

## *CROWN OF CRYSTAL FLAME*

*By*  
*C.L. Wilson*

### *Prologue*

*Northern Celeria ~ 24<sup>th</sup> day of Verados*

Death raked like a knife across Ellysetta Baristani's empathic soul. Talisa Barrial diSebourne was dead. Killed by the Tairen venom in the deadly red *Fey'cha* her husband, Colum, had thrown at her Fey truemate, Adrial vel Arquinas.

Of Colum diSebourne—Talisa's husband—there was no sign.

The scorch of ozone, the odor of powerful magic released with explosive force, still hung heavy in the air. No one needed to draw Ellysetta a picture. She'd felt Colum's hate-filled fury, felt Talisa's death. Adrial's wild, deadly Rage. She'd sensed the moment Colum's anger turned to terror, seen the unmistakable explosion of Adrial's magic, and then...nothing. A vacuum of emotion, the utter stunned silence of disbelief, followed at last by grief and accusation and a chaotic whirl of unchecked thoughts and feelings.

Colum had discovered his wife returning from the forest with her Fey lover, and he'd set into motion the series of events that had led to this: Talisa and Adrial dead. Colum... simply *gone*.

"My son." Great Lord Sebourne—Colum's father—stepped into the open space where his son had been. His eyes swept the clearing. His jaw thrust out aggressively. "Where's my son?"

"He's gone," Talisa's father, the Great Lord Cannevar Barrial, answered in a bleak voice. "They're all gone." His sons Luce, Parsis and Severn stood in stricken silence beside him. He swiped at the tears brimming in his eyes and glared at his neighbor. "I hope you're jaffing satisfied, Sebourne."

Kneeling on the ground beside the bodies of Talisa and his brother, Rowan vel Arquinas fixed grief-stricken gaze on Ellysetta. "Please Feyreisa. Save them. If anyone can, it's you."

Rowan's ragged whisper spurred her to action. She raced past the snarling Great Lords and dropped to her knees in the trampled grass and dirt beside the fallen truemates.

"Rain, try the shadar horn on Talisa," she commanded. A gift from the Elf King, Galad Hawksheart, the curling horn from the magical horses called shadar was reputed to be an antidote to any poison—even irreversibly lethal tairen venom.

“Ellysetta,” Rain murmured. He laid a hand on her shoulder. “It’s too late, *shei’tani*. They’re already gone.”

Her gaze shot up, pinning his. “I have to at least try to save them,” she cried. “You know I must.”

Compassion and understanding softened his expression. “There’s nothing to be done. They have passed beyond the Veil. Even if you could call their souls back into their bodies, you would only summon them as demons, not as the friends we knew

The sounds of shouting made them turn. Lord Sebourne and Lord Barrial were at each other’s throats, swords drawn. All their men had blades in hand as well, ready—even eager—to spill their own countrymen’s blood

“What are you thinking?” Ellysetta cried. “Haven’t you had your fill of death?”

Though the Fey-Celierian treaty that prohibited Fey from manipulating of mortal thoughts with their magic—and though that was precisely the crime for which Adrial vel Arquinas had been sentenced to death—Ellysetta still did it. She regarded the rage-filled men spun a weave of peace upon them.

“Sheathe your swords,” she commanded, infusing her voice with compulsion. “There will be no more killing here today. Lord Barrial, Rowan, tend to your dead. Lord Sebourne, mourn your son. For the sake of the dear ones each of us have lost, let there be peace between us.”

Though Sebourne sheathed his sword, not even Ellysetta’s weave was enough to still his anger completely.

“Peace?” he spat. “There will be peace when Celieria and her king are free of Fey manipulations and control.” And then he turned to the king and declared, “Sebourne will not fight beside these Fey *rultsharts*. I will not spill one more drop of Sebourne blood on their behalf, or trust them at my back. I pray gods you soon find the strength to cut free of their strings.”

Raising his voice, Great Lord Sebourne shouted, “Warriors of Sebourne! Mount up. We ride for Moreland!”

## Chapter One

*I watch my loved ones weep with sorrow,  
deaths silent torment of no tomorrow.  
I feel their hearts breaking, I sense their despair.  
united in misery, the grief that they share.*

*How do I show that, I am not gone...*

*but the essence of life's everlasting song*

*Why do they weep? Why do they cry?*

*I'm alive in the wind and I am soaring high.*

*I am sparkling light dancing on streams,*

*a moment of warmth in the rays of sunbeams.*

*The coolness of rain as it falls on your face,*

*the whisper of leaves as wind rushes with haste*

*~ Eternal Song, a requiem by Avian of Celeria*

*Celeria ~ Kreppes*

*24<sup>th</sup> Day of Verados*

“The bodies of Talisa and Adrial have been sent back to the elements,” Rain announced, speaking to the top of Dorian’s bent head.

After Talisa and Adrial’s deaths earlier in the day, while the King’s Army continued marching to the great walled city-fortress of Kreppes to prepare for war while Rain and the Fey had stayed behind with Great Lord Barrial and his sons to say their final goodbyes and return the bodies of their loved ones to the elements from whence they came.

Now, as he and Ellysetta stood before Celieria's king in the chambers Great Lord Barrial had surrendered for Dorian's use, Rain feared that the deaths of Adrial, Talisa and Colum diSebourne on the fields of northern Celieria today had destroyed far more than three lives.

Only one month ago, the Fey had learned that the evil High Mage of Eld intended to unleash a terrible army upon Celieria. An army one of his Magers had compared to the mythic Army of Darkness, a world-conquering force of millions. Rain and Ellysetta had spent weeks trying to cobble together an alliance to combat the threat. But now, thanks to what had happened with Talisa, Adrial, and Colum, the small army they'd managed to assemble was threatening to come apart at the seams.

King Dorian X of Celieria, who had not risen when Rain and Ellysetta entered, continued to scan the sheets of parchment in his hand as if Rain had not spoken, while leaving the king and queen of the Fey to stand before him like chastised children summoned to the schoolmaster's office.

Irritation flickered through Rain. Dorian had a right to his anger—and Rain knew he deserved reproach for hiding Adrial's continued presence in Celieria City from Celieria's king—but he would tolerate no discourtesy towards Ellysetta.

"The Fey stand ready to fight," Rain continued, "but before this battle begins, King Dorian, the Feyreisa and I must know what impact our recent mutual loss will have on our alliance."

The hands on the parchment froze. The Celierian king's head lifted. Eyes hard as polished stones clashed with Rain's gaze.

"It's a little late for such concerns, don't you think?"

The quiet venom in Dorian's tone surprised Rain. Since meeting the descendant of Marissya and Gaelen's sister, Marikah vol Serranis, Rain had never regarded Dorian as much more than a too-weak, too-mortal product of a great Fey bloodline. Fey in name only, with little to recommend him as either a strong leader or a seasoned warrior. But there was a new edge to Dorian that Rain had never seen before. A flinty glitter in his eyes and resolute hardness to his jaw.

Trusting, accommodating Dorian vol Serranis Torreval had grown steel in his spine—and with it a decidedly less favorable view of the Fey.

Rain spread his hands in a placating gesture. "King Dorian—"

"You knew!" Dorian kicked back his chair and surged to his feet. "All this time, you knew about Adrial and Talisa. You knew Adrial and the others hadn't gone back to the Fading Lands. Knew they were using their magic to hide their presence from Talisa's husband. You knew, and you condoned it. Not only that—you participated in their deception!" He jabbed a finger in Rain's direction. "You, who posture and pride yourself on

Fey honor, intentionally set out to deceive me, the Sebournes and the Barrials. Both Border Lords, vital in defending Celeria against the Eld. Was your talk about the Mages gathering strength again just talk, too?"

Rain's skin flushed. "I know how this must seem—"

"*Seem?*" Dorian gave a harsh, humorless laugh. "You spoke so eloquently about honoring our customs, holding our marriage vows as sacred as your own, and all the while, you plotted to rob a man of his wife. Is this the measure of Fey honor? Is this how low and worthless it has become—or is it merely an indicator of how low and worthless *your* honor has become?"

At Rain's side, Ellysetta bristled, but he silenced her with a small touch of his hand. He deserved Dorian's anger.

"You counted on my trust...on my belief in your honor," Dorian continued hotly. "You manipulated me like the puppet my own nobles have accused me of being. You used my faith in the goodness of the Fey—even my love for my Aunt, Marissya, and ties of kinship—to deceive me. You are the reason three people died today! How I wish I'd heeded Tenn v'En Eilan's warning about you!"

"That's enough!" Ellysetta exclaimed. Her green eyes shot sparks. "How dare you lay full blame for today at his feet? You, who bear as much blame as he?"

"Ellysetta, *las*." Rain pulled her closer, half afraid of what she might do to Dorian. "Dorian has a right to his anger. I *did* manipulate and deceive him. And I will bear the weight of Adrial and Talisa's deaths, as I bear the weight of all the lives lost to my sword and to my flame." Silently, he added, *\*\*Perhaps Tenn was right, and I truly have lost my way. \*\** Had he fallen from the Bright Path and been too blinded by his love for Ellysetta and his hatred of the Eld to realize it?

She whirled on him, anger eclipsed by shock and repudiation of his silent confession. *\*\*Rain, nei. Don't even think that way. You are a champion of Light. Don't you ever doubt it, \*\** She clasped his face in her hands and stared fiercely into his eyes, as if, by sheer force of will, she could make him believe her.

Turning back to Dorian, she said in a calmer voice, "In his sorrow and guilt over today's terrible loss, my *shei'tan* allows you to heap blame upon him without protest. But I will not. What great evil has he done? He allowed a dying man to spend the last months of his life watching over the woman he loved. If that is a crime, you should pray to the gods you would have the heart to be as guilty as he!"

For the first time since they'd entered this chamber, Dorian looked uncertain. "Vel Arquinas was dying?"

"Ellysetta," Rain murmured a low warning. The high price of *shei'tanitsa* was a dangerous truth Fey never revealed to outsiders.

"Aiyah, he was" she confirmed. *\*\*I'm sorry, Rain, but it's long past time he learned the truth. He is part*

*Fey, after all.* \*\* To Dorian, she continued aloud, “From the moment you upheld Talisa’s Celierian marriage, Adrial’s life was over. You did not realize it, but by denying him his *shei’tani*, you condemned him to death”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Dorian scowled and spun away, stalking over to the large window that looked out over the Heras River and the night-shrouded darkness of Eld. “Despite what the poets say, a broken heart never killed anyone.”

“Perhaps not among mortals, King Dorian, but the same is not true for the Fey. Once a fey finds his true mate, he has only months to complete the bond or he will die.”

Dorian stopped in his tracks. He turned, glancing uncertainly between the pair of them. “Is this true?” he asked Rain.

Rain sighed, then nodded. “*Aiyah*, it is true.”

“But you have yet to complete your bond with the Feyreisa. Are you telling me *you* are dying?”

“I am.”

Nonplussed, Dorian leaned back against the window, his hands gripping the stone sill. “How long do you have?”

“Not long,” Rain confessed. Ellysetta’s hand crept into his. He squeezed her fingers gently. “Weeks perhaps. No more than a month or two.”

“If this is true, why is this the first I’ve ever heard of it?”

Rain sighed. “Ellysetta once asked me the same question. My answer to her was the same as it is to you now: if you had so great a vulnerability—would you let it be known to those who might wish you harm?”

“You think I wish you harm?”

“You? *Nei*. But you are king of a people who have shown increasing animosity towards the Fey. It seemed wiser just to keep our secrets safe.”

“Knowing this,” Ellysetta said, “can you now understand why Rain acted as he did? It’s true he allowed our Spirit masters to weave the illusion of Adrial and Rowan leaving the city while in truth they remained behind with Talisa’s quintet, cloaked in invisibility weaves to avoid detection. And *aiyah*, he kept the secret of their presence from you so that no blame would fall upon you. But he didn’t do it so Adrial could steal another man’s wife. He did it so Adrial could spend the last days of his life close to the woman he loved.”

Dorian recovered his composure and regarded them both with a mix of suspicion and defensive ire. “Even if he was dying, that doesn’t excuse vel Arquinas for what he did. To manipulate diSebourne’s mind the way he did...to run off with the man’s wife. Those are not the actions of an honorable man—Fey or mortal.”

“*Nei*,” Rain agreed. “They are not. And that is precisely why Adrial would have embraced *sheisan’dahlein*,

the Fey honor death, and why no Fey will attempt to avenge him. What Adrial did was wrong. None of us will deny that. But his brother Rowan tells us he was going to do the honorable thing. He was going to leave his *shei'tani* with her husband and return to the Fading Lands.”

Dorian's shoulders slumped. "You should have come to me. Trusted me. If I'd known the price of the matebond, I could have tried to do something to spare vel Arquinas's life. Now it's too late. Three lives are lost—one of them the only heir to a Great House. Sebourne and his friends will make certain I regret my indulgence of the Fey."

"I do understand, Dorian, and I will do all that I can to make amends, but we have a far greater threat than Sebourne's vengeance to worry about now. Hawksheart warned us the Eld would attack tonight."

"Tonight? I thought you said the attack would come next week?"

"Apparently, things have changed."

"How many Elves did Hawksheart send to our aid? If the attack does come tonight, will they get here in time?"

Rain took a breath. This, even more than Dorian's anger, was the part of this meeting he'd been dreading. "The Elves are not coming, Dorian."

"They're not?" The king's brow furrowed. "Lord Hawksheart thinks the Danae alone will be enough against an army as large as the one you expect?"

"We never met with the Danae. Hawksheart's Elves intercepted us before we crossed Celieria's borders. He promised he would speak to the Danae on our behalf, but even if they agree to come, it will be days, possibly weeks before they reach Kreppes."

"Then we are doomed." Dorian began to pace.

"The keep is heavily guarded, and the shields are strong," Rain said. "Between your twelve thousand men, Lord Barrials' two, and my three thousand Fey, we'll give the Eld a good fight, I promise you. The Mages will not claim one fingerspan of Celierian soil without paying a high price."

"Don't patronize me," Dorian snapped. "I've read the legends about the Army of Darkness. It was millions strong, they say."

"Legends often grow over time."

"Yes, but even if this Mage has built an army only a tenth that size, our eighteen thousand would still be outnumbered twenty to one. If the Elves and the Danae had agreed to fight, we might have stood a chance. *Might*. But now...."

"Now, if this Mage truly *has* built an army to rival the legend, the best we can hope is to hold back the tide

and kill as many of them as possible before we are overrun,” Rain agreed baldly. “And pray our defeat will spur the Elves to action, as our pleas for aid could not.”

“You must hold out some hope of success,” Dorian insisted. “You would never bring your shei’tani here, if you thought defeat were certain.”

“She is here because I am, but if the situation becomes dire, her quintet will take her to safety.”

At his side, Ellysetta went stiff as a poker. *\*\*Rain, I'm not leaving you.\*\**

*\*\*We will talk later.\*\** He would not look at her.

*\*\*Nei, we won't. Because there is nothing to talk about. I won't leave you. You're mad if you think I would.\*\**

The corner of his mouth quirked, and despite the seriousness of their situation, he cast her a quick glance, sparkling with wry humor. *\*\*I believe we've already established that, shei'tani, and I'm getting madder by the day.\*\**

She glowered. *\*\*That's not funny.\*\**

Dorian paced across the room to the glassed window carved into the thick stone walls of the keep's central tower. Thick swaths of embroidered velvet hung across the glass, buffering the room against the chill of the north's snowy winters. He pulled back one of the hangings and peered out across the torch-lit northern battlements into the darkness of Eld.

“It is late. My scouts have reported no armies on the horizon. My generals have already sought their beds. I suggest you do the same. If an attack does come tonight, 'tis better we face them rested and ready to fight.”

Dorian returned to stand beside his desk. “Lord Barrial has ordered his servants to prepare a suite for you and the Feyreisa. Her quintet may stay with you, of course, and you may post another quintet to stand watch with the tower guard. But have the rest of your troops make camp outside the walls. I am not the only Celierian unsettled by today’s events. Emotions are running high, and I prefer to avoid any potential conflicts.”

“Of course.” Rain gave the brief half-nod that served as a courtesy bow between kings and held out a wrist for Ellysetta's hand. “We have no wish to cause you further distress.”

\* \* \*

After leaving the king, Rain and Ellysetta went out to the Fey encampment—Rain to meet with his generals and Ellysetta to ease what she could of Rowan’s grief. One of Lord Barrial’s servants was waiting for them upon their return and showed them to a spacious suite in the inner fortress’s west wing.

Now, secure behind the twenty-five fold weaves of her quintet and Kreppes’s own impressive shields that self-activated each night at sundown, Ellysetta lay in Rain’s arms in the center of the room’s opulent bed. A



warm fire crackled in the hearth, illuminating the room with flickering dance of shadows and firelight.

“How is Rowan?” Rain stroked a hand through her unbound hair.

“Devastated.” Her head rested on his chest. She snuggled closer, needing the feel of his arm around her, the sound of his heart beating beneath her ear. “The loss of his brother eats at his soul. Bel offered to spin a Spirit weave to Rowan’s sister, but that only made things worse. He couldn’t bear the thought of telling her their brother is gone. He blames himself for Adrial’s death. I don’t know how he could possibly think that. None of this was his fault.”

“Grief isn’t always logical. And with a Fey, it’s never mild. Our kind do not love in half measures.”

The Fey did nothing in half-measures. That intensity of emotion was part of their appeal. It made them the fiercest warriors, the staunchest allies, the most passionate lovers. The most devoted mates.

She ran a hand down his torso, fingertips stroking the silky smooth skin. All she had to do was touch him to set her world to rights.

“I wove what peace on him I could,” she said, “but I’m worried about him. There is a look in his eyes...a shadow I’ve never seen before. Almost as if some part of him died with Adrial and the rest is only going through the motions of living. When this battle starts, I don’t think he intends to live through it.”

“I will talk to him tomorrow.”

“Thank you.” Rain knew loss. He knew what it was to wish for death. Ellysetta traced a pattern across the skin of his chest. “Rain...”

“*Aiyah?*”

“About what you said earlier to Dorian. The bit about me leaving if the battle grows grim.”

He caught her hand, stilled it. “I’ve already commanded your quintet to take you to safety, when the time comes.”

She rolled away and propped herself up one elbow so she could see his face.

“Lord Hawksheart said we should stay together,” she reminded him. “‘Do not leave your mate’s side,’ he said. ‘You hold each other to the Light,’ he said. He said that we could only defeat the Darkness together.”

“He said many things. Most of which I don’t trust.”

“I see.” Ellysetta freed her hand from his and laid down on her back to stare up at the ceiling. “So we kept information from Dorian for our own purposes, yet you expect him to forgive our transgressions and trust us as if nothing has ever happened. But when it’s we who are deceived—when it’s Lord Galad keeping information from the Fey for his own purposes—somehow that makes *his* every word suspect?”

Dead silence fell over the room, broken only by the snap and pop of the logs on the fire.

Rain sat up, furs spilling into his lap as he twisted to face her. Silky black hair spilled over his muscled shoulders. His brows drew together.

“You think I have treated Dorian the way Hawksheart has treated us?”

She met his gaze. “I think we decided which truths to tell him and which to keep secret, just as the Elves have done to us. So now he distrusts us. Just as we distrust the Elves. Yet somehow we think he should just forget our deceptions and heed our advice without question—while you will not trust Lord Galad.”

Rain scowled. “The two are not remotely comparable. Hawksheart left your parents to suffer a thousand years of torment. He sent gods knows how many people to their deaths. He refuses to fight the Darkness he *knows* is coming.”

“And three people are dead because we let Adrial stay with his *shei'tani* and hide his presence from the Celierians. And now, though you've been told we must both face the High Mage together, you want to send me away and ensure our defeat.”

“You are twisting the facts. I want to keep you alive! How is that so wrong?”

She sat up and put her arms around him. “I don't want to die, Rain. But I won't be sent away so you can sacrifice yourself. You need me.” She stroked her fingers through his hair, smoothing the long strands back from his beautiful face. The bond madness was upon him. He fought it every moment of the day, and without her close by, the battle was more difficult. “And I need you, just as much.”

The last three weeks, they'd been each other's constant companion, never apart for more than a few chimes, and tonight, when he met with his generals while she went to heal Rowan, she'd felt his absence acutely. She'd come to rely on the strength she drew from him when he was near, just as she'd come to rely on Lord Hawksheart's magical circlet of yellow Sentinel blooms to keep the Mage out of her dreams when she slept. Just this last bell apart from him had left her feeling stretched thin. She'd found herself constantly reaching for him through their bond threads, drawing his emotions to her and soothing him with her own. Needing to know that he was close, that he was well, that she was not alone.

It frightened her, a little, how much she needed him. How much she'd come to depend on the constant flow of strength and reassurance between them.

“Sending me away won't save me, Rain. Without you to keep me strong, it's only a matter of time before the High Mage claims my soul.” She already bore four of the six Mage Marks needed to enslave a soul, shadowy bruises upon the skin over her heart, invisible except in the presence of the forbidden Dark magic, Azrahn. “You know that, even if you want to deny it.”

His face crumpled. “I can't lose you.”

“And that’s why you can’t send me away. Because the only way you could ever truly lose me is if the Mage claims my soul.” Two more Marks and she would be lost forever. “Besides,” she added softly, “if you sent me away, where would I go? You’re the only family I have left.”

Ellysetta was, essentially, an orphan. Mama—Lauriana Baristani, her adoptive mother – was dead, killed by the Eld. Papa and her two sisters, Lillis and Lorelle, were lost in the magical fog of the Faering Mists. Her Fey parents, Shan and Elfeya v’En Celay, whom she had never met, had both been prisoners of the High Mage of Eld for the last thousand years. Rain was the only family she had left.

His head bowed. *Shei’tani*. The word escaped his battered mind, filled with sorrow and despair.

She pulled him close, stroking his hair and back and he kissed her tenderly. But when tenderness blossomed to passion and he would have borne her down upon the bed, she stopped him.

“If this is to be our last night together, *shei’tan*, I don’t want to spend it here, in a strange room in a cold castle on the borders.”

His brows rose. “Then where would you have us go?”

“To the Fading Lands.” When he frowned in confusion, she lifted a hand. The lavender glow of Spirit gathered in her palm. “I want to spend our last night in Dharsa, with our friends and family around us and the tairen singing from the rooftops and the scent of Amarynth in the air.”

Rain lips curved in understanding. “I think, between the two of us, we can arrange that.” His weave joined her own, threads merging and spilling out across the room. The walls, the bed, all of Celieria faded away, replaced by the perfect beauty of Dharsa and the gardens near the golden Hall of Tairen. Faerilas, the magic infused waters of the Fading Lands, bubbled in exquisite marble fountains, and the air was redolent with the scent of magic, sweet with the perfumed scent of jasmine and honeyblossom and Amarynth, the flower of life. The Fey were singing, the music rising into a soft evening sky. Fairy flies winked and glittered amid the flowers and trees.

And there, standing in the great marble arches, stood Ellysetta’s family. Mama and Papa and the twins. And her Fey parents, Shan and Elfeya, healthy and whole and free, their faces alight with love. Kieran and Kiel. Adrial and Talisa. Rain’s parents, Rajahl and Kiaria. Sweet, shy, gentle Sariel dancing the Felah Baruk with the joyful Fey maidens and fierce-eyed Fey.

Rain and Ellysetta joined them. They danced and they sang, and as the night deepened, they walked out into the perfumed gardens and made love beneath the stars.

And overhead, the sky was filled with tairen.

And the world was filled with joy.

*The Faering Mists*

Lillis Baristani had never been happier in her life. Whatever magic this was in the Faering Mists, she never wanted to leave it. She had spent every day glued to Mama's side, sitting beside her on a wooden swing in the misty garden, cooking and laughing with her in the kitchen, lying with her head in Mama's lap as Mama read to her at night. Everything she'd missed since Mama had died. Everything she'd wished she could do again.

Every moment seemed perfect, enchanted. And Mama was even more wonderful than Lillis could ever remember her being. It was as if whatever had happened that day in the Cathedral of Light had changed Mama, stripped her of the fear and disapproval that had so often darkened her eyes.

Tonight, Lillis and Mama cuddled together on the suspended wooden swing Papa had installed on the back of their house, rocking gently as they watched the fairy flies dance across their garden, trailing glittering fairy fly dust in their wake. As Lillis watched the little whorls and streamers of colorful light and rocked in Mama's arms, she heard herself confess that she and Lorelle had revealed their magic to Papa and to the Fey.

The chime the words were out, she clapped a hand over her mouth and wished them back, but instead of delivering a sharp chide, Mama only smiled and stroked Lillis's hair. "It's all right, kitling," she said. "I should have told the truth myself long ago, but I was afraid."

That made Lillis's eyes go wide. Mama? Afraid? But she never feared anything. Lillis was the scaredy cat of the family. "What were you afraid of, Mama?"

"Oh, many things." Mama sighed. "But mostly I was afraid that what happened to my sister might somehow happen to you and Lorelle."

Lillis leaned back to look up at her mother in surprise. "I never knew you had a sister."

"She died long ago." Mama's eyes were dark and sad. "Her name was Bessinita...my sweet little Bess...and I loved her more than anything in the world." Then Mama had told her how Bess had been a Fire weaver too, like Lorelle and Mama, only when Bess was two, she accidentally burned a neighbor's house down. The villagers had insisted on winding Bess—taking the baby out into the dark Verlaine forest and abandoning her there to die.

"What did you do?"

"There wasn't anything I could do. I wasn't even as old as you are now." She rested her chin on the top of Lillis's head. "I prayed and prayed that someone would find her before the *lyrant* did, or if nothing else, that the Bright Lord would send his Lightmaidens to carry Bess away to the Haven of Light."

Tears turned Lillis's vision hazy. "Poor little baby. Poor little Bess."

"That was why I was always so afraid of magic, kitling. Not because I thought you or Lorelle were horrible

for having magic, but because I was so afraid of what people would do if they knew.”

“But you’re not afraid anymore?”

Mama smiled gently. “No, kitling. When I let love be my guide, fear lost its power over me.”

“So you’re not mad at us for telling?” Lillis asked.

“Of course not.” Mama pressed a kiss in Lillis’s curls. “I’m very proud of you and Lorelle both, and I’m proud of Ellie too. I love you all more than I can say.”

“I love you too, Mama.” Lillis snuggled closer and closed her eyes in bliss. Her arms squeezed tight around Mama’s neck, holding her close, and she breathed deep of the special scent that was Mama’s own, the scent of home and love and security where bad people never came and monsters never howled. “I never want to lose you again.”

Mama caressed Lillis’s hair in slow, rhythmic strokes, and the beat of her heart thumped reassuringly beneath Lillis’s ear. “I’ll always be with you, Lillipet. No matter what. If ever you’re feeling alone or afraid, just remember that. And remember this too: we are all the gods’ children. All our gifts come from them, but it’s what we choose to do with those gifts that determines whether we walk in Light or Shadow. When you see Ellie again, will you tell her that for me? And tell her I said to let love, not fear, be her guide. Will you do that for me?”

“You can tell her yourself. Once Kieran and Kiel get here, we can all go find Ellie together.”

Mama smiled. “I think she’ll understand it better if it comes from you. Will you promise me, kitling?”

Lillis frowned a little, but agreed with an obedient, “Yes, Mama.”

“And you won’t forget? No matter what?”

“No, Mama.”

Her reward was a kiss and another hug. “That’s my sweet Lillipet.”

Lillis burrowed into her mother’s arms, closing her eyes in bliss as Mama’s love and warmth enveloped her and held her tight.