

# King of Sword and Sky

Leisure Books ~ Sept 30, 2008

ISBN-10: 0843-9605-90

ISBN-13: 978-0843-9605-94

By

C.L. Wilson

## Prologue

### Eld ~ Boura Fell

“Two Primages and sixty of my Black Guard slaughtered, and yet somehow the pair of you survived. While my prize escaped.”

In the lowest levels of Boura Fell, the subterranean fortress buried deep beneath the dark-forested heart of Eld, High Mage Vadim Maur paced the *sel'dor*-veined floor of a small, sconcelit cell. Before him, two battered and bruised men sat chained to a pair of black metal chairs. One wore the blood-and-filth grimed remnants of an exorcist's scarlet robes. The other wore shredded and stained crimson rags that had once been the silken garb of a Sulimage, a journeyman practitioner of the vast and ancient arts of Magecraft.

Vadim Maur's pacing came to an abrupt halt. Luxuriant purple robes swirled about his spare form. Long, bone-white hair slid across his shoulders, accentuating the pallor of a face that had not seen sunlight in a thousand years. One beringed hand shot out. Thin, cadaverous fingers closed around the swollen jaw of Kolis Manza, Eld's most famous and esteemed Sulimage, who had until only a few days ago served his master Vadim Maur's bidding in Celieria City.

Now, the Sulimage's sash had been stripped of its jewels of achievement, and the shredded, honor-bare swath of cloth had been tied around the man's throat to mock his once-proud status as the High Mage's most accomplished and magically gifted apprentice.

“Capture her,” Vadim hissed. “Bring her to me. That was my command.” Long, ridged nails dug deep into the Sulimage's skin. “Yet you returned *empty handed*.”

“She was too powerful,” Kolis protested weakly. “Not even the Primages could stand against her.”

“Powerful?” Silver eyes snapped with fury, and white frost formed on every surface as the room's temperature plunged in sharp response. “Of course she was powerful! She is the crowning achievement of my last thousand years of work! The Tairen Soul I created! My greatest triumph—*and you let her slip through your fingers!*”

“What more could I have done, master? The Fey broke through our defenses.” The Sulimage coughed, then groaned as his broken ribs protested. “I tried to hold them off, to give the others time to get her into the Well, but then she... her magic... just exploded. She surprised us all.”

“Silence!” Vadim's free hand shot out with vicious force. Despite the High Mage's great age and increasingly frail appearance, his fist smashed hard against his apprentice's face. The

heavy rings of power decorating each of his fingers amplified the force of his blow, and the crack of bone and the crunch of breaking cartilage echoed off the stone walls of the chamber. Blood sprayed from Kolis's mouth and nose. A groaning breath wheezed out of his lungs, and he slumped senseless in his bonds.

Vadim turned to the man in the ragged exorcist's robes and whipped a wavy-edged Mage blade from the sheath strapped to his waist. He snatched a handful of greasy brown hair and yanked hard, pulling back the prisoner's head and exposing his throat to the dagger's razor-sharp edge.

Pale blue eyes, surrounded by stubby black lashes, looked up at him in mute fear. Fresh blood trickled from both nostrils and the corners of the man's mouth, and vicious purpling bruises swelled on skin still mottled from earlier beatings. A pulse beat like a trapped sparrow in the man's throat, and his barrel chest rose and fell with short, rapid breaths.

The prisoner swallowed convulsively, and the skin of his neck pressed against the razor-sharp edge of the Mage blade. Even that light touch tore a fresh slice in the captive's skin. No blood trickled from the wound. The dagger's thirsty black metal drank every drop before it spilled, and the dark cabochon stone in the blade's pommel began to flicker with ravenous red lights. The man froze in breathless silence.

Vadim's mouth twisted in a snarl. "And you, butcher's boy. Did you seriously think for even the tiniest instant that your miserable, insignificant mortal life held any value to me except as a means to capture Ellysetta Baristani?" Vadim leaned forward, letting his silver eyes turn to dark, bottomless wells of blackness sparkling with red lights as Azrahn, the sweet, powerful magic of the Mages, gathered within him.

Den Brodson, son of a Celierian butcher and former betrothed of Ellysetta Baristani, stared up into those twin pits of blackness and knew he was staring death in the face. He'd seen death before, a few days ago in the Grand Cathedral of Light, when Rain Tairen Soul had pulled a Fey blade from its sheath and smiled into Den's eyes.

Then, Den had turned and leaped into the Well of Souls to escape. Now, gods help him, he had nowhere to go.

The white-haired High Mage leaned closer still. "Your only value to me now is what small service the Guardians of the Well will offer in return for the delivery of your rotting corpse as a sacrifice."

A mewling whimper broke from Den's bloodied mouth. He'd seen the Guardian's handiwork...seen what they did to the dead and dying. As long as he lived, he'd never forget the high-pitched, animal screams of Eld soldiers being eaten alive when fresh blood seeped through their bandages and drew the hunger-maddened demons like wounded creatures drew thistlewolves.

Gods, he didn't want to die that way. "Please..."

Black eyes sparked with a sudden flare of malevolent red. The High Mage put a hand over Den's chest, directly over his heart, the fingers curved like claws so that only the fingertips touched. All five, pointed nails gouged into the skin as if the Mage intended to bore through Den's chest bones and rip out his heart. The black eyes whirled. The skin where the pallid hand touched grew cold.

"No, wait! Wait!" Panicked, Den shoved his feet against the cell floor and scooted his chair

back, retreating from the icy hand. The leg of his chair caught on an uneven stone and with a choked wail, he toppled over backwards.

Pain exploded in his skull as his head cracked against the stones. His hands, shackled at the wrists, scraped hard against their metal bonds. The sudden jolt shook his entire body, and a long, narrow parcel of wadded cloth fell out of his robe's deep pocket to land beside him.

The pair of pale, hulking guards standing near the door strode forward to grab Den's chair and haul it—and him—back upright. One guard kicked the small parcel, and sent it skittering across the floor. The fabric unwrapped as it went, and a handful of long, crystal-topped needles spilled out, chiming an absurdly cheerful series of tinkling notes as they rolled across the stone floor.

The High Mage went still. His eyes narrowed and lightened from nightmarish black to a slightly less terrifying shade of cold, glittering silver. Sheathing his dagger, the Mage pointed to the scattered exorcism needles. "Bring those to me," he commanded.

Both guards rushed to obey, gathering up the fallen needles and bringing them back to their master. The Mage examined them closely. Most of the dark crystals topping the needles were dark, but several sparkled with ruby lights.

His jaw clenched. He spun around, grabbed Den's chin in a fierce grip and shook him, making stars whirl across Den's vision. "These crystals have tasted blood," the Mage hissed. "Whose flesh did the needles pierce, mortal? Yours? Or someone else's?"

Den swallowed the acrid bile rising in his throat. "Ellie Baristani," he groaned. "She pulled them out to stop us from taking her into the Well."

The High Mage released Den and straightened. He lifted the needles to his nose and inhaled deeply. His eyes fluttered closed. When he opened them again, the Mage smiled.

"Well, mortal, it seems you will keep your miserable life another day, after all." He untied the sash from around his waist and wrapped the needles in it carefully, then deposited the small bundle in his own deep pocket. "I do not punish those who please me, and this gift is pleasing indeed."

The shallow, relieved breath had barely left Den's lungs before his chest constricted on a new surge of panic when the High Mage lunged and his bony hand closed round Den's throat.

"Today is my gift to you," the Mage hissed. "But for life after daybreak tomorrow, there is a price, mortal." He lifted the Mage blade, twisting the black, razored edge so the light of the sconces made shadows dance across the dark metal. "Accept my Mark. Willingly bind your soul to my service. Or when the Great Sun rises, you will die a death more hideous than any you can imagine."

Den whimpered.

The Mage smiled, pressed the point of his dagger to Den's wrist and sliced. Blood welled from the cut and slid down Den's arm like scarlet teardrops. The Mage lifted the wrist to his lips. Den flinched as a pale tongue flicked out, tasting his blood. "Answer me, boy. Surrender your soul or die. The choice is yours."

Den's hand shook. His entire body trembled. How had this happened? How had his plans gone so awry?

The Mage's grip tightened, pointed nails digging into the soft skin of Den's inner wrist. "Speak, mortal! Do you accept my Mark? Of your own free will, do you bind your soul to my

service?”

Den’s dreams of living in luxury in some remote part of the world, growing fat on the profits of Ellie Baristani’s magic, shattered like broken glass. There would be no palatial estate. No soft-skinned, buxom serving wenches to tend his every need. No lords lining up to seek his favor. There would be no Ellie Baristani on her knees before him, kissing his feet and begging for his forgiveness, whoring herself to please him.

His eyes closed. His shoulders heaved with helpless, silent sobs.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Yes, master,” the Mage’s hissing voice corrected.

“Yes, master.” Tears gathered in Den’s throat and burned at the back of his eyes.

“Then say it. ‘Of my own free will, I accept your Mark and bind my soul to your eternal service.’”

Den heard himself, weeping brokenly, repeating the damning words. Hot tears ran down his frozen cheeks. The cold press of the Mage’s mouth clamped against his wrist and pulled sickeningly as the Mage sucked Den’s blood from the sliced vein. Then came the colder press of that taloned hand gripping the skin above his heart. A sickly sweet aroma filled the air, overpowering, like barrels of rotting fruit. Pure, frigid ice, sharp as a knife, plunged deep into his chest. A will, heavy as stone, pressed down upon his.

He was in a black river, gasping for breath and fighting desperately to stay afloat, while a heavy weight slowly and relentlessly dragged him down. His head bobbed under. The thick, black, oily liquid of the river—so cold, so horribly sweet—enveloped him. His lungs burned as the air in them ran out and the need to breathe became overpowering. He fought, struggled, tried to kick his way to the surface, but the weight anchored him down, dragging him deeper and deeper.

His world was total darkness. No light. No hope. No hint of warmth. His lungs were on fire. If he breathed he would drown. If he didn’t breathe, he would die.

His mouth opened on a deep, desperate, despairing gasp. Oily blackness flooded in, filling his lungs, filling him.

With one last, choking, weeping cry for his lost life, Den Brodson surrendered.

## Chapter One

### *Celiera ~ The Garreval*

Seven days after departing Celiera City, the Fey reached the end of the mortal world. As the small caravan of wagons and loping Fey crested the top of a last, rolling hill, Ellysetta's breath caught in her throat. A great fertile plain stretched out below, miles of land sectioned into hedgerow-partitioned fields, all greening with well tended crops against a dramatic backdrop of majestic mountains thrusting up from the earth like a solid wall.

"Oh, Papa," Ellysetta breathed.

"'Tis the most beautiful sight I've ever seen," Sol Baristani agreed in a whisper as he sat beside his daughter on the wagon seat, a lit match held, forgotten, over the tobacco-filled bowl of his favorite pipe.

Together, father and daughter stared in awestruck wonder at the majestic peaks filling the horizon.

At first glance, the mountains almost appeared to be a single range but Ellysetta knew from the countless histories she'd read that they were actually two separate mountain ranges. The fierce Rhakis arrowed down from the north, nearly colliding with the stately swells of the Silvermist range. Only a scant mile separated the two, an infamous pass known as the Garreval, gateway to the Fading Lands.

Misty clouds swirled across forested cliffs and steep highland pastures of the Silvermist mountains. The clouds hovering over the Rhakis were less gentle, dark with rain and boiling into lightning-shot thunderheads as the sharp peaks continued northward towards Eld. Those soft clouds and fierce storms merged into a dense, shimmering fog that filled the pass between the two ranges, and Ellysetta gave a small shiver at the sight.

The Faering Mists. The magical barrier that surrounded the Fading Lands, impenetrable to all but the Fey.

The match Sol held over the tobacco-filled bowl of his pipe burned down unnoticed until the heat scorched his fingers. "Sweet brightness!" he yelled. Hissing, he shook the match out, tossed the scorched remains over the edge of the wagon, and blew on his stinging fingers.

Ellie turned, trying to stifle her laughter as she reached for his hand. This wasn't the first time her father had seared his hands on a matchstick. It wouldn't be the last. His attention was too easily caught by some real or imagined beauty—often while he held a lit match in his hand, thanks to his fondness for his pipe.

"I'm all right, Ellie-girl," Sol protested when she took his hand.

"I know, Papa, but Marissya says I should practice whenever I get the opportunity." She held her father's hand in hers and focused on the reddened flesh, trying to block out the flood of thoughts and emotions that poured into her mind when she touched his skin.

Love. Worry. Instinctive fear, tinged with guilt. He still wasn't comfortable with the shining brightness and palpable magic of the beautiful stranger sitting beside him.

Ellie forced back the stab of pain his fear caused and tried to focus her thoughts the way Marissya v'En Solande, the Fey's most powerful healer had shown her. Throughout the week-long westward journey across Celieria, Marissya had spent several bells each day with Ellysetta, teaching her how to wield her own powerful healing magic.

Though Ellysetta still had much to learn, she now understood on a conscious level the basic patterns of the healing weaves she'd been unconsciously spinning all her life. Marissya assured her she'd soon be able to summon and spin those weaves on demand, using only the amount of power needed to weave them, but restraint was something Ellie still had difficulty mastering. The powerful, hidden barriers that had kept her magic bottled up were gone now, and the weaves she'd once spun with such subtlety now surged forth at her call like a river gushing through a shattered dam.

Remembering Marissya's admonitions, Ellysetta reached down into the well of energy at her center, carefully calling forth the glowing threads of power she would need. Red Fire to draw the heat from the wound. Green Earth to heal the damaged flesh. Lavender Spirit to steal away the pain. And something else Ellysetta had discovered while observing Marissya during their lessons. A special, golden something that Marissya called a *shei'dalin's* love, the mysterious force that was unique to Fey women. It made all the threads of the *shei'dalin's* weave shimmer with a warm, golden cast. No Fey warrior could spin his magic the same way.

"It springs from the compassion and empathy of a Fey woman's heart," Marissya had told her. "It isn't a seventh branch of magic. We cannot separate it out and weave the *shei'dalin's* love by itself. It's just the natural way Fey women weave magic."

"And do I weave *shei'dalin's* love the same way?"

At that, Marissya had laughed. "Feyreisa, you do *nothing* the same as other Fey." Then, still smiling, she'd added, "I'm sure you must, Ellysetta, but when you weave, your magic is so bright, its power blinds me."

Now, holding Papa's hand in hers, she attempted to summon her magic and wield it with control and restraint, as Marissya had been trying to teach her.

She found the threads, wove them in a loose healing pattern, and with a gentle "push" of power, sent the weave into her father's hand. The push slammed out of her with the force of a hammer strike, her weave flaring with blinding brightness.

The startled jerk of Papa's body and sudden widening of his eyes made her grimace in dismay.

"Light save me," she muttered under her breath. Then, in a louder voice, she said, "Are you all right, Papa?"

Sol blinked several times and took cautious inventory of himself. When he didn't find any missing—or extra—appendages, he gave a smile. "Well done, Ellie-girl. The finger's good as new." He held up his hand to show her.

Sure enough, the angry red burn on the tip of his finger was gone. But that wasn't the problem. She watched her father run his newly healed hand through his hair. His hand stopped in mid-motion.

"Oh," he said. Sol Baristani was of the age when many mortal men began "thinning the

forest” as Papa put it. Or, rather, he had been. Keeping his gaze fixed on her face, he patted the newly thickened growth of hair crowning his scalp. “Well...er... that’s not so bad. Provided it’s not some frightful shade of green.” His brows drew together in mock concern, and he added in a hesitant, rather fearful tone, “Er...it’s not green, is it, Ellie?”

Ellie sighed. “No, Papa, it’s not green.”

With a twinkle in his eye, he pretended relief. “Well then, there you go.” He laughed and grinned, and reached across to pat her hand. “You did good, Ellie-girl. You may have overdone the weave a little, but the finger’s healed. Besides, what man wouldn’t like a little more hair when his own starts to go missing, eh?” Thrusting his pipe stem back between his teeth, he lit a fresh match and held it to the bowl, puffing until the shreds of tobacco began to glow orange and puffs of fragrant smoke wreathed his newly regenerated headful of hair...and a face that had lost at least ten years of age in an instant.

She forced a smile. “*Beylah vo*, Papa.” Weaving youth on mortals wasn’t one of the things Marissya had taught her—but apparently the patterns were very similar to regular healing.

A happy shriek sounded at Ellysetta’s right. The Fey warrior, Kiel vel Tomar, his long silvery-blond hair woven into a plait, ran past with Ellysetta’s nine-year-old sister Lorelle perched on his shoulders. Kieran vel Solande, Marissya’s son, followed a few paces behind. Lorelle’s twin, Lillis, sat on Kieran’s shoulders and kicked his chest with her heels as if he were one of the Elvish *ba’houda* horses pulling the wagons in their caravan. Her small fingers clutched tufts of his thick, wavy brown hair.

Lillis and Lorelle were clad in miniature versions of Marissya and Ellie’s brown traveling leathers, which they had insisted Kieran weave for them. Kieran and Kiel had done their best to keep the children’s minds off the grief of Mama’s death by making each day of the trip a new adventure. The twins had taken to the idea, enthusiastically using even the briefest stops as an excuse to explore—always under watchful Fey eyes, of course, but rarely in clean, tidy places. The keepsake boxes Papa had carved for them years ago were now overflowing with treasures from their journey: small rocks, wildflowers, snail shells, bird feathers, whatever caught their attention.

Kieran cast a grin Ellysetta’s way. His steps faltered as he caught sight of Sol Baristani; then his gaze shot to Ellysetta. She blushed furiously. A *shei’dalin’s* ability to restore mortal youth was a secret the Fey had guarded for millennia, and she had just revealed it for anyone to see.

Fortunately, before he could say anything, Lillis tugged on Kieran’s hair and bounced on his shoulders. “Faster, Kieran!” she cried. “They’re beating us!”

With a final look and a shake of his head, Kieran turned away and raced down the grassy hill after Kiel and Lorelle.

Ellysetta watched them and the tension that had been growing in her all week squeezed her chest tight. They were nearing the end of the journey. One more day, two at the most, then she would leave what remained of her beloved family to follow her new husband Rain through the mysterious Faering Mists, perhaps never to return.

Sol patted her hand and nodded his chin in the direction of the twins. “It is good to hear them laughing again.”

“Yes,” she agreed. The twins hadn’t had much cause for laughter of late.

“They miss their mother,” Sol said. “They try to smile and laugh for my sake, but I hear them each night, crying into their pillows and pleading for her to come back.”

Just that quick, Ellie’s own sharp grief struck hard. Her face crumpled and her eyes filled with tears. “I miss her too, Papa.” Stern as Mama sometimes was, Ellie had never doubted her love—and never loved her back with any less than her whole heart.

“Oh, Ellie.” Sol slid an arm around his daughter’s shoulders and pulled her close. “My sweet, Ellie-girl. We all miss her.”

She turned her face into his neck as she had so many times in the past and sobbed. And her father held her, as he always had, patting her back and rocking her as if she were still the small child who’d crawled on his lap for comfort after evil visions tormented her dreams.

She cried until her tears were spent, and when they were done, wiped her eyes as best she could and begged again as she had so many times this last week, “Won’t you please come with us, Papa? Rain will grant you and the girls escort through the Mists. You could live there, with us, in safety.”

Sol sighed. “We are not Fey like you, Ellie. Our home is here, in Celieria, and the last promise I ever made your mother before...” His voice thickened. He drew a quick breath and swallowed the lump in his throat. “I promised her that day before she left for the cathedral that if anything ever happened to her, I’d make sure the twins were raised in Celieria, among their own kind.”

“Papa, she asked you for that promise when she still thought I was demon-possessed and the Fey were evil. She realized her mistake in the end. Don’t you think she’d realize her mistake about this too?” They’d been over this a thousand times since leaving Celieria City. “Wouldn’t she’d rather know the girls were safe regardless of where they live?”

“I gave her my word, Ellie. Shh.” He put a finger on her lips to forestall further objections. “It was my last vow to her, as sacred to me now as if I’d sworn it to her on her deathbed. So long as there is a chance of the girls living here in peace among our own kind, then here we will remain. You’re Fey, Ellysetta. You belong in the Fading Lands. We are mortal, and we belong here.” His eyes were filled with sadness but also unwavering determination.

Seeing that look, Ellysetta knew she’d lost. Her father was the most loving man she’d ever known, but when he had that hint of steel in his eye, it meant he’d made up his mind and would not be budged. She bit her lip, stared at the hands clasped tightly in her lap and nodded, afraid to look at him for fear the fresh tears burning at the backs of her eyes would spurt out in dreadful, graceless sobs.

She heard her father sigh again, saw him shift in the periphery of her vision. His hand, broad and bronzed and callused from his years of woodcarving, reached out to cover hers. Love, rich and sweet and steadfast as love ever had been, poured into her through the touch, along with pride and gratitude, and a thought that rang in her head clear as a bell.

*I love you, my sweet Ellie-girl. No man could love a daughter more, and no man could be prouder than I am of you. Though I will do everything I can to honor your mother’s wishes, I won’t risk my children’s safety needlessly. If trouble comes, the girls and I will pass through the Mists. That’s my oath to you.*

Through vision blurred by swimming tears, she met his eyes and saw for herself the truth she could feel through the touch of his skin. It was more than she’d expected. His promise was



an oath he considered as binding as the vow he'd made to his wife.

As the wagon continued its swift, smooth roll down the grassy hill towards the fertile plains of the Garreval below, Sol looked out at the majestic mountains and green fields.

"This is a beautiful place," he said. "I think your Mama would have been very happy here." Ellie laid her head on her father's shoulder. "I think so too."

\* \* \*

"The redirection weaves are up. The Garreval is secure." Belliard vel Jelani, General of the Fading Lands, released the net of Spirit threads tying him to the dozens of Fey scouts spread in a five-mile radius around their destination. As they had all week, the warriors had cleared the caravan's path of mortals and spun redirection weaves to turn away curious locals and Eld spies.

Just over three weeks ago, Celierians and their families had lined the roads and cart paths from the Garreval to Celieria City to watch the immortal Fey run past on their annual trek to the nation's capital. This time, not one mortal would see or remember the Fey's passing.

Bel turned to find Rain staring off towards the Fey caravan, his face drawn. "Rain? Something is wrong?" Bel's hand went instinctively to his steel, his fingers hovering over the hilts of his Fey'cha throwing daggers.

"*Nei*." With obvious effort, Rain dragged his attention back to his best friend. "Well, *aiyah*, but no different from the wrongness that has followed us since leaving Celieria. She weeps again for her mother."

Bel glanced down at his hands, away from the pain in Rain's lavender eyes. For all his power—impressive even by Fey standards—Rain could not weave the sorrow from his beloved's heart. Oh, he could have spun a rosy illusion of happiness upon her—or asked another Fey to steal her memories—but that was not the Fey way. Both honor and love bound him, and he could do only what Fey men had for centuries: stand strong for his mate and offer what comfort his love could provide.

"You should go to her," Bel said.

Rain sighed and shook his head. "*Nei*, she needs him more than me now—someone who loved her mother as deeply as she did."

Bel had known Rain too long not to hear the comment left unsaid. "Everything Lauriana Baristani did, she did for love," he reminded Rain gently. "And in the end she gave her life to save her child."

"I realize that," Rain replied, "but I cannot pretend an affection I never felt."

Bel nudged a large clump of field grass with the toe of one black boot. Lauriana had never wanted Ellysetta to wed the Fey king, and she'd made sure everyone—including Rain—knew it. "Perhaps," he finally said, "Ellysetta doesn't need you to pretend love you did not feel. Perhaps it is enough just to know you are there, loving her."

"She knows." Rain swept a sharp gaze over the valley below. "So, there's been no unusual activity in the last four days, and not a single person following us since we left Celieria City. I'm not sure if I should be relieved or suspicious. The Eld I knew would never let us get away so easily."

Bel took the hint. "Perhaps our decoys are working." A separate party of Fey had gone north, towards Orest, accompanied by a magic-warded wagon, so that Eld spies might think it

held Ellysetta and her family.

“Let us hope so,” Rain said, his face set in stone. “But let us also prepare for the alternative—and not only from the Mages. If the dahl’reisen learn that Ellysetta can restore souls...”

Ice shivered through Bel’s veins. “You don’t think Gaelen would...” His voice broke off in disbelief, then surged back in protest. “He is Ellysetta’s lu’tan.” After Ellysetta restored his soul, Gaelen had bloodsworn himself to her service, vowing to protect her for the duration of his life and the death that followed. No lu’tan would break that vow. “Gaelen is Fey once more. His honor has been restored. Do not forget, without him Ellysetta would already be in the hands of the Mages.”

Rain’s jaw set. “I have not forgotten. Nor do I forget that all it takes is one look at his face without that scar, and his dahl’reisen friends will know the truth.” Of all the Fey, only dahl’reisen scarred, and they only when they made the kill that tipped their immortal souls into darkness. When Ellysetta had restored Gaelen’s soul, she’d wiped his dahl’reisen scar from existence. “No matter what trust you may feel for Gaelen as a fellow lu’tan, do not let your guard down. The dahl’reisen cannot be trusted, and they could attempt to use his long acquaintance with them to their advantage.”

Rain’s expression grew grim. Bel felt the brief surge of power, quickly harnessed, that came in response to whatever unpleasant thoughts were crossing Rain’s mind.

“I think I will return to Ellysetta after all,” Rain said.

He stepped back and the brief surge of power became a breathtaking flood as he summoned the Change. Sparkling gray mist billowed out in whirling clouds around Rain, and when it cleared a death-black tairen crouched in his place. The great winged cat fixed one large, glowing purple eye upon Bel, and a throbbing Spirit voice sounded in Bel’s head, powerful and resonant with the rich musical tones of the tairen.

\*\*To Teleon, brother, and tomorrow, to home.\*\*

\* \* \*

Ellysetta climbed out of the wagon to walk the last mile across the greening plains of the Garreval as twenty Fey raced on ahead to secure their destination: the outpost built at the base of the ruins of the once-great fortress of Teleon. Lillis and Lorelle walked beside her, their small hands clutching hers.

She would always be grateful for this time Rain had given her with her family. He could have flown her straight to the Fading Lands on tairen-back but he had not. Knowing how dear her family was to her, he’d arranged for all of them to travel together. The Elvish ba’houda horses, bred for endurance and speed, traveled much faster than mortal steeds; but Rain in tairen form, using magic to power his flight, could have traversed the thousand miles across Celieria in a single day.

Even though he still left small courtship gifts on her pillow each morning, this extra time with her family was his true gift to her, and she worked to sear every precious memory into her mind. Like this one: the girls tripping through the tall grass at her side, their hair bouncing with their steps. A slight breeze blowing, fragrant with the scents of mist off the mountains and warm grass waving in the wind. She squeezed the twins’ small hands and watched dimples flash in

their cheeks as laughter bubbled from them.

Dear gods, how she loved them. And if any harm ever befell them because of her...

\*\*No dark thoughts, shei'tani.\*\* The admonishment slipped into her mind on a now-familiar weave of Spirit.

Ellysetta glanced up at the great winged black cat soaring swiftly towards her over the top of a nearby hill. \*\*Not so dark this time,\*\* she answered. \*\*Only a little grey.\*\*

She could not blame him for thinking the worst. Her mind had not been peaceful since leaving Celieria City. The High Mage might not know where her body was, but despite Rain's presence and the twenty-five fold weaves the Fey placed around the camp each night, the High Mage been able to find her soul more than once when she dreamed. He'd not managed to put another Mark on her, but each time he'd found her, she'd bolted out of sleep with her tairen roused to a raging bloodlust, roaring for death and vengeance.

Consequently, she'd spent most nights wide awake and flying the moonlit skies with Rain.

\*\*I was just thinking I'll miss my sisters when we're gone. And I can't help worrying about their safety\*\*

\*\*Kieran and Kiel will allow no harm to befall them.\*\* The two Fey and two hundred of their brethren would be staying behind at Lord Teleos's ancestral estate near the Garreval to guard Ellysetta's family.

Rain swooped down the side of the hill fast and hard, Changing in mid-flight to the black-leather-clad form of his lean Fey body. He landed running, and a brief, swift jog brought him quickly to her side.

Just the sight of him and his glowing lavender eyes made Ellysetta's breath catch in her throat. All Fey were ravishing creatures, but the legendary Rain Tairen Soul outshone them all. He was an immortal king whose unshielded Fey beauty dazzled the senses, his face a masterpiece of breathtaking male perfection, saved from prettiness by the thrust of strong bones beneath the skin and the aura of deadly promise that swirled just below the surface.

He was a Tairen Soul, the strongest and rarest of all Fey, a master of all five branches of magic wielded by the Fey, capable of Changing into one of the magical, fire-breathing tairen of the Fading Lands.

He was her truemate, the other half of her soul; and when at last Ellysetta found the courage and unconditional trust necessary to embrace the darkest shadows of his soul and her own without fear—to bare without reservation every thought, every fear, every shame and maleficence inside her—then at last their souls would join for all eternity. If she failed, their uncompleted bond would drive Rain to madness and eventually death.

Yet even knowing that, Rain's love—intense and absolute—shone from his eyes as he approached, setting Ellysetta's senses aflame. She began to tremble. \*\*Shei'tan.\*\*

Luckily, before Ellysetta could embarrass herself, her young sister Lillis squealed and threw herself into Rain's arms, shattering the intoxicating spell holding Ellysetta captive.

“Will you take us flying again today, Rain?” Lillis's long eyelashes fluttered and her rosy lips curved in a beguiling smile. Only nine years old she might be, but Lillis Baristani had already honed her feminine wiles to an art.

“Oh! Yes! Yes! Please do!” Choosing natural exuberance over winsome guile, Lorelle bounded up, grabbed Rain's free hand and jumped up and down with excitement.

Ellie smothered a laugh. Lillis and Lorelle had shed their fear of Rain and his power. He had become part of their family. Which also meant he'd become a hapless male to be twined around their fingers.

Rain, in return, had learned how to relax around them and let them draw out the Fey-gentleness in his heart. Though he was a man who could slaughter his enemies without mercy, with the twins, he now laughed and smiled like a man who had never known darkness.

“Let us get you safely settled in your new home first, *ajianas*. Then I will take you both flying again.”

Of course, he still had to work on how to say no.

“Hooray! Hooray!” Lorelle threw up her arms and danced around him in enthusiastic circles.

“Can we have a new kitty in our new home?” Lillis asked, fluttering her lashes again. “Since we had to leave Love behind.”

Kieran had convinced the girls that Love the kitten, who had a terrible aversion to magic, would be miserable living in the Fading Lands or staying with them so close to the powerful magic of the Mists. They'd reluctantly agreed to leave Love behind in Celieria City with Gaspare Fellows, the Queen's Master of Graces.

Rain smiled. “A new kitten? I imagine Kieran and Kiel can arrange that. Perhaps one for each of you, hmm?”

Lillis strangled him with more hugs, then leapt out of his arms so she and her twin could run tell Kiel and Kieran they were going flying again and that Rain had said they could have a new kitten.

Ellie shook her head and watched them go. “One day you will have to learn the fine line between loving adoration and slavish devotion.”

He pressed a kiss on her palm. “Let me give them what gifts and freedoms I can. Their lives will soon have restriction enough. Teleos!” Rain lifted a hand to the Fey-eyed Celierian Great Lord, Devron Teleos, who stood beside the truemates Marissya and Dax v'En Solande, staring in silence at the place that was to be the Baristani family's new home. “How long has it been since you've been to the Garreval?”

Teleos's mouth drew down in a grimace. “I've made a point of visiting all my holdings at least once every year, but as you see, there's not much to draw me here.”

Below, on the lower slopes of the Rhakis mountains, the remains of a once-great fortress rose from the tumbled rubble of silvery blue stone: Teleon, the former family seat of House Teleos. Even after a thousand years, its once-fabled beauty still lay shattered and abandoned, its Fey-spun towers and parapets crumbled, the remains covered in lichen and mosses and crowded with tufts of cliffgrass. A small stone outpost—crudely built and clearly mortal in origin—had been constructed atop a small hill at the base of the mountain, not far from the remains of what had once been a glorious gate into the walled city-fortress. Smoke curled up from a vent hole in the outpost's small central hall.

Ellysetta tried to hide her dismay. This was her family's new home?

As if hearing her thoughts, Lord Teleos said, “I feel a poor host for offering my guests so rude an accommodation.” The Celierian Great Lord, a descendant of Rain's long-dead friend Shanis Teleos, eyed the remains of his once-great family estate with grim eyes. “Rain, are you

sure the Feyreisa's family would not be better served in one of my more respectable holdings?"

Rain smiled and shook his head, his straight, silky black hair sliding over his black-leather-clad shoulders. "*Nei*, this is perfect for our needs."

"This was a place of great beauty once," Lord Teleos said in a sorrowful voice. In the days before the raising of the Mists, his family had been close friends of the Fey, and the many Fey ancestors in his family tree had left Devron and all his forebears stamped with Fey eyes, a glow to their skin, and lifespans much longer than those of pure mortals. Teleon, which had once been an estate of inestimable beauty, had been a gift from the Fey to their kin in House Teleos.

"*Aiyah*, it was," Marissya agreed. "I remember the terraced gardens with all their fountains. It reminded me of Dharsa."

Lord Teleos regarded the ruins of his family estate with somber eyes.

"I always wished my ancestors had repaired it once the poison of the Wars was cleansed, but perhaps it's best they never did. Mortal hands could never have done Teleon justice." He sighed. "Some things, once lost, are better left in the past."

Rain made a sound in his throat that sounded like something torn between a growl and a laugh. "And some things deserve to live again." His eyes crinkled at the edges. "You did say we could make it habitable, Dev."

Teleos's brows drew together. "You mean to restore Teleon?"

"*Aiyah te nei*." Yes and no. And on that mysterious note, Rain smiled and said, "Come. I think you will find you are not so poor a host as you fear."

Brimming with curiosity, Marissya, Dax, Teleos and Ellysetta followed Rain as he led them the final half mile to the foot of the mountains.

Near the gate of the small outpost, and stationed along its outer wall, two dozen armored Celerian soldiers stood at attention. To a man, they sported snarling tairen's-head helmets and white tabards edged with scarlet and emblazoned with the arms of House Teleos: a golden tairen rampant on a white field with a rising red sun. Pennants of white, scarlet and gold fluttered in the breeze.

They passed through the open gate, but when Lord Teleos would have headed for the main hall in the center, Rain stopped him. "*Nei*, Dev, not that way."

Bel ran up just as the small party rounded the corner of the hall and started towards the back wall. Ellysetta turned to greet him, only to find him frowning up at the mountain towering over the back wall of the outpost. The shimmering radiance of the Mists was very bright, like a shadow made of light rather than darkness. Though mortal eyes would not see it, the whole mountainside glowed and rippled with undulating bands of magic.

Rain turned to cast a glance over his shoulder and smiled at Bel's perplexed look. The rear stone wall of the outpost lay before him. Rain took another step. The air around him rippled like water in a pond.

With one more stride, Rain passed through the wall and disappeared from view.

"Spit and scorch me," Dev breathed. He glanced at Marissya and Dax, then charged after Rain, plunging headfirst into what seemed like solid stone. The air rippled again, and Lord Teleos vanished too.

"Spirit weave," Kiel said, his eyes sweeping over the mountainside. There was no sign of Rain or Lord Teleos, only the rear wall of the outpost and, beyond that, the tumbled remains of

Teleon scattered across the mountainside, tufts of cliff grass and stands of hardy mountain trees waving in the breeze.

“Scorching clever one,” Bel said. “They’re using the magic-shadow off the Mists to mask the energy of the weave. Not even a Spirit master would see it until he was almost on top of it.”

“Well?” Kieran said with an eager grin. He held out a hand to Lillis. “What are we waiting for? Let’s go see what’s behind the weave.”

With a burbling laugh, she stuck her hand in his and they ran up the trampled path after Rain and Teleos. Lorelle grabbed Kiel’s hand and yanked the Water master with her as she darted forward in hot pursuit.

Ellysetta, Bel and Sol followed close behind, and when they stepped through the rippling wall of illusion and cast eyes on the sight beyond, Ellysetta’s jaw dropped open in stunned wonder.

“Bright Lord save me,” Sol whispered, staring awestruck at the gleaming magnificence before him. “I’ve never seen anything so beautiful.”

“It’s like a magical palace from a Fey tale,” she breathed.

They were standing at the open, arching gate of an immense mountain fortress of unparalleled grace and beauty. Silvery blue stone soared high into the sky in a dazzling display of Fey artistry and architecture. Crenellated walls gave way to lush, gracefully terraced gardens bursting with trees, fountains, fragrant shrubs and flowers. Pennants in the bold colors of House Teleos fluttered in the breeze from every tower and along the series of interior walls that ringed up the mountainside and circled the upper keep with level after level of protection and silvery blue beauty.

“Ellie! Papa! Come look!” Lillis and Lorelle stood in the center of a small grassy park nestled against the second inner wall. They laughed and danced beneath the graceful, arching branches of cherry blossom trees as pale pink petals rained softly down upon them. Kieran and Kiel stood nearby, watching the children with indulgent smiles.

Lord Teleos stood dumbstruck at Rain’s side as Ellysetta and Sol crossed the lower courtyard to join the twins. “You did it,” he said. “You restored her to her former beauty.”

“Not completely,” Rain admitted. He dragged his gaze away from Ellysetta and the children and gave Devron Teleos his full attention. “A number of the gardens and buildings on the middle levels are still just Spirit weaves, but the walls and gates are real, and defensible, as is the manor at the top.”

“Even so...this is an amazing feat. How did you manage it?”

“Three thousand Fey stand guard at the great war-castles of Chatok and Chakai beyond the Mists. While we journeyed across Celieria, they came through the Mists to prepare a suitable home for the Feyreisa’s family. And to prepare Teleon for battle once more.”

Lord Teleos turned to him in surprise. “You think the Eld will strike here? With the Mists blocking any hope of entrance to the Fading Lands?”

Rain looked across the flagstone-cobbled courtyard to the lower garden, where Ellysetta, Sol and the twins were inspecting a marble fountain of dancing maidens whose slender, upstretched fingers rained veils of clear water into a small pond.

His expression lost any hint of softness. “If the Eld come,” he said, “I doubt it will be passage through the Mists they’re after.”

## Chapter Two

*In sorrow, the blood-sown earth despairs, and granite stone weeps bitter tears.  
In fields once green, love lies entombed beneath a silent lake of glass  
Forged in raging tairen flames, dark with the death of dreams.  
There, shades of men and once-great kings yet battle evil's tide  
While silvery maidens softly dance and sing of love that died.*

*Sariel's Lament* by Avian of Celeria

Ellysetta stood on the balcony of a well-appointed bedchamber in one of Teleon's spacious upper towers and looked up at the Mists. Several bells earlier, the setting sun set the Mists ablaze, giving the illusion of a curtain of fire burning across the world. Now the night was deep and the Mists were a shifting, shimmering glow of multicolored radiance against the dark of a near-moonless sky.

Rain and Lord Teleos had spent the day inspecting Teleon's defenses and assisting the Fey in weaving silvery blue stone into magic-warded buildings and fortifications, Marissya, Ellysetta and the too-exuberant twins—who simply could not bear to be cooped up inside—had ventured through acre after acre of terraced gardens and countless miles of corridors, rooms and levels of the newly restored fortress. Though, as Rain had said, many of the middle gardens and buildings were naught but the shells of Spirit weaves—and how unsettling it was to enter a building only to have it disappear once you crossed the threshold!—there was still plenty of Earth-spun reality to explore; and the Fey who would be stationed here to protect the Baristanis would continue the reconstruction their brothers had begun until all of Teleon was restored to its former glory.

The girls, Ellysetta knew, would be happy here. With so much room to play and so many wondrous secrets to be discovered, it would be a long time before they felt the urge to stray from the safety of the keep in search of adventure.

The clap of bootheels on stone made her cast a glance over her shoulder. Still clothed in black leather and full steel, his Fey skin as pale and luminous as pearls in moonlight, Rain approached. He'd been meeting with Teleos, Bel, Kieran and Kiel to discuss the defense of Teleon and review troop strength and dispersal in the rest of Teleos's holdings.

War was coming. No matter how some still tiptoed around the truth, all of them knew it. They only hoped there would be time enough to prepare before Celeria's borders erupted into open battle.

And though it seemed a terrible thing to ask, Ellysetta had secretly prayed that when the attack came, the Eld's first strike would come in some far distant part of Celeria like Orest or Celeria City so the Fey would have enough warning to evacuate Lillis, Lorelle, and Papa to safety behind the Faering Mists.

That secret prayer seemed ill-considered now. The hearth witches of the north—and there

had been plenty of them living in her childhood town of Hartslea, despite the strong Church presence there—believed that wishing harm upon others would bring three times that harm to the wisher. Was hoping the first battle of a war started somewhere else the same as wishing harm upon another? Ellysetta shivered at the prospect.

“Cold?” Rain asked.

“A little.” She seized on the excuse, not wanting to admit how nervous a silly superstition made her.

“There is a thing I need to do tonight before returning to the Fading Lands. I had hoped you would come with me, but if you are cold, perhaps you should stay here, instead, and try to get some sleep.”

“No, I’m fine.” She reached for his hand. “Of course, I’ll come with you.”

“Then let’s go—and bring your cloak.”

Ten chimes later, they were soaring through the night skies high over Teleon. Ellysetta stretched out her arms and turned her face up to the stars. Rain spun a light Fire weave to keep her warm as the chill, thin air swept past.

\*\*Hold on.\*\* The brief command was her only warning before Rain twitched back his rounded tairen ears, spouted a warming jet of flame that lit the night, then tucked in his mighty wings and dove.

Ellysetta screamed with laughter and grabbed for the high, curving pommel of her saddle just as the unsettling thrill of weightlessness came over her. Together, she and Rain fell through the sky, plummeting freely towards the ground miles below. The moonlit sky went silvery white, and fine droplets of water misted Ellysetta’s face as they plunged into a cloudbank. She caught the tangy-fresh chill of cloudmist on her tongue, drinking its bracing sweetness.

One heartbeat, two, then they burst through the clouds back into the crisp, clear darkness of the night.

Tairen wings spread wide, snapped taut, and the wild, reckless plunge became a swooping ascent. Ellysetta screamed again, a breathless, exuberant sound, and clutched the saddle tight.

\*\*Rain! I think I left my stomach back there.\*\*

The now-familiar, chuffing sound of tairen laughter joined the rush of the wind in her ears.

\*\*Hold on again, shei’tani. This is even better.\*\*

Flows of magic spun out to bind her securely into place and Rain shot forward on a thrust of a magic-powered speed. The world rushed by in a dizzying blur, and with a subtle shift of his wings, he sent them spiraling into a corkscrew roll. Shadowy earth and moonlit sky whirled in a wild kaleidoscope before Ellysetta’s dazzled eyes.

Another woman might have shrieked in fear and begged him to stop. Ellysetta only flung back her head and laughed in delight. Freedom coursed through her veins like a potent drug.

She would never tire of flying. The limitless joy of dancing laughter-spangled winds, the thrill of diving through misty clouds and soaring so high she could almost scoop stardust with her fingertips: flying was a joy so rich, it chased back all sorrows and fears. Well, she amended silently, *almost* all.

\*\*Rain, do you honestly think when we get to Fey’Bahren, I can just walk in and spin a weave that will cure the kitlings of whatever is killing them?\* That was the reason Rain had come to Celieria to find her. Unbeknownst to the outside world, a mysterious sickness had been



killing unborn tairen kitlings in the egg for centuries, decimating their numbers until scarcely more than a dozen of the great cats still lived. A magical oracle called Shei’Kess, the Eye of Truth, had sent Rain to Celieria to find the key to saving the dying tairen.

She, Ellysetta Baristani, was that key. Even if none of them actually knew how she was going to manage the miracle.

\*\*I know it doesn’t sound like much of a plan,\*\* he said, \*\*but the tairen have never let any of our healers into the lair—not even Marissya. You, however, are both a Tairen Soul and my true mate. You’ll be able to enter the lair and weave healing on the kits as no other shei’dalin has been able to.\*\*

\*\*This assumes I’ll even know what weave to spin when I get there—let alone how to spin it.\*\*

\*\*That’s why Marissya will be going with us to Fey’Bahren—so she can continue your training and counsel you while you’re healing the tairen. Besides, you may not even need her help. She tells me you have been doing well in your studies.\*\*

\*\*She is being kind.\*\*

\*\*I doubt that. I heard you healed Ravel’s new Fire master well enough this afternoon while I took your sisters flying.\*\*

She gave a short laugh. \*\*Oh, yes, I healed him all right. I made that wound vanish as if it had never been.\*\*

\*\*There, you see—\*\*

\*\*And I erased every hint of weariness from the last week of travel,\*\* she informed him. \*\*And wiped clean every shadow on his soul. And filled him with such an abundance of energy that he shone like a newly minted coin and spent the rest of the day racing circles around my quintets until Bel and Ravel both threatened to pull red on him if he twitched another muscle.\*\*

There was a brief silence; then Rain said in an oddly choked voice, \*\*Well, shei’tani, there are worse tribulations in life than healing a Fey too well.\*\* Chuffing tairen laughter vibrated in his throat.

Her eyes narrowed. He found that amusing, did he? \*\*And when he wasn’t annoying his brother Fey, he was following me around like a lovesick puppy.\*\*

The chuffing laughter changed instantly to a low, rumbling growl. Licks of flame seared the air before Rain’s muzzle. \*\*Oh, was he?\*\*\* The fur on the back of his neck rose up, and his rounded ears lay back. Tairen were territorial creatures, and they definitely did not appreciate encroaching males trespassing too near their mates.

\*\*Ha! You see? It’s not so funny anymore, is it?\*\*\* She ran a frustrated hand through the wind-tangled spirals of her hair. \*\*I’m like a rultshirt in a spider-silk shop. If Marissya asks me to summon a puff of Air, I call a gale so strong it knocks her off her feet. If she asks me to summon Water, I nearly flood the encampment.\*\*

\*\*Your power is vast,\*\* Rain soothed, \*\*and no longer restrained by the weaves set upon you in childhood. You simply need time and practice to learn how to wield it in moderation.\*\*

She sighed. \*\*Even assuming I can learn to control my power enough to spin the right weaves, what if healing doesn’t stop whatever’s killing the kits?\*\*\*

His right wing dipped, and he banked, wheeling back around towards the south. \*\*Then we go to Dharsa and start from the beginning, asking the Eye of Truth for guidance and searching

the Hall of Scrolls in the hopes of finding answers. Perhaps you can help us see something we have overlooked all these years, or perhaps your presence will induce the Eye to be more helpful.\*\*

\*\*Rain, be realistic.\*\*

\*\*I am. I asked for the key to saving the tairen and the Fey and the Eye sent me to you. To me, it seems quite clear that whatever is killing the kitlings, you are integral to making it stop. I do not doubt this, even though you do.\*\*

Rain's wings spread wide and he sank through the sky in a circling glide, alighting on a stretch of empty field. A cradling ribbon of Air magic deposited Ellysetta on her feet while the Change swirled around Rain's tairen form in a sparkling mist.

His hands rose, long fingers threading into the wild spirals of her flame-red hair, the pad of his thumb brushing across her lips and leaving tingles of awareness behind. "We're here, shei'tani."

Ellysetta glanced at their surroundings. Nothing looked familiar.

"Where is 'here'?"

His eyes went dark. "This is Eadmond's Field."

\* \* \*

The lake of glass stretched out for miles, its dark, glossy surface glittering beneath the dim light of the moons overhead. Mist swirled in ghostly eddies along the silent, lifeless shores of the lake, and in the scant moonlight the shifting vapors looked like spectral maidens dancing forlorn pirouettes.

Ellysetta could hardly breathe as she regarded the wide expanse of what once had been the most infamous battlefield in the history of Celieria. Here, a thousand years ago, Rain's first mate, Sariel, had been slain by Elden Mages and in grief-stricken madness over her death, he'd given himself to the Wilding Rage and scorched the world with tairen flame.

As they approached the southern shore of the glass lake, they passed a bronze statue set in a circle of carved stones. Her throat grew tight as she realized the bronze was a life-sized replica of the doomed couple immortalized by Fabrizio Chelan's famous painting, Death of the Beloved: Rain Tairen Soul clutching his dead mate, Sariel, and crying out his despair to the heavens. The stones circling the statue retold the fateful battle through scenes carved into diamondine granite. Millennia would pass, she realized, before weathering finally laid to rest the story of Rain and Sariel.

Ellysetta traced the etched words, reading the tragic conclusion of the tale she knew so well. "Some say if you walk to the center of the lake, you can still see the Lady Sariel, beautiful as a sunrise, appearing merely to sleep beneath the surface." Rain's sudden stab of sorrow slapped her senses, and she gave gasp of dismay. "Oh, Rain, I'm sorry." She'd told the tales so often to her sisters, the words had spilled out automatically. "I shouldn't have read that aloud."

"Nei, it's all right," he said. "I like that story much better than the truth."

She bit her lip, hating her thoughtlessness. She knew the fanciful Fey tale couldn't possibly be true. The Mages had severed Sariel's head and burned her with Fire.

"I killed millions that week," Rain said. His voice was a low scrape of sound. "Thousands of them here. Eld and their allies mostly, but even Fey and mortals and Elves and Danae who

were not quick enough to flee my wrath.”

Ellie knew that too. Celieria had erected smaller memorials at various points around the lake of glass in memory of all the allies of Celieria who had perished in a sea of tairen flame. The flame had rained down without cease, turning the very earth into a lake of molten obsidian glass that swallowed every trace of the armies on the battlefield.

Ellysetta left the circle of stones and went to his side. “You must stop blaming yourself, Rain. You didn’t know what you were doing.”

“I knew,” he corrected her. “I was simply beyond caring.”

The Wilding Rage had taken him: the terrible fury of the Fey, a sweeping, conscienceless wrath that knew no mercy, no remorse, just the pitiless, relentless drive to destroy whichever enemy had spawned it.

From here, Ellie knew, Rain had flown northward, searching out the armies of the Eld and their allies, raining fire and death upon all in his path. He’d blanketed the entire nation of Eld in scorching clouds of tairen fire, leaving naught but smoldering ashlands in his wake. Even then, his Rage still shrieked for more blood, more death. He’d skimmed along Eld’s eastern coast, boiling the seas with tairen flame and sinking fleets of enemy naval vessels. By the time the Fey and the tairen had finally forced him from the sky, half the continent lay in ruin and millions had perished.

“You ended the Wars,” Ellysetta reminded him.

“I almost ended the world.”

“But you did not. Even in your Rage, you focused the bulk your fury on the Eld.”

He would not let her cling to her illusions. “I was coming south to scorch Celieria off the map when Marissya and the others stopped me.”

“Do you think you would truly have done that?”

“*Aiyah*. Gods help me, but I would have.”

Ellysetta clasped both of Rain’s hands in hers, feeling his self-loathing for the horrors he had wreaked upon the world. Countless innocents had died here that day as well as the hated enemy.

“I know their names,” he said. “Each and every one of them slain by my Rage—and there are so many. For centuries, I lived with the sound of them shrieking in my mind. Over time, I learned how to quiet them, but they’re still there, still screaming. Any time I let my barriers fall, I see their faces and relive their memories of the lives I shattered.”

“Rain, you spent a thousand years in torment for one terrible act of madness. Haven’t you suffered enough? Let them go.”

He met her gaze, his Fey skin shining with a faint, silver luminescence, his eyes with their slightly elongated pupils glowing. “Ellysetta, I cannot. The torment of their lost lives is mine to bear. Only death or the completion of our bond can release me.”

A misty breeze blew across the lake, cool from the night air sweeping down off the Rhakis Mountains and rich with the scent of magic from the Mists. Rain looked up at the bright glow of rainbow lights that danced in undulating flows along the mountaintops. “So many lives lost on my account. Here at Eadmond’s Field and there as well.” He gestured to the Faering Mists. “Twelve thousand of the oldest, strongest Fey and all the tairen prides but one gave their lives to build the Mists.”

“You cannot blame yourself for their deaths too.”

A look came over his face that made her heart ache. “Can I not?” he said softly. “All the Tairen Souls but me were dead. I was the last, and I was wild with madness. But as the last, I was also the Tairen Soul, Defender of the Fey. Had I perceived a threat to the Fey, I would have flown again. So they built the Mists. I’m sure, in part, they meant to save the world from me, but mostly, they died to save me from the world. To give me peace for as long as they could in the hope that I would live and regain my sanity.”

She felt his guilt, his silent horror. “Oh, Rain.”

“How does a Fey repay such sacrifice? How can he ever be worthy? How does he atone for all the lives lost because of him?”

She captured his face between her hands. “By doing exactly what you’re doing now,” she assured him. “By living the best you can. By trying to save the people and the land those Fey loved. By honoring them, as you’ve done every day since I first met you.”

“I think you see this Fey more favorably than he truly is, *kem’san*.”

“*Nei*, I see him plainly enough.” She laid her palm against his chest. “And I love the Fey I see.”

When she gazed at him with such unwavering surety, he always saw a different reflection of himself shining from her eyes. A stronger Rain Tairen Soul, so much better and brighter than he truly was. As if, when she looked at him, she only saw the Rain he might have been if he’d never scorched the world, a good and worthy king. He longed to be that noble Fey, if only because he could not bear to diminish himself in her eyes.

“I cannot restore the lives I took or repair the dreams I shattered, but I can at least ensure that the brave friends and allies who fell here will never be forgotten. Will you walk with me while I do that, *shei’tani*?”

“Of course I will.”

He led her to the shore of the lake and lit a globe of bright Fire over their heads to light the way, but when he stepped onto the dark glass, she hesitated to follow. In the Fire-light, she could see the glass was smooth and glossy, untouched by dirt, animal tracks or even a speck of dust. It was as if nothing of the living dared invade this sacred site of the dead.

“Perhaps we shouldn’t walk on it,” she suggested. “It seems like walking across a grave.”

“Nothing of those who died here yet remains,” Rain assured her. “My tairen flame saw to that. But I will spin Air beneath our feet as we walk so that we do not touch the glass.”

Silvery white tendrils spun out from his fingertips, and the bottoms of Ellysetta’s feet tingled as the weave formed. She stepped out onto the glass and slid several handspans as if the lake were a frozen pond and her shoes were ice skimmers instead of embroidered silk ankle boots.

Barely half a manlength from the shore, Rain stopped. “An Elvish bowmaster fell beneath my flame on this spot. His name was Pallas Sparhawk, of the Deep Woods clan. He had a mate named Celia and a son who’d seen only three winters.” His head bowed. “I never met him in life, but I will never forget his death.”

Lavender Spirit gathered in Rain’s hand, spinning into a three dimensional image of a handsome, stern-eyed Elf with nut-brown hair hanging in plaits around his pointed ears. Red-orange Fire spun out in a searing weave, etching the Elf’s name into the glass on the spot where he died and below that the fallen man’s clan name and country. He held his hand over the etched name and said, “*Las*, Pallas Sparhawk. May the world be a kinder place when next you return.”

The Elf's name flashed and the Spirit weave of the Elf's image sank into the glass lake.

"I have tied the weave to the etching of Sparhawk's name," Rain said. "Those who draw near will see his name and his face and share a few of his memories. Perhaps they will find it in their hearts to mourn him a little."

"It is a fine tribute to him, Rain," Ellysetta said.

"Is it? There is another reason I brought you here. When you complete our bond, my memories of these folk will become yours as well. You should know, before that happens, some small portion of what that entails. You should know—" He broke off. His jaw worked for a moment, and when he spoke again, his voice was gravelly with tightly checked emotion. "You should know what really happened here that day. It wasn't the romantic Fey tale Celierians have made of it. These were good people, with lives and loves of their own. If I could spin time, I would take this day back."

She could feel the weight of his sorrow and his guilt. He knew, better than anyone alive, exactly what he'd done, the lives he'd destroyed. Until their bond was complete, she could not erase that pain. All she could do was stand beside him and try to help him shoulder the burden.

"Then let me meet Pallas Sparhawk, so I may mourn him as you do." She stepped forward, close to the name etched deep into the glass. The moment she drew near, Rain's Spirit weave swirled in a cloud of lavender mist. The Elf's face formed in her mind, and with it came a rush of memories: the face of his wife, the love he had felt for her, the moment of his son's birth, the day he'd presented his child with his first, tiny little bow, the march to battle, the friends he'd fought beside, and the final gasp of fear and acceptance as an orange wall of tairen flame raced towards him. His last thought, as the flame enveloped him, had been for his wife, Celia, and their son, Fanor.

Tears filled her eyes and spilled down her cheeks for the brave man lost, for the sorrow of the beloved wife and child to whom he'd never returned. "His wife and son, if they still live, should know that his last thought was of them." She took a ragged breath and wiped away her tears. "When you send the envoy to the Elves, you should tell them what you've done here and let them know their dead have not been forgotten. You should let all the allies know."

"You think they would want that?"

"I do. Even the mortals may have family members who will want to come here one day, to learn and remember as well as to mourn."

Throughout the night, they walked the lake, covering every inch of glossy black glass, creating the memorials, celebrating and mourning the lives lost until finally, just before dawn, only the place where Sariel had died remained unmarked. It was not, as legend claimed, at the center of the glass lake but closer to the southern end, where the Fey healing tents had been.

When Rain started to weave the same marker into the lake's surface for Sariel, Ellysetta stopped him. "For the last thousand years, her name has been linked to tragedy and death," she said. "Celierians say she sleeps beneath the glass. Why not let them have their legend, and give her a memorial that will let the world remember her as she truly was? Why not give her something like this?" Calling upon Spirit, the one branch of magic Ellysetta could usually weave with some measure of success, she spun an image of the memorial she had in mind.

Rain regarded the Spirit weave in surprise. "Are you certain this is what you want?"

"It's what she deserves." She covered his hand with hers, and her sincerity flowed through

the touch. “I do not begrudge her the love you bore for her, Rain. She brought you joy in a world of war and death, and I will always be grateful to her for that.”

He drew a breath, his heart swelling with emotion so great, it nearly brought tears to his eyes. “You would have loved her too, you know.”

She smiled, her eyes filled with warmth and understanding. “I know. I’ve loved her from the first time I read about her. Now, I think I loved her so much because some part of me knew how much you did.”

He raised her hands to his lips and pressed a kiss upon the backs of her fingers. “Then let it be as you wish. Step back a little. I will need to call Fire.”

He waited for her to move a safe distance away before lifting his hands and summoning his magic. Earth and Fire gathered in his body, pulsing with energy. When he had the strength he needed, the bright, swirling threads of green and red spun from his fingers, coiling and plaiting into the necessary weaves. He directed the weaves at the surface of the lake, heating the obsidian glass until it began to glow a molten, fiery red. Slowly, the glass began to rise, drawn upwards by Earth. He wove until the memorial took shape, then added Air and Spirit to finish it before slowly cooling the steaming glass with swirling gusts of warm Air.

When he was done, the eastern sky was lighting with the first approach of dawn and the obsidian lake was no longer a solid sheet of flat glass. Instead, in the center of the southern end, on the spot where Sariel had died, a sarcophagus rose from the surrounding glass as if offered up from the depths of the lake itself. Glossy black glass set with a rich abundance of gold and gemstones formed the rounded rectangular base. Atop that base, beneath a thick layer of clear crystalline glass, a Spirit weave of Sariel lay in peaceful repose. Rain had spun the weave to show Sariel as he remembered her, a young Fey maiden as beautiful and gentle as the dawn, with snowy white Fey-pale skin, hair of blackest ebony, and lips like rose petals.

Beneath her sleeping figure—written in the four languages of the ancient allies: Celierian, Feyan, Elvish and Danae—he had inscribed the words Ellysetta had suggested: *Sariel the Beloved. May she awaken with joy to truemate’s call.*

As Rain and Ellysetta stood together regarding the results of his weave, the Great Sun peeked above the horizon. Dawn bathed the lake of glass in warm light, setting the names etched in the dark surface afire like diamonds sparkling in the sun. As the sun rose higher, beams of soft, golden light fell upon the shining glass of Sariel’s tomb, and the Spirit weave within shimmered and glowed, sending bright rainbows of multicolored light spilling out in a radiant aura around the tomb. Within the rainbows whirled Spirit weaves of Sariel, laughing, dancing, healing, each image filled with life and joy.

Rain’s heart rose up in his throat and the arms he had wrapped around Ellysetta’s waist tightened to pull her close against him. He bent his head to press a kiss against the thick, fragrant, silken spirals of her flame-red hair. “*Beylah vo, shei’tani.* Thank you for this.”

No longer was the lake of glass a place of loss and death and hopeless dark, but rather a memorial of peace and beauty, glistening with the golden promise of a new day.

Ellysetta turned in his arms, her leaf-green eyes shining, her lips curved in a smile that filled his heart with long-forgotten joy. “*Sha vel’mey, kem’san.*” She cupped a hand to his jaw. “Take me back to Teleon so I can make a few goodbyes of my own, and then let’s go home...to the Fading Lands.”

### Chapter Three

#### *Celiera ~ Teleon*

“Well, well, look what the tairen dragged in.” Kieran vel Solande slipped a polished *meicha* scimitar into his hip sheath and turned to greet the warrior who had just passed through the Spirit weave protecting Teleon from outside eyes.

Gaelen vel Serranis paused just inside the lower bailey and let his gaze sweep across the restored estate. “Impressive.”

The sounds of industry filled the air as on every level of the city fortress Fey toiled in the midmorning sun. All Fey with enough command of Earth to make themselves useful were once again busy replacing the remaining Spirit weave buildings with real mortar and stone, while Air masters assisted in shuttling loads of blocks and wood, and Fire masters forged metal for gates, door braces, and weaponry to aid in the defense of the city.

“Greetings, uncle. You’ve been gone so long, I was beginning to think a tyrant made a meal of you.” Kieran made a tsking sound and shook his head. “Ah, well, hope springs eternal.”

Gaelen narrowed ice-blue eyes at his sister Marissya’s son. “Still full of sass, puppy? Clearly, vel Jelani isn’t working you hard enough if you still have breath to jabber.”

“Ha. Where’ve you been?”

Gaelen reached out to ruffle the younger Fey’s head, a deliberately patronizing gesture that made Kieran scowl and jerk away. “Not your business, youngling.” It was Gaelen’s turn to grin, and he took pleasure in it. “Where is the Tairen Soul?”

When Kieran just glared and pressed his lips closed, Kiel rolled his eyes and answered in his stead. “On the third level with Lord Teleos, finishing what he can before he and the Feyreisa depart.”

“And the Feyreisa?”

“On the upper level, planting a memory garden for her mother with Marissya and the twins.”

Gaelen nodded, then glanced at Kieran and furrowed his brows. “What’s this mess?” He reached out to straighten the leather Fey’cha belts crisscrossing Kieran’s chest. “You call yourself a warrior? Sloppy, vel Solande. Very sloppy.”

Scowling, Kieran looked down to see what his uncle was talking about. The next thing he knew, he was flat on his back with his own Fey’cha pressed against his neck, and death was glaring down at him from the eyes of the man who’d little more than a week ago been the most dreaded and feared *dahl’reisen* who ever lived.

“Very sloppy indeed,” Gaelen repeated softly, his tone a cold wind, his eyes lethal shards of purest ice. “Are you so eager to die?”

Kieran froze. Part of him was sure this was yet another of Gaelen’s humiliatingly effective demonstrations of how little the current generation of Fey knew of true sword-mastery. Vel

Serranis had pulled one of the black-handled blades from Kieran's chest straps rather than a lethal, poison-dipped red Fey'cha.

Another part of Kieran feared that maybe this wasn't a lesson after all.

"Answer me, puppy," Gaelen snapped. "Are you so eager to die?"

"Are you?" Kiel growled with low menace.

That was when Kieran noticed the Water master leaning over Gaelen, two red Fey'cha pressed against Gaelen's neck and belly.

Gaelen spat out an oath and the knife pressing against Kieran's windpipe eased back. When Kiel's blades withdrew as well, Gaelen rolled left, sprang to his feet and glared at them both. "The Mages are at work in the north. A warrior has disappeared for days on end, and you do not know where he's been. Yet you welcome him without suspicion? You stand there like a dull-witted fool while he strips you of your own blade and threatens you with it? I ask you again, are you so eager to die?"

He expanded his disparaging gaze to include Kiel and the dozen glowering Fey standing outside the blocking weave he'd woven when he'd lunged for Kieran. "And that goes for all of you as well. Not one of you even cleared steel from scabbard before I had a blade at your brother's throat. Vel Tomar, at least, has tolerably swift reflexes...and good instincts." The last he added with grudging approval. He nodded at the deadly red-hilted Fey'cha still gripped in each of Kiel's hands. "Red is the right choice when you suspect the threat may be real."

Gaelen dispersed his final shield, and the surrounding Fey muttered angrily and sheathed their weapons.

"That's a good way to get yourself killed, vel Serranis," someone called out.

"By you lot?" Gaelen scoffed. "Not flaming likely. I'd have to be *sel'dor* pierced, bound, and blinded before you had the advantage. Are you the best the Fading Lands can produce? Gods save us all." Gaelen shook his head in disgust. "What is the Tairen Soul thinking to let his mate stay so long outside the Faering Mists with naught to keep her safe but a pack of untrained infants scarce weaned from the breast?"

Kieran slapped the dust off his leathers and, scowling, caught the black Fey'cha Gaelen tossed back to him. "He was thinking to protect her family on their journey to their new home—and to give the Feyreisa as much time with them as he could before she passes through the Mists. Our scouts have been securing our path five miles in every direction. And, for your information, there have been no attacks—nor any sign of danger."

"Have there not? How lucky for you."

The sarcasm rubbed Kieran the wrong way. "Is this how you honor your oath to the Feyreisa?" he snapped. "'Learn to get along,' she said, yet here you are again, taunting and attacking us. After she told you to stop."

Gaelen's mouth opened...then shut. His eyes narrowed, and he bowed his head to acknowledge the point scored. "*Sieks'ta, kem'jitanos*. You are right. She would not be pleased." His gaze became pointed. "That you started it is no excuse."

Kieran's face froze in mid-smirk.

Kiel coughed into his hand. "He's got you there, Kieran," he muttered, which earned him a frigid glare from his friend. "Well, you did," he said, then turned to Gaelen. "Since you find our warriors' skills so lacking, perhaps you could help us improve them?"



Several of the other Fey stiffened in outrage.

“Are you asking me to be your *chatok*?” A mocking lift of one black brow accompanied the question.

Kieran snorted, thinking Kiel was making a joke. Only warriors of the greatest skill and most unbesmirched honor became *chatok*, a highly-regarded mentor of warriors. Gaelen vel Serranis, the rebel warrior who’d willingly thrown himself down the Dark Path to avenge his twin sister Marikah’s murder, was the last Fey who would ever qualify for such an esteemed position.

Kiel wasn’t joking. “We lost too many masters in the Wars, and of those who survived, the greatest and most experienced among them gave their lives to build the Mists. War will soon be upon us again, and we cannot afford to be ill-prepared. You have skills we all need.” The Water master shrugged, the gesture a graceful ripple. “So, *aiyah*, Gaelen, I *am* asking you to be my *chatok* for whatever Levels of the *Cha Baruk* you think I have not truly mastered. Will you grant me this honor?”

Gaelen was openly taken aback. “That was sarcasm, vel Tomar, not a serious offer. I have been *dahl’reisen*. I chose the Shadowed Path. I walked its bitter trails for a thousand years rather than ending my life in honor as a worthy Fey would have done.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that you have skills we all need. Even the Feyreisa advised us to learn from you.”

“So she did.” Gaelen’s lips pressed tight together. “And as I promised her, I will teach you what I know, but only as a brother Fey. I will not dishonor the *chatok* who mentored me by pretending I have the right to stand among their honored company.”

“Then I will accept your instruction, and I thank you for your willingness to share your knowledge and warrior’s skills with me.” Kiel bowed smoothly, his waist-length, golden blond hair spilling forward like gleaming falls of sunlight.

Gaelen was silent for a moment, his black brows drawn slightly together as he regarded the other man. “You are surprising, vel Tomar. And I thought the world held no more surprises for me.”

Kiel smiled, his eyes as blue and guileless as a calm sea. “I am a Water master, Gaelen. There is always much more to us than shows on the surface.”

Gaelen laughed. “That, I will grant you.” He glanced at Kieran. “And you, puppy, are clearly an Earth master. Head hard as a rock. Will stubborn as stone. And so resistant to change, it will take an earthquake to move you once you’ve settled into place. Just like your father.” When Kieran scowled, he grinned. “Ah, the Feyreisa will have to forgive me. Pricking that pride of yours is too much fun to give up altogether.”

Kieran snarled.

Gaelen just laughed again and glanced at Kiel. “Where’s vel Jelani?”

Kiel pointed towards a small copse of white-trunked, golden-leaved Shimmering Lady trees on the uppermost level. “Up there, with the Feyreisa and her sisters.”

“*Beylah vo*, vel Tomar.”

“*Sha vel’mei*,” Kiel replied as the infamous older warrior raced off towards the shimmering trees.

Kieran punched Kiel in the arm. Hard.

“Ow!” Kiel rubbed his bicep. “What was that for?”

““Be my *chatok*?”” Kieran exclaimed. ““Teach me what you know?’ Tairen’s scorching fire! What the Seven jaffing Hells are you thinking? You’re my blade brother, and you’re taking sides with the enemy?”

Kiel glanced at Gaelen’s retreating form, then back at Kieran. “He’s your uncle, not the enemy. Besides, the Feyreisa told us to learn from him.”

“He’s a *dahl’reisen*.”

“Former *dahl’reisen*,” Kiel corrected.

“Where do you think he’s been this past week? Praying in the Bright Lord’s church? He’s been with *them*, the ones who walk the Shadowed Path.”

Kiel’s brows rose over eyes as deep and blue as the Lysande Ocean. “What difference does it make if he has? He is *lu’tan* to the Feyreisa. In life and in death, he is bloodsworn to protect her.”

“You’re too trusting, Kiel.”

Kiel’s blond brows shot up. “Me? I wasn’t the one who stood there while he stripped my blade and used it against me.”

Kieran’s back teeth ground together. “He’s insufferable.”

“Admit it,” Kiel said, “insufferable may be exactly what some of the masters at the Academy need to shake them up and challenge their methods, to get them thinking about new ways to train our warriors. And,” he added with a smirk and a sidelong glance, “exactly what some rock-headed Earth masters I know might need as well.”

“Get scorched.”

\* \* \*

Near the copse of Shimmering Lady trees that overlooked the Garreval, Marissya, Ellysetta, and the twins planted a freshly tilled flowerbed with the rosebushes and flowers Lauriana Baristani had loved most. Rain’s task at the lake of glass had given Ellysetta the idea of creating a small memorial garden: a little something of Mama to leave behind for Papa and the twins, here where Papa could sit and look out over Celieria while the twins played Stones on the lawn nearby.

Ellysetta hummed under her breath as she dug her spade into rich, dark soil and made a hole to receive the last of the fragrant pink Heart’s Ease plantings Lorelle was waiting to deposit. Beside her, Marissya patted into place the last of Love’s Promise, the exquisitely perfumed red rose that had been Mama’s favorite.

Ellie sat back on her heels to survey the work. “I think we’re ready for the statue,” she told Bel as the twins picked up two full watering pots and enthusiastically irrigated the new plantings. “Gently, kitlings,” she advised as mud splattered on their dresses. The two looked up innocently, and she bit her lip to keep from laughing at the thick layers of dirt smeared across their small faces. Lillis and Lorelle had yet to discover the gardeners’ art of brushing back wayward strands of hair with a forearm rather than soil-begrimed hands. “All right, that’s water enough. Come away, girls, and let Bel set the statue.”

The twins stepped back from the flowerbed, and Bel hefted the heavy white marble statue of a winged Lightmaiden and set it down with a grunt and a thunk at the center of the semicircular

garden. Though Ellysetta had allowed Kieran to carve the marble statue using Earth weaves, she had insisted that all other preparations for the garden be done entirely by hand, as her mother would have wanted.

“What do you think, girls?” Ellysetta asked as they all stood back to regard their accomplishment. A brilliant semi-circle of pink and red roses hugged the slender white trunks of the Shimmering Lady trees, and a colorful selection of fragrant blossoms and herbs filled the ground around the statue. The base of the statue was inscribed with Lauriana’s name and her favorite verse from the Book of Light: “May the Light always shine on your path and shelter you from harm.”

“It’s beautiful, Ellie,” Lillis and Lorelle sighed. “Papa will love it.”

“I think so, too.”

“I think vel Jelani set the statue crooked,” a male voice declared. “You should make him redo it.”

“Gaelen!” Marissya turned with a happy smile and rushed to fling her arms around her brother. “You’re back.” When she released him, she turned back to the garden with a frown. “Do you really think the statue is crooked?”

He smiled with a tenderness reserved exclusively for his only living sister. “Nei, ajiana. I was teasing. I thought it might be fun to see vel Jelani heave the thing about some more.”

Bel gave the former dahl’reisen a baleful cobalt glare while Marissya only laughed, hugged him again, and declared, “Meiruvelei, kem’jeto. Welcome back, my brother. I’ve missed you.”

“I’m glad you have returned to us, Gaelen,” Ellysetta greeted. She reached out to take Gaelen’s hands in greeting. “How are Selianne’s children?” He had left Celieria City with her best friend’s orphaned babies in his care, promising to take them someplace where they would be safe from the Mage Mark placed upon them.

“Safe and well and with those who will love them as you requested, kem’falla,” he answered with a bow. When he straightened, he frowned. “But I am not pleased to find you still here, outside the protection of the Fading Lands. Your mate is unwise.”

“We leave in three bells, as soon as he and Lord Teleos have finished their discussions.”

“You should not even be here. If Rain would have flown you as swiftly as he could, you would already be five days past the Faering Mists.”

“Setah.” She held up a hand. “Do not scold.” She reached out to pull her twin sisters close and drop kisses on their mink-brown curls. “Run fetch Papa, girls. Let’s show him Mama’s garden.” When they were gone, she told Gaelen, “The delay was on my account, because Rain knew I could not bear to be parted from my family so soon after Mama’s death.”

“The reason doesn’t matter. You should be behind the Mists. Safe. And so should Marissya.” He ran frustrated hands through sheaves of straight black hair. “I though vel’En Daris had more sense that to keep you here in Celieria guarded by puppies barely weaned from the breast.”

The seizure came without warning.

One moment she was about to chide Gaelen for his pessimism; the next she was writhing on the flagstones, shrieking in agony.

The pain was instant and all-encompassing and all too familiar. Her spine arched, spasming in red hot pain as her hands clawed at the rock beneath her. The tendons in her body stood out

like ropes of steel, and her muscles clenched so tight they became torturous, burning bricks beneath her skin.

\*\*Rain! Dax! Ti'Feyreisa! Fey! Ti'Feyreisa!\*\* Dimly, she heard Marissya send the frantic cry for help racing across the common Fey path.

Ellysetta saw her reach out, her shei'dalin hands already glowing bright with healing weaves of gold-tinted Earth and Spirit. She heard Gaelen shout a warning, but it was too late.

The moment Marissya laid hands upon Ellysetta, agony enveloped her. It didn't rush out of Ellysetta. It simply expanded to sink its venomous fangs into Marissya, filling the shei'dalin's empathic senses with savage, brutal, shattering pain, as if every bone in her body were splintering, every muscle shredding and her soul was burning in the fires of the Seven Hells. Marissya screamed and fell back, yanking her hands off Ellysetta's body in instinctive self-preservation.

"Marissya!" Gaelen grabbed her by the arms and all but flung her across the walk into the middle of the adjacent lawn, well out of reach of whatever held Ellysetta in its grip.

"Light save me." Marissya wept, her voice shaking as helplessly as her limbs. She raised horrified eyes to her brother. "Dear gods, Gaelen, I've never felt anything like that. Never." She had served on the bloodiest battlefields of the Mage Wars, Truthspoken the souls of mortals who had perpetrated acts so vile they'd made her ill to touch them, yet never felt the kind of soul-deep agony now wracking Ellysetta's slender form.

"Bel, take Marissya to safety," Gaelen commanded. "I will tend the Feyreisa."

"Nei, I am her lu'tan. I will not leave her any more than you." Bel dropped to his knees beside Ellysetta's rigid body, careful not to touch her as he sent a questing filament of Spirit into her mind. He backed out again just as quickly when the wild, enraged power of her tairen sensed his intrusion and responded with a scream of rage and flare of searing magic. Whatever was attacking her, he couldn't get close enough to examine it. \*\*Rain? Where are you?\*

"I am here." Rain shot over the edge of the terrace and slid down a column of Air just as Ellysetta's body flung itself into a fresh series of violent convulsions. Gaelen and Bel both leapt to catch and hold him when he lunged for Ellysetta.

"Do not," Bel hissed. "You are truemates. Touch her, and even without a completed bond, you'll feel it as strongly as she does."

A tortured scream tore from her throat, ending on a groaning rattle as the convulsions worsened, then blessedly tapered off. Ellysetta collapsed against the flagstones, trembling and gasping for air. Rain broke free of Bel and Gaelen's grip and dropped to his knees beside her, scooping her limp body up in his arms. "Shei'tani."

Her head rolled back in the crook of his arm. Her eyes opened, the pupils lengthened to catlike slits, the green irises radiant and glowing. "Rain." Her hand clutched his arm and then began to shove at him in frantic desperation as she tried to wriggle free of his hold. "Let me go. Quickly, before it starts again."

"I won't. Whatever this is, I won't just stand here while it tortures you." He would not release her, and no matter how hard she tried to break free, her slender body was no match for his strength.

"Teska, Rain! Please." Already the pain was back, another brutal lash of it. Her body went rigid. Her jaw flexed, and her neck strained so hard each breath was a victory. This was going

to be as bad as any seizure she'd ever had. And with Rain touching her skin to skin, he would feel her shattered emotions as if they were his own.

Rain's jaw clenched like an iron vise, the tendons in his neck standing out. "Tairen's scorching fire!" The backlash of his pain redoubled her own, and she screamed.

Gaelen and Bel dove towards them in a desperate effort to pull them apart.

"Let go, Rain, scorch you!" Gaelen snarled as Rain fought him off. "You're only making it worse-- can't you see that? She's feeling your pain too. You're building a harmonic. Marissya!"

His sister spun a compulsion weave and thrust it into Rain's mind while Gaelen and Bel worked to pry Ellysetta free of Rain's arms. Her weave reached enough of him that his grip loosened for an instant. Bel yanked Ellysetta free and Gaelen wrestled Rain to the ground, pinning him there until some measure of sanity returned to his wild eyes.

The moment it did, Rain shoved Gaelen away and scrambled to his knees, crawling to Ellysetta's side. Her eyes were wide and frightened, her body shaking violently.

"Get...Papa." Each word was a hard-won fight. "He knows...what...to...do... ahhh!" The last word died in a wail as fire ripped through her and the world dissolved once more into shrieking agony.

\* \* \*

### *Eld ~ Boura Fell*

Muscles bulged in the burly Eld guard's back and thick arms as he swung the heavy sel'dor war hammer he called Boraz, the Bone Grinder. The hammer strike landed with a meaty thud and the loud crack of breaking bone.

Hanging from chains attached to the barbed sel'dor shackles clamped around his wrists, Shannisorran v'En Celay gave a guttural roar of pain as his right hip shattered. His body writhed, and the tremors sent arrows of fire shooting through his body as splinters of bone tore through bruised muscle. The pain was devastating. Already it had gone far beyond his ability to contain. He'd felt great, searing arrows of it blast down the link the Mage's evil magic had unwittingly forged between Shan and Ellysetta Baristani, the daughter he'd not seen since birth.

"How did you do it?" Across the room, High Mage Vadim Maur watched Shan's torture with icy eyes. "How did you and our lovely Elfeya manage to hide your daughter's magic from me?"

Shan sucked air into his lungs as he struggled to separate himself from the searing pain engulfing his body. He coughed and groaned as a fresh bout of pain wracked his body. His torture had begun with a simple but brutal pummeling before advancing to the hammer blows. Several of his ribs were broken, and with every breath, blood pooled in his mouth. He spat a mouthful of it on the ground.

"I know you engineered her escape, and I know you somehow bound her magic so I would not detect it."

Shan tossed back the strands of matted black hair covering his eyes. The guard had shattered Shan's ankles first, then his kneecaps, and now the first of his hips. He still had seven major joints to go, and he knew Maur wouldn't leave one of them whole whether he answered or not. He lifted his chin in a gesture that Elfeya had always bemoaned as a sure sign of his

intractability and fixed unblinking eyes—a predator’s stare—on the High Mage.

Maur’s teeth clenched for a moment. Then he gave a cold smile. “Lord Death.” He sneered the nickname Shan had earned many centuries ago, before finding his truemate, when he’d been the deadliest Fey warrior ever to walk the Fading Lands. “So arrogant, even now. I have not forgotten how the pair of you tried to help her escape my Mark in the Solarus. You failed, you know—I Marked her again—but you’ll still spend the next thousand years begging me for death as a reward for your efforts. You and Elfeya both.” He gave a short nod.

The guard swung his war hammer again.

The chains rattled as Shan’s body jerked and shuddered from the force of the blow. His scream echoed off the black stone walls. *Pain is life.* He reminded himself, silently reciting the litany he had taught his *chadin* at the Academy in Tehlas. *Fey eat pain for breakfast. We jaff it on a cold night just to keep warm.*

“Strip the flesh from his back,” Maur ordered coldly. “Use the Fire whip. I don’t want him bleeding to death, just close enough to it to make his mate eager to please me.”

Shan’s vision blurred as the guard circled around him, the Mage’s favorite Fire-tipped whip clutched in his meaty hand.

The first blow seared him to his soul. He writhed as flesh ripped and scorched. Reeled, as the shattered bones in his legs scraped and shredded his flesh from the inside out. Ah, gods have mercy. Maur just might break him this time.

*\*\*Shei’tan.\*\** Elfeya’s voice, warm as a summer sun on the shores of Tairen’s Bay, washed over him. *\*\*I am here, beloved. I am with you. Together, we are strong.\*\**

With an ease that would have driven Vadim Maur wild with rage had he known of it, Elfeya slipped into Shan’s mind, circumventing all the dark weaves and *sel’dor* and black witchery the High Mage had employed to keep them isolated. She was there, with Shan as she had been since the day of their bonding, an inextricable part of his soul. His strength, his blessing, his greatest weakness. *\*\*Leave me, Elfeya. Shield yourself. I cannot bear for you to suffer.\*\**

*\*\*Nei, never. I will not let him break us. You are Shannisorran v’En Celay, the greatest champion the Fading Lands has ever known. You are a warrior of the Fey, and I am your truemate, a shei’dalin of great power. This Mage may hold our bodies, but he has no command over our souls.\*\**

The second whipstroke shredded the flesh off his back. He flung his head back and screamed himself hoarse.

*\*\*Shan! Stay with me. Focus on the sound of my voice, beloved.\*\** When he didn’t respond, her voice grew sharp as the Mage’s whip. *\*\*Speak to me, Fey!\*\** she barked. *\*\*Who are you?\*\*\**

She’d spent too many years of their life together eavesdropping in his mind as he drove his *chadins* to the end of their strength, then commanded them to eke out more. She was such a fierce, brave blade in her own right, his equal in every way. And she was right. Fey did not surrender, not to fear, not to pain, not to despair. They fought until their hearts burst in their chests. *\*\*I am warrior,\*\** he gasped. *\*\*I am Fey.\*\**

*\*\*Kabei! And what is a warrior of the Fey? Tell me! Shout it out!\*\**

The whip ripped a third stripe off his back, but this time his choked scream was not a mindless howl. This time it was a declaration of defiance, ripped from his aching throat, each

word a rasping challenge. “I am the steel no enemy can shatter.” He thrust his chin out, met Maur’s vile silver gaze, and snarled through gritted teeth, “I am the magic no dark power can defeat.”

The High Mage smiled.

As the fourth lash fell, pain blinded him. He focused his mind on Elfeya’s warmth and forced the cry from his burning lungs. “I am the rock upon which evil breaks like waves. I am Fey! Warrior of honor! Champion of Light!”

Shan sagged in his chains as the torment enveloped him in a hazy cloud of mind-numbing pain. He clung to consciousness and sanity by a thread, the words he’d just cried so defiantly repeating in his mind again and again, punctuated by the sound of Elfeya’s quiet weeping.

An icy breath blew across his face, soft and taunting. “You will rot in darkness, Fey, while your mate serves my pleasure and your daughter surrenders her soul.”

The mad sentence in Shan’s soul roared with fury. Across the link that bound him to his child, her own beast screamed back in wild rage. The next moment, a vast bolus of power blasted across the link, rushing into his broken body, searing him with a painful jolt. His beast seized the power, using it to feed his Rage. Shan’s vision turned to black shadow, lit with vengeful red sparks. “Not if I rip you limb from limb and feast on your bloody bones, Eld maggot.” He lunged for the Mage, teeth bared as he cried, *“Ve sha Desriel!”*

He saw the war hammer swinging from the corner of his eye. The Mage cried, “Don’t kill him, you idiot!” Pain smashed into his skull. Shan’s body went limp as consciousness fled.

\* \* \*

Sol clutched his daughter’s body, rocking her as he had so many times in the past, singing the songs that had soothed her as a child. Blazing twenty-five-fold weaves of power formed a visible dome of magic around them. A five-fold weave had done almost nothing to ease her suffering, but the twenty-five-fold weave had at least dulled the pain enough that she was no longer screaming and convulsing.

Marissya didn’t know how to heal her. The pain, whatever it was, was not coming from any wound to her body and whenever Marissya tried to probe, Ellysetta’s tairén roused with a vengeance, fierce and furious over any hint of *shei’dalin* intrusion into her mind. Rain, whom Ellysetta trusted, could not touch her without causing further pain. And Gaelen, who had suggested he spin the forbidden soul magic Azrahn to see what he could detect, had been unanimously shouted down.

Suddenly Ellysetta’s spine went stiff again and her eyes flew open wide. *“K’shareth na pearson sh’veerre korbay!”* she cried, her voice a ragged scrape of sound, hoarse and broken and several octaves lower than her normal tones. *“K’shafair na selltemorra sh’veerre dagorren! K’shadure a daynalle pear coda la cresses! K’shafay! Shaysan lowcha! Liesse chakai!”* She shouted the last wild words, then collapsed in Sol’s arms. Her head lolled back, and she began to mutter the same unintelligible phrases over and over again.

Sol raised stricken eyes to the Fey, who were standing around him in shocked silence. “All you Fey with all your power, can you do nothing? Was Laurie right about this being demons after all?”

Bel swallowed. “Only if the demon possessing her is the spirit of a Fey warrior.”

“What do you mean?” Sol demanded.

“We mean she is speaking Feyan,” Rain said.

“Then what is she saying?”

Gaelen answered, his face a blank mask. “She is reciting the Warrior’s Creed. It is taught to every Fey boy who enters the Warrior’s Academy to begin his training in the *Cha Baruk*.”

With a sudden, fierce scowl, Rain knelt beside Sol Baristani and seized Ellysetta by the shoulders. “*Nal?*” he demanded. “*Nal ve sha?* Who are you? What is your name?”

Her head lolled limp on her neck. He caught her face between his hands. “Tell me!” The muted pain of her unseen injuries tore at his senses. Within his soul, Rain’s tairen roused, hissing, power licking at his limbs and lunging against his restraints.

He felt the sudden wild surge as Ellysetta’s own tairen leapt in answer. Her eyes flew open and fixed upon his face. The threads of their bond blazed to life. His tairen, Eras, roared with fury, sensing something else—someone else—there in her soul with them. Before he could react to the threat, Ellysetta’s body flared bright with sudden power and Rain’s limbs went abruptly weak. Her pupils widened, until no hint of green iris showed, and Rain reared back in instinctive shock and horror as for one brief instant, her eyes shone pure, whirling black, filled with red sparks.

“*Ve sha Desriel!*” she cried. Their combined power left her on a rush. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she slumped, unconscious, in her father’s arms.

“What in the Seven Hells just happened?” Dax demanded. “What was that?”

“I don’t know,” Rain snapped. “Something was there, inside her, something besides her tairen. I don’t know what—maybe a Mage, maybe a demon. Whatever it was nearly brought out her tairen, and she can’t control it yet. We need to get her to the Fading Lands. Right now.” He spun a shout across the common Fey thread. ***\*\*Fey! Prepare for departure!\*\****

“Rain,” Marissya protested. “You can’t mean to send her through the Mists now. We have no idea how they’ll react to her Mage Marks, and if that seizure nearly brought out the tairen, the Mists may well finish the job.”

“Marissya’s right, Rain,” Bel agreed. “The Mists can brutalize a Fey. She needs time to recover, to rebuild her inner barriers to keep the tairen in check.”

Rain turned hard, furious eyes on the pair of them. “We don’t have time. I don’t know what attacked her just now, but I’ll be scorched if we’re going to stay around here one bell longer and give it a chance to come back. Marissya, the chime she wakes, weave peace on her. Bel, Gaelen, you two help her build what barriers she needs to keep the tairen caged and protect herself against whatever the Mists might try to do to her.”

“Rain?” Sol Baristani interrupted. The woodcarver was still holding his daughter’s unconscious body, stroking her hair and rocking her as he had so many times since her earliest childhood. “‘Vaysha Dezrielle.’ She’s said that before during her seizures. Is it also Feyan? Do you know what it means?”

Rain’s mouth pressed into a grim line. “It means ‘I am Death.’”