

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

JADEN'S HONOR

Sassy Lane

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

JADEN'S HONOR

By Sassy Lane

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A pregnant male falls to the floor in pain. He is completely covered in fine clothing with only his face and fingertips visible. He is clutching a heavy curtain for support, and there is no one around to help him.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

“He’s coming!” I fall to floor as ripping pain seized me. “Oh, Jade... If only you could be here... I’m so sorry...”

I’m fairly open to whatever the author wishes. I see this as a royal birth, potentially on a far-away planet where there is some kind of conflict among houses/planets/enemies; and “Jade” (you can change the name if they speak to you) is out fighting. He could be on the opposite side if that suits you. Maybe they had a fight that morning? Maybe it was a sudden war with neighbors? Maybe it’s twins? Bonus points if you can work the quote in and/or expand upon it. Angst is fine too.

Science fiction and/or fantasy please. Prefer HEA or HFN, but not BDSM or too kinky. Well, it can have some kinky but not too much. :)

Sincerely,

Eloreen

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: m-preg, soulmates/bonded, gods, magic, mild violence, non-explicit, age gap, royalty, warrior, men with pets.

Word Count: 26,973

Author's Note

No story happens in isolation. Thank you to the ladies from my Amazon readers' group. They beta'd the story and helped to make it reader friendly. A big *Thank You!* to my patient editor, who put up with my total inability to understand Google Docs and found a way to make it work.

JADEN'S HONOR

By Sassy Lane

Jaden knelt before the altar in a small forest temple, his thick blond hair dark with sweat. He laid down his sword and wiped his face with a dampened rag. The cool stone floor of the temple was a blessing after an unexpected skirmish on the low mountain hills.

Long, sleek muscles burned lightly from recent use. His side ached where an arrow had grazed him, but Jaden set that aside and soaked up the quiet peace of the room. After a long moment, he removed his ruined shirt. Wetting the rag again, Jaden placed it over the long wound on his side. He donned his vest and fastened it closed over the rag. It was a makeshift bandage, but it wouldn't be needed for long.

Jaden was a weapons master and a devotee of the Warrior Goddess, Ashriel. Though it had once been considered an honor to follow the Warrior's Path, the necessary skills and training had fallen out of favor in a population slowly turning from the old ways. He was the last of his kind.

Jaden's childhood had been spent training with his grandmother. The fierce old woman had been determined that the knowledge and skills that had long served their clan would not be lost to the next generation.

After his grandmother had passed, Jaden had roamed the kingdoms, searching out anyone who could add to his training. Now, at forty-seven, he was in his prime and acknowledged to be unsurpassed in fighting skills, the very reason he had been sent for by King Raidon of Vostek. Jaden considered the letter he had received from the king several days before, requesting a meeting.

Vostek was a rich country. Deep seas on the eastern border and low mountains in the west cradled a fertile land, and there was little true poverty here. As a king who understood the motivations of his people, Raidon had originated a unique apprenticeship program that was open to any of his subjects; making it possible for anyone who wished to learn valuable skills.

During his reign, Vostek had become a plump prize. Too tempting for the Dal of the southern kingdom of Arkon to resist, it was now a kingdom under siege.

Jaden stretched broad shoulders and brought his thoughts back from their wandering. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, clearing his mind. A wisp of breeze caressed his cheek, further cooling him. It happened occasionally during his meditation, a friendly ghost of air against his hair or face as if the Goddess was checking on him.

Jaden let out another breath, quickly slipping into a state of light vigilance that he could maintain for marks, and waited for the king.

An elderly man tottered through the palace halls, focused in his intent. Finding the door he was searching for, he burst inside. "Prince Lin..."

Prince Lin Aterios looked up at their priest, Dagen, just as an explosion rocked the halls. He jumped up and grabbed the old man to keep him from falling.

"Dal Varent has breached the walls. We must leave, quickly!" the priest gasped.

Lin nodded, dark eyes dancing around his room. Moving decisively, he went to the bed and pulled two pillows from their covers. Into one cover he shoved some clothing, a pair of boots, and his small case of jewelry. Into the other, he put a wrapped parcel of seeds he had intended as a gift to a visiting counselor. On top of the parcel, he placed food from a nearby table: fruit, stuffed bread, and some cheese he quickly wrapped in a bit of cloth.

Glancing at Dagen, Lin grabbed two cloaks. He was a little taller than the priest, but they were close in size, and the old one would need the warmth. He ushered the frail priest ahead of him. "We must get to the stables."

Two sets of soft slippers were silent on the palace floors. The men moved cautiously through the halls as sounds of fighting were heard in the distance.

"Where is my father?" Lin asked, when they stopped to peer around a corner. "I thought he was to meet the warrior, Jaden, this morning."

"He had been delayed by the Cawley delegation. He was readying to leave when he received word of Dal Varent's approach. He sent me to find you and warn you to get out of the palace."

Reaching the stable after long moments of wary vigilance, the pair stepped inside. Lin glanced around quickly. He looked at the priest for a moment and made his decision. He threw a light saddle over a dark-colored, powerfully built

gelding. Another small saddle soon graced his favorite, a pale, long-legged mare.

Lin loaded the mare with his burden of sacks and cloaks and tied her reins to the saddle of the gelding. Stepping into the saddle, he reached a hand down for the priest.

“Give me your hand,” he demanded when the priest hesitated. “I won’t leave you here.”

Lin hauled Dagen up and across his lap sideways, supporting him with his arms around the priest’s waist. Tapping his heels lightly into the gelding’s flank, Lin headed for a small gate that led to the dense woods at the rear of the castle grounds.

“Where was the meeting to take place?” Lin questioned, knowing the old priest was a confidante of his father’s.

“There is a small, abandoned traveler’s temple in the forest near the border,” Dagen answered.

“Do you know the way?”

Dagen nodded at Lin. “I can take you there.”

Marks later, Prince Lin’s arms were exhausted. His dark, chin-length hair was hanging limply in his face. He had been holding onto the older man for half the day it seemed, keeping him in the saddle as he dozed. They had not dared to stop, making careful way to the small temple, deep in the forest.

The gelding’s head came up, and he snorted, startling the priest awake just as the building came into sight. Round shaped with a tiny room stuck to the back like a small tick, the temple looked as if it had been abandoned for many turns, though some recent repair work could be seen.

“I am not sure I can get down on my own, Prince Lin,” the old man rasped, as they stopped.

“Allow me to help, Elder.”

Lin’s head shot up at the deep voice. A tall, lean man was stepping from beside a tree. He was wearing dark leather clothing and knee-high moccasins covered his feet. A fitted vest left long arms bare, and hair the color of fine honey was tied back from a strong face. Lin could hear no sounds as the man walked towards them.

“Warrior Jaden?” he asked hopefully.

“Indeed, but you are not King Raidon,” the warrior answered.

“Please, can we speak inside?” the prince asked. “We have been riding for marks, and we would really like to get down.”

Jaden nodded at the prince and gently helped the old one from the saddle. Lin got down and followed as the warrior carried the small priest off to the sleeping room at the back of the temple. Gently, he set the priest on the cot at the side of the room and went back outside.

“Rest a moment, priest. I will be back.” Lin knelt by the cot and waited until Dagen nodded at him before going out to care for the horses.

Prince Lin was stiff and sore, but he took the time to pull water from the old well. He poured several buckets into the trough for the thirsty animals. Jaden had already tossed their gear over the little fence rail and given them a quick brushing to remove the worst of the sweat and dirt. Lowering the bucket a last time, Lin pulled more water and made his way back to the sleeping room.

Inside the small room, Jaden was tending a small fire when Lin returned. He had brought in Lin's bags and covered the dozing priest with the cloaks.

Lin quietly thanked the warrior when he took the heavy bucket, poured water into the waiting kettle and moved it over the fire.

Jaden stirred the contents of a second kettle as Lin sat heavily on the floor by the hearth with a small groan. Jaden glanced at the prince, then dipped a rag into the remaining water and handed it over. “Will you tell me your story now, Princeling?”

Lin accepted the rag gratefully and began.

“In the palace, we have heard much about you and your company of mercenaries. Traveling bards sing the praises of a fierce warrior who fights in battle like a wraith of the Gods. You command a force that is known throughout the lands. It is said that you could have any number of rich commissions, but that you choose to help others at no gain to yourself if you believe the cause is just.”

He rubbed the rag over his face as he continued, “My father listens avidly to news of the various squabbles and wars that are happening across the kingdoms. Whenever possible, he sits and has dinner with the head of the Guard. He has great respect for your skills and has been following your story for many turns now. A few mornings ago, he informed me he had dispatched a letter requesting to meet with you.”

Lin glanced up. The warrior was sitting very still, watching him with a steady gaze. He suppressed a small shiver at the focused attention he was receiving and began wiping his hands as a distraction.

“I thought my father was simply looking to hire your company. The neighboring Dal’s troops have been harassing our border for some moons now. We have increased the border guard and are recruiting heavily. Yesterday, Father informed me that he has received several offers from Dal Varent for a marriage alliance. He has refused them all. Dal Varent is a poor ruler of his people and Father would never allow him to gain a position of authority here. We thought to have more time but early this day, troops forced their way into the palace. He sent the priest to warn me to leave. A fight was raging as we left.”

Jaden was quiet, listening. When the prince was done speaking, he nodded and scooped small bowls of the light soup he had prepared before the pair had arrived. After handing a bowl to Lin, he placed a gentle hand on the knee of the priest, waking him. Jaden handed over the second bowl and sat thinking for a moment before he spoke. “I have heard rumblings from Arkon before this. In the last turn, the holdings of several lesser nobles from that area have been swallowed up. Dal Varent is an ambitious man, as are most Dals. They are mercenary men who rule through military might, so I can see him wanting ties to Vostek. Your land is rich and has broad sea ports that would be very attractive to someone seeking to gain a position of power.”

He paused thoughtfully, then mused aloud, “While it is not unheard of for kings or male nobles to marry in order to strengthen kingdom borders or settle a political situation, this is mostly the case when there is no living heir, and there are no other branches of close familial ties. It is a stabilizing gesture to prevent high-ranking families from destroying themselves through war, while successors are being chosen.”

Looking at Lin, Jaden continued. “This is not your situation. You are young and could easily marry and have many children. While he could try for a military takeover, Dal Varent has nothing to gain from a marriage with you. Even if something were to happen to King Raidon while you were married thus, any of the higher-ranking families could challenge for rule. For a true alliance of kingdoms through marriage contract, there must be an heir.”

“There would be an heir, Warrior. Prince Lin is the Bearer.”

Jaden could feel the blood leave his face. He glanced back and forth between the old priest and the lean young man, stunned.

“The Bearer,” he whispered softly. “There has not been a Bearer in hundreds of turns, before even my great gran’s gran-dam.” His gaze moved back from the princeling to the Elder.

The old priest nodded, understanding Jaden’s awe. “It is true, Warrior. The prince bears the mark on his stomach.”

“It has been a closely kept secret between my father, me, and a few servants. The mark appeared just over a turn past. Dagen is our priest, and he sent to the High Priest for advice, though we have yet to hear from him. We have been in shock and not certain what steps to take next. Dal Varent seems to have acquired the knowledge somehow, and he is determined to use it to his advantage,” the prince said sadly.

“Were I to enter into a marriage with the Dal, and it then became public knowledge I was the Bearer, he would have incredible power. Dal Varent is erratic and a bad ruler. He cares nothing for the lives of his people and uses them up like cattle. Can you imagine what he would be like if he were in a marriage to the Bearer? The world could not contain his greed.”

They were all silent for a time.

“There are some things to consider, Princeling.” Jaden ticked off points on his fingers. “If Dal Varent is in control of your castle, he can simply attempt to claim the rule by takeover. He might have to fight off the high-ranking families, but if his military is in place, he has a chance. He might claim you were wedded before disappearing. The papers would be easy to forge. He could also claim you were kidnapped and offer a large bounty to whichever person can return you to him. You would find yourself a hunted man. Lastly, there must have been some sort of proof that Dagen sent to the High Priest. If Dal Varent has that, whether he has taken the castle or not, he might simply make an announcement claiming you as the Bearer. Kings, Overlords, Dals, nobles greater and lesser, anyone who has ever had any pretensions of rule would be searching for you. It would throw the kingdoms into chaos, and no one at all would be concerned over what happened to Vostek.”

The prince turned grey before Jaden’s eyes. Quickly, he grabbed the young man by the back of the neck and forced his head down.

“Take a slow, deep breath,” he commanded. “Again.”

Jaden was carefully watching the princeling when the priest spoke up. “You could put an end to this, Warrior. You could bond with Prince Lin.”

“WHAT?” All right, shouting at the old one was not going to help. Jaden tried again. “I’m sorry. Elder...”

“It IS a solution, *Warrior*.” Dagen was insistent. “Perhaps the best of all solutions,” he mumbled to himself.

Bonding... Jaden couldn’t believe the elder would suggest it. Bonding was a matter of deep gravity. It was a literal joining of the souls and could only be accomplished by a high priest. The oaths between the two people being bonded were sworn directly to the Gods.

An ancient custom from a time when the Gods ruled directly over their people, bonding was absolutely unbreakable, a matter of highest consequence. Even rarer now, when it *was* sanctioned, it was usually to avoid massive loss of life, or at the end of a long and bloody battle to seal a truce. The very life-forces of those swearing the bond were irrevocably tied together even through death and into the next plane.

Jaden stood and began to pace. “This is not...”

“I would be willing to bond with you, Warrior Jaden,” Prince Lin said quietly from near the floor.

“*BONDING IS NOT DONE LIGHTLY!*” Jaden said with great heat. “Honoring the Gods may have fallen out of favor in recent times, *BUT I DO!*”

Jaden turned and faced them both, hands on hips, legs spread in a strong stance. “I am a dedicated Warrior of Ashriel! I live every day of my life working to uphold standards that honor the old ways. I will not make a mockery of a Gods-blessed BONDING!”

The princeling stood and faced him, cloaked with great dignity.

“My entire life I have known that I must enter into a marriage contract and continue my line, though admittedly I thought to be married to someone’s daughter. I care deeply for my people and have been groomed to understand that I would be required to make sacrifices for them. Whether it was wedding some stranger to build alliances or entering into a contract with someone I despised didn’t matter. The possibility that Dal Varent could bring war to Vostek, could ruin my people, is untenable. The only thing of importance is to make sure my people are cared for and protected. The. Only. Thing.”

“Do you understand, young prince, that I have over twice your turns? That if you bonded with me there would NEVER be another. No shy glances or flattering words from courtiers. No deciding later you made a mistake. You

would be *MINE!*” Jaden threw his arms in the air. “I am a possessive man. I would...”

“Would you honor me?” Lin interrupted. “If we were bonded, would you put *me* first? Would you care for and protect me, our children, and my kingdom?”

Jaden was stopped mid-rant by the prince's words, and he considered them well.

“With everything I have and everything I am, Princeling. With my very last breath, it would be so,” he said quietly.

Prince Lin took a step closer and gently touched Jaden's chest. “Then I would accept a bonding, Warrior of Ashriel.”

“SO BE IT. The bonding is accepted!”

Jaden felt all the hair on his body stand on end. He and Prince Lin both jumped as the bodiless voices made their pronouncement. The princeling's eyes were wide, the white clearly visible until a blinding flash of light forced them both to turn away and cover their faces. Blinking furiously and shaking his head to clear the tears from his eyes, Jaden reached out to Prince Lin.

“Are you all right?” he demanded.

“Yes. Yes, I am fine,” Lin assured him. “What... are we...?”

A snicker, quickly becoming a hearty chuckle, had them both looking through watery eyes towards the Elder.

“Well, you ARE at a temple.” The old one chortled as he slowly faded from view. “I haven't had this much fun in *ages*...”

Jaden turned to Lin: “We need to leave. Now.”

Lin nodded rapidly in agreement.

Three transparent beings appeared in the small temple. The first appeared to be a dark-blonde female with silvery, glowing eyes. She was dressed in leathers, her hair tied back from her face. The second had short brown hair and similarly glowing eyes. He was dressed in a simple tunic, sandals on his feet. The third was in the form of the old priest, now standing straight and tall.

“You made interesting choices this time,” the woman spoke to the third form.

The old one smiled. "They will do well I think. The older one is pure forged steel, hard and strong, his honor defines him. The younger is compassionate, softer, but there is strength in him. He will hold."

The second man waved his hand, returning the room and surrounding area to its original, neglected-looking state. "I hope so, Brother. It took us hundreds of turns to pull them back from the brink last time. We were barely able to start over."

"Tradition was upheld during the last Opposition. It was time to try something new." The old man shrugged.

The woman spoke again. "The planets will be aligned in less than a turn. We will know then."

The three beings faded out, and the temple was silent once more.

Jaden helped Lin down from the saddle and pulled him close before he fell. Lin had been riding since early that day and was barely able to stand at first. They had left the forest temple two marks ago as the sun was setting, eyes still watering from the bright light at the temple. He rubbed his hands firmly up and down Lin's back, trying to help ease the stiffness he knew the prince would be suffering from. Lin groaned softly and buried his head under Jaden's chin.

Jaden gave him a small hug and patted him on the back. "We are stopping for the night, Husband. The innkeeper here makes a respectable meal and there will be a tub to soak in."

Husband. BONDED.

Jaden still found it hard to believe everything that had happened that afternoon. He had been dedicated to Ashriel since he was a child and had great respect for the other deities, but this was not something he had come to expect from the usually quiet and sober Gods. He was uncertain what all of this meant for the future.

Lin lifted his head, and Jaden's stomach tightened. His eyes traveled Lin's face. The right side, from forehead to cheek, was marked with a strange silver design. From the gasp he heard, Jaden guessed his face was similarly marked.

"We need to stable the horses and find the innkeeper," Jaden said pragmatically. "I have no doubt the marks will still be there after a meal and a bath."

“I am feeling quite overwhelmed right now, Jaden,” the prince declared firmly.

“I understand, Princeling.” Jaden sighed, gathered the reins of all the horses and walked into the stable; he could already imagine how the innkeeper would react.

Jaden watched through the doorway as Lin dried his hair. The tub of water had been steaming hot, and Jaden had poured some strongly scented liniment oil into the water to help ease Lin's muscle aches. Lin had soaked for at least a mark before the cooling water had convinced him to leave the tub. It had given Jaden plenty of time to get cleaned up and check the bandage on his side. As he thought, the wound was already healed. Increased ability to heal was one of the Goddess's blessings, and he was very grateful for it.

Jaden was sitting at the table, one of his saddle packs opened and bits spread out, when Lin finally came out of the bathing room. He felt himself grin as Lin stopped at the small side table to take a bowl of thick stew and hungrily began to eat. Lin hopped up to perch on the end of the bedframe while he ate. Fingering another dangle and some more beads over into a small pile, Jaden watched the prince.

“Are you feeling better now?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you. The bath helped immensely,” Lin answered between bites.

Dressed in a simple shift borrowed from the innkeeper, and freshly scrubbed from his bath, Lin looked very young. Jaden felt a wave of protectiveness towards him.

“What are you doing?” Lin asked as he ate.

“I am El'oreen,” Jaden said simply.

Lin nodded his understanding.

Jaden originated from one of the nomad clans that ranged on the north side of the Oreen Mountains. There were a number of clans in that area that held to the old ways. Well-trained and skilled warriors, the few clansmen and women who chose to leave the mountains were in high demand as bodyguards and soldiers.

Being a people highly skilled in war, the El'oreen had also become skilled in ways to avoid confrontation. Over time, the clans had devised a visible

marking system, a style of beading that was practically a language in itself. Since he was no longer an eligible person, Jaden was going to weave the appropriate beads and dangles into his hair. The long lock would be separated from the rest of his hair and worn at the side of his face.

“Oh, wait a moment.” Lin knew that part of the Oreen marriage custom involved wearing a token from one's partner. He set down his bowl and moved over to his pillow-cover bags, pulling out his small jewelry case. Bringing it to the table, Lin removed a necklace made of beautiful green stones. The pieces were all individually mounted in silver settings and Lin separated several.

“Would you add these to your hair?” he asked.

Jaden smiled warmly at him. “I would be pleased to do so, Husband.”

Lin watched as Jaden separated out a portion of his hair and began weaving different bits into the section he had separated.

“I didn't see beads when we first met. Were there beads in your hair earlier? Are you wearing only the marriage beads? Is there a certain order the items have to be in?” Lin queried like a curious cat.

Jaden nodded. “You are correct. I was not wearing beads this morning, but I wish to acknowledge our bonding. I want everyone to know that I am claimed, and that I claim another. In doing this, I not only honor the traditions of my people, I create additional safety for you. There are few who will challenge an El'oreen warrior, let alone one who is a Warrior of Ashriel.” He tapped a finger next to his eyes.

“Why do you tap your eyes?”

“Come closer, my prince, and look at my eyes,” Jaden invited. “What do you see?”

Lin moved close and leaned over Jaden. He could feel the warmth of Lin's body and smell the liniment he had soaked in. Jaden could tell the moment his husband realized what he saw. Lin stiffened and breathed out slowly in awe.

The irises of Jaden's eyes were a dark brown color, but radiating out in a starburst pattern from the center of each eye were silver shapes like teardrops.

“I was taught Ashriel's way by my grandmother,” Jaden explained. “I was a child when she left this plane, and I chose to honor her by dedicating myself to the Warrior Goddess. My dedication was made in all seriousness, though I was but a youngling. When I was older, had mastered all of the old forms, and had a

better understanding of what it meant, I renewed my dedication. Ashriel accepted me and marked me as hers. When I am in battle or angry, I am told my eyes have a silver glow. It is fair warning to any who would challenge me that I carry the scales of a Goddess's justice."

He held up three tri-color pieces. "These beads are from my clan. They show that I have completed my training and attained manhood. They are the beginning. Other bits come from battles or significant periods of my life, in the order they happened. These," Jaden held up the green stones Lin had given him, "These will complete the braid. Any further events in my life will be recorded on different weaves. "

Lin sat softly on the edge of the chair near the table. "This is a very big thing. The Bearer being tied to a Warrior of Ashriel. I knew being the Bearer was significant in ways I did not understand, but this," he waved between the two of them, "this is more."

"It is," Jaden agreed. When he finished with his lock, he picked up several more beads and moved to kneel beside the chair where Lin was quietly eating the last of his stew. Jaden carefully added the beads to a small section of Lin's hair.

"Do you think the silver markings on our faces are simply saying that we are bonded, or do they mean more?" Lin wondered. "That old priest had been at the palace for over two turns now. Why would he stay so close and in mortal form if he was more?"

Jaden shrugged. "I do not know. It has been a very long time since the Gods were this active. We will search out a scholar as soon as we are able to do so."

Jaden gently captured tapping fingers. "In the morning, we will start towards Wolf's Den. It is the winter holding for my company when we are not in action. I will send someone to the palace to learn the situation there before we decide our next step. While we wait for word from my scout, we will find a scholar and see if there is any understanding to be had."

He took the empty bowl and set it on the table. Pulling Lin lightly to his feet, Jaden walked around the large bed with him. "Come, rest. There will be plenty of time for worry tomorrow."

Jaden lifted the covers up for the prince and climbed in after him. He pulled Lin close against his side and kissed the top of his head. "Sleep well, Lin."

Lin woke slowly, aware of the large frame next to his radiating heat. It was still dark out, though one ambitious bird was already chirping loudly. Comfortable, he let his mind drift.

So much had happened in a relatively short period of time. He was still adjusting to the fact that the Bearer's mark had appeared this last turn. Waiting for word from the High Priest; accepting that he would marry a male. It was a position he had never thought to be his. As the only child of a royal, Lin's duty was to continue the family line, and his only marriage option had been with a female. Before the bonding... his mind skittered a little here. The happenings at the temple were overwhelming, and he let those thoughts go for now.

Lin turned his head a bit and studied the warrior sleeping next to him. Thick hair hung loosely over a large shoulder. His skin had light-colored scars from various old injuries, but was otherwise darkly tanned all over, a stark contrast to Lin's own smooth, pale skin. Large veins ran over his arms. Jaden was not bulky like many swordsmen. He reminded Lin of one of the big plains' cats, all sleek, heavy muscle. Even in repose the warrior exuded power. Lin wanted to stroke the fine hairs that lightly covered Jaden's arms, legs, and chest to see if they were as soft as they looked.

He had heard so many stories about Jaden from his father and the bards. He was said to be intelligent and decisive, ruthless in battle once engaged. It was also said that he was considerate of those who could not help themselves; gentle and generous even. That Jaden had great respect for the old ways, Lin had seen firsthand. He had been glorious in that moment at the temple, standing so strongly, eyes flashing...

Eyes flashing; Lin gasped as he recalled Jaden's eyes. He had been marked *twice* by the Gods. They *both* had been marked *twice*! This did not bode well for the future. His stomach tightened with worry over what it all meant, and he began to breathe faster. Suddenly, a large hand reached out to pull him closer to the furnace that was Jaden.

"Whatever worries you so, let it go, Husband." Jaden's sleep-husky voice admonished, "We prepare ourselves for the eventualities we can foresee, and when the Gods are done laughing, we deal with what is. The day will bring what it will bring."

Lin sighed, comforted by the solid warmth next to him. He tried to relax, making a conscious choice to trust the man he had willingly bonded with. Wiggling into a more comfortable position, he went back to sleep.

Jaden was awakened by soft sounds coming from the hall outside. He opened the door to see a tray set with two bowls of porridge, one of dried fruits and nuts, a small pitcher of honey, and a larger one of milk. He picked up the tray and snorted softly. Usually a garrulous fellow, the innkeeper had taken one look at them the night before and couldn't get them into their room fast enough. A superstitious soul, the innkeeper wanted nothing to do with the goings-on of the Gods.

Lin poked his head above the blankets as Jaden turned back into the room. He held up the tray so Lin could see it. "The innkeeper wishes us an early start to our day, Husband."

Lin snorted softly and turned over to stretch. Jaden eyed the slender length of him. "I alluded to your age earlier, but I would like to know. How many turns do you have, Lin?"

"I celebrated my twenty-fourth a few eves ago," Lin said quietly. "Does the difference between us bother you?"

"I would not have searched for a spouse as young as you are," Jaden answered honestly. "*However*, you are the Bearer. I believe we were bonded because there is no other who would be able to offer you the level of safety I can provide."

Jaden set the tray on the side table and moved to sit on the side of the bed near Lin. Gently, he brushed the hair back from Lin's face. "Already, I have strong feelings of protectiveness towards you. I have no doubt other feelings will grow. I am yours, as you are mine. I do not regret our bonding."

"I feel like a mimic-bird, but I am overwhelmed by the speed of everything that is happening," Lin said sadly.

"It is something we all feel at times, Lin," Jaden assured him. "You are certainly not alone in your feelings, but remember this, YOU were chosen. We may never understand the reasoning of the Gods, but something is happening that is important to them, and YOU were chosen to fill their need. It is no small thing, Lin."

Lin held Jaden's eyes for a long moment, and then nodded. "Thank you for that. If there is anyone who could understand what I feel, it would be you."

Jaden smiled and patted Lin's thigh. "Come, let us break our fast. We have a long day's journey ahead of us."

Snagging a handful of dried fruits and nuts from the small bowl, Jaden winked at his husband and said in a high-pitched, querulous voice a granny might use, "Eat. You're too skinny."

It was fully dark by the time they arrived at Wolf's Den. The sentry had looked at them curiously but waved them past, recognizing Jaden.

Lin was sound asleep in his arms. They had been riding hard since early that morning. They had made good time, able to avoid stopping because of the extra food Lin had packed along. Just past dark though, the princeling had started nodding and swaying in the saddle. Jaden had pulled Lin over to his mount, and he promptly slid into a deeper sleep.

It had taken a moment, but Jaden had been able to tie the gelding's reins to his saddle. The horse followed along placidly, unlike Lin's brat of a mare, Belle. That horse had far too much energy, and the silly mare had made a game of finding anything possible to spook at. Even now, she was prancing as lightly as if she had just woken up.

At Jaden's command, his horse lowered to the ground. Carefully, Jaden dismounted with Lin still cradled in his arms.

"I may need to make the next trip, Jaden. You seem to have found a prize." Nava, one of his scouts, appeared from the shadows as Jaden's horse rose back up.

"I have 'found' a husband, Nava. Be respectful," Jaden warned.

"A husband?" Nava was shocked. "When? How? You were gone less than a handful of days."

"As the Gods will it, Nava, it shall be. Take the horses to the stable and wake Jaston. I will speak with you both when I have settled my husband."

Nava nodded and hurried off with the horses, whistling for the stable boys.

Jaden sighed and took Lin inside the building that housed the sleeping area for singles. He passed the room that sufficed as his office and pulled open the door to his sleeping room. Laying Lin on the bed, Jaden carefully removed his boots and cloak. Jaden removed a thick duvet from his chest and tucked it around Lin, who promptly cuddled in and began snoring softly. He stroked Lin's hair for a moment, then headed to his office to meet with Nava and Jaston. He had barely taken two steps inside the door before Nava dropped the cup he had started to pour mulled wine into.

“You have been marked *again*?” Nava swallowed nervously. “It is rare enough a God or Goddess will mark a person anymore, but you have been marked twice now. Does this have anything to do with the husband you brought home?”

Jaston turned from his place by the window. “You married?” He moved around Nava until he saw the markings on Jaden’s face and the beads in his hair. “Who? When?”

“Please finish pouring the wine, Nava,” Jaden said. He really wanted a drink before he started this conversation. Nava and Jaston were two of his best scouts, but they could be dramatic old uncles at times.

Nava handed him a cup and sat. Both men were watching Jaden closely.

“You know I went south to Vostek to meet with their king?”

Both men nodded at him.

“Lin, the king’s son, showed up at the meeting place instead, with an old priest in tow. Apparently, there was an attack on the palace and King Raidon sent the priest with a warning to Lin that he needed to escape. Dal Varent’s troops had gained entry to the palace by then. It is unknown whether the Dal succeeded or failed in his attempted coup at the castle. It is also unknown whether King Raidon is alive or dead.”

Jaden took a long drink from his cup. “Oh and while we were at the old forest temple, Lin and I were bonded directly by the Gods. It seems the old priest wasn’t actually a priest after all.”

There was dead silence in the room. Jaden rubbed his face with his hands before he finished. “Lin has also been marked twice. He is the Bearer.”

Jaston, stunned, whispered the old children’s rhyme,

“The Bearer comes in time of need; there is danger to us all. He bears a child granted by the Gods—Guard him well. Guard him well. His safety is our first concern—Guard him well. Guard him well. The Bearer comes in time of need; there is danger to us all.”

“Sweet Mother,” Nava swore softly. “What is happening?”

Jaden shrugged. “We have no idea at this time. It has been so long since there was a Bearer that I know little of the lore. The only thing I do know is that something is coming and we need to be alert.”

Jaden stood and paced a few steps towards the large map on the wall. He stared at it for a moment then turned back to his scouts.

“You two are the best suited for gathering the information that I need, so I am sending you both to Vostek. I need to know the situation at the palace and whatever rumors may be floating around the castle town. I need to know if the king is deceased or alive. If he is alive, does he need to be rescued? What condition are the town's people in? Take whatever coin you think you will need and try to keep out of trouble. I do not want to have to retrieve you from the Dal or a cell.” Jaden stared pointedly at Nava, who huffed at him. “In the interim, the prince and I will hunt down a scholar. At the very least, we need to find whatever information we can on the Bearer.”

Jaston spoke up, “The ale house in Kenta is a good place for you to start, Jaden. There is a decent information broker there. If there is something he does not know, at least he will be able to get you started in the right direction.”

“I may be able to get into the palace proper,” Nava commented. “I know one of the cooks, if he is still there.”

“Be very careful, both of you,” Jaden said sternly. “Something is afoot, and at this point, we know neither the players nor the rules.”

The two men clasped arms with him and left. Jaden moved towards the window and looked around at the familiar buildings, shadowed now in the darkness. His mind unsettled, he headed out into the brisk night air to his favorite secluded spot. Letting the peace and solitude fill him, Jaden breathed deeply for a moment, and then began the forms that would clear his mind and focus him.

Jaden awoke early as was usual for him. He made it a point to share as many meals as possible with his company and those of the townspeople who chose to eat with them in the large main room. He gently shook his husband awake. Lin sat up rubbing his eyes.

“The morning meal will be served soon. I usually eat it in the main room with the others. While I would choose to give you more time, there is no doubt that the news that I returned with a husband will be all over the town by now. It will be easier to deal with them all at once than to be hounded by small groups throughout the day,” Jaden said apologetically.

Lin nodded. If there was one thing he understood, it was the need to make appearances. “Do not worry, Husband. It will be well.”

And so it was. Instead of being mobbed, there was a constant stream of people who made their way to the head table. Lin greeted everyone easily, remembering names and engaging in small talk that included all those around. What could have been awkward was instead pleasant, as Lin skillfully guided the conversations and made everyone comfortable.

Jaden reached under the table and squeezed Lin's hand. His husband had done well indeed.

Cerron was making cryptic notes in his ledger when two men in hooded cloaks entered the tastefully decorated room he used for business. He was used to being approached at odd times by all manner of persons. Having established the most successful messenger-bird and information brokerage in the West Kingdom, his knowledge of rumors and other tidbits was highly sought after.

Cerron studied the men discreetly before looking up. The first one was of average height and slim, a tall boy or younger man. The second was tall and broad shouldered, his movements loose and easy, definitely a man used to fighting. Both were wearing well-made cloaks and boots, but the younger man's were of a finer sort. He was possibly a rich merchant's son or young noble and his bodyguard, very interesting. Cerron sat up.

"Gentlemen, how may I help you this morning?" he inquired smoothly.

The larger man spoke. "We are searching for a scholar or old scrolls that have information on the Bearer," he stated.

"The Bearer." Cerron settled back into his chair. "That is an unusual request."

He played with the ring on his first finger. "I am not sure that is something I can help you with, sirs. Scholars of rare topics are solitary at the best of times, and any scrolls on the subject would be ancient and difficult to locate."

The pair simply stood quietly, watching him.

After several long moments, Cerron casually offered, "I may have heard of a scholar who collects and studies the oldest scrolls. He spends all of his time traveling from one moldy place to another in search of information. He is currently studying a small group of priests with some odd ways. They keep themselves isolated and choose only one new member each turn. All of their time is spent learning old history and traditions. Nothing is written down. All

the knowledge is passed on orally. They learn by chant, it is said they have prodigious memories.”

The larger one casually tossed a gold royal onto his desk. “Where are we to find these chanting priests, Cerron?”

“Perhaps I am not interested in your money,” Cerron suggested, his eyebrow raised.

“What is it you seek, Trader of Secrets?” the second one asked in a soft tone.

Ouch, the young man was definitely a noble with that understated insult.

“I wish to know why a youngling came with his bodyguard to find information on the Bearer.”

“He is not my bodyguard, though he guards me well,” the young one responded. “He is my husband.”

Cerron crossed his arms and stared at the pair. “I find that difficult to believe. I have heard no information regarding a recent marriage in a noble house.”

“Choose your words carefully, Cerron.” That was definitely a warning from the larger man. So and so, there *was* something between this pair. His interest in these two was piqued.

“Do you believe in the Gods, Trader?” The youngling had taken a step closer to his desk.

Cerron shrugged, thrown off by the question. “Like most, I attend the Festivals.”

“Then it is time to believe again.”

The youngling pushed his hood back, and Cerron's eyes widened. Silver lines and shapes scrolled around the right side of his face, in sharp contrast to black hair and eyes. Clan beads hung from a lock of hair at his temple, though he was obviously not of clan descent.

“Gods-touched,” Cerron barely breathed the words. He moved slowly around the desk, his hand reaching reverently towards the young man's face.

The large one stepped in front of the youngling and lowered his own hood. He too, was Gods-touched, and a fully weaved lock decorated the blond hair that fell past his broad shoulders. “Bonded,” he said firmly.

Cerron carefully drew back his hand, making no sudden moves that could be misconstrued by the El'oreen warrior. His eyes flicked between the two men several times, bits of information coalescing into a pattern, but that couldn't be. He swallowed hard. "Tell me what you need to know."

Jaden watched as Belle sidled sideways and Lin easily straightened her out. The same way Lin had handled meeting his people during the morning's meal break and the information broker in Kenta. Despite the way the men and women in Jaden's company had clamored over his bonded and Lin's claim of being overwhelmed a few, short days ago, Lin had shown nothing but calm ease throughout the entire day.

Lin either had no worries in his head, or he had a formidable public mask. Jaden grunted softly. Who knew that the young prince of a farmer nation could be so... princely?

He considered the situation and made a decision. Kneeing his mount to the west, they left the small road that would lead to the barracks town. It was several heartbeats before Lin looked up.

"What is going on?" he questioned. "Why are we headed towards the mountains?"

"We are making a detour. There is something I want you to see."

Jaden led the way up the mountain and through a small pass. It was growing considerably colder, and the horses' hooves crunched through old snow. Finally, they turned behind a large boulder, but instead of being forced to stop, the narrow passageway opened up.

Off to the side of an area almost entirely walled in by the surrounding rock, a small body of water steamed gently in the cold air. Lin gasped and dismounted to kneel beside a group of tiny bell flowers. A gentle finger brushed against delicate heads hanging heavily from thin stems.

He looked around, taking in the beauty of the small oasis. "It's a lovely place Jaden. Thank you for bringing me here."

Jaden smiled at his husband, pleased that he approved. Dismounting, he put a bit of grain down for each of the horses and removed two hair sticks from his bag before removing his cloak.

Hidden by the surrounding hills and protected from the wind, the small hot spring made an inviting sanctuary. Jaden had removed his shirt and boots before Lin looked away from the little plants growing nearby.

“You are going to freeze and get sick,” he warned.

Jaden shook his head and continued to undress. “The water is quite warm, Husband. It is a good place to relax for a while.”

Lin walked over and dipped his fingers in the pool. “It is amazing,” he said softly.

“You have never seen a hot spring before?” Jaden asked, as he removed the last of his clothing. He deftly twisted his hair up off of his neck and secured it with one of his hair sticks.

Lin stared quietly at Jaden a moment before lowering his eyes.

“The castle grounds are a half mark’s ride from one end to the other, a bit more from top to bottom. If there were no meetings or visiting highborn, I was free to do as I pleased. I would often ride or study with the Master Gardener, but I had never actually left the grounds before Dal Varent attacked us. I am my father’s only heir. He took no chances with me.”

Jaden walked to Lin and cupped the side of his face. He nudged Lin’s chin up and placed a gentle kiss on his husband’s lips. “Your father showed his love and concern. There is no shame in that.”

Lin ducked his head and Jaden moved behind him. A soft touch pulled Lin’s hair around and up. Tucking the hair stick securely into Lin’s hair, Jaden tugged at the fastening to his cloak. “Come, join me and relax a bit.”

Jaden tossed Lin’s cloak over a nearby rock and started working the ties to his pants.

Lin blushed, batting his hands away. “Go soak. I will join you in a moment.”

Jaden kissed the back of Lin’s head and moved to the spring, sinking to his neck in the steaming waters. He sighed in pleasure and watched Lin carefully remove his shirt and boots, setting them aside. Lin was fussing, cheeks still flushed with embarrassment, and Jaden decided to share a story.

“When I first left the mountains, I apprenticed with a sword master whose clan lived at the edge of the Iraci plains. There is a reptile there with lines of bright color decorating its skin.”

Lin looked over at him, interest in his face.

“I had never seen anything like it, and I asked one of the clan elders what it was. He told me that it was a painted lizard.” Jaden shrugged and grinned a little. “I was horrified that someone would treat a creature so. The next morning, they found me at the river with a small sack of the lizards. I was trying to wash them clean.”

Delighted peals of laughter rang out against the rocks, and then there were splashes as Lin joined his husband in the warm waters.

Gathering Lin close, Jaden nuzzled him with small kisses and light hands. Soft sighs were barely heard as Jaden gradually encouraged his husband to release his stress.

Lin sat on the middle fence rail along the side of the horse pasture. Lazing in the morning sun, his feet curled under the bottom rail and his arms thrown over the top, he was quite comfortable.

He wished it were spring; he missed feeling the earth and grass beneath his feet. He loved to sit on the grass in the sunlight, his fingers curled in the blades. He remembered lessons from the Master Gardener, who taught him the importance of caring for the land. As he learned how all growing things were interconnected, Lin had imagined lines of energy connecting everything that surrounded him. Lin himself was the spider tending the web, creating order out of chaos. He smiled, remembering his childhood fantasy of reaching out with the energy to heal various animals on the grounds.

Lin loved animals. Earlier that morning, he had made friends with the heavily pregnant kitchen cat. He had cuddled her in his lap and felt the tiny lumps squirming in her stomach. She would be birthing her kits in the very near future. Lin rubbed a hand across his flat stomach, wondering what it might feel like. Once again, his thoughts traveled to Jaden.

Lin had been spending a lot of time thinking of Jaden since they had first met. Jaden treated him with a gentle kindness that made Lin want. He had been feeling awkward about it, but sitting here in the sun he took the time to consider the situation. The warrior was his; his husband. His *bonded*. There was really no reason to feel hesitant; they would have a lifetime together. Two lifetimes actually, they were bound together in this plane and the next one.

Lin smiled, thinking of Jaden's kindness at the hot spring when he shared an embarrassing story from his youth to make Lin feel better. The gentle teasing

and soft touches made Lin feel safe and cared for. He was developing strong feelings for Jaden, and it was time to do something about it. Lin understood that Jaden's vow to put him first meant that he would have to make clear his desire. So be it. Lin hopped down from the fence and stretched. He had a big El'oreen to claim.

Jaden had positioned himself so that he could keep an eye both on his men training and his husband on the fence. Lin seemed content to bask in the sun so Jaden turned his attention back to the training taking place in the courtyard.

The small wars, skirmishes and raids that typically kept mercenaries busy during the fair seasons were decidedly lacking in the rougher ones. Highborn tended to stay tucked away in their manors and castles when the weather turned, so mercenaries were mostly found spending their earnings in towns and cities during these times.

Jaden, however, did not disband his company through the harsh snowy season, nor did he follow the custom of letting those under him laze through the winter. His company was moderately sized, usually numbering between sixty to eighty men and women. They were a disciplined and well-trained group, easily able to take on larger numbers. When the seasons changed, Jaden brought everyone back to Wolf's Den, a small town populated by former soldiers and their families who had useful trades. Gear was cleaned, repaired, or replaced, and the animals and people were able to heal up and rest for a bit. Then the training began all over again.

The company and town followed the same type of hierarchy to be found in most mountain clans. They were all responsible for each other in the way of a large, close family. Though few were related by birth there were sibs to harass, aunties and uncles to keep order, and elders to learn from.

If someone did not fit within their family, that person was invited to leave. The skill level of the fighter was not a consideration at that point and the fact that Jaden treated his people as a family first, made his company wildly popular with the clans. The large clan base and tight bonds his troops enjoyed were two of many things that set Jaden's company apart from the others.

“AHHH...!”

Jaden looked over in time to see his second, Ande, land hard on his back and winced. He had warned Ande not to harass Kai, a small Breccan who had recently joined them. Lean and wiry as a whole, Breccan fighters were

notorious for their wicked, hand-to-hand fighting style and their incredible speed. Ande was, it seemed, determined to learn the hard way.

Lela and Lala, twin sisters who shared an earthy sense of humor, approached from the side. "Heyla," they said in unison. "We are going to start the staff exercises," Lela started. "You are going to be busy," Lala continued.

Jaden looked at them for a moment and followed their gazes back to Lin, who was now moving with purpose towards the three of them. He was quite focused on Jaden. One of the women shoved him lightly, and they both laughed.

"You are newly married, brother. Go pay attention to your husband."

Jaden turned towards Lin, who stopped and waited for him to approach.

"Are you alright?" Jaden asked.

"We are married," Lin stated. "You are mine."

Jaden tilted his head at Lin, waiting for him to finish his thoughts.

"I want a kiss," Lin demanded, narrow eyed. "A real kiss."

A slow smile lit Jaden's face. "You do?" he teased. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Lin said firmly and nodded.

Reaching out with both hands, Jaden gently cupped Lin's face. He felt Lin's hands grasp his waist as he lowered his mouth slowly to his husband's. Brushing his lips softly, Jaden lipped and teased Lin's mouth until he opened up and then kissed him, deep and slow.

Soon Lin's hands had moved to circle his neck. He was leaning fully into Jaden, who had lost himself in the sweet heat of his Lin's mouth until loud hoots and teasing calls brought his attention back to the courtyard. All exercises had stopped, and everyone was watching them.

Jaden leaned forward, touching his head against Lin's for a moment, but Lin jumped up and wrapped his legs tightly around Jaden's waist. Reaching out automatically to catch him, Jaden now found his hands full of Lin's bottom.

He grinned widely. "As you wish, Husband."

Pressing a short, hard kiss against Lin's mouth, Jaden carried him off to their room. He was surprised by the prince's forwardness, but he approved of Lin's honesty and his directness. His husband was demanding his due, and Jaden was determined to give him everything he deserved.

Lin climbed the ladder to the loft. Aki, the cat, had birthed her kits up here a few evenings ago, and Lin took every available opportunity to spend time with them. He found a comfortable spot in the sun where he could watch the kits without disturbing Aki and tried to relax. His mind invariably moved between two sets of thoughts. He was either worrying about his father and the state of the palace, or the evenings he spent enjoying his husband.

And enjoy he did. None of his previous encounters with courtesans and courtiers had prepared him for bed play with Jaden. Jaden was lusty and teasing and intense and... *playful*. Lin was amazed at the sheer joy in life that Jaden expressed each day. Jaden had explained that part of the Warrior's Path was to do everything to the fullest extent possible. It didn't matter if you were fighting in battle or aiding the helpless, or simply existing in the day, it meant giving your best at all times. Whether he was making Lin mindless with sweaty pleasure, or sitting in the sun repairing a saddle, Jaden was right there, laughing and sharing with him.

Lin's feelings for Jaden were growing stronger each day, and the pleasure he received from his marriage made the guilt of not being at the castle that much worse. His stomach tightened, and he startled when Aki jumped into his lap to be petted. Cuddling her close, Lin concentrated on his little friend and her tiny kits.

Jaden stepped outside, glancing around the courtyard. Ande, Bron and Lala were standing together near the pasture fence. They looked over at his appearance, and Lala tilted her head towards the stable. Jaden nodded and headed in that direction.

It seemed that whenever he could not find Lin, all he had to do was go into the loft above the stable. Lin was enamored of the kitchen cat and her kits and popped in to check on them regularly. As expected, Jaden found Lin curled up in a sunny spot, petting the cat.

Lin looked up as Jaden's head and shoulders rose above the ladder. "Have you heard anything yet?"

They were both fretting. Jaden wanted desperately to learn the lore surrounding the Bearer as well as any information they could discover on the Gods' unusual level of recent activity. He was growing quite fond of Lin and was determined to protect him. Lin equally wanted news of his father and the goings-on in his kingdom. They had delayed nearly half a moon; it was as long

as they could safely wait. Lin had agreed that even if there was no word by the next day, they would leave to find the chanting priests Cerron had told them of.

“The sentry just sent word. Nava and Jaston will be at the gate shortly.”

Lin quickly set down the cat and moved towards the ladder.

They made their way to the eating area. Jaden's stomach was twisting, and he did not understand his feelings of dread. He was beginning to think that he was feeling Lin's fears. It was the only thing that made sense to him, but such a thing should not be possible. They *needed* to find those priests and speak to the scholar. There was no telling how much trouble they could unknowingly get themselves into.

Jaston and Nava cantered through the gate and directly up to Jaden, attracting attention from several others. Both men looked tired and worn. Jaden motioned for someone to take the horses and care for them. He herded the two men towards a table and pulled Lin close. It did not look like there was going to be good news forthcoming.

Someone brought a tray with a large pitcher of cider and several mugs. Jaston handed a mug to Nava and began.

“Dal Varent now controls the palace. He is saying that he entered into a marriage contract with Prince Lin after the prince wrote to the Dal asking for his protection. The Dal said that Prince Lin was afraid of an assassination threat made by one of the highborn families. He claims that when he arrived to retrieve his husband he was attacked, and while he was fighting his way to the prince, persons unknown took the prince from the palace.”

There were rumblings from around the table as Nava began his part of the story.

“I was able to see my friend, the cook. King Raidon has supposedly collapsed from the stress of Prince Lin's disappearance. He is sequestered in his private rooms. The Dal and his guards have taken members from each highborn family as ‘guests’ to ensure the compliance of the highborn against the threat to the kingdom. They are being kept under close watch in a private area of the castle. Dal Varent says that he will not leave until Prince Lin is returned safely to him. The town is being systematically searched for signs of the ‘kidnappers’. All strangers are being detained and interrogated. Several of the townspeople trapped us at the inn before we were able to leave. We managed to get out of the room we were in before anyone came to question us, but there are now at least two men they have the excuse of searching for.”

Nava took another drink. He was obviously troubled by what he had seen and heard. "The castle servants are nervous and rumors grow wildly. Several servants are said to have disappeared, not to be found anywhere. My friend, Abel, said that when he took a tray ordered by the Dal to the throne room, Dal Varent was drawing strange symbols over all the walls in what appeared to be blood."

The room was crowded as more people tried to fit inside to hear the news, Jaden could feel the tension increasing.

"We weren't able to come straight back," Jaston picked up the story again. "We knew we needed to get this information to you, but there are riders out over all of Vostek. Heralds are visiting the towns and villages with Dal Varent's proclamations while his soldiers search. It has taken us three days to make our way west and get back here to warn you."

Jaden bent to pick up Lin before he collapsed and hugged him close to his chest. He needed to get his husband out of the room, but he took a moment to look around first.

"We are evacuating Wolf's Den. Everyone is to be ready to leave by mid-sun tomorrow. Do whatever you have to do."

He carried Lin to their room and focused on his husband, trusting Ande and the others to do what needed to be done.

Jaden leaned into the back of the small wagon to check on his husband. Lin had been in shock last night, responding to little. Eventually, Jaden had the cook bring a mug of warm milk with a generous portion of apple brandy, honey, and spices stirred in. It had taken several tries, but Lin finally finished the milk and fell asleep.

Lin was currently tucked into a little nest of bags and blankets where he could not be easily seen. He was still quiet, but much improved over the previous evening. He and Jaden had discussed their options and agreed that there seemed to be a link between Dal Varent's actions, and Lin being the Bearer. Their search for knowledge had become imperative.

Though Lin was worried about his father, the Dal could not harm him without proving his lies, so he was probably safe for a time.

Ande and several others approached as Jaden tossed the last pack into the little wagon.

“We were able to fit all of the weapons and gear into the false bottoms of the wagons. Nothing is out except for a few bows and staves as you ordered. The livestock has been divided so that the groups look like traders or travelers. There are a dozen groups that number ten to fifteen each, as requested, and the fighters and scouts are mixed in with the townspeople. There is one group of elders that has requested to stay together. I will take them to one of the closer plains clans. Everyone is ready, Jaden,” Ande informed him.

Jaden nodded. “Good. I need six volunteers to sweep the town. Have them secure and cache whatever food stores and or other items of importance that could not be taken with us. They can go to Kenta as traders or workers when they are done and blend in with the locals there.

“I want everyone else to make their way north to one of the Oreen Mountain clans or the high plains clans in the northwest. The Dal might try to search that far but it will do him no good, and the smaller groups can be easily absorbed by individual clans in those areas. Does at least one person in each group have a clan marker?”

They all nodded at him.

“Be safe then. I will send word as soon as we figure out what we are doing next.”

Ande and the others clasped arms with Jaden and left. Several minutes of orderly noise and bustle followed. Jaden was about to mount his horse when Lin moved to get up.

“Jaden, the cats!” he called out. “We can’t leave them.”

Jaden moved to make sure Lin stayed in the wagon, and Lala came over. “We will check for you Lin.”

Lala headed towards the stable, and Lela followed her with a lidded basket. A few minutes later they returned. Lela leaned into the wagon to hand the basket to Lin and ruffled his hair. “They are all safe inside, Lin.”

“Thank you.” Lin leaned back into his nest, clutching the basket and smiling at the women.

Mounting his horse, Jaden took in the ones that had stayed with him. “Let’s go.”

They were seven days into their journey north, and the trip had been uneventful so far. Their small wagon traveled easily across the broad, flat plains. Dark trees with long, slender branches dotted the grasslands, and lightly wooded areas could usually be found near a stream or other source of water.

They were nine now, searching for information that would explain the strange goings-on. Traveling with Jaden and Lin were Lela, Lala, Nava, Jaston, Foss, Kai and Bron.

Lela, Lala and Nava were from mountain clans like Jaden's. Jaston was from a plains clan and Kai, Bron and Foss were from the far desert. Kai and Bron were Lin's age, with the same dark hair and brown eyes. Lala and Lela were a few turns older with streaky, dark-blond hair and tanned skin like Jaden's. Nava, another blond, was a dozen turns older than the twins. Foss and Jaston were of an age with Jaden but with darker coloring and greying hair. With their small wagon, eleven horses, and clan member looks, they appeared exactly like the trading nomads they were pretending to be.

If everything went perfectly, it would be just over a half-moon before they finished crossing the Iraci plains. Several more days would be needed to reach the edge of the Seneff Mountains. They should find the isolated priests soon after that.

They had finished setting up camp for the day, when Jaden was startled by waves of satisfaction coming from Lin. On the other side of the wagon, Lin was sitting in the waning sunlight with the kits squirming in their basket nearby. Barefoot, with his eyes closed and his hands on the ground, Lin looked completely content despite the coolness of the day.

Jaden sat on the grass nearby and allowed the quietness of the moment to run through him. Eventually, Lin moved closer and stretched out with his head in Jaden's lap. Jaden stroked his fingers through Lin's hair. "What were you smiling about, Husband?"

"I was thinking how angry I am with Dal Varent," Lin answered easily.

"Thinking how angry you were made you smile? I do not understand."

Lin turned over to look at Jaden. "I was smiling because I imagined reaching out to all of the insects and vermin that live near the castle. I was encouraging them to harass the Dal and the troops that had invaded their space."

Jaden stared at Lin, who was wearing an innocent smile. He pulled until Lin was straddling his lap. "I think that I can come up with much better things to make you smile."

Lin laughed softly and nipped at the strong neck in front of him, licking the bite to soothe it. His hands slipped under Jaden's vest, feeling the powerful muscles underneath. He leaned fully into the heat of Jaden's body.

"That's a fantastic idea, Husband," he purred against Jaden's skin, and they rose together to find a more private place.

Kai, Foss, and Lela were sitting in the early sun with Lin when Jaden and Nava came back from the morning's scouting trip. The three of them were laughing at the antics of the kits, a moon old now and bravely nosing and nipping the grass just past the edge of their blanket.

The group had developed an easy routine. There were usually two acting as sentries for the camp. Two or three would stay with Lin, and the rest would split the camp set-up and other chores. They switched duties as the mood took them, traveling a good distance during the day and making swift camp in the evening.

Jaston approached them as they tethered the horses. "Do we still have visitors?"

"Yes. They are keeping out of sight in the tree lines and tall grasses, but we are being watched," Nava answered.

"If it was the Iraci, we would already be dealing with them," Jaston said thoughtfully. "These may be a cousin clan. They will probably watch us until their elders decide whether or not they are willing to tolerate our presence."

Lala walked up as they were talking. "Bron found a mineral lick that shows signs of much animal activity. He is setting some snares now."

"We will spend two more days here," Jaden decided. "We can let the horses rest while we hunt. I want two deer, three if possible. We will dry as much of the meat as we can, but I want to leave at least half a deer and all of the skins for the watchers. Maybe that will win us some goodwill."

As the others walked off to begin the needed preparations, Lin walked up to Jaden and tilted his head for a kiss.

"Do we have time for a walk?" Lin asked. "I have been craving greens, and that wooded area behind us may be good for fern fronds."

“Put the babies in the wagon and grab the basket. We will go look,” Jaden told him.

Lin ran off to grab the kits. Jaden eyed his form appreciatively before he grabbed his bow and quiver from where it was leaning by the side of a tree. Lin returned with kits in hand, petting each one as he set it down inside the wagon, telling them to be good and stay on the pillows until he returned.

Jaden shook his head, smiling, and reached back behind the tree for one of the packs he had stashed there. Casually removing a tiny flask of oil, he slipped it into one of the pockets on his leathers and went to get his husband.

They finally neared the edge of the Iraci plains. Jaden was relieved to be on the final part of this journey. Two small delays meant they were nearly a moon into the trip, and Lin's behavior had become a concern. He tired easily, taking long naps in the wagon. When he was awake, he was rarely hungry and looked like he might be losing weight. In the evenings, Jaden would sit with Lin half asleep in his arms, encouraging him to eat, but it didn't seem to make a difference.

Foss had searched for and found a beehive, built a smoky fire under it to calm the bees and collected a large amount of honey. Kai made a weak tea sweetened with a good bit of the honey, and Jaden made sure Lin stayed hydrated with it.

Lately, Lin would wake in the late afternoon and begin brushing things: the cats, the horses, Jaden's hair; it didn't seem to matter. Jaden had learned that when Lin became cranky, handing him a soft cloth and a kit would divert him nicely. It was funny watching the kits come running when Lin called, small tails straight in the air as they bounced their way over to him. They would sit nearby, waiting their turns while Lin brushed them until their coats gleamed. All the while he would be chattering at them, telling them how smart they were, what good hunters they were going to be or whatever else came into his head.

This morning, Lin popped up off the blankets he shared with Jaden, full of energy. He had straightened his clothes and brushed his hair before Jaden even had time to fold the blankets. Walking to the kettle, he scooped a bowl full of breakfast grains, added a measure of honey, and quickly ate.

Jaden eyed his husband, unsure what to make of Lin's sudden energy but pleased to see him eating.

Lin walked to Belle and removed her from the tether line. At this point, everyone in the camp was watching Lin curiously. Moving just outside of camp, Lin brushed out Belle's mane and tail and checked her ears and eyes.

"There you are love. You are beautiful once again. Now go run for a bit while I brush the other horses. Do not step on any of the kits, and do not step in a hole. Give yourself a good workout and I will give you a proper cleaning when you get back. Now shoo." With that, Lin slapped her on the flank and Belle took off running.

Everyone was on their feet now, breakfast forgotten, as they watched Lin chase off his horse. Jaden carefully approached Lin as he walked back to the tether line.

"What are you doing, Husband?" he asked softly as Belle raced off.

"Belle is used to a lot more exercise than she has been getting lately. She was bored and needed to run," Lin replied calmly.

Bron walked over to the tether line to join Jaden, Kai trailing behind.

"Lin, I left a clean pair of pants and a tunic on your blankets. You are welcome to borrow them if you want to bathe in the creek and wash your things." Bron was completely casual as if it were of no importance.

Lin instantly switched gears and grinned hugely at Bron. "Thank you Bron. That would be amazing," he said appreciatively. Lin took off, scooping up the borrowed clothes and heading towards the creek.

Belle raced past the camp a second time; head up, ears forward, mane and tail flying straight back with her speed. Jaden wondered when things had gotten out of hand and looked questioningly at Kai and Bron.

Bron's shoulders lifted as he shrugged. "My older sister was crazy in the early part of being pregnant too. It will pass."

He and Kai each went to a horse and started brushing them down so that Lin would not be distracted from his bath and come back to "help".

Jaden stood for a moment, briefly stunned. Lin's behaviors now made perfect sense. He shook his head; he was going to have to keep up. His husband seemed to be one step ahead of him, and Jaden knew he could not protect Lin from behind.

He approached Lala and Nava later that day. Those two had the greatest knowledge of herbal medicine, and they quickly provided Jaden a list of foods

that Lin should be eating. As soon as Lin realized what they were talking about, he was able to help.

Lin's knowledge of farming and plants was vast. He knew about the types of earth and minerals needed to grow the specific herbs Lala and Nava wanted to add to his meals, and he was able to find the areas where those herbs would most likely be growing. Between the three of them, they were able to provide a healthy diet for one who was bearing.

Jaden had insisted that Lin now ride in the wagon, which initially caused a problem with his strong-headed husband. Jaden had been backed by the entire group, but none of that would have mattered if Bron had not taken Lin aside.

Lin had listened with respect to Bron as he was widely acknowledged as a master with horses despite his youth. Bron had explained the danger and been very firm about the fact that being pregnant meant no riding, and that was that. Lin wasn't thrilled, but he stayed in the wagon. As a compromise, once a day, the group would spend a mark traveling at a snail's pace so that Lin could walk and stretch.

One night at the fire, Lin shared his concern that they needed to find a nursing mother to feed the babe when it was born. Jaden smiled and shook his head, coming up with odd alternate suggestions. Lin was working up a good bit of annoyance, the others watching with amusement, when Nava broke into the conversation.

"He is teasing you, little brother. It is not uncommon for a mother to lose her milk in the clans. Accidents happen as well. Most any clan we come across will have feeding cups we can use for the babe. They are easy enough to come by."

"What are feeding cups?" Lin asked, as he reached out and pinched his husband.

Jaden laughed and leaned away as he explained. "They are tiny cups of carved wood or polished metal. They are about three or four times the size of a thimble with a little curved edge that sticks out. You hold the babe upright and sit the cup at the edge of its mouth, tilting it just enough that the babe can reach the milk with its tongue. The babe will take a small amount in and quickly learns how to drink. An elder will keep an eye on the person feeding the babe for the first few days, to make sure it is going well. Though it is important to keep the babe calm, it is fairly simple."

Lin glared at Jaden. "You couldn't have said that from the beginning?"

Smiling, Jaden pulled his husband closer and apologized with kisses.

Lin was floating quietly above the camp site; he was having a most unusual dream. He seemed to be a transparent shade of himself. The world around him looked curious too, like he had double vision. He could clearly see the camp and surrounding area, but everything was outlined in a soft, pale blue.

Fascinated, Lin reached out and pulled a leaf from a nearby branch to examine it more closely. The blue glow quickly faded as the life left the leaf. A small bit of blue welled from the branch where he had removed the leaf and Lin understood. He gently stroked the branch, healing the injury he had caused.

Lin floated higher. From here, he could see how everything was tied together. Where the plants and grasses were healthy and abundant, the faint blue collected into small streams the thickness of a string. These traveled down to connect with other strings, becoming larger and brighter. All of the life in the plains was interconnected like a beautiful spiderweb, just as he had imagined.

Floating over to an area of bare ground, Lin noted the missing energy lines. Studying the web, he found where some of the spider strings had become tangled; causing a knot. There was a small pool of energy there that had a brownish cast. Lin viewed the detail of the surrounding pattern and encouraged several tendrils to change their course, reconnecting that section of the pattern.

Pleased with what he was doing, Lin moved back towards the camp. He floated over the horses and the cat and her kits, stroking them as he passed. They were all glowing with health.

He went through the camp. Kai and Bron were vibrant so he moved to check Lela and Lala; they too were good. Nava's color was strong so he was passed by as well. Jaston's color was a bit faded; Lin paused here. Very gently, he nudged and encouraged Jaston's life force to a stronger hue. When he was glowing like the others, Lin moved on. He looked around but didn't see Foss.

Knowing at least one person usually stood sentry at night, Lin moved in increasing circles looking for him. Lin finally found Foss up in a tree watching the night, but he was not doing well at all. Foss was pale blue around the edges, and there was a muddy brown in his chest preventing the blue from flowing freely.

Lin considered this for a bit, before approaching Foss. Placing his hand flat on Foss's chest, Lin gathered energy from the life all around him and pushed it strongly into Foss who gasped out loud and threw his head backwards smacking it into the tree, which caused him to slump.

Suddenly Jaden was there, daggers in hand. Now it was Lin's turn to gasp, Jaden's energy was a silvery-blue, but his eyes were pure silver. One sharp whistle later, the others were all gathered around Jaden, who gestured at Foss. Kai, Bron and Lela took off into the night, checking the darkness for danger while Lala quickly climbed the tree and balanced on the limb next to Foss. She felt for his pulse and gently patted his face.

Foss groaned a bit and reached for the back of his head. Lala handed down his bow and encouraged Foss to move to the edge of the tree limb that he was perched on. Nava and Jaston stood under the limb, waiting to help Foss down. Lin wanted to roll his eyes. He had been trying to *help*, and Foss's glow *was* much better now.

Lin moved towards Jaden, who was keeping watch over the three helping Foss. Jaden's glow was beautiful, and when Lin reached out to stroke Jaden's skin, his energy flared. Lin reached out, spinning a bit of the energy closer.

Jaden's eyes flicked towards him, and Lin was sure Jaden saw him when they both felt it. A great malevolence was out there. Lin removed his hand and the feeling left. Jaden started running back to where Lin's body lay on their blankets. Lin floated behind him, putting his hand back on Jaden's shoulder.

The feeling of danger came back, and they both looked up. A slender, red-black pulse of energy was making its way towards Lin's body. Jaden leaped and landed over Lin, covering Lin's physical body with his own.

Lin's shadow-self cried out soundlessly and PUSHED. The blue web of life pulsed and rose up, creating a barrier that shielded Jaden. The dark energy broke apart on the shield, and Lin felt weak. It was definitely time to wake up.

Sinking back into his body, Lin opened his eyes. His husband was above him, exactly as he had dreamed, eyes still glowing silver.

Jaden sat up and carefully gathered Lin to him. "Do you know what happened?" he asked.

Lin was shaken. "I thought I was dreaming."

Jaden shook his head, staring at Lin. "Whatever happened was real, Lin." He pushed Lin's hair back from his face and stopped, still as a statue.

“Your eyes are blue.”

They arrived at the temple near midday, over a moon from the time they had started. While the others set up camp about a quarter-mark away, Lin and Jaden left to find the scholar. The middle-aged priest who answered the bell took one look at their faces, and quickly ushered them into a study.

A short while later, two men walked into the study. One was grey-haired; his face was lined with age, but he was still standing tall. He was wearing simple homespun robes and sandals. The other was perhaps twenty turns younger and dressed in pants, a tunic, and soft slippers.

“Welcome travelers. I am Ruud,” the older one began. His eyes traveled their faces. “And this is Arram. Please, sit. It seems to be the season for visitors, and I would hear your stories.”

Time passed as Jaden and Lin told their stories and discussed what they knew of the lore surrounding the Bearer. From the scholar, they learned the pregnancy would last just five moons, compared to seven and a half for a normal pregnancy.

It seemed that the long, slightly-curved, silver mark that sat low on the prince's abdomen would be the babe's method of exit. As the time neared, the mark would become thin, eventually splitting in two down its length as the babe left Lin's body and resealing after.

The prince and babe both would be vulnerable at that time. The energies required of the birthing would completely drain the Bearer, and he would fall into a deep sleep lasting several marks at least. Someone must be present to care for and guard the babe and prince.

Arram had a theory concerning Lin's affinity for animals. He thought that the prince was actually communicating with them on some level, and that the longer Lin was around a certain animal the more intelligent it would become. The priest thought it was because some of the Bearer's powers were rubbing off on the animals.

Both scholar and priest agreed that the Bearer was a guardian of some sort. He was supposed to stop a great evil but what that evil was or how Lin was to stop it, neither man knew. The happenings of the previous night baffled them.

From the bits and pieces Arram had been able to discover, it seemed that the Bearer had appeared only twice before. The first time was around two thousand turns ago; the last time just over nine hundred turns ago.

Neither of the men had a clue as to why Lin's eye color had changed.

Lin and Jaden also discovered that one part of the design on their faces was a combination of ancient symbols for Ashriel, the Warrior Goddess, and Jor, the God of Life. The other part of the markings made no sense to either priest or scholar.

Both men were mystified by the fact that Jaden and Lin were twice marked. They had never heard of such a thing before.

Marks later, Jaden's head felt stuffed full and had begun to ache. From the look on Lin's face, he felt the same, and they got ready to take their leave. Ruud walked with them to the gate before stopping Jaden with a hand to his arm. "A moment, Warrior, if you please."

Jaden looked back at the old priest. "How can I help you, Elder?"

"With everything that is happening and all this talk of the Gods, I was wondering why you had not yet reached out to Ashriel for knowledge."

At Jaden's blank look, he continued. "You are a Warrior of Ashriel. You have been accepted by her. Surely you have felt her presence in your life?"

Nodding at the priest, Jaden agreed, "I have felt her attention on occasion."

"Yes, exactly." Ruud's hand was firm on Jaden's arm as he tried to get his point across. "You have the ability, Warrior. Talk to your Goddess."

Jaden waited until the moon was shining brightly before walking out into the night. He climbed a large rock bathed in moonlight and knelt quietly. Always before in his meditations, he had emptied his mind, allowing Ashriel's energy to reach out to him. Tonight, he was calm but focused, actively seeking Her attention. After some time had passed, Jaden felt the quality of the night change, and he looked around.

The shape of a tall, fit woman was standing just past the edge of the rock. Her form flickered, there but not, her eyes bright silver.

"*I wondered if you would seek me, Warrior.*" The voice was clear in his head, but Jaden was certain the words were not spoken out loud.

Jaden rose up and inclined his head respectfully to his Goddess, standing tall and proud before Her. Ashriel smiled her approval, and waited for him to begin.

"I seek understanding, my Goddess. Strange things are occurring, and I only understand bits and pieces of the whole," Jaden said. "I need you to explain what is happening, and what I must do. Last night, something attacked the Bearer. A thing like I have never seen before. I believe Lin was bonded to me for his protection, but I do not know what I am protecting him from."

Ashriel held out her hand. *"Come to me, Warrior."*

Stepping forward, Jaden took the Goddess's hand. Instantly, they were in a darkness lit by thousands of stars, both near and far. Jaden looked in wonder at the beauty around him.

"Are we in the sky?"

"Not exactly," Ashriel replied. *"Simply somewhere it is easier for me to spend time. There are many things of which you will hear and see that you will not understand right now. Fullness will come when it is ready."*

Jaden nodded his acceptance of this statement, and the Goddess continued.

"For all of us, times and places are stacked one upon another, near but never touching. There are those who do not understand the journey, and so it ends for them on a single plane. Others, like those of this planet, will travel to more of these places during their time. Moving from the plane you are on, to the next, is one example of this."

The Goddess paused here, as if debating how much to tell him.

"Those who are like me have fullness of understanding and traverse many planes with ease. A number of us, in our travels, have come across worlds with younger, less understanding races and decided to... mentor them, guide them until they had understanding of their own."

"You made yourselves their Gods. You made yourselves *our* Gods," Jaden said with dawning awareness. These were frightening thoughts.

"It might be perceived that way," Ashriel admitted. *"Most of us thought ourselves benevolent guides, but with time it has become more."*

"What it means for you and your people is that you have had a chance at life that would not have been yours if we had not intervened. One of our people, Valru, has chosen to use his abilities to seize control of other races, slowly draining them and their worlds of life. He sends an enormous burst of power to overwhelm the planet he has chosen, so that all on it are defenseless. This weakens him, but the energy he receives back when he leeches the planet dry is richer and more intense. He is addicted to it."

“If you are so powerful, why do you not stop this beast? Is this not the duty and honor of those in power; to watch over and care for those who cannot care for themselves? Is that not what it means to be your Warrior?”

Jaden was confused and angered by Ashriel's tale. Everything he had ever learned and stood for was outraged at the knowledge he was gaining.

“Many of those from our home were spread out across the planes of time and space when these things first occurred. Much time passed before others realized what he was doing. When we learned of the happenings, a number of us returned. We were over a dozen, but we were on the planet investigating when Valru hit us with a second blast of energy. His power caught us by surprise; we were only able to react.”

This, Jaden could understand. An unexpected attack of sufficient severity, regardless of the size of the force, could easily cause chaos and panic.

“From our travels, we had learned that during certain times, the barriers between dimensions were thinned and with enough power, could be crossed. This was one of those times. We pooled our power, quickly gathered those we could reach, almost ten thousand of your people, and sought a new haven for you. Three of those with us sacrificed ALL of their power to get everyone to this place. The effort it took to maintain the life forces of those we brought with us was immense.”

“We discovered a planet that we were able to adapt to our charges and made sure that they all survived. This was almost three thousand of your turns ago.”

“The things you speak of make a story fit for a master bard's tale, but what does this have to do with what is happening now? What is happening to my husband? *How do I protect him?*” Jaden was determined to learn what he needed to in order to keep Lin safe.

“Valru was furious at our interference and sought retribution. When he tried to cross over the first time, we were taken by surprise. Individually, none of us were strong enough on this plane to block him. We exist in too many times now. Once you have reached a certain level of existence, coming back to lesser planes is extremely difficult. We needed a focus, someone from your plane we could provide energy to and teach how to block Valru from crossing.”

“You created the first Bearer,” Jaden stated.

“It was not intentional. When we chose the first focus and sent power into him, he was already married. We quickly realized that something unexpected

had occurred. The energy caused changes within him. As soon as we realized what happened, we provided protections so that he could bear and birth the child without harm.

“We were able to use Rallo, who became the first Bearer, to push Valru back to his own dimension. Though changed, Rallo was content as he was and lived a mostly normal life with his family before they passed to the next plane.

“Ira, the second Bearer, did not fare as well. We followed the same path as we had with Rallo and chose a married man of moderate age. We later learned that Ira did not share strong feelings or closeness with his husband. When he needed support in his fight with Valru, no one was there to aid him.

“Valru was not able to breach the dimension, but he managed to use his energy to influence some here to do his bidding. They received a very small portion of Valru’s power and used it in an attempt to manipulate the barrier from this side. His followers were fools who believed they would continue to share Valru’s power and protection. They caused much damage before they were stopped.

“Ira was alone, and though we poured energy into him, losing two more of our own in the process, he was destroyed in the battle. It was hundreds of turns before we were able to heal all of the damage that was caused by Valru’s minions.”

Ashriel pointed to the series of stars commonly called Hunter’s Bow. *“Beyond these stars are one of the barriers I spoke of earlier. In half a turn, the planets will align in such a way that the barriers will be stretched to their weakest point. Valru will certainly try to cross over at that time, if not sooner.”*

Ashriel looked at Jaden intently. *“The cycle is beginning earlier than expected. We thought to have more time before he began his efforts, but Valru has managed to snare someone on this side; the one you call Dal Varent. We can already feel his attacks on the barrier. The danger to this planet is severe and yet... there are other differences to this cycle.”*

“What do you mean?” Jaden asked cautiously.

“I have claimed you as my own, and you have become more than before. Your abilities are increased, your reactions sharper. You are aging at a slowed pace, because I gave you a piece of my energy the day that I marked you.

“When Dagen chose Lin as the Bearer, he was changed as well, but with Lin there are differences.” Ashriel’s lips twisted in a small smile. “This one

seems to be writing his own tale, and when he agreed to bond with you—my Warrior—he changed it even more.

“You two were enhanced from your previous encounters with us, but you received additional energy when we bound your souls. The change is now significant, and affects the path you are on. You are more than the mortal being you once were, and so is he. Lin is more powerful than either of those who came before. He flares brightly with his strength, like a beacon in the night. It makes him a visible target to his enemies.

“Guard your bonded carefully, Warrior. Should Dal Varent succeed in interfering with the Bearer, it will greatly weaken our ability to aid your people. You must not allow that creature to aid Valru, or the danger will grow immeasurably. If he is able to thin the barrier enough, Valru himself will be here, and we do not have enough strength on this plane to save your world were that to occur.”

“I would guard Lin for my own selfish reasons, but he is also the guardian of my people. I will do whatever I need to, in order to protect him,” Jaden said gravely. “Though why have his eyes changed? Is he in any danger from this?”

“The energy of your world is wild and barely tamed; the power of it crashes like a heavy sea against the shore. Lin is in communion with it, and creates order where there was none. He does not yet understand this, but the change you see in his eyes is merely a reflection of the power he now wields.”

Ashriel touched Jaden's shoulder. “I would not have you spend too much time here. Until we meet again, Warrior.”

With that, Jaden was back on his rock, the early morning sun peeking above the horizon.

Nava was still standing sentry when Jaden returned to the camp. Jaston and Lela were talking quietly by the fire; everyone else was asleep. Jaden went to Lin and smiled in fondness to see him curled in the blankets, cat and kits by his side.

He knelt, brushing the hair from Lin's face, waking him. He kissed his husband's temple in apology and helped him sit up.

“We need to talk.”

Lin sat on the ground with his back to Jaden's chest and between his legs. His morning sickness gone and appetite restored, Lin's belly had begun to

swell. He had become very fond of tummy rubs, and Jaden seemed to enjoy the closeness this provided. He was always willing to spend time holding Lin and caressing his belly.

The others were gathering around the fire to hear Jaden's words. There was quiet for a time while they digested his story, and then they began discussing the best way to move forward.

"So our priorities are torn between keeping Lin safe and stopping Dal Varent?" Jaston asked.

Jaden nodded at him. "Ashriel said that we have somewhere between a quarter turn and a half turn before Valru will be able to reach us from the place he is at. That is the greatest danger. For now, we must stop the Dal from assisting Valru. Anything we can do to make it harder for Valru is beneficial to our plight. We must also guard Lin, as he is to be the focus for the Gods' power against in the upcoming battle."

"We need to gather the company," Lela said. "But I do not believe you two should be left alone."

"We must enlist the aid of the Iraci." All eyes turned to Foss, and he continued his thought.

"We have entered a time of danger to us all. It is only right that we spread word of what is happening. At the same time, we do not want panic. The clans are a good place to start because they still follow the old ways, and doings of the Gods won't shock them. The Iraci themselves are formidable fighters and would make excellent allies. Their horsemen could move quickly to get word to the other clans, while we move at a slower pace for Lin. At the same time, they can pass word along to our scattered company that we are regrouping."

"The Goddess mentioned that the second Bearer needed strength he was not able to draw from his husband," Lala said thoughtfully. "I wonder if that means others can share energy with the Bearer."

There was a pause while everyone considered that for a moment.

"We need Bards," Kai said suddenly. "Priests might not be taken seriously right now with so few townspeople following the Gods, but everyone listens to a bard. Dal Varent is spreading stories as he wants them told, and he may have swayed many. We don't want bounty hunters coming in and trying to rescue a supposedly kidnapped Lin. Bards can craft our tale in a way that will reach people and show them the evil that the Dal is trying to accomplish."

"These are all sound ideas." Jaden turned towards Jaston. "You are from a plains clan, what is the best way to approach the Iraci?"

"Showy strength appeals to them," Jaston replied. "They are loud and boisterous. They love bright colors and things that shine. They care for the weak and elderly, but bold strength and ability are what is respected. The Iraci feel that you should know your worth and be proud of it. You must observe the formalities. There is no discussing of business on the first day. Do not be afraid to boast, and show no fear."

Lin sat up from leaning against Jaden and looked around the group with a slow smile. "I think we can handle that."

Foss and Jaston had wisely taken off to scout for an Iraci encampment. Lela, Nava, and Jaden were trying hard not to look at each other. Every time one of them looked the other in the eye, they all started laughing again. They had finally gotten themselves under control when Bron went by with his horse, and they lost it again. Lela and Nava were wiping tears from their eyes.

"Enough, I can't stand it," Lela finally gasped.

Lin, Bron, Kai, and Lala had gone more than a little crazy on the "showy" part of their plan. Though Jaden's company was different from most, they were still mercenaries. A good portion of their wealth went into jewelry, gems, and other small, high value items that were easily carried. Those four had spread the items around... pretty much everything.

First, they had chivied everyone into brushing the horses until they gleamed. Each horse got several braids in their manes with baubles added in. They had taken everything out of the wagon and rearranged it to look like a small, comfortable room. Lala had added intricate braids to Jaden's hair and several simpler braids to everyone else's. Lin's hair was pulled back enough to show his beads but otherwise loose.

Jaston had some kohl sticks that he had intended for a pretty thing in Kenta. Kai borrowed them and used them generously on Jaden and Lin to highlight their eyes and the silver bonding marks.

Lin was wearing his silk clothing. His clothes had been too tight around his growing middle, but Kai had been able to use the second tunic to add material to his good set. He also wore his green necklace, which fit him like a collar now that he had given Jaden several pieces.

Lin and Bron had their heads together for a bit then visited the horses, spending long minutes with each one. Lin even had Aki wearing one of his bracelets around her neck.

With everyone cleaned up and wearing their best leathers, hair braids, jewels, and bits of kohl, they were quite the sight.

“Enough,” Jaden agreed and went to collect his husband.

They rode boldly into the camp. Iraci sentries had let themselves be seen about a half mark earlier, and as expected, the clan members were awaiting their arrival with curiosity.

Jaden took a moment to look the clan over. Dark, waist-long hair and tanned skin were shared by all of them. The people were of average height and very lean, probably a people who enjoyed foot racing. Jaden bet they would be very fast.

He walked his horse to the warriors, and one of the men separated from the group and came up to him. They stared at each other for a few moments before the other man grunted.

“I am Tonda. I am First Hunter of the camp and Chief of these people.”

“I am Jaden, a Weapons Master. I am Chief of *Drus Stryke*, a mercenary clan, and Chosen Warrior of Ashriel.”

Murmurs sounded throughout those gathered round. These were a people who understood what is meant to be not only a Weapons Master, but also a Warrior. The name of the mercenaries, Strength Carries, and all that it implied, was not lost on them.

Tonda moved over to Jaden, who had dismounted, and clasped arms with him.

“Come, tell us your stories,” he invited.

They lounged around the fire with the clan, eating bowls of boiled grains with bits of highly seasoned meat on top. Children sprawled and listened to their elders with undisguised interest. Lin asked for something warm to drink, and smiled at the small child who brought him a cup of fermented mare's milk.

Tales and boasts were being called back and forth, growing wilder as everyone else relaxed and shared cups of hard cider. As the day wore on into late afternoon, one fellow had become surly and stared at Lin, who was in his

favored position, leaning against Jaden's chest. After several glancing looks, the man turned to Jaden and sneered, making a comment about his pet.

Before Jaden could stop him, Lin was gone. The miscreant hit the ground hard and was now on his stomach, with his neck under Lin's soft slipper. The man gasped in pain, his arm twisted high behind him. Lin kept firm hold of his wrist and hand, pulling up hard.

Jaston, Bron, and the others immediately surrounded Lin, protecting him from any who might take offense. In the stunned quiet, Jaden stood and casually called out.

"Husband, it is impolite to dismember people while a guest in their camp."

All heads swung in Jaden's direction, and he took the time to casually dust his clothing. When he was finished, he walked towards his husband and the helpless man under his foot. Jaden stood beside Lin and placed a soft hand on his shoulder.

Lin released the man with a huff and placed one knee on the ground. Speaking very firmly, he stated, "I am Lin Aterios, Prince and sole heir to the kingdom of Vostek. I am Chosen of the Gods and bonded to Jaden, Warrior of Ashriel. *I. Am. The. Bearer.* I am no one's pet!"

Accepting Jaden's hand, Lin stood and smiled sweetly at him. Jaden raised a brow in amusement at Lin's attempted innocence.

"Perhaps we should leave, Husband. We may have overestimated the Iraci's ability to aid us in this battle," Lin said, as if it were of no import.

Jaden pulled Lin close and stepped away from the clansman on the ground. Only then did he pay attention to the fact that they were the focus of everyone's attention. Lin's claim that he was the Bearer had most frozen where they stood.

"He is pregnant and quite moody," Jaden said to the group and shrugged as if to say, *What can you do?*

Tonda nodded and beckoned them closer. "I would hear more of this battle."

They were finally alone. After hearing their tale, Tonda had sent off a half-dozen riders to the surrounding clans to begin spreading word of what was happening. They had been invited to stay the night and had accepted Tonda's offer of hospitality.

Lin watched Jaden tie the tent flap closed and turn towards him. Jaden slowly undid the fastenings on his vest. Lin made a soft noise in appreciation of the show Jaden was giving him.

Jaden took his time removing his moccasins and leathers. When he was fully naked, he knelt and slowly crawled up the blankets towards Lin. As he reached Lin's feet, he stopped and removed the soft slippers, brushing up a pant leg to kiss Lin's ankle. Moving forward, he placed a kiss over Lin's hardening shaft and unfastened the band at his waist.

"So, Husband," he began, while placing tiny kisses all over Lin's growing belly. "Would you like to explain how a cherished and overprotected princeling was able to do what you did earlier?"

"Not really." Lin groaned, as Jaden scraped Lin's skin with his teeth.

"Mhmm," Jaden growled softly, and took his time teasing and nipping at the lean legs being exposed. "I am quite sure it is a story I need to hear, though."

Lin let out a small gasp as Jaden slipped off his pants and started nibbling at the tender skin behind his knee.

"I knew that you would react to the taunt, but it would not have won any respect for me, and it would not have convinced the Iraci to help us. They needed to see me as worth fighting for."

Jaden nodded. "That is why," he agreed, "but not how."

"It's embarrassing," Lin hissed, as Jaden continued his way up from the inside of his thigh to the crease of his leg.

"Is it more embarrassing than washing lizards to get off the 'paint'?"

"Well..." Lin yelped and laughed as Jaden pinched his bottom.

He reached up to unfasten his tunic, and Jaden moved over the top of him, halting his hands. He brushed his lips against Lin's neck and whispered, "Leave the top and tell me your story, Husband. Please."

Lin sighed. "I told you before that my mother passed when I was young. Father loved me, but I was a quiet child, and he was often busy. I craved his attention. I used to see him talking and laughing with the guardsmen, and I wanted him to be that easy with me. I began following the castle guards to their training sessions. Lito, the head guard, realized what I was doing and started teaching me balance moves for fighting against larger opponents. When Father found out, he was horrified that I might be injured and demanded that I stop.

Lito eventually convinced him that a future king must know how to fight and defend himself, so Father let me keep studying. I was older before I realized that my father loved me no matter what.” He shrugged a little and laughed.

Jaden kissed Lin softly for several moments and then pronounced, “No, the lizards were more embarrassing. You must suffer.” He blew a giant raspberry against Lin’s stomach, and Lin’s laughter rang out from the tent. Further words were not needed for some time.

Lin awoke before the others and walked off to find a quiet patch of early morning sunlight. He felt restless, like there was something he needed to do. On his way out of the camp, he stopped by the wagon and opened his parcel of seeds. He considered them for a while and then opened one of the packets. Lin shook out three seeds and carefully closed the packet, tucking the remaining seeds safely away with the others.

Locating the path they had come from, Lin followed it back until he found the place he remembered. A low floodplain was about three hundred paces distant and would work perfectly for what he had in mind.

Using a sharp stick, Lin dug a slender trench, placing the seeds two hands away from each other. He sprinkled a little bit of the rich dirt over the top and encouraged the seeds to settle in. He stayed there until he felt the seeds awaken and begin to take root.

By spring, three hardy and fast-growing brambles would be well established. They would continue to grow quickly, and before winter, there would be nutritious, blue frostberries for the Iraci and a hearty home for many of the smaller denizens of the plains. Lin was satisfied with the new growth he had started, but this was not the only reason he had come out this morning.

Spying a small, raised area, Lin sat down and got comfortable. He closed his eyes and faced the weak morning sun, feeling the life that surrounded him. He concentrated on seeing things with his mind, like he had before when he thought he was dreaming.

There was so much energy here. It flowed wildly all around, crashing streams and uneasy pools in some areas and thin spots in others. The farmer in Lin demanded that he bring order to the chaos. This was a good place, and he desired to keep it that way.

Slowly Lin formed his favored shape. He created the anchor of a web, encouraging the streams of energy to split into long lines that radiated outwards

for a thousand paces like the spokes of a giant wheel. He made these lines strong yet flexible, just like spider's silk. Once the supporting structure was in place, Lin drained the pools to make the small, connecting lines that would tie everything together.

The web was too bright so Lin spread the energy outward, increasing the size of the web. It looked much better now, but it was still pulsing more than Lin liked, so he pulled at the excess energy and added it to his own. The animals and vegetation were all glowing with health, and nothing seemed stressed by either too much energy or too little, so Lin was content.

An idea began to form in his mind, but he needed some time to consider it.

Lin took a brief moment to check on the little group he now thought of as his. He smiled when he saw that Jaden was nearby, apparently keeping watch over him. The others appeared to be getting the wagon and horses ready to leave. Lin considered for a brief moment, and then tossed a sticky tendril of power at each of the others so that he could keep an eye on them.

Jaden's silver-blue power was glowing brightly and reaching out, as if seeking something. Lin studied the questing threads and then frayed the edges of his own power. Quickly, he spun the two together, binding his life force even more tightly to Jaden's. Their powers flared, then settled over both of them. He heard Jaden chuckle with wry amusement.

"If you have spent long enough ordering the world to your liking, it is time for us to start."

Lin opened his eyes at Jaden's soft touch. "You can feel what I am doing?" he asked.

Jaden nodded. "Yes, to an extent. I don't know how you are using it, but I can feel the power you are wielding, and I can tell it is something that satisfies you. I have been able to feel your emotions almost from the beginning."

"I don't understand. I don't feel anything from you." Lin was puzzled by this.

"Are you sure of that, Husband? I believe you receive my feelings quite well." Jaden brushed the hair away from Lin's face, letting his fingers play with the beads.

Lin thought about it. He closed his eyes again and sorted through his feelings, examining them one by one. Several of his feelings had a strange echo. That was it! They were similar enough in their emotions that Jaden's feelings felt like Lin's own.

Happy that he had solved the puzzle, Lin started to pull back when he noticed an odd sense of vagueness. Curious, he followed it back and almost fell over. It was from the babes.

“Babes?” Jaden questioned sharply. “You heard them? As in more than one?”

Lin's eyes flew open, and he looked at his husband in shock. “There are three,” he whispered.

Jaden nodded, picked Lin up and headed for the wagon. “Call your cats,” he said grimly. “We are leaving now. You have babes to grow, and I have a Dal to kill.”

They were now stopping only long enough for Lin to get out and pee. Mark-long breaks where he could walk for a bit were things of the past. The trip back to Kenta was being made as quickly as possible, but they would not reach the town before full spring. There was a dramatic increase to the group's sense of urgency. Multiple births were not unheard of in the clans, but they often came with complications to the mother; or birthing parent in Lin's case. The idea that Lin carried three was seen as a concern by all.

Jaden would have to slow down once they reached the main road; it was far too bumpy to take at speed in a wagon. For now, Lin rested in a comfortable nest of blankets and clothing. He entertained himself by flicking beads here and there for the kits to play with. They were much more active now, growing large and strong but still with the skinny, long-legged look of adolescence.

Lin had developed new sleep habits with this trip. Bored with the forced rest during the day, Lin slept through large parts of it, and so when they camped at night, Lin was wide awake. At least he had enough free time to work out his earlier idea.

In the evenings, Jaden would spend a mark or so with him. He would rub Lin's belly and talk to the babes who were growing well, based on the size his belly was attaining. While the camp slept and the cats hunted, Lin would begin his projects.

The first thing Lin would do once the camp was quiet was choose three to five seeds from those in his parcel. He would select and plant seeds with aggressive growth patterns or high yields and encourage them to take hold.

Quickly growing vegetation would consume vast amounts of energy, and Lin encouraged the seedlings towards periods of sustained, hyperactive growth. He altered the existing energy patterns of the surrounding area to create strong, supportive webs. Connecting the new webs to those from the previous pattern covered the greatest area possible. His idea was now a definite plan.

Valru was coming. The Gods were concerned that it would be so; to Lin that meant it *would* be so. By establishing an interconnected system that would operate as a whole, he was looking to thwart Valru's weapon of choice. Filled with vegetation capable of utilizing enormous amounts of energy, the webs would flex instead of being overwhelmed and tearing apart. The effects would be spread over a vast area, and the energy-hungry plants would drain the webs to a safe level.

Lin imagined if this worked, the entire land might soon look like an untamed forest. There would certainly be a population explosion among the animals. No doubt there would be energy to spare for generations to come.

Aki chittered, and Lin opened his eyes. Aki had brought him a hare almost as large as she was and sat proudly next to it. Lin picked her up and cuddled her.

"Thank you, my little friend. You are an excellent hunter and generous with your bounty. I will have a tasty meal with this one." Aki purred loudly, rubbing against Lin's belly and head-butting his hand.

Soon, Lin had to put her down and laugh. All of the kits had brought little offerings to him. Each one carried a fat dormouse or tree hare in its mouth.

Lin gathered the kits to him, smiling with pleasure. He cuddled them close and praised their hunting skills, but reminded them to take only what was going to be eaten. Soft ears were rubbed, and he made sure that each kit received several moments of attention. Lin finally set them all down and grabbed one of the many sharp knives to be found around the camp.

He skinned each little offering, wrapped it in a bit of greens and set it in the kettle over the coals. The hare he cleaned and cut into pieces, adding it into the kettle along with more water. He built the fire up and looked for some herbs to add to the pot.

Spying some reeds near a slow part of the stream, Lin wandered that way. The tubers were delicious and would mix well with the small game. He started to step into the water when large hands pulled him back. Jaden removed his cloak and wrapped it around Lin.

"You need to stay out of the water, Husband. You cannot risk getting a chill," he admonished. Jaden dug up a number of tubers for Lin and washed them clean in the stream. "Let us return to the fire. You should not be wandering at night."

"Lala and Bron are standing sentry tonight. You were sleeping. How did you know where I was?" Lin asked curiously.

"I always know where you are. I feel you here and here." Jaden touched his head and then his chest. "I awoke and followed you as soon as you left the camp site."

The tubers were quickly sliced and added to the kettle. Jaden moved it to the side of the fire and gently pulled Lin closer. "You need to sleep, Husband."

"All I do is sleep," Lin grumped.

"You are also growing three babes. You need to rest so that they grow well." Jaden kissed the top of Lin's head. "Come lie down with me, and I will rub your belly."

Lin looked up at Jaden through his lashes. "What if that isn't what I want you to rub?" he asked with a little smile.

Jaden snorted softly at his husband's antics and gathered him close. "I think we should retire to the wagon and see what I can do to help you find sleep."

Cerron made his way home from the traveler's inn. There were many disturbing stories coming out of Vostek these days and people were beginning to flee the land. He wondered what happened to the two men who had visited him a quarter-turn ago.

He had never been a devout follower of the Gods, but seeing those two had brought to mind a number of half-remembered stories from his youth. That the men had disappeared without a trace both disappointed and concerned him, especially with the information coming from Vostek.

His thoughts turned inward, Cerron took little notice of the fact that the lamps in his room were already lit. The door clicking firmly shut behind him brought his attention sharply into focus. The young noble from before was seated at his desk, smiling. His large El'oreen warrior was standing just off to the side from Cerron's shoulder, near the door.

The noble stood, and Cerron's eyes bugged out. The youngling was pregnant! He sank slowly into a chair near the desk as old children's tales swam

in his head. There was a soft laugh, and then the noble was kneeling in front of him.

“You will need to pay attention, Trader. We have work for you to do.”

“The Opposition draws near. It is time to let go.”

Several forms were gathered beyond the sky of the nearby planet. They flickered and did not hold shape.

Ashriel's form flared for a moment. “How can we let go?” she asked gravely. “It is our responsibility to care for these life forms, Pona.”

“Our care should have ended some time ago. When we began our journeys, our guidance was never meant to be more than the barest aid. It should not have become more,” the one called Pona stated firmly.

“With Valru's actions, things have changed, Sister, and that is our fault.” Jor spoke softly, but he was adamant.

“It has always been our way that younglings have a few centuries to explore their space. Then when it is time, they are ready to be taught,” Pona argued.

“Then ‘tradition’ is wrong and needs to be changed. Tradition does not make our responsibility or guilt any less,” Dagen stated baldly. “The fault is ours. The dimensions and times we visit are not at our level of understanding, and yet we let loose our younglings to explore them. How can that not be wrong? When things then go badly, it is OUR fault.”

Pona was frustrated, this was an old argument. “We saved them. Their lives were returned. We should be finished with this.”

“We took them to a foreign place and made them a nest,” Ashriel said sadly. “It was hardly in repair to what was suffered. If this race dies, it will be genocide. How can we conscience that? Has there not been enough loss already?”

“There are so few of us left...” Pona lamented.

Dagen's eyes flashed in anger. “And whose fault is that? Children should not be left to wander the galaxies alone. If you don't want their early care, don't create them!”

“Or bring them to one who IS willing to care for them. I, for one, would have accepted responsibility,” Jor added.

“Tradition will be upheld. Finish this if you must, I am through here.” Pona left with a dull flash.

Ashriel sighed. “There is so much work left to do.”

“No, Little Sister,” Dagen said. “We will help them as we can to stop Valru and then it is time to find the others. We cannot allow the younglings to continue unsupervised. It is not safe for them or the ones they may encounter.”

Ashriel looked to Jor, who nodded agreement with Dagen. “It is time, Sister. We leave when this is done.”

Dal Varent swiped another spider off of his collar and grimaced. This was the most vermin-infested place he had ever seen, and when he was finished with his task, he would take great pleasure in burning it to the ground.

He was very close to finished now. The energy he received from terrorizing and draining the servants was powerful and made his work on the barrier go much faster.

When Dal Varent had first discovered the Scrolls of Power, he had thought them a farce. They were simply moldering in the burial tombs of a high-ranking family. None of the former occupants had even been aware of their existence. One night, out of boredom, he had read the scrolls, and how pleased he had been with the information he'd found!

It seemed that many hundreds of turns in the past, there had been a loose association of men who had learned to manipulate the life forces around them. They had gained great power and discovered an energy source so vast that they were willing to sacrifice everything around them to obtain it. There were many details in the scrolls, too many for the Dal to ignore.

He was learning and gaining power from the information in the scrolls, and it left him starving for more. The energy source that was mentioned made him weak with greedy delight. He still searched for the one mentioned as the protector of the energy source, the so called Bearer, but it was no longer a matter of importance. His power was already so great that it was unlikely any protector could stop him now.

According to the scrolls, the barrier hiding the energy source would be at its weakest point in six moons' time. However, the Dal knew he was stronger than the idiots that came before. Already he had figured out a way to weaken the barrier containing his prize. Soon, very soon, it would be his.

The stories of the Bearer and his Guardian were spreading rapidly. Between Tonda's horsemen and Cerron's information network, increasing numbers of people were hearing the tale, daily. Many offers of aid were received, and clan members arrived from across the lands. Fortunately, most of Jaden's company had reached Kenta by this time, and Jaden used them to organize the others.

The alehouse quieted when Jaden stepped inside. Two men and a woman had just arrived from Vostek and Jaden wanted very much to hear what they had to say. Nava caught his eye and motioned towards a side room. He headed in that direction.

Lin was sitting on a small couch with Foss and Lela standing behind him as sentinels. He was listening intently as the woman spoke. She paused as Jaden entered the room. Taking a seat next to Lin, Jaden encouraged her to continue.

"As I was saying, Prince Lin, there are over five hundred soldiers at the castle and in the town. The Dal is said to have brought all his men from Arkon; there is no one in control there now. Check points have been set up so that no one can enter or leave by the main roads. One of my nephews is a server at the inn where the commanders are staying. There is some sort of infestation at the castle, and those who can, stay elsewhere. My nephew learned the patrol schedule, and so we three were able to get by."

"Have any of you heard news of my father?" Lin asked anxiously.

All three shook their heads. One of the men spoke. "There are only rumors from the castle of servants disappearing and blood sacrifice. There has been no mention of King Raidon or any of the high-born that were taken."

"Did your nephew mention if the patrols were keeping to the same schedule, or rotating it?" Jaden asked the woman.

"I don't know. He could not leave because one of the commanders has been paying quite a bit of attention to him, and would have noted his absence. He got us what information he could." The woman was visibly upset, and one of the men put his arm around her.

"It has been a stressful time. We should rest now."

Jaden looked to Foss, who walked to the door. A moment later, someone was there to escort the trio to a room.

Lin pulled his legs up, rubbing his belly.

Jaden pulled Lin close, stroking a hand across his shoulders. "We will rid your land of Dal Varent and find out what has happened with your father," he promised.

After a moment, Jaden gave Lin a hard hug. "So, Husband, shall we gather to discuss Dal Varent's downfall?"

The look Jaden received said much more than words.

A small cart wended its way through the forest. A blonde female was handling the reins and chatting with a pregnant woman in a cloak. The soldier's eyes tracked them for a bit before he called out to his partner.

"Hey, come look."

The second soldier glanced up. "Entertainment," he grinned.

They stood and watched the two women, who seemed oblivious to their surroundings. The first soldier stepped forward to block the cart. "Hello pretties." He grabbed the head collar on the horse, controlling its movement.

The second man stepped closer to block the cart. Two soft thunks were heard, and both men fell to the ground, feathered arrow-shafts protruding from their throats.

"Stupid men," Lala remarked with contempt. She turned to Lin. "No one is harmless," she said sternly.

Lin thought of some of the court functions he had attended, and nodded his agreement. Lela and Bron emerged from the trees to quickly search the men for maps or other valuable information, then pulled them to the side and buried them under leaf fall. A clansman appeared long enough to secure the horses, before disappearing back into the forest. The cart started on its way once again.

They made a cold camp that night; only soft voices and the sounds from the horses to be heard. Over three hundred had been gathered from Kenta and were moving slowly through the forests on the north side of the palace.

Lin had Lala stop twice that day so he could plant seeds and set order to the energy of the land. He worked diligently to both strengthen the webs and tie them closely to the animals and vegetation. Power flowed through him with ease of practice.

He checked and reinforced the bonds he had with his small group and added power to the energy he shared with Jaden. Lin was determined to give his husband every possible advantage in the upcoming fight.

He was rubbing the ache in his belly when Jaden appeared next to him. Jaden's eyes had slowly become more silver than brown; an interesting look with Jaden's dark, honey-colored hair. Lin assumed his husband's bond with Ashriel was flaring, and that his eyes would regain their usual dark brown when this matter was settled.

"You should rest, Husband." Jaden sat behind Lin and wrapped him in his arms.

Lin leaned back into Jaden's chest. "I don't think I will be able to rest until this is over."

"I will not allow the Dal to harm you or the children," Jaden stated firmly. "No matter what, I promise this to you."

Caught by Jaden's tone, Lin protested. "Do not promise your life for mine, Husband. It is not an acceptable trade."

"I swore it so in the temple when we were bonded, and neither my feelings nor the oath have changed." Jaden kissed the top of Lin's head. "You and the babes come first, no matter what."

Lin pulled Jaden's arms tighter around him. "Then we must make certain that you never have to make that decision."

The following day saw them past three more patrols, and then they were in sight of the castle town's walls. They wanted the edges of their force to be just visible to the sentries. The line of clansmen and mercenaries spread in a huge semi-circle that edged around the wall. Though the approaching forces were outnumbered, a group of this size should quickly catch the attention of the troop commander.

Jaden planned to challenge Dal Varent to single combat. While he knew the Dal would not be honorable in his dealings, the time gained would allow the small groups led by Nava, Foss, and Lala to enter the palace and wreak havoc from inside. They would cause as much disruption as they could in order to hinder Dal Varent's ability to aid Valru.

Lin had been working feverishly on his webs all morning. Jaden could feel his focus and determination. Wanting to see Lin before he had to leave, Jaden went to find his husband. One of the Iraci quickly approached and held out a small sheet of folded paper.

“What is this?” he asked.

“The Bearer instructed me to give you this at midday,” the man replied.

Jaden felt a knot in the pit of his stomach. A strong foreboding ran deeply through him as he slowly opened the note. Lin's writing jumped out at him.

Husband, before anything else, know that I love you.

When I first offered to bond with you in the forest temple, my only thought was of my people. I feared the damage and chaos that Dal Varent could bring and thought to thwart his ambitions. That is no longer my primary concern. As greatly as I care for my people and my land, this pales compared to the feelings I have developed for you.

I should arrive at the palace before mid-day; I left while you were in conference with Nava. There is no doubt the Dal will be distracted.

Come and retrieve me, my love. I promise to let you yell without interruption for as long as you need to.

Yours in this plane, the next, and always,

Lin

Jaden's desperate shout caused all birds within a hundred paces to take to the air. Jumping onto his horse, Jaden took off like an arrow, the pulse of anger and fear that followed him was felt by everyone nearby.

Tonda watched Jaden take off and ran to his horse. “Come,” he yelled. “The plan seems to have changed.”

The riders raced after Jaden, who was already far ahead.

Lin drove his little cart directly towards the guards manning the gate in the back wall. He stopped when instructed to do so. As one of the men approached, Lin pushed back the hood of his cloak.

“I am Lin, Prince of Vostek. The Dal has been searching for me.”

Lin was taken to the throne room to await Dal Varent. The guards ushered him inside and quickly left, shutting the doors. Bloody-looking shapes on the walls repulsed him and cast a feeling of unease over the room.

Walking to the dais, Lin stepped up and sat upon his throne. Calming his mind, Lin closed his eyes and searched for the best place to begin healing the energies around him.

He had been working for less than a mark when he was surprised by meowing. Aki was in the room with him. Lin scratched at the arm of the throne and encouraged her to jump up. "How did you end up here?" he questioned in amazement. "You need to hide, Aki. There is danger here."

Aki had no sooner jumped down and run behind the throne than the doors were flung open, banging sharply into the walls behind them. The Dal entered the room in what he must have considered a grand manner, followed by several guards.

Lin looked down in disapproval at the man who had caused so much chaos. He could see dull, red energy seething around the older man. Rapacious tendrils reached out, searching for something to grasp onto. Several moved towards Lin, but he had surrounded himself with a cocoon of energy that the tendrils could not penetrate.

Irritation flashed briefly in his eyes, and then Dal Varent leaned, in studied indifference, against one of the little tables in front of the dais.

"Such power; just as the scrolls promised." He smirked. "Unfortunately, I no longer need your strength, but your energy will be a lovely treat." His lips slowly twisted into a frown as he was ignored by the prince, and he straightened up in irritation.

Lin was clearly at ease and allowed a small, mocking smile to grace his lips. Casually, he asked, "Have you always been so easily led, Varent, so that you jump to do another's bidding?"

Dal Varent growled deeply and hissed, "I am a DAL and I will be an *emperor*, boy."

The little smile on Lin's face was genuine as he shook his head. "You have no understanding of what it means to rule or what true power is. You are a nursery room bully, Varent. Fear will only lead you to a certain point before it overwhelms those who fear you and causes the panic that will be your doom. Even were you to be successful today, your days are already numbered."

"You ANT," the Dal roared in anger. "Already, I have found a way to reach the energy cache behind the barrier that hides it. By the end of the day, you and the life you carry with you will be nothing more than a tasty snack! Then you will see what true power is."

Lin was prevented from responding by the wave of anger and fear that ran through the room. Dal Varent's head whipped around as if scenting the source of the energy. He walked to the window and his slow, evil grin caused Lin a moment of dread.

"I will deal with you in a bit. I have a toy to play with." The Dal laughed and strode from the room, his energy crackling around him.

Lin could hear the locks click into position as the doors were shut. He leaped from the dais and felt a jolting, sharp pain run low across his abdomen. He moved carefully to the window. In the distance, he was able to see a rider racing full out towards the town gates. Behind the rider, the entire army of mercenaries and clansmen rode, feverishly trying to catch up. It could only be Jaden.

Another hard pain caused Lin to double over, and he fell to the floor. "They come," he whispered as ripping agony seized him. "They are too early. Oh Jaden, I am so sorry, my love."

Ashriel was watching the barrier pulse on a distant plane when she was startled by an intense wave of fear and anger. She turned her attention to the world below as Jor and Dagen appeared beside her.

"And so it begins," Dagen intoned sadly.

"NO. It is too soon, they are not ready yet." Ashriel looked to their focus and felt deep agony from him. She was conflicted as to where her powers were needed most.

Jor's energy reached out to her. "Concentrate on your Chosen, Little Sister. We will do what we can to strengthen the Bearer and keep Valru from this plane."

Deep gratitude shining in her eyes, Ashriel concentrated on her Warrior.

Lin cried out as another wave of pain threatened to steal his breath. He scooted back so that he was supported by the wall and pulled at the curtains around him. When one fell, he quickly made a little nest on the floor, hoping he had the energy to place the babes safely before he lost consciousness from the energy drain.

Silver lightning arced across the sky and gave Lin hope. From where he was kneeling, Lin could see Jaden's energy reach for the power of the bolts, and it surrounded him as he approached the gates.

Energy flaring, Jaden urged his horse to leap. In one giant bound, it cleared the town wall as if it were a pasture fence!

Jaden rode straight into the center of the startled troops, his sword flying in patterns as he fought. It was one of the most incredible things Lin had ever seen, and he felt a moment of pride in his husband.

Hissing at another pain, Lin turned away from the window and moved his focus inward. He started forming tiny, delicate webs of power to protect the babes and hoped it would be enough to last until someone found them.

Dal Varent crossed the bailey at a brisk pace. He was close to freeing the pulsing energy from the barrier that surrounded it, and he was not about to be stopped now. He approached the melee that was occurring just inside the town gates and paused to draw power from the death all around him.

The gates crashed open. A stream of fighters on horseback passed through the walls, engaging the troops within. Snarling, the Dal took his sword and, using the energy at his disposal, flung it with all his might at the blond warrior at the head of the fray. As the sword struck, the barrier pulsed a final time and ripped wide. A tremendous burst of power shot out to envelop everything, and Dal Varent collapsed, drained.

Lin weakly wrapped the third babe in its tiny web and laid him with his siblings. He barely had the strength left to cover the babes with a bit of curtain before he slumped back to the floor. The mark on his stomach was sealed once again, but blood was everywhere. Aki head-butted Lin and licked his face.

Trying desperately to stay awake, Lin felt Jaden take a devastating blow. He had time to cry out before the deep energy drain claimed him, and he lost consciousness.

...There was darkness and then light...

Lin fought his way to awareness. He searched for Jaden but could not feel the connection to his husband. Everything around him was silent, and he

crawled to the window. Deep, red power covered everything in sight. People and animals were lying jumbled on the ground.

Valru's power was overwhelming everyone else but must have revived him. Lin reached again for Jaden and could not find him. His heart broke, and in tears of anger, Lin PULLED.

In high orbit around the world named Chalybeous for its steel-blue seas, Science Officer Derek Jin was happily manning his station. The starship Portman was investigating unusual power fluctuations from this quadrant, and they had found a small, inter-dimensional rift.

The moderately-sized planet nearby was found to be supporting a healthy and diverse population of life forms. Classified as a primitive world, the human-like race of beings on the planet was still enjoying their version of the medieval age.

The First Officer had ordered an orbit that could not be observed from the planet. They had been here for almost two weeks now, and Jin had enough information for a very interesting paper. He was about ready to close down his station when a sudden, sharp spike in energy readings sent him lurching for the communication switch. "All power to the shields, NOW!"

The Captain turned towards the Navigation Officer as the First Officer ensured that the ship's shields were at maximum power. "Put the science station on the main viewer. I want to see what is happening," he snapped.

The small, pulsing rift they had been investigating was split wide. A heavy beam of red energy emerged from the rift, hitting the planet's center mass. It quickly covered everything on the ground and seethed up through the atmosphere. The crew watched in horror as the life-sign readings from the planet plummeted.

The science station computer chirped, and everyone looked towards the Science Officer until the navigator gasped, "Captain!"

All eyes glued to the main viewer. What appeared to be a thick, heavy web was forming around the entire planet and seemed to be absorbing the energy from the rift. At first, the energies seemed to war, then the web slowly turned brilliant blue in color. Great, sparking arcs raced around the web as the beam from the rift trailed off. The web glowed brightly for a moment and then pulsed once, hard.

The energy shot cleanly through the rift to the other side, and now a beam from the web seemed to be sealing the rift closed. Soon, there were no traces that the rift had ever existed. The blue web slowly leached back to the planet, and all the life-sign readings returned to normal.

There was a moment of stunned silence on the bridge before the Captain turned to his Navigation Officer. "Back us away, slowly. I want to be completely out of this quadrant before we engage warp engines. Communications Officer, prepare a buoy and take note. By the power vested in me according to section three of the Charter of the Allied Federation of Sentient Planets, I hereby declare Chalybeous to be an interdicted planet under penalty of imprisonment on the moon of Sauter 9. Effective immediately!"

Fingers shaking, coordinates were carefully plotted and engaged.

Lin stared in confusion at the two silvery beings, a man and a woman, who faded in and out of the darkness. "Where are we? Have I passed to the next plane? The babes—do they live? Was Valru defeated? What happened?"

The woman put out her hand. "*Peace, little brother. Your world is safe, and all are well thanks to your actions.*"

"*Valru has been sent back to his plane and is greatly weakened. We travel to bring him under our care as soon as we take our leave of you,*" the man added.

"You two are Ashriel and Jor?" Lin asked. "And you're leaving us?"

They nodded at him, and Ashriel smiled. "*You saved your people today, little brother, and in doing so, changed the shape of your future forever. You are no longer in need of our aid.*"

"I am confused. Changed the future how, and why are you calling me 'little brother'?"

Jor's gaze was gentle, and he answered for Ashriel. "*She calls you little brother because you have passed beyond your mortal bounds. You have handled enormous energies, and they have changed you and many on your world.*"

"How do you mean? Please. What is happening? I really don't remember much except sorrow, and determination that Valru would not hurt my babes." Lin looked from one God to the other.

Ashriel sent a wave of peace to Lin and explained. *“Dal Varent had weakened the barrier to the point where Valru would have been able to cross over. Valru sent a burst of energy through the barrier that was designed to overwhelm your planet. Instead, you took those energies and transformed them.”*

“The webs you created absorbed a great deal of power.” Jor continued the story. *“It was exactly as you planned, but there was an excess the webs could not absorb. When the power threatened those close to you, you created a way to save them. Much as you encouraged your seedlings to change and grow, many of your people have been changed as well. You have given those close to you the ability to change forms at will. It utilizes energy from the webs and helps to stabilize the matrix you have created. Much as you have learned, intent becomes fact. The ability is still evolving.”*

Lin was stunned. “That sounds like a terrible thing,” he breathed. “You cannot just leave us at a time like this.”

“A final gift then, little brother, before we leave. Choose a form, and I will stabilize the change for you.” Ashriel waited for Lin’s response.

Aki popped to mind, and Lin chose. “Cats will be the second form.”

Ashriel was quiet for a time, eyes closed in concentration. *“It is done, and, as we are leaving not to return, I have given you a further gift. Your people will be protected for a long time to come. There will be two forms that can be attained; both will be powerful and long-lived. They are a slight conceit to me, but do you no harm.*

“The first will be great, blond cats with silver eyes. They will have the ability to meet any threat, no matter where it originates. These warriors will be the Guardians, protectors of your people and absolutely just. There will be no corrupting them.”

Lin’s eyes filled with tears at the similarity to Jaden, and he blinked rapidly.

“The second form of cat will be slightly smaller with silver and black fur. They will have bright, blue eyes,” Ashriel briefly caressed Lin’s hair, *“reflecting their ability to manipulate energy, as you do. I have limited these changes to the three hundred and forty that rode with you to this battle.”*

Jor moved forward and placed a gentle hand on Lin’s shoulder. *“Now we leave, little brother. As a final gift from me, you will always be able to recognize the ones so blessed. Even in their mortal forms they will breed to*

type, either warrior or mage. All Guardians will be large, blond-haired and silver-eyed. The Silvers will be black of hair, with your blue eyes. There will be no halfings; the lines will always breed true.

“Watch over your people, Lin. Work together and be well.” With that, the two beings faded from view.

Lin heard a babe crying in the distance. He closed his eyes and imagined himself in the throne room next to his babes.

Lin heard crying, then a soft voice singing. Slowly, he opened his eyes and tried to blink the room into focus.

Lala popped into his vision and grinned. “Heyla, you’re awake. Good, your son was anxious to meet you.” She was holding a small, silver-eyed babe in her arms.

“You’re awake.” Bron walked up, holding another silver-eyed babe. He held her so that Lin could see. “Your daughter has been keeping us busy. You were asleep for over twelve marks.”

Nava entered the room with a tray. He smiled broadly to see Lin awake and set the tray aside. “Here, brother, let me help you sit up so you can drink. Don’t try to move yourself yet. You are probably still weak.”

Carefully, Nava shifted Lin and placed some pillows behind his back. Placing a cup at Lin’s mouth, he watched Lin take a few sips then set the cup back down and began to talk.

“When everyone first came to, there was much confusion. Suddenly, Aki was in front of us, making a LOT of noise. Lala, Kai, and I followed her to the throne room and found you and the babes. There was blood everywhere, but you were still breathing, so we brought you here and cleaned you up. I was surprised at the babe’s health since they were born too early, but Kai said he could see tiny webs of energy around each one. We assumed you found a way to protect them. Can you tell us anything more?”

Lin nodded and glanced around. “Where is the third babe?” he asked in concern.

“Right here, Husband.” Jaden walked into the room with an incredibly small, black-haired babe cradled gently in his arms. Lin’s heart felt like it stopped and then raced back to life. He stared at Jaden in wonder. “You are

here. I felt the blow you took. I thought you had died and gone to the next plane.”

Jaden smiled and sat on the bed next to Lin. “One of Ashriel’s blessings is significantly increased healing. I needed several marks to recover before I could even leave my bed, but I am fine. By evening tomorrow, I will be completely healed.”

Tears pooled and fell from Lin’s eyes, and Jaden kissed them from his lips. Lin felt like his heart was overflowing with joy. He gathered his tiniest babe from Jaden’s arms and smiled.

“We have a lot of work ahead of us, Husband.”

“So I assumed. Would you care to explain the change to the land and all the felines roaming the courtyard?”

Lin could see the increase in the forest from his position on the bed. He felt a deep gratitude that his idea concerning the excess energy had worked. Jaden helped Lin up, and they walked to the window. Lin grinned widely at the sight. There were two hundred or so large, blond cats and half as many smaller, silver and black ones roaming the courtyards.

All were being loudly lectured to by Aki from her perch, high on a fence post.

Fin

Author Bio

With a newly turned teenage son (who provides great writing music) and an adult daughter who has moved back home until she leaves for the military, Sassy suffers from more 'squirrel on crack' than usual. Just ask the patient Goodreads team.

Plot bunnies run amok in the garden, chased by the not-quite-domestic cat her daughter adopted from a local shelter, and who has now adopted Sassy as 'his human'.

Despite all attempts to convince him otherwise, Damien, the cat, now occupies her former pillow. He watches intently as she plays games on her phone until she falls asleep at night. At which time, she becomes the pillow.

C'est la vie.

Contact & Media Info

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