was expecting quite a lot of talking in the immediate future.

Matt curved a hand around the back of her neck to bring her close enough for a kiss, before

releasing her to get up. “Have fun. What’s left of the money I brought is buried in my pack somewhere. Remember to open it the right way.”

On the way here, he’d showed her the trick to opening the purse of coins without a nasty magical bite. Picking pockets was a hazardous profession in Perifaithe.

She dressed quickly, braided her hair, and fastened the purse to her belt. It was much too warm in Perifaithe for a tunic, so it was in plain sight, but she rather doubted anyone would get close enough to her for that to be a problem. Messing with sorcerers was a bad idea, Alina was a fighter in her own right, Kisea was sure Kalli could do far better than she’d had a chance to demonstrate when kidnapped, and she had no doubt Shon would be paying no attention to what the market offered, only to staying on guard. With the number of Southerners in Perifaithe, simply having at least one man with a group of women would prevent some possible problems.

Back in the main room, she gestured broadly towards the door. “All set. Shall we?”

22

The Assembly Hall being in ruins, what remained of the Assembly chose to convene outside, where there was sufficient room for onlookers—which there certainly were. Some effort had gone into creating a useful set-up, but there were no tiers, no seats for the watchers, only six chairs in an arc for the much-reduced Assembly, all in formal cloaks, and a bench facing them for Kisea and Matt, who was currently not wearing his. The audience was, several rows deep, primarily students, who were sitting on the ground to make it easier for those behind them to see and hear. Nitarai was in the front row, and right beside her was a male siren of an age to be a student, who looked intensely nervous despite several other classmates circling them, protectively Kisea thought. The probable controller, she guessed, whose future hung on this as much as her own did.

At least he had Nitarai there, and on the other side a possibly human male classmate holding his hand much the way Matt was holding Kisea’s.

But he didn’t have a group of in-laws waiting as well, along with Fala and Jori-in-human-form.

“Kisea Jordan,” Etanyne said.

Some sorcerer was helping with acoustics: her voice carried too clearly without being a shout.

Kisea stood up, let go of Matt’s hand. He stayed where he was, close enough for her to reach him, certainly close enough for her to feel his mind against hers, but not trying to hold her.

“The rulings of the Assembly as it currently stands are nonetheless valid and binding,” Etanyne said, “as far as issues that are already before us, at least.” She paused, took a breath.

“On behalf of those current and historical members of the Assembly who were oblivious to what was happening, you and all controllers have our deepest and most wholehearted and fervent apologies. The Assembly and the College failed you tragically and possibly beyond all reasonable forgiveness. We will do everything possible to set things right for the future. The details of sweeping rulings regarding controllers will need to be discussed and confirmed once the Assembly is restored to its proper level. However, what we can do, we will. There will be no more murders of students for having any sort of gift, and we will do our best to ensure that any student at the College will, without exception, feel safe in exploring their gifts and asking for help in doing so with the certainty of support, not condemnation.”

Kisea closed her eyes, wondering which of the gods she should be thanking, as the students cheered.

Though possibly, much of that thanks should be going to a single stormhawk, instead.

Nitarai's friend was safe. Any future controller who came to the College was safe. No one else would have to face the choice she had. It wouldn't happen overnight, but at least officially, they existed and were protected.

"Since the issue of the current telepath Oath being untenable for controllers has been raised, we will be looking at devising a new version of the Oath which will be more appropriate. That, however, will take some time since it should not be done in haste, and we do have a considerable number of urgent issues competing for our attention. Current educational materials need to be reassessed to make certain that all students learn more accurate information."

More noise from, probably, the students, in clear approval.

"Does the student body find this acceptable?"

"We do," Nitarai confirmed.

"Do the relay telepaths find this acceptable?"

"We do." That was Garrick, from not too far back in the audience.

"Do the lifewitches, as a body, find this acceptable?"

"We do," Olisai said, her voice ringing across the crowd with a distinct note of triumph.

Etanyne nodded. "Kisea. Your current personal legal status is that of a renegade."

Kisea wrapped both arms around herself and took a deep breath. Here was her own future, the ruling that would determine whether she could go home with Matt and his—their—family or might as well die.

"The law technically states that any telepath of reasonable strength, which you unquestionably are, must swear the Oath or be considered a renegade. However, we've already acknowledged the difficulty with the current Oath, and quite possibly running away from the College before being asked to take it saved your life and led therefore to the exposure of a cancer within the College. The status of renegade is meant to indicate that someone is dangerous in some way, and you have, repeatedly, acted with admirable restraint under extremely trying circumstances. Several of us are uncertain that we would have done as well in your place. You have, in fact, put yourself at risk numerous times in order to help others. The Oath does exist for a reason, however. You asked, originally, that the Assembly recognize that your husband's Oath extends in spirit and legal responsibility to include you as well. For the time being, we consider this to be acceptable, but once there is a viable version of the Oath for controllers, we will expect you to be the first to take it. The Assembly hereby declares that you are no longer a renegade in any sense, and you are free to do as you please with no further need to hide."

It took a moment for that to sink in, though behind her she heard what was probably the students begin to cheer with renewed vigour and enthusiasm.

It was over.

No more hiding. No more conflict. No more impossible choices.

They could just go back to the Manor, and she could try to adjust to having a home and a family.

Etanyne smiled at her, and as the sound level dropped somewhat, she added, "We would like to ask your help with the best way to create that new version of the Oath and with several other matters as well, including updating the woefully inaccurate information available in the library and considering the best approach to help students who share your gift, but there's no hurry. We do understand you have personal matters to deal with."

To her own utter embarrassment, Kisea felt her breath catch in a sob that just refused to be forced back down, felt tears that wouldn't be stopped, and hid her face in her hands, aware that she was shaking.

Matt stood up long enough to urge her gently to sit on the bench and sat beside her, an arm around her; she turned so she could bury the sobs in his shoulder. He pulled a handkerchief out of somewhere, she had no idea whether it was on him already or magic was involved, and gave it to her.

"I think," Matt said, "that translates as, thank you. And I second that."

"Thank you for all the work you've done in bringing this to our attention," Etanynne said. "As uncomfortable as this has been, something very wrong can now be set right."

"Go home," Honora said gently. "Build your life the way you want it. I doubt it will ever be a conventional one, given who you're sharing it with, but it can finally be what you deserve."

"The trials of those members of the Assembly who were involved in this monstrous conspiracy will take place when they are all fit to take part in it," Etanynne said. "And when we have a full-strength Assembly to conduct those trials. We are in the process now of considering and contacting candidates, and hope to have the vacant seats filled before long, but we're being somewhat cautious. We are requiring that candidates be questioned under truthspell about several issues. We will make a public announcement when we are able to proceed, and until then, the remainder of the Assembly will continue to deal with any urgent issues that arise as best we can. Thank you all for your patience and your understanding and your cooperation while we work through this situation. This hearing is adjourned."

Kisea heard a lot of motion around her, but couldn't seem to stop crying, and Matt appeared to be quite willing to hug her tightly and let her cry herself out.

"She's all right?" she heard Nitarai ask softly.

"Yes," Matt said. "She's been afraid for a long time. Not having to be afraid any more is a big thing."

"Very," said a young male voice. "You two saved my life, and I didn't even know it was in danger."

"Good. Then do something wonderful with it."

"I've been reading the stuff about healing minds. I think that would be amazing to do."

"We'll stop by to talk before you leave, maybe," Nitarai said. "Right now, your family is waiting. Including those cute scary guards of yours."

I'm sorry, she told Matt.

It's all right. Anyone who matters understands. Anytime you're ready, we can go back to our rooms. And anytime we want to, we can go home. And you can help Kian and Shon and Jori with trying to keep me out of trouble.

Probably a lost cause, but worth it. I love you.

I love you too.

And thank you. For never giving up on me.

He kissed her forehead. *Thank you for taking the enormous risk of trusting me all over again.*

Sniffling, she drew back enough to wipe her eyes, then blew her nose. That she was red-eyed and flushed and probably not terribly attractive right then, she knew, but there was nothing she could do and what difference did it make? Like Matt had said, those who mattered understood.

"Can we drag Fala back to Jordan Manor for that proper wedding celebration, do you think?" she asked Matt out loud.

He laughed. "We'll think of a way. And we'll get Lenart and Brylain there, too. I'm sure there'll be time while Kara and Lori and Kalli are making plans. With remounts for my parents and both uncles and Kalli, there'll be no problem with her having a horse to ride. It's going to be a long and leisurely trip. I'm not doing anything involving folding time-and-space for ten people, one stormhawk, three pack horses, and over a dozen riding horses. Not even with you there afterwards." He made that handkerchief vanish, gave her a clean one. "Feel better?"

“I think it's going to take a while for everything to really sink in, but yes, I think so.”

“Good. C'mon, then, Kisea-Shimai Jordan, you have a life to get started on, and after as much time as got lost already, there's no more to waste. Let's go figure out what's next.”

Afterword

Thank you for taking the time to visit one of my worlds! If you enjoyed it, please consider leaving me a review at your favourite site, telling your friends, or dropping me a line to let me know. Keep your eyes open for more of my work!

~~Steph Shangraw / prysmcat

Who's Who

Kisea, once *Shimai*, a renegade half-siren telepath and mindhealer

Matt (Matthian Jordan), a quarter-alasir Sixth-level sorcerer, Jordan's High Warden of the Peace

Kian, Matt's half-alasir cousin, a fighter who likes the wilderness

Shon (Shonalthan Telsea), Matt and Kian's alasir cousin, disowned by Telsea, a swordsman with other skills

Jori, a stormhawk who made a bargain with Matt and Kian

In Elmford

Arilai, a siren-blood harlot

Petra, a siren-blood municipal clerk

Wilmot Tanner, a married man

In Eyrie and Malachite

Aivynne, Kian's alasir-blood friend, and her siren-blood husband

Rylina, a young siren-blood who had a bad experience, and her mother

Vaelynnne, a mixed-blood girl who needs an escort to Malachite, and her father

At the ferry

Hugh, a human ferryman

Alfeo, a siren-blood telepath

Melienne, an alasir Fourth-level sorceress

Trinai, a siren-blood telepath

Ursula, a human Fifth-level sorceress

At Jordan Manor, and other Jordans

Rob, Lord Jordan

Kara, Lady Jordan

Kallima, their eldest daughter, who likes horses

Tobin, their only son, Jordan Heir

Adelia, their youngest daughter

Alina Jordan, a fighter and escort, who saved Caalden

Jai, a fighter and escort, Alina's half-alasir husband

Chris Jordan, a fighter and escort, who abdicated in favour of Rob

Lorienne, a weaver, Chris' alasir wife, previously of House Telsea

Elric, Manor relay telepath

Joanna, Manor sorceress

At the College and in Perifaithe

Brylain, Matt's roommate ten years ago, human telepath

Fala, Kisea's roommate ten years ago, mer sorceress

Hamo, Matt's classmate ten years ago

Garrick Thursten, human Perifaithe relay telepath

Nitarai, an outspoken siren-blood telepath student

Olisai Liriu, siren-alasir lifewitch

The Joint Assembly

Etanyne, siren-alasir lifewitch, Speaker for the Assembly

Biserai Gevinu, siren-blood telepath, once Kisea's teacher

Chimo Efisu, siren-blood telepath

Doria, telepath

Idella, human telepath (telekinetic)

Gossethien, alasir-blood sorcerer

Honora Drazen, human sorceress

Parvynne, alasir-blood sorceress

Baldwin, sorcerer

Zayn, sorcerer, possibly mer

unnamed: male Southerner telepath, female lifewitch, male lifewitch

About the Author

Steph Shangraw lives in southeastern Ontario, Canada, with three rescued cats and their other human minion. In the limited time spent not writing fantasy, she makes handmade cat toys, runs a lolanimals website for her friends to play on, tries to keep up with a writing blog, and of course serves her feline overlords. She started writing over 25 years ago, offered several novels on her website for her friends, and is finally venturing into "real" self-publishing.

For more info, other work, or to contact her, visit: www.prysmcat.com