

Chapter I

Came the dark thunder of the drums.

Bronze gates groaned open on either side of the arena. From their rows of stone seats sweeping up the steep hillside, the fire daemiani leaned forward in hungry anticipation, their torch-like multi-hued flames flickering in the dwindling light. Excited murmurs flared to a roar as the contestants paced forth to meet in the center, two black shadows backlit by Kéoathâch's heaving orange waves of fire. spurts of scalding yellow and scorched scarlet burst free of the fire lake's seething ooze, clutching at the sky's smoky brown pall, only to fall back in slurping gulps.

The drums throbbed a second time, the deep boom reverberating off the High Seat's blood red stone. Upon it reposed the Firelord, Tvashtar Tizón. From beside him, the Herald Eshel stepped to the edge of the dais and raised his arms, flickering gray flames outlining his familiar crook-shouldered figure. "Folk of Nonetre!" The rasping voice commanded immediate silence. "Behold the condemned! This eve they do battle for their offenses here in *Batoras*. To death, the loser. To the winner, life. Approach ye the Tvashtar!"

Clad in snug ebony tunics, the two féyree advanced to stand before the High Seat. The heavily muscled golden one, with deep blue wings, grasped his curved blade with practiced ease. The other, the green of a just-unfurled leaf, clutched the hilt with both hands, a tremor visible through her entire slender body. Her pale yellow wings seemed to shiver, Kéoathâch's light flickering through them as sunlight through a tear. Both bowed before raising their blades to salute. Stone-faced, the Tvashtar gave a slight nod. The Herald clapped once. "To life!"

The féyree faced each other, blades up in brief salute. Then the golden féyree lunged. Blades clashed, edges screeching with a flash of silver sparks. Back and forth they slashed, amidst the crowd's groans and cheers. Vaulting into the air, soaring, plunging, tumbling over and around each other like ferocious dueling birds, then plummeting back to the ground to hack and strike. Threads of dark blood writhed down the green féyree's left thigh; her arms struggled more and more with each lift of the blade. With an ugly laugh, the gold féyree dropped to one knee and took a vicious swipe at her legs.

So swiftly she was a blur, the other sprang high. For a heartbeat, she hung suspended over him, hefting the blade above her head. Then down she hurtled, her weight adding to the slashing cut that sheared off his right wing. He screeched, dropped his blade, and crumpled forward, face crushing into the crimson dirt. Landing beside him, the green féyree stood panting, wings slumped, blade yet tightly clutched. Kéoathâch vomited hissing flames.

Slowly she gazed up at the fire daemiani who had risen to shriek and cheer. Warily she lifted the blade above her brow in victory. The crowd stamped, trembling the ground so that pebbles danced. Something brushed her foot. She glanced down. "Kill me," begged the gold féyree. "For if you do not, they will cast me into Kéoathâch, a death far more terrible than your blade's swift mercy. In the name of Lúnasa and the Mother, I beseech you, kill me."

Shuddering, she looked up at the exultant fire daemiani soaring skywards in spurts of flame, spinning and tumbling about like some grotesque mockery of a revel in her now-lost realm of Lampion. "May you meet the Twins beyond the Veil," she murmured, bringing the blade down with her last scrap of strength.

The Tvashtar gasped, amethyst-hued hands clutching his knees so tightly, the knuckles

gleamed lavender. He recoiled as she stared up at him, silver eyes brilliant with hate, even as exhaustion dulled her bodyglow. Her blade drooped, bloody tip propped on the ground.

“*Amsaras!*” The fire daemiani shrieks shuddered the air. “*Tvashtar, amsaras!*”

Eshel looked to Tizón, frowning slightly at the rigid face. “My lord? They cry that Andalorsa be awarded life.” He released a slit-thin smile. “At least until the next Batoras. Your decision?”

The *Tvashtar* swallowed hard. About his brow, the ring of tiny flames hovering just above a twisted circlet of red gold sputtered indigo sparks. He stood, black cloak writhing beneath golden wings, and advanced to the dais’ edge. He raised both hands, gazing at the féyree. The immediate hush was disturbed only by Kéothâch’s belch and burble, its sharp reek threading the hazy air. “*Amsaras, Andalorsa. Well fought!*” Again he lifted his hands to quiet the bellows of approval. “And now two choices I give ye.” He ignored Eshel’s sudden scowl. “Will ye remain here as a warrior for Batoras, or will ye serve in one of the great gardens as thrall to the Firelord of Nonetre? Choose!”

Andalorsa hesitated. In the under-caves of Batoras where she had been trained for battle, she had been given to understand her only choice would be to fight over and over until, like Oros, she finally fell to another condemned thrall. That the *Tvashtar* was presenting her an alternative left her breathless.

“The *Tvashtar* has demanded an answer!” Eshel’s voice was harsh with coiled anger. He already guessed her choice. She should not be permitted to leave – her unexpected performance guaranteed at least one more good battle; he was loathe to let her escape. Why had the *Tvashtar* even offered?

“*Tvashtar Tizón, I choose the gardens!*”

A groan dribbled from many throats. The *Tvashtar* ignored it. “To Rualâch ye are condemned. Such is my order; such is my command. Now, return ye to the under-caves.” With a final salute, Andalorsa retreated.

“My lord, surely you will reconsider...”

Tizón whirled about, aqua eyes orange-embered with fury. But he kept his voice low such that it reached no further than Eshel’s ears; not even Falaise, Thrak or Ashnarg, who were waiting a short distance behind the High Seat, could catch his words. “She fought bravely. She fulfilled the conditions of Batoras. Be not so ready to fail in rewarding those who serve, for most surely you will regret such actions in the end.”

Inclining his head to conceal blazing eyes, Eshel gave a curt bow. “My lord is wise. It shall be so.” He faced the crowd. “It is finished!”

The drums thundered three times, then fell silent.

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Tizón stared moodily over Nalôch’s ramparts at the incessant boiling fires, eyes watering slightly from the pungent gout of smoke that lurched free of Kéothâch, the Cauldron of Smokes. Crouched on a rocky knoll that jutted thumb-like into the bubbling ooze, the hulking black stone fortress was dominated by the split-spired tower of the *Pirâsh*. About its roots clung smaller dwellings; coiling around all was a high wall. Dwellings clotted the nearby low hills, clustered around small glowing fire wells or smoking vents. Beyond sprawled the barren Plains of Nûr that bunched up against the Tulelôch Mountains wherein was cradled his realm’s life-sustaining great gardens.

He felt as restless as Kéothâch’s heaving surface. Time unfolded differently here in Nonetre as compared to his former realm of Lampion, he mused, amazed that already two *lumnas* had passed. There was a never-ending current of tension, a hurrying urgency that he

often found grating. But this was foolish. After all, was he not Tvashtar? No longer Pook, the wingless spryte struggling through archaic Rites to earn his wings. In this, his new realm, he had taken the name Tizón, Firelord of all Nonetre. His word was law.

Yet, he admitted, he was at times jealous of Danaí and his other spryte friends who had successfully earned their wings by completing the nine Rites of Krisállys after he had abandoned them and Lampion for Nonetre. His own wings, easily released by Eshel, drooped at the thought. And even though Lady Atelaí had graciously permitted him to join the festivities of *Oisillon*, and celebrate with the newly-fledged féyree, he had felt like an outsider, uncomfortable under the Lady's penetrating gaze and the Dolmen's barely veiled contempt. Did they suspect?

"Why so preoccupied, oh mighty Tvashtar?"

He felt Saía's too-familiar caress trail up his back, tug gently on a curl of his shoulder-length black hair, glimpsed her long scarlet fingers contrasting against his black tunic. Expelling an inaudible sigh, he turned to face her. "Just thinking about Eshel's plans to make Lalâch more productive. He says we need to lift more water up into the gardens, but because one of the crystals flawed nearly two sevendays ago, there is not enough heat. So we are at some point to journey there that I may better understand the workings and decide."

Saía quirked a golden eyebrow, pursing her full lips in what she knew to be a fetching pout. "But for uncounted seasons, Eshel has overseen the three great gardens."

"That was before I was crowned Tvashtar," Tizón snapped, nettled she presumed to question him. "Just because it has always been done in a certain way does not mean it is the right way or the best. You'd think Eshel is the Dolmen or something." Ignoring her surprised stare, he stalked back into the Pirâsh, his flame crown spitting angry scarlet sparks as he vanished down the tower's curving stairs.

She considered pursuing him, then instead reached out to her brother. "Syar? Syar, can you speak?"

'For a moment.' His voice felt reassuring, almost cool inside her mind. She savored his mental touch – none knew of this mind-link; it served them both well. 'I am nearly descended into Forgerôch. I plan to punish Taskmaster Crask for having let that dwarf thrall escape at the stone gate. The fool! Not that he will get far in the Tulelôch Mountains. At best, a new warrior for Batoras. At worst, bones. What tidings?'

'The Tvashtar questions Eshel's plans. They are soon to visit Lalâch. The Herald is greatly mistaken if he thinks Tizón will be little more than a figurehead.'

Syar's mental voice thinned, signaling distraction. 'You know Eshel deems Tizón as the only one who can claim Lampion for us. He is wise in the ways needed to shape our new Tvashtar.'

She could have sworn there was a slight sneer underlying his last words. 'Yes, but...'

'I have duties to which I must attend, dear sister. Distract the Tvashtar. If he is occupied, he will be less likely to make sparks.' The mind-link faded.

Saía frowned, her fingers twining waist-length golden tresses into snarls. Already she had discovered that the Tvashtar was not as pliable as anticipated – and she found that oddly exciting. Half fire daemon, half féyree, her sensuous beauty was such that few could ignore her. Eshel had early on recruited her to his inner circle, valuing her abilities, and had assigned her as consort to the new Tvashtar. Yet Tizón, while enjoying her company, was close-mouthed, keeping between them a barrier that she as of yet had not been able to breach. As of yet. She smiled.

"Lady Saía."

She did not bother to turn around, recognizing Analkar's cloying voice. "Yes?"

"Your presence is requested in the Firelord's Hall."

"Very well." Holding her golden wings tightly closed against the hot wind gusting off Kéoathâch, Saía followed the flickering green fire daemon into the tower's dark archway.

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Hresh bowed "My lord Herald, the new crystal has arrived from Lampion." He stood in the entry, not daring to step in. Never was the Black Chamber entered except by Eshel's explicit invitation.

Gazing through the crystal pane that overlooked Kéoathâch, Eshel did not bother to turn around. "Let it be prepared to accompany us on the journey to Lalâch. Make it so!" The thud of the closing door reverberated dully along the walls, the sound tangling in a clutter of dried plants, powders, metal basins and flasks scattered across trestles and sideboards; the jumble of things used by a *Talushim*, a loremaster of Nonetre. It rattled a pile of bones heaped in a corner, causing one to slither and clatter to the floor. Eshel shook his head. Bones from a folk now dried and gone. As they all would be if his plans went awry.

So long had he toiled on them! Over five hundred winters, even as he watched time extinguish other fire daemiani. Ever since that terrible day when they had attempted to cross the barrier between daemensions into Lampion, only to be repulsed with such violent magic, that all but he had died. And even he had not escaped unscathed. Still could he hear her shrieking, see a whirling silver blur, feel the white-hot burst and excruciating impact as the spell hurled him and the others back. He rubbed his crooked right shoulder, felt the familiar tweak in his shortened left leg. She had sealed the rift, and long had it been before he was able to pierce the barrier anew. None were left who recalled that time, nor how the force of the blast had destroyed Dannôch. He had made sure any vestiges of his failure had been replaced by the tale of how the eruption of Kéoathâch – that occurred soon after – had destroyed the Tvashtar and his stronghold. But somehow, in the end it had granted him absolute power. He was eldest, thrice the normal age of any fire daemiani. Why, he could not guess.

Turning, he glanced about the chamber lit only by the fire lake's flickers. He rarely lit the torch urns – only when the Tvashtar came to learn what he must be taught. His thoughts meandered to the glimmers of discontent he still sensed about his choice. At the outset, the *Cromosh* had spoken openly about their doubts that one who was not a fire daemon could lead as Tvashtar.

"What nonsense is this?" Draish had demanded. "We are all agreed that we must take Lampion, for little remains in Nonetre. At your orders, our newly-chosen warriors will soon assemble at Iskâmôrlach to begin training under the Firelord. Your spies have assured us that except for some insipid guild of Guardians, the féyree have no trained warriors, expect no attacks. Time has lulled them, the dwarves and the ael into complaisance. Like the ripest fruit, Lampion waits for us to pluck it. Yet you propose a féyree as Tvashtar, and an untried wingless one at that?"

Eshel had waited for the grumbling to die down, contemplating the twelve daemiani *Cromoshor* seated around the scarlet stone table. Well he knew the power of his presence as head of this High Council. Shorter than the others, with a face haloed by a silvery shock of flames, his head seemed too big for his thin, almost stick-like body. His skin was a dull ash gray, the mark of an extremely old fire daemon whose body fires were dimming. Yet his eyes still glowed the intense blue of the hottest flames. As the Herald, his word had been law. Until his prophecy had been fulfilled with the coming of Pook from Lampion. At last,

when it grew quiet, he continued. “In all these many seasons, never have you questioned my prophecy.

“Of lavender he will be made; of shadow his roots are wrought.

A questing mind unafraid of desire for what is sought.

Wingless born, winged be; a chasm he will span,

Féyree master, daemons’ lord – he shall all command.

“Why do you now doubt? Was it not my vision to create the great gardens, which prolong our survival even as Nonetre withers? Have I not established links within Lampion, seducing the hearts of those that we can use as needed? Have I not devised ways to replenish our thralls, capturing ael, dwarves and féyree with our *selgáich*, the barrier stalkers? I tell you, no fire daemon can lead us into Lampion. While the féyree’s fear of daemiani has dulled over time, their tales of Sôlon are yet taught, and it would take little for féyree, dwarves and ael to join against us.”

“So?” Malas growled. “So after our onslaught, there would be less folk. That means more for us!” Laughter roiled among the Cromosh, flaring their flames brighter.

“We have but this one chance to enter with our warriors, for otherwise the barrier breaches can not be rendered wide enough,” Eshel replied coolly. “If we fail, another three winters must pass before the chance arises again. And I doubt we have three winters left to us.” His voice rose. “Surprise is essential! As when we conquered Nonetre, we will need those who know how to live in Lampion to serve us. They will become our thralls, and so ensure our survival. A féyree leading us will seduce them into uncertainty; they will hesitate. Through our use of him, we will have the opportunity to acquire vital knowledge that we yet lack – and must have if our plans are to be successful. By the time they grasp the truth, we shall overwhelm them.”

“Think you they would not suspect one of their own?” Rakas wagged his head disbelievingly, pale purple flames darkening with irritation. “Those who we take from Lampion have never been permitted to return. Yet now he comes back? That will lay grounds for great doubt.”

“Of course he will be questioned,” Eshel retorted. “But at least they will give him a chance to speak. Were he a daemon, the barriers would be sealed – and that must not happen. It will take the power of all our Talushim to open the breach rifts wide enough. The wrong word, and all is lost. Including us.”

“But Tvashtar? Always has the flame crown been bestowed upon a fire daemon,” Nemish rasped; others nodded. “But since the strange drowning of Ìdras, at your prophecy, none have sat upon the High Seat. I have spoken with this Pook, and he is no empty-headed féyree. Even as your prophecy foresaw, he does indeed have a questing mind. There is an impatience to learn, to try new things; both weaknesses you can exploit. But push him too hard, and he will snap free of your control. Would it not be better to instead make him the highest leader, our *andástariq* among the warriors, and finally crown a true Tvashtar? Too long has the High Seat remained empty.”

Fools, Eshel thought, toes curling in his boots as he listened to the others’ agreement. All Lampion is within their grasp, and yet tradition binds and blinds them. He kept his voice calm. “Wise are your words, good Nemish. Yet were he to come among them overtly a warrior, would that not be cause for alarm? Whereas if he is presented as our Firelord, would it not imply our respect for Féyree – and convince both him and them of our, ah, good intentions?”

Sedaris nodded, drumming ochre fingers on the tabletop. “Ahhh, I follow your deception.

A sop to their doubts, at least enough to put them off track. But I agree with Nemish – he will not be content as figurehead. Forget not that if he is crowned Tvashtar, then he is the Most High – even over you, our Herald. Do you accept that risk?”

Except for the muted hiss and crackle of the daemiani’s flames, the Council Chamber was silent. Well did Eshel understand Sedaris’ real question. Would he accept relinquishing power, and the lesser role of influencing from within the Tvashtar’s shadow? It would be more difficult – but he would continue to do so. Although he could not deny Pook was less pliable than expected. Could he have erred in his choice? No – he would not believe that mistake of himself. A warped smile frayed his lips. “Let none here doubt my power. If I can not control a young féyree, then indeed I am a fading fire daemon.”

There was an uneasy quiver of laughter; all understood the implication. Eshel was indisputably the most powerful of all Talushim, and while in theory, if the other high loremasters chose to join in magic against him, they should be able to overcome him, none had any desire to put it to test. Now would be the wrong time. And if the Drying continued apace, they had little time left.

“It is then agreed by the Cromosh that you will support my pronouncement of him as our new Tvashtar? A show of sparks?” Eshel was pleased by the unanimous show of brief colorful bursts, yet carefully noted those that were last to vote.

“But by some other name, one befitting our Tvashtar,” Sedaris griped. “Pook. What name is that? It sounds like a hiccough after a bad meal or a belch from Kéothâch.” Several guffawed.

“I offer the name Tizón.” The smiles dissolved into sharp crackles of displeasure.

“You would name him after an ancient myth?” Draish said, blue flames edging black.

“Not a myth,” Eshel smoothly corrected. “The few scrolls salvaged from Dannôch’s destruction recount that Tizón was a great Talushim who lead us forth from Maalfet to Aretonsk and then to Nonetre, well over fifteen hundred winters past. What better name to choose for our Firelord than one who lead us to glory so long ago?”

There were several moments of silence, before Sedaris nodded. “Let his new name be Tizón.”

The brittle snap of firestone cracking on the hearth pierced Eshel’s musings. He recalled the thunderous roar of approval as he presented Tizón to the great crowd just two *lérvras* ago, as summer passed its height. It seemed just yesterday, but already sixty days had lapsed. Their joy and exuberance still gave him a heated flush of pride. Yet not long after, he had heard some were less than pleased. At first these had been easy to snuff out. But now they were hidden, like smoldering embers buried deep. No matter. There came another polite tap on his door. “Enter!”

An amber daemon bowed. “My lord, you are awaited in the Firelord’s Hall.”

“Tell them I shall be down presently.” His gazed out again at the sand swells sweeping up towards the Rimfire Mountains. He sensed little snow would fall this winter; without it, the great gardens would soon fail. At best, three winters. Let the restless ones grumble. They would behold the proof of his great wisdom when they wallowed in Lampion’s richness. And his name would be entered in the Scrolls as the greatest of all fire daemiani.

Soon. Very soon.

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Tizón stood beside the High Seat in the Firelord’s Hall. Tall flame-shaped pillars of bright-burnished bronze twisted between the hammered copper floor and many-arched roof, inlaid with beaten metals patterned after the swirling colors of fire. Panes of sheerest

crystal had been secured between a final curved row of more closely-spaced pillars to enclose nearly a third of the hall, allowing the polished stone walls to shimmer with Kéothâch's fiery bursts. A large square, cut through the roof above the High Seat, permitted rays from the twin suns, ochre Ítasca and scarlet Aurums, to engulf it. For anyone gazing from the great bronze entry doors down the long chamber, it appeared as if the hall spilled out into the fire lake's seething cauldron, with only the Tvashtar standing between them and the flames.

Which, Tizón knew, was exactly what they were supposed to feel. He realized that behind the doors were already gathered those awaiting this day's decisions. He furled both fists. Judgment Day was one of the many aspects of Nonetre with which he struggled. The penalties were, to his mind, often too harsh, and he battled the favoritism he knew plagued the proceedings. In debates with Eshel and the Cromosh, Tizón had advocated a balanced and informed approach, such as was practiced in Lampion. It had gotten ugly.

"Punishment is the only way to prevent crime," Cromoshor Malas had insisted, speaking in the condescending manner that always grated on Tizón. "Through fear, we control. Through pain we produce fear. Do you think we could maintain our realm without such laws?" Behind Malas, seated in a half circle facing the Tvashtar, the Cromosh all nodded in agreement. "And yet, depending on the circumstances, we grant them chances for redemption. And in ways that entertain our folk."

"It is too coarse, too narrow." Tizón stalked back and forth before the High Seat, aware their embered eyes followed his every gesture. "What of the elements surrounding the event? What of the individual?" He held up a hand to forestall Malas' rebuttal. "I am not saying punishment may not be warranted – but I am concerned that it has grown too simplified... become more a judgment by opinion instead of fact."

Eshel waited until the mutters died down and the Tvashtar paused in his pacing. "My lord, what you say reflects a compassion and wisdom beyond your seasons. Yet you are also newly come to Tvashtar. Rather than debate and change, would it not be wiser to first experience why we do it in this manner?"

Tizón had ground his teeth to restrain an angry retort. How frequently he was presented with variants of this attitude! Strange how many of the daemiani were as resistant to change as the féyree. For all they advocated new ways of doing things when it served their needs, they disliked ideas that challenged their familiar ways.

And now Judgment Day had come again. Once every tércera it was held. This was his second. He shook his head – today he would make them realize he was a smart and capable féyree, and no fire daemon's plaything.

Three dull booms vibrated through the bronze doors. Tizón assumed the High Seat, squirming a moment to get comfortable. Artfully smythed from red gold, the throne resembled a spreading flame that embraced the Tvashtar, gathering behind him to peak in an ever-burning torch. The Firelord, crowned and surrounded by fire.

The doors groaned apart. Two blue-flamed guards marched in, curved naked swords raised before them. Eshel and Saía were next, he with his limp, she graceful as molten metal. Behind filed the accused, all in bindings, led by the pompous Cromoshor Draish. The victims and their speakers followed. Saía and Eshel approached, bowed, and then took their seats on either side of the dais. The accused clustered to the left, the victims and speakers to the right.

"First victim." Draish motioned forward a silver daemon and her speaker. Both bowed. "My lord Tvashtar," commenced the speaker, orange flames banked to a quiet shimmer. "Namurisi accuses thrall Imitri of attempting to escape, stealing gemstones to bribe her way

past the guards, and using forbidden magic to stun her pursuers.”

“Imitri, stand forth.” The hall’s design amplified Draish’s nasal voice.

Tizón had already guessed who she was. Tall for a féyree, Imitri’s scratched and bruised sand-hued skin still glowed, her chin lifted defiantly as she approached the High Seat, shuffling in the tight ankle bindings that pressed deep grooves into her flesh. She stared up at Tizón, dark brown eyes bright, face expressionless.

“Down thrall!” The flat of the guard’s blade whacked across Imitri’s shoulders, and she collapsed to her knees. Yet her head remained unbowed.

Tizón clapped once to prevent another blow. “How plead you?”

“I plead both innocent and guilty.”

A murmur rippled among the audience. Draish spluttered indignantly. “You can not be both!”

This should be interesting, Tizón thought. “Explain yourself.”

“My lord, I did indeed attempt to escape. I did steal the stones. What magic I know, I used to dazzle the guards. Yet my lord, I am a thrall. And not by my choosing. I was stolen from Lampion and forced to serve. Therefore the wrongs of which I am accused came from my pursuit of freedom, perhaps a chance to regain my realm. Where is the dishonor in that?”

Her gaze bored into him, challenging. Tizón pondered, fingers tapping his knee. She had broken the law, yet herself was a result of wrongdoings. He knew what Eshel or Draish would say: Iômask, the endless labyrinth twisting beneath Nalôch. To them, all that mattered were the facts. Yet Tizón could not deny that thralls were vital to Nonetre. Without them to perform their labors, much would remain undone, and the fire daemiani would be prevented from pursuing their preferred activities. If a thrall were permitted to attempt escape, to break laws, what precedent would that set? It was not his fault that some were taken from Lampion – although Eshel insisted there were those that came of their own choice. There was a need; thralls fulfilled it. And yet.... “Thrall Imitri. To the next Batoras are ye condemned.” He smiled inwardly at Draish’s scowl. “If you survive three, your wrongs shall be forgiven.”

“And my freedom?”

He knew the answer she sought, just as he knew he could not give it. “To Chardâch will you be sent, to toil in the great garden. It is forbidden for a thrall to return to Lampion. Guard! See she is taken to the under-caves of Batoras, and trained for battle. Be it so!” He watched as she was jerked to her feet, and half-shoved from the hall.

Tizón was relieved that as the petitions progressed, none were severe enough to merit the worst penalty. Some he assigned to hard labors. A dwarf was to be publicly flogged. Two ael were to be confined for a time in the gloomy *carcainic* beneath Nalôch, where Kéoathâch’s heat seeped through the stone walls to make breathing difficult, and forgotten prisoners were sometimes found desiccated beyond recognition. Slowly the hall emptied. Judgment Day was nearly done. The last speaker approached, his tall figure seething vermilion flames. Scorn shone in the maroon eyes as his gaze slid over the Tvashtar a moment before he bowed.

“Where is the victim?” Draish demanded.

“Cromoshor, she is dead. That thing there!” He pointed to a slumped figure. “That thing murdered my sister, pushing her into Baïsenlâch, holding her down, and smothering her flames. I speak for she that can speak no longer.”

“Stand forth accused!”

Tizón’s gut twisted as the figure stumbled towards the dais. Torn wings that might have

been silver trailed behind the rag-clad féyree. Dull white eyes almost invisible among mottled bruises gazed from a yellow face that confessed not the slightest shred of hope. She sank to her knees, staring at the first step. “How do you plead?”

For a long moment, the féyree remained silent. Then, without lifting her head, she whispered, “Guilty.”

Stunned, Tizón leaned forward. “You admit to murdering a fire daemon? You know the penalty?”

Her voice was muffled. “I know.”

She was not going to give him any out. A pulse pounded in his throat. “But why?” She did not answer.

Before he could prevent it, the guard cuffed her, knocking her over. “Answer the Tvashtar, thrall!”

Straining, as if every muscle hurt, she pushed back up to her knees. A thin trickle of blood leaked down her forehead from a cracked scab. “Come see your realm, oh Tvashtar Tizón.” Her soft voice was empty of emotion. “Come see the bad, come meet the truth. For those of us that live with the bad and the worse, we choose escape how and when we can.” She lapsed into silence.

Tizón saw Draish, Eshel and Saía gazing at him expectantly. She left him no choice. None at all. “Thrall, you are sentenced to death. You will be taken to Lôgaras, the Smoking Mountain, and sent into the burning passages of Traílias to be consumed by fire.” At least her death would come quickly, not the long drawn out suffering of Iômásk.

“And the Tvashtar shall be present to see the sentence carried out,” Draish purred.

“I have other duties to attend to!” Tizón fought the urge to scrape the smug look off Draish’s face.

“Oh, but you must,” Eshel intervened. “It is the Tvashtar’s duty to witness the death of any he condemns.” He released an oily smile, gesturing to the guard. “Take her away.”

The féyree staggered upright, gazing at him a final time. To Tizón’s utter dismay, she murmured, “Thank you.” Then, thrust along by the guard, she shuffled away.

“Judgment Day is concluded!” Draish clapped three times, emitting a cascade of sparks, the sound crackling about the hall. He bowed to Tizón before departing, followed by Eshel.

“My lord?” Saía stepped towards Tizón, one hand uplifted.

“Leave me!” His eyes strained for a glimpse of the féyree maid, but she was gone. Saía bowed, her lips thinned in anger, then turned and hastened out. The doors thudded shut, the deep groan echoing through Tizón like the heavy drumbeat of the féyree death march.

Chapter II

It was after mid-day when Danaí awoke. She savored the calm of the moment, feeling the weighty drag of her new amethyst wings, once again marveling that the Rites of Krisállys were already a day behind her. She had earned her wings; now she must advance to her Guild. But which one?

Today was one of rest after yester eve's Oísillon ceremonies that celebrated the release of their wings and the Rites' completion. Many of the new-fledged féyree still dozed under the wide leaf shadows of mallows and wood violets. With a yawn, she glanced around. Joson lay nearby, snoring softly, head pillowed on a birchkin. Damon was a little further off, awake, gazing dreamily up at a drooping willowherb's magenta flowers. She peered about, emerald eyes half-lidded against the bright sun and smiled as she saw legs sticking out of a few remaining pink foxglove blossoms – she too enjoyed sleeping in their fragrant blooms. Her new wings ached and itched a little. Movement near the trestle tables caught her eye; she saw Mentors and other féyree eating, some perched on the *Shebn's* gnarled oak roots, others relaxing along the nearby Trykle's cool mossy banks. With another yawn, she rose, stretched – a flash of slender silver in the sunlight – and nearly toppled backwards, unaccustomed to her wings' weight.

"Let me help you dearling," Triása chuckled, coming up and steadying her. "How do you feel?"

"Off balance and heavy," Danaí admitted, letting go of her aunt's arm, and leaning forward to counterbalance the weight. "When do they start to feel a part of you?"

"Not for a while." Smiling, Triása steered her niece towards the trestles. "You'll find them even more of a pain when you start flying practice morrowmorn. You'll discover muscles you didn't know you owned." She chuckled, then winked an eye as azure as the sky. "We are very generous with *numronbar* salve during this time."

"How much longer must we remain in the Dell?"

"Since Oísillon was held almost a lumna early because of this situation with Pook and Nonetre, you will be here another three sevendays, until *Verlúnasa*, when night and day are even – which was when Krisállys and Oísillon would have originally occurred. Your pod will continue magic training, and also go through Dream Calling Council to be confirmed to your guilds. After which the Rites will be formally concluded. You will actually be leaving early – flying practice traditionally comes after *Verlúnasa*."

"Aren't we supposed to go home to our dells?" There were several folk Danaí had missed seeing over the past five lumnas, and she wanted to show off her new wings.

"Yes, for a sevenday." Triása waggled a finger beneath Danaí's nose. "But I remind you that you are forbidden to speak of the Rites to your spryte friends. And though you may not believe me, you'll find it hard in some ways to talk with them. There's a rift between you now, as odd as that may sound."

"You said 'situation'. Auntie, surely Nonetre is more than that! That dreadful place, with thralls, no forest, only fire and dust." She shuddered, recalling her journey with Lady Argentyne and Toron. "Didn't the Dolmen summon the Warlords for the Council?"

Triása frowned, the fine tracery of lines deepening about her eyes. "First, remember they come as Guardians, not Warlords. It is common for them to accompany their Chief Táins. Only if war were declared would they assume that long-unused title, as is the duty of

each dell's Chief Guardian. And yes, Toron summoned them – at the Dolmen's command. The problem, my dear, is that not everybody is convinced Pook is a danger. He was most courteous yester eve. Hasty judgment is a dangerous mindset."

Danaí halted, head shaking in disbelief. "I am not hearing this! You *know* Pook – or Tvashtar Tizón as he now styles himself – is dangerous. Lady Argentyne showed this. Toron knows it. And what about the sendings?"

"First, none are clear on what they mean. Like all sendings, they are subject to interpretation. I do agree that to underestimate Pook is a risk. But after a thousand winters of peace, we are in no position to be the aggressors. And although I should not tell you this, Toron plans to bespeak the other Chief Guardians about the possible need for defense. While you may doubt it, the Dolmen is more of your mind than many others." She gave a dour smile at Danaí's grimace. "He mistrusts everything about Pook – but there are others who desire to learn more. You know that is the Féyree way – to decide through agreement, not mandate."

Danaí felt a shimmer of unease ripple through her silvered shoulders. "It feels all wrong, Auntie."

"Enough, sweeting." Triása's voice tightened with a hint of impatience. "Time to eat and replenish your strength." She gestured at the serving trenchers laden with seeds, early acorns, and elderberries. "Trust me – you'll need it! I will speak to Melítsa to bring you a green tunic; that silver one is only for ceremonies." Giving Danaí's arm a final squeeze, she hurried off, sun glinting on red hair and cobalt wings, vivid against her creamy coloring.

Loading her trencher, Danaí looked around for her podmates. She spotted Rhytha waving at her from where she sat chatting with Síddiqui under a purple *cura*, their pearl gray and amethyst skin a perfect compliment to the flower. Síddiqui's new wings were as blue as fresh-faceted sapphires, while Rhytha's were a soft mossy green.

"How did you do it, Danaí?" Síddiqui blurted, aqua eyes bright with interest under a touse of black hair.

"Do what?"

"Talk Rhytha through the Krisállys? She was smothering, then heard you inside her head."

Danaí hesitated, uncomfortable that Rhytha had spoken about the mind-meld. "I didn't want her to die; I was so afraid she would; you know nobody would have done anything. So I just started concentrating on her as hard as I could. Somehow we connected – maybe because we're friends. I don't know." She stuffed some seeds into her mouth to preclude further speech. Only the Mentors who had guided them through the Rites and her close friends knew about the mind-meld journey with Lady Argentyne. She wondered if that had made joining with Rhytha easier.

"You saved my life." Rhytha's topaz eyes glowed with the intensity of her feelings. "Lady Atelaí told me afterwards that she 'heard' you – and approved of what you did." Rhytha's freckled cheeks rounded with a broad smile. "She's amazing. You really should spend some time with her."

"By the Twins!" Síddiqui stuttered. "Lord Andámion and Lady Atelaí are the Most High féyree in Lampion. One doesn't just 'spend some time' with them!"

Still smiling, Rhytha shrugged, pushing back a stray strand of fiery red hair. "Titles don't mean anything when you think on it. It's what an individual does, their deeds and actions – that's what defines them." She sobered. "After all, think on the Dolmen's attempts to kill Danaí, even destroy the whole pod by sending us to Kyllgohr's lair. We'd have been ice

dragon tidbits if Danaí hadn't come up with that idea. He's supposed to be the Most High Loremaster of Féyree – do you really think he deserves to be?"

Síddiqui sighed. "I'm no Seer, but my gut says these Rites are just the beginning, not the end of the troubles."

Setting down her trencher, Danaí ran fingers through frowzy silver curls. "I agree. We all saw how Pook spellcast Ela and the others into Nonetre. Me, I think he put on a good act yester eve. Pook was once my best friend. Now..." she sighed sadly, "now I despise him and wouldn't trust him as far as I could spit."

A drum roll jerked their attention to the scarlet-flowered weathersign bushes. Mentor Óyon stood just before them, beating his tambour. "Council is called! Mentors, Chief Taíns and Guardians, come to the Skystone."

"Well, that leaves us out," Rhytha grumbled. "What do you think they're going to talk about?"

"Pook for sure. Triása told me plenty don't think he's any danger. How can they be so snail-brained?"

"They don't know Pook's intentions," Kerión remarked, ambling up along with Joson and Damon, their loaded trenchers threatening to topple. The three were a stark contrast to each other – orange, ivory and bronze, each with a matching thatch of black hair that had grown back since being hacked off at the start of the Rites. They sat down, careful not to spill anything. "So they have to chew it among themselves and figure out what to do."

Damon halted in his deft skinning of the soft fuzz from an acorn wedge. "After what happened to Ela and the others, could anyone doubt his intentions?" A note of incredulity nudged his voice higher. "Kerión, Pook is lord of the fire daemiani. Every Teaching warns us against daemiani of any kind. What's to discuss?"

With an impatient shrug, Kerión munched a redberry. "It just seems dumb to judge a situation before you know what's going on, that's all. The Lady wouldn't have let him attend Oísillon if he were a risk."

"Seems pointless to argue right now," Joson said, privately disagreeing with Kerión. "We'll hear about it soon. Aren't these sweetseeds excellent?" He applied himself to eating.

Danaí wished she could share his calmness.

* * * * *

Lord Andámion and Lady Atelaí stood before the Skystone, conversing with some of the Chief Taíns. Knotted about itself like the roots of some ancient tree, the metallic black Skystone seemed to consume light. Skald lore told it was the firestar sent by Lúnasa to herald the end of Sólón's terrible reign. Each Dolmen, the Most High Loremaster of Féyree, had dwelt within. An oval hollow, set slightly off center, marked the entry, and the Dolmen stood just within, observing the edginess rippling across faces. Finally, it stepped forth. Even in the mid-day warmth of late summer, it remained cloaked, the bone white of its skin barely visible from within the mud-brown cowl. Striking the butt of its oak staff three sharp cracks against a flat stone, it cried, "Council is convened."

The Lord and Lady assumed their seats on two polished white pebbles placed before the Skystone, the Dolmen standing to the Lord's right. The seven court Guardians took their stance behind, while eighteen Chief Taíns, two from each vale, settled before them in a half-circle. Mentors and Chief Guardians stood at the rear, several fanning their wings to cool themselves in the unseasonably sultry air. After all were settled, Lord Andámion rose.

Taller than most, with wings like beaten copper, his citrine eyes gazed a moment at the expectant faces, judiciously weighing his words. His oak-leaf green robe blended with

his skin, and his bronze shoulder-length hair was bound by a twined silver circlet. Upon this was set a large round emerald, green as new grass, scattering sparkles of sunlight. “Yesterday, as we gathered for the final Rites, the many strange incidents attending this Krisállys were recounted. The unexplained murder of Skald Yarbrough. The fire daemon’s brazen appearance. Lady Argentyne’s revelation, and her journey with Toron and Danaí to witness Pook crowned as Tvashtar Tizón, Firelord of Nonetre, whom all beheld yester eve. During a dance with Lady Atelaí, he did beseech permission to address this Council. And so we are to discuss his request and determine our course of action. Speak thy thoughts.”

Its voice icy with disdain, the Dolmen spoke first, as was its right. “Ye know that Pook seduced five fellow sprytes into Nonetre. Yester eve, he appeared with a guard – a flaunting of force. We trust him not. What reason have we to deal with fire daemiani – with any daemiani? Do not the Scrolls clearly state the dangers of doing so?”

“But Pook is not a daemon,” objected Eldrich Anoran of Kristál Glen. “He is a féyree. Should we not at least listen? If we deny any discourse, are we not winging to conclusions without knowing the facts?”

“By choosing to be the daemiani’s firelord, he has become one of them,” snapped Diestel, Tequestar Glen’s Chief Guardian. “Do not delude yourself otherwise. It is as the Dolmen says; the Scrolls explicitly forbid dealings with daemiani. What then is there to listen to?”

“If you do not know, how can you judge?” Anoran retorted, irritation roughening his voice. “And to my eyes, he did not appear transformed into a fire daemon. Simply a féyree, fully-fledged.”

“Without having completed the Rites – as you may recall,” Diestel shot back.

“Perhaps there are things he has to offer that could be of use to Lampion,” suggested Eldrich Treána of Darling Glen. Taléo, her fellow Chief Taín, stared at her dumbfounded. “Who is to say that what we have is truly sufficient? Just because he may have a different way does not mean it is wrong.”

The rancorous debate floundered about. Toron and Triása exchanged stunned looks, as Melarna whispered to Quenton, “Are they sun-touched? This is far more than just about his visit to Lampion.”

The lean amber Mentor shrugged. “The unknown wafts an allure that the known can not. It has been near a thousand winters since the Days of Dimness, when true fear stalked and starved all Lampion. Too comfortable have we become if there are those who would even consider such a possibility as not only acceptable, but reasonable.”

Listening to the arguing, Lady Atelaí tried to dismiss her unease. Elaborately braided sunbeam tresses formed an elegant backdrop to her intricate silver circlet twined with crystals and sapphires. Her crystal-like bodyglow wavered as she gave close attention. Her heart told her Pook bore danger to her folk, yet it was her duty as Lady of Féyree to follow their will. Such were the laws as scribed in the Scrolls of Atonement, which ensured no single féyree held control as Sôlon had. Her wings, the hue of sun-splashed water, shivered briefly as that name trampled among her thoughts; a shadow dimmed her vision, vanishing as Eldrich Maníchia’s voice shrilled.

“We can always choose to reject what he has to offer at any time! An open mind prevents mistakes. And should we not consult our own dells and vales? I know our folk in Tequestar Glen would expect it of us.”

A simmer of green light sizzled about the Dolmen’s staff. Its usually emotionless face was seamed with anger. “Are ye all gone addled? All that Pook will convey are hollow

promises, a pretty cloak hiding trouble.”

“Forgive me, Most High.” Eldrich Edigen of Mireer Vale’s apology for interrupting did not reflect in his red eyes. “But of what are you afraid? Pook seeks naught more than an audience.” Objections churned about his words.

Lord Andámion signaled for silence. “Our shadows have grown long during this exchange. With so much controversy, I shall ask we cast a vote. Let all among the Chief Táins and Chief Guardians who believe we should grant Pook audience raise thy right hand.” There was a rustle as hands surged high and remained lifted while both the Lord and Lady tallied.

With a note of surprise in her mellow voice, Lady Atelaí announced the count. “Fourteen favor. Thirteen do not. So. We will summon Pook to audience on Verlúnasa, when all are to return for the Rites’ conclusion. Ye may depart and rejoin thy vales until summoned for Dream Calling Council.” She observed how some faces were rigid with anger, while others smiled with anticipation.

Toron held himself so stiffly, he seemed more a spar of jade than a living thing. He was disconcerted at how many Chief Táins had expressed favor. Yet no Guardians had, and in this lay hope for the council he intended to call.

The Lord and Lady nodded at the Dolmen. “Council is concluded.” It spat each word out as if tasting something foul. Then it stalked into the Skystone.

* * * * *

Joson nudged Danaí. “They’re coming back. And Toron and Triása sure don’t look happy.” Along with Damon, Rhytha, and several other podmates, they peeked out from under the feathery golden ferns where they lazed, watching as the multi-hued crowd flew over or pushed through the weathersign bushes. Many broke off into clusters that moved away to more secluded flower clumps and grass tussocks.

“Atelya? What do you see?” Rhytha was staring at the maid’s misty eyes, normally the soft brown of a young deer. She reached out a hand to touch her, but hesitated, knowing it unwise to break a trance.

With a sharp breath, Atelya shook her head, marigold skin flushing dark orange. “I saw... the Dolmen holding forth the Dragon’s tear... silver beams... the air burning... but how can that be?” She blinked, sighed. “It’s fading. My Calling may be that of Seer, but I have no idea how to make sense of my visions.”

“You will,” Síddiqui reassured her. “We’ll be confirmed to our Guilds soon.”

“Which are you going to choose, Danaí?” Damon asked, idly twiddling a sliver of bark. “I’m easy. My Calling is Weaver – and I sure do want to be one! Best of all, I get to go home to Mireer Vale where the Weaver’s Guild is. But your Dream Council revealed both Healer and Charmer. You can’t do both at once.”

Danaí squished her heels into the pleasantly cool rust-hued moss. “I’m not sure, but I think Healer. Not that I don’t also want to be a Charmer, but I just feel the Healer Guild is where I belong.” Looking up, she was startled to encounter Joson’s concerned eyes.

“I’ll bet your aunt will have a fit if you don’t choose Charmer first, you know. Are you ready for that?”

“Jo’, why would you even think Aunt Triása wouldn’t support my choice?”

“Well, for starters she’s a Charmer herself and she’d be proud to have you follow in her wing beats. You’ve often said how she’s like a mother to you, having fostered you as *lirupai* for Second Season. And given your talents with wood folk and the silver fox in your Dream Council, my guess is she’s going to push you hard.”

“But our Callings are determined by Lúnasa and the Mother,” Rhytha put in, nettled at his insistence.

“And if you didn’t want to be a Skald? Then what would you do?”

Rhytha’s mouth opened, closed. She had never questioned her Calling. It felt so right. But what if she had disagreed – or, like Danaí, been faced with more than one choice?

“Well I, for one, am delighted with your decision.” Siddiqui beamed. “It’s nice to know I’ll have a friend’s shoulder to sob on when I’m making a fumble-fingered mess of herbs and flowers, and probably spellcasting the Guild Master right out of existence,” she added, drawing merriment from her friends.

“I am looking forward to being a Guardian,” Joson admitted, nibbling a scrap of *míyacan*.

“You’re big enough,” snorted Keríon, giving Joson a friendly dig in the shoulder. “You’d never make a Tracker. For that, you have to be slim like me.” He stood up to exaggerate his point, tripped over a pale yellow wingtip and with a yelp, fell on top of Joson.

“Oh, you’re definitely going to creep right up on all the wood folk,” Damon chortled. “And I’m not sure being orange is going to be the easiest thing to hide in blossom time.”

“No problem. We’ll learn all sorts of masking spells,” Keríon replied cheerfully, after he and Joson had untangled themselves. “My sire’s brother is a Tracker – and he’s as scarlet as oak leaves after frost. I’ve watched him vanish into a green bush between one blink and another. There’s ways to disguise how you look. You just wait. Someday, I’ll sneak up on you and scare your arm hair straight!”

Damon grinned suddenly. “Flying starts tomorrow! Can you believe it? We’re actually going to be flying!” He grew giddy with excitement. “Not needing a bird, but out on our own. Look out birds, here I come!”

“You be careful with those rainbow wings of yours,” Rhytha smiled, reaching out to pinch his cheek. “Remember Lady Atelái said you would see and do much in your lifetime. Don’t fall flat on your face as you flap.”

The triple-trill of a reed pipe interrupted their discussion about what flying would feel like. “Evenmeal!” Joson stood up. “Let’s go find out what happened at Council – after we eat of course.” He wobbled a moment, adjusting to the weight of his new wings, the slate blue of clouds before a storm.

“My dear Jo’,” Danaí smiled up at her friend as the little group ambled towards the trestles. “I will know that Lampion is in dire danger when your appetite is gone.”

He grinned down at her, ivory bodyglow shimmering brighter in the gathering gloaming. “And I will know our fair realm is in real trouble when you fail to make a joke about my appetite.”

* * * * *

“So, which Mentor do we approach to find out what happened at Council?” Carrying full trenchers and mugs of honey mead, Danaí and Joson surveyed the scattered clusters of féyree.

Joson glanced about. “Maybe Melítsa? She’s over there with Melarna, and both have stood up for you.”

“May we join you?” Danaí asked courteously, as they approached. She still had to get used to their no longer being clad in the brown Mentor robes of the Rites.

With a sideways glance at Melarna, Melítsa answered. “For what purpose?”

Her reply bristled with hostility, although Danaí suspected it wasn’t actually directed at her and Joson. But they were obviously unwelcome. Joson somehow managed to miss the

less than subtle hint.

“We had hoped to ask you about Council, if permitted.”

“It is not.” Mélarña was curt. “Were it so, the Dolmen would have invited you.”

“Forgive our impertinence.” Joston bowed, not quite covering his surprise. “We will eat elsewhere.”

“Something must have really warped at Council,” Danaí muttered as they hurried away.

“You think so?”

“Now don’t you take that tone with me, Jo’. We didn’t do anything wrong, and you know it.”

“I know, I know. It’s just rudeness always sets me off.”

“Let’s find somewhere peaceful to eat. Hopefully the others will have had more luck.”

* * * * *

The purple-gray of gloaming was harvesting night’s shadows to deepen the darkness when Damon, Rhytha and Síddiqui joined them at their favorite mallow, its magenta flowers now furled. Their bodyglows shimmered softly, like dim patches of rainbow, but Danaí could see from their brightened eyes that they carried tidings.

Rhytha plopped down beside Danaí, shaking her head. “To say the Mentors and Eldrich were close-lipped would be an understatement. You’d have thought we were asking them to reveal loremaster magic or something.”

“I even tried to pry something out of my Chief Taíns.” Síddiqui grumbled. “I figured Eldrich Symnon or Maníchia would at least speak to me as a member of Tequestar Glen. Getting a stick to talk would have been easier.”

Damon glanced about to make sure none were near. His copper eyes glowed. “I couldn’t get anything out of anyone either. So I snuck into that hawthorn bush near the Shehn and waited. Chief Guardian Shadia came by – she’s from my vale – and she was talking to Ilynei, Ardmoor Vale’s Chief Guardian. They were so intent, they never sensed I was there – which is unusual.” He paused. “You’re not going to like this. You know Pook asked for an audience with the Council? When put to vote, enough were in favor that he’s being invited back.”

“You’re joking! After all that has happened?” Danaí was aghast.

Rhytha poked her. “Hush up a moment, will you? Let him finish.” Danaí bit her lip.

“So Shadia said Toron approached her afterwards, and wants to hold a Guardian Council morrow late-day. She agreed, asking if all the others would be there, but he didn’t know yet. Then they got to talking about how many of the Chief Taíns were curious about what Pook has to offer. But it was close – it passed by only one vote, and Ilynei said she’d bet her finest *dirq* neither Lord Andámion nor Lady Atelaí were pleased about it.”

“Scary, you ask me.” Síddiqui absently chewed her fingernails. “It’s as if they don’t believe Pook is trouble.”

“Or don’t want to,” Rhytha added softly. “Think of how the Dolmen refused to heed Danaí – I doubt he believes anything you say, even now. Keep an eye out for that one, Danaí. Just because the Rites are over doesn’t mean it’s stopped thinking you’re a risk, especially given your old friendship with Pook.” Her brow puckered. “Damon, did Shadia or Ilynei say anything about the Dolmen?”

He nodded, imitating Shadia’s raspy voice. “Could you believe how angry he was? For a moment he looked like he wanted to turn Anoran to stone when he came out in support of the meeting.” His voice sinking to its usual huskiness, he added, “Sounds like the Dolmen’s

got bigger problems than Danaí to deal with right now.”

“Good thing,” Danaí muttered. “I don’t need to be constantly watching over my shoulders.”

“Hsst!” Rhytha turned towards the creak of a grass blade bending. “Somebody’s coming.”

It was Mentor Tarlokyn. His smile seemed forced. “Much as I’m sure you young folk would like to babble until dawnshine, training resumes morrowmorn. A good night’s rest is important. And eat heartily – although I’m sure I need not impress that upon you, Joson.” His smile relaxed as Joson rolled his eyes to his friends’ giggles. “To rest all.” He nodded then moved on towards another group.

They settled down, Danaí pillowing her head on her birchkin-stuffed rucksack. Shortly after the sprytes’ return from Glaceturm, she had snuck off in the silent time before dawnshine to bury the six remaining dragon’s tears she had garnered during the Beast Rite. She had secreted those, along with the gold flake she had found in the Jharma, beneath a redberry bush by the trail to Silver Lake. Its shiny berries would help to find the bush in winter, while its tortured roots and sharp-spiked leaves would discourage most wood folk from digging. Gazing up at the star-strewn sky and Lúnasa’s glowing full face, her mind skittered about like wind-spun petals. Healer or Charmer? Pook – invited back! Learning to fly... the stars blurred as she sank into sleep’s furry darkness.

Feeling uncomfortably warm, she rolled over, opening her eyes. She was in an unfamiliar chamber, thick with shadows that dodged about in the dim light of guttering torches and an open hearth’s orange embers. Rumpled beneath her were heavy swaths of cloth; her legs lay under a partially tossed aside coverlet. From behind came a sleeper’s gentle even breaths. She sensed a jumble of feelings – anger, confusion, sorrow – but from where?

There came a creak, loud in the silence. A sliver of dull yellow light appeared in a wall, widened, vanished. She watched as a hunched figure, outlined by a faint shifting gray flicker like the glimmer of a nearly dead ember, limped over, looked down at her – and gave a start of surprise. “My lord, you are awake?”

“My mind burns with many thoughts and questions, Eshel. Among them now is what brings you into my private chambers in the dark, unannounced?”

That voice! Pook? With a shock, Danaí realized she was seeing through his eyes. But how could they be joined? Had he been thinking of her as she had of him? Could he do the same to her? Quickly, recalling how the nyad had cautioned that a mind-meld could be sensed, she tightened her thoughts in hope of giving no hint of her presence.

Eshel seemed to shrink into himself before replying in a breath just above a whisper. “I knew the Lady Saía was in your chamber, and as it is so late, did not wish to knock and disturb her.”

Danaí now recognized his voice – the one that had announced to the seething fire daemiani crowds that her friend was the prophesied Tvashtar Tizón. He reminded her of a clawcat, clad in a tense readiness to pounce. Yet outwards he seemed an old, warped thing. His smile did not reach his eyes – and she sensed that Tizón knew this.

“I repeat. Why have you come?”

“I have but a few moments ago received a message requesting my presence at Lalách. I most humbly ask that you waken early to journey with me, for you have oft’ expressed a desire to become more involved with such duties. We have the new crystal, Taskmaster Syar has some ideas, and I would have you be a part of the decision-making.”

“A part of...?” Tizón sat upright, bringing his eyes level with Eshel’s. “As Tvashtar, is

not my word law?”

Danaí was intrigued by the coolness of Eshel’s reply. “Only under certain circumstances, my lord. Perhaps I have not made this clear. Your word, without doubt, carries the greatest weight. But in those situations that affect Nonetre to high degree, it is the Cromosh that determines the final outcome.”

“Ah, yes. The Cromosh. Thirteen fading fire daemiani cozy in their safe, familiar ways. Your ways, Eshel. Not mine.”

Eshel stiffened, flames brightening. “My lord, forget not that I am the head of the Cromosh. How can they be other than who they are? They are not unwilling to change – but like all wise leaders, they are cautious. Why do you mock this?”

“Eshel, let us understand one another. I left Lampion because it is a realm mired in old ways. Old traditions, old thoughts, old ideas. Take our Rites. Sprytes dying for no reason, when a simple dirq slash could release their wings, as you did for me. We have spoken of the Dolmen – one convinced its word is the final ruling. Lampion is a realm content with itself – yet there is so much opportunity, so many ways to make life easier. We have both agreed that we can make Lampion flower anew. Yet when I am forced to suffer the sayings of those doddering oafs, I wonder if they can see beyond their own noses? Who, then, is to make this vision you and I share come to pass?”

Eshel released a lean smile, eyes smoldering. “My lord, we have an old saying that green wood can be burned; it just takes a little longer to catch flame. We can not force the Cromosh; but we can persuade and nudge them along our path until they believe they walk it of their own accord. Let them see – with deeds more than words – that their Tvashtar’s utmost desire is the betterment of Nonetre. To this end, do not impale yourself upon every blade; rather acquiesce when it serves your purpose. You may not always agree – but there will be a time to change such things as your power strengthens. We both know our goal. Bend your mind towards that, and we shall see it succeed. But you must be patient, lest you build walls instead of breaking them down.” He stared intently at the Tvashtar.

Tizón sighed, suddenly tired. His head ached again. He had to acknowledge the wisdom of Eshel’s words. “You speak wisely. Let us plan how we shall, as you say, persuade the Cromosh, on our journey to Lalâch.”

Bowing, Eshel backed away. “My lord, it shall most certainly be as you command.” The fissure of light cracked the wall, leaving behind darkness. Tizón lay back.

I must leave, Danaí thought, afraid he would become aware of her presence. I must wake myself up. She focused her mind on the Great Dell, felt Tizón’s thoughts dissipating. Then it was as if she were swimming up through syrupy, clinging waters, dragging herself out of the deepest dream. She opened her eyes, heart pounding. A distant jug-a-room of frogs along the Trykle thrummed soothing reassurance. I need to talk to Triása, she thought. If I can ever catch her when she’s not in the middle of everything and everyone.

She rose, moving silently. Only star shine lit the Dell. Except for the frogs, the night was quiet. The cool damp air raised bumps on her skin, and she muttered a warming spell for comfort. Restless, she ambled towards the Trykle, proceeding cautiously among the trees’ deep shadows. She paused, hearing the faintest whisper of voices over the creek’s muted mutter. In a ray of starlight, she beheld two féyree kneeling by the stream. Each scooped water into basins that glinted silver, then held them high with a murmur of words, after which they carefully poured the contents into watersacks. Creeping closer, she recognized them – Triása and Nacci.

“Thank you for your aid, my friend.” Nacci stoppered her sack, laying it beside the other

two, the water sloshing softly. “Starshine water soothes troubled minds, and helps in my Healer work. The best comes from here.”

“Why is that, do you think?” Triása rose and stretched, cobalt wings gray in the night.

“My guess is the Shehn. It is our most sacred tree, and its roots wander widely. Will you have one of the sacks? The wood folk sometimes need calming when you treat them.”

“Gladly. We’ll send them back to Goldyn Vale with our Chief Taíns when they depart.”

“Troubled these Rites have been,” Nacci sighed. “Especially for Danaí. Ever does the Dolmen watch her. Were not so many other problems burgeoning, I would counsel you to place guard on her.”

“There is, after a fashion. Toron feels the same way, and he and several other Mentors, including Melítsa, Melarna and Quenton, keep an eye on her much of the time – or on the Dolmen.”

Nacci shook her head, rising. “It is our highest loremaster, Triása. Master of spells we can not conceive. One does not simply ‘keep an eye’ on the Dolmen. You know it fears her. I am convinced that when it heard her kryptic from the Truthing Well, it understood more than it acknowledged. And the Lady Argentyne silvering her shoulders? To the Dolmen, she is change personified. Dangerous change.”

“And what would you have us do, Nacci?” Triása concealed her apprehension as she started to shoulder a watersack. It slipped and thumped on the sand as she spun about, grasping her dirq hilt. “Who goes?”

Silently cursing the leaf that had crackled underfoot, Danaí slipped from behind the tree root, walking over. “Just me, Auntie. I couldn’t sleep and was wandering about, when I heard your voices.” What should she say?

Nacci stared intently at her a few moments, frowning. “You seem disturbed. Speak.”

How did she know, Danaí wondered, feeling at the same time relieved. “I had a strange dream....”

“This is not good,” Triása muttered, after Danaí concluded her tale. “Somehow you mind-linked to Pook. Has this happened before?”

“Once.” She squirmed a bit under Triása’s gaze. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you. It’s been so crazy. We were in a cave in the Rymples. But in that dream, we actually spoke. I don’t think he knew I was there this time.”

“Wonderful.” Nacci groaned. “The Dolmen will have an absolute fit when it hears about this.”

“Do we have to tell?” Danaí’s stomach clenched with dismay.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Triása patted her shoulder absently. “Anything to do with Nonetre must be conveyed to not only the Dolmen, but also the Lord and Lady. They have commanded it so.”

“Do you think it will change their decision to invite Pook? Realize he means trouble for Lampion?” The shake of Triása’s head dashed Danaí’s hopes.

“No, because it does not change what they already know. Come. We must return to the Dell.”

“Her having such a dream will further rankle the Dolmen,” Nacci advised. “And so let us speak only before all three, for the Lady Atelaí has a calming way about her; none other has her influence over the Dolmen. If you will take my counsel, let us not bring Danaí. If they wish her, they will summon her.”

“Thank you!” Danaí’s appreciation was so heartfelt, the other two had to laugh. Off to

the east they heard the faintest warble of a sleepy bird.

“Dawnshine is not far off, dearling.” Triása gave her niece a gentle push. “Try for a little sleep. You’re in for a very busy day.”

* * * * *

Danaí awoke to the mornmeal reed pipe summons, relieved her nap had been dreamless. Rising, she glanced around, seeing few Mentors. She started towards the trestles, but the smell of food knotted her stomach, and she took only a mug of blackberry juice. Puffy gray clouds were clumped overhead – the day promised humid.

“You need to eat,” Rhytha reminded her, as Danaí joined them. “Here, have one of my elderberry chunks.”

Nibbling on the purplish berry, Danaí was surprised at how nervous she felt. The Mother knows I’ve flown birdback. Why such worry? Yet it took all her concentration to force the food down, especially as it appeared not to want to stay in her stomach.

“Pod, attend to me!” Mentor Alamaí stood a short distance from the trestles, Mentor Tamilyn at her side. “Gather by the Shehn after mornmeal.” She smiled at the eager faces, knowing there were about to be some surprises.

“It’s going to take forever to learn to fly if there are only two Mentors teaching us,” Kerión grumbled as he caught up to Danaí’s little group. She had begun to suspect he was sweet on Rhytha.

“Damon, what’s the matter?” Rhytha asked. “You’re so quiet.”

“Ah, I was just thinking about Elánoria.” He kicked at a seed hull. “If my half-sister hadn’t been such a complete fog brain and gone off with Pook, she’d be here learning to fly. I still can’t believe she was such a dim.”

Danaí had to suppress a surge of anger. “You know Pook spellcast to lure them to Nonetre.”

Damon gave a sad bit of a smile. “Yes and no. Only after they agreed did he do that thing with their wrists. So in large part, they went of their own choice. That’s what I just don’t get.”

“Yes and no,” Joson echoed. “Yes, all five were sick of the Rites – who wasn’t? And Ela was sweet on Pook. No, don’t stick your tongue out – she told Rhytha so. But remember Danaí couldn’t talk? If that wasn’t magic, I don’t know what is. Something – or someone – helped lure them in.”

Shaking his head, Damon said, “I didn’t hear anything.”

“Oh, please!” Joson snorted. “Magic is largely in the mind. Have you forgotten how Mentor Tarlokyn lectured on that point to Pook when we were spellcasting féyree dust?”

I wish I could tell them about that dream, Danaí thought, as they ambled along. But I don’t know Kerión that well. Ahead loomed the Shehn, the great oak’s massive branches casting welcome shade. Already its rustling leaves had a burnished cast, hinting at autumn. The two Mentors waited near the knotted roots, and gestured they be seated.

“You will remember that prior to Oísillon, we covered how your wings would feel and the basics of flight,” Alamaí began. “But as with all skills in life, it is one thing to be taught, another to do. Although flying looks simple, I assure you that it is anything but. I can guarantee there will be many sore muscles.” She smiled. “The Healers have prepared plenty of numronbar.”

The pod glanced at each other. Was flying really going to be that difficult?

“So. Dull as this may seem, our first step is to flap.” Tamilyn gave his crooked smile at their disappointed faces. “What, you think you just leap and fly? Muscles need to be

developed. Stand and space yourselves apart by lifting arms and touching fingertips. Remember that your wings are no wider or taller than the full reach of your arms. In this way you can quickly judge whether you have safe passage through a gap.”

“Now raise your wings,” Alamaí instructed. “Hold them up for a count of thirty, then lower them – slowly.”

Danaí was startled at how heavy her wings felt after a few moments, dragging hard on her shoulders, tugging on her neck. All around, she heard grunts and hard breathing. She started to lean forward to offset the weight.

“No!” Alamaí exclaimed, passing nearby as she moved among the seventeen podmates. “That is a bad habit that will throw you off balance when you must raise and lower your wings quickly.”

By the time Tamilyn reached thirty, everyone’s faces were flushed. “Now again. Ten more times. I will count.” Both Mentors prowled about, correcting posture, checking to make sure wings were fully extended.

“Uhhh, we’re in trouble,” Rhytha groaned as they started the fifth lift. The sun climbed, adding its warmth to already overheated bodies. Completing the tenth lift, they stood panting, smearing sweat from their foreheads.

“A short rest,” Alamaí called, as several smiling Mentors approached bearing full watersacks. “Sip sparingly, lest the next effort makes you wish your stomach was empty.”

“By the Twins, I’m already hungry,” Josen grumbled. “And mid-meal isn’t anytime soon.”

Despite her aching shoulders, Danaí laughed. “And now we finally understand why there are few fat féyree. If raising and lowering our wings makes us this hungry, imagine how famished we’ll be once we’re actually flying!”

“Weren’t you the one in such a rush to fly?” Rhytha teased Damon, as her friend eagerly un-stoppered the watersack and took a deep swig, before handing it along.

“I could drink the whole thing,” he sighed, eyes following the sack as he massaged his left shoulder. “You wonder if the manylegs have the same problems. Or birds.”

“No question, they do.” Danaí stretched, trying to loosen the kinks in her neck. “You’ve seen how new-fledged birds start with short hops? Think of the unlucky ones that fall from the nest. If a Charmer doesn’t find them in time to summon the mother, they almost never survive. Triása jokes that spring is bird-saving season.”

“Why bother?” Kerión wiped his lips with the back of his hand. “You can’t save them all.”

“Even if you can only save some, isn’t that what’s important?”

“Well, I mean, why is it our responsibility to take care of other folk? They don’t take care of us.”

As if seeing him for the first time, Rhytha gave a disappointed frown. “You’re funning, right? Don’t you fly birdback? Don’t birds serve as messengers for your vale? Haven’t you spent any time with the wood folk?”

Flustered by her sharp-tongued barrage, Kerión said, “You’re right. I hadn’t considered that. But I’ve never had to rescue them. We’ve just sort of gotten along.”

“Didn’t part of your Teachings involve time with the Charmers?” Josen queried. “We had to learn basic greetings, and help with the wood folk. I once assisted Charmer Ídria with a jay whose wing broke dodging a hawk.” Kerión was saved from further embarrassment by Tamilyn’s summoning shout.

“And now we will continue to work on your wing strength with flapping,” the Mentor

announced. “I sincerely doubt that I will have to persuade you it will be harder than it looks.”

“It’s going to be a very long day,” Síddiqui grumbled.

* * * * *

By evenmeal, when the two Mentors dismissed them, the pod was one continuous groan. “I’m almost not hungry,” Josen muttered as they trudged towards the trestles, wings slumped. “I’ve got muscles I didn’t even know I owned – and all of them hurt!”

“I feel like somebody braided my back muscles and pulled them too tight.” Danaí tried to massage the knot under her right wing. “Ooooooh, Rhytha, that feels so good.” She groaned as her friend began to knead a tender spot.

“Here come the Healers!” Damon pointed at the approaching group, lead by Nacci. “And unless I miss my guess, those basins are going to be filled with numronbar. Catch my dust!” He sprinted ahead.

“Where did he find that energy?” Rhytha wondered, staring after him bemusedly. “I could no more run right now than fly. Just walking is a challenge.” Soon the air was filled with the pungent, eye-watering stink of the numbing salve accompanied by moans of relief as the Healers rubbed it in.

Afterwards, Danaí and her friends settled with their trenchers in an open space well clear of the ebb and flow of hungry féyree. A moist breeze laden with the faintly smoky scent of autumn mumbled around the Dell, bobbing the fading flowers and tugging free a scattering of birch leaves that swirled away like giddy féyree, flashing gold in the westering light.

“I have to admit I’m ready to go home,” Rhytha said, propping herself on her elbows after she had finished eating. “It will be nice to be among familiar folk, not always worrying about the next Teaching.”

Josen halted, a sweet-dot of hardened honey halfway to his mouth. “You think being in a guildhall is going to be all sunbeams and sipping dew? We’re going to be learning forever is my guess.”

“Well, at least we won’t have to deal with wraiths and dragons in our guildhalls,” Damon put in cheerfully.

“Actually, I had a strange dream last night,” Danaí began, telling of the dark chamber.

“Who in the name of the Mother is Eshel?” Damon demanded.

“He’s the one Lady Argentyne called an ‘evil shadow’, and the fire daemiani hailed as their Herald. I have a feeling he’s like the Dolmen – in more ways than one.”

“What harsh words.” Rhytha shuddered. “Lalách. Cromosh. As if somebody were gargling. I can just tell the Dolmen must have loved hearing about this.”

“Thank the Twins you weren’t summoned to the Skystone,” Damon said. “Maybe Lady Atelaí was able to get the Dolmen to see some sense, and that having a dream isn’t your fault.”

“It just sounds bad,” Josen griped. “There’s something creepy about all this. Like a webber waiting in the shadows to sneak up and nip you. And yet the Council is inviting him here. Barmy, if you ask me!”

“The Guardians sure didn’t want to,” Damon said. “Which reminds me – weren’t they supposed to have their Council today? I don’t see any of them about.”

* * * * *

Toron had chosen a quiet place on the Dell’s east side not far from the Skystone that still enjoyed shreds of sunlight, yet was clear of any bushes that could hide interested ears.

He wished Triása could attend, but there would be things discussed meant only for Chief Guardians, and he could not bend his guild's rules. He wondered how many would respond to his summons.

Lavender wings flickering, mist grey Shadia flitted in, her slender figure trailed by Gliffshado Glen's Tallac, unusual in that his lean figure was dark green from head to toe to wingtip. Toron scanned for others, and was rewarded with Ilynei and copper-winged Diestel who asked, as he alighted, "Only five? And the other four?"

"The sun has not yet sunk below the Shehn's topmost branches," Toron replied. "We shall wait until then."

"Forgive my tardiness," Áliya called as she slipped from among the stems of some tall grasses. Her beige skin and taupe wings had allowed her to blend perfectly. Beside her strode Teril, taller even than Toron.

"Firebaugh and Kristál." Toron ticked off the dells on his fingers. "That leaves Rymple and Darling. Have any heard if they would attend?"

Teril frowned, sapphire eyes glowing in his ice-white face. "Pazin bespoke me earlier, and disliked that we planned to meet. He was unsure and said Maílyn felt likewise, in particular since our Guild Master Lord Andámion did not call this council. They deemed attendance as by choice, not mandate."

"But any guild can meet among themselves at any time. That is their right." Shadia looked surprised. "Since when is such a meeting questionable?"

"Witness the deep rifts among the Chief Táins." Diestel shrugged. "Sides were being taken, and such breeds caution, even suspicion."

"Much as I wish all were here, let us commence." Toron took a deep breath. "And let this be a Council of the Warlords." There was a flicker of brightened eyes. "None here voted in favor of Nonetre. I would ask your reasons."

Teril and Tallac spoke almost in unison. "They are daemiani."

"All our Teachings warn us against them," Ilynei added, silver hands prodding the air to emphasize her points. "But beyond that, consider that they have succeeded in piercing the barrier between daemensions. I would wager there is more a-wing than simply Tízón's request for an audience."

"Toron, could Danaí's improper use of fire magic on her Sojourn have breached the barrier?" Tallac's violet eyes darkened as he spoke. It was a dangerously laden question, and all knew it.

Well aware his reply would impact their council's outcome, Toron was blunt. "No, I do not. While she most assuredly erred, and attracted a fire daemon in doing so, I now suspect the barrier has been breached many times, likely for longer than she has lived. Think of those who are believed to be among 'the lost.'"

"Who says the lost are in Nonetre?" Tallac challenged.

Nettled, Toron smothered his irritation. "On my journey with the nyad, I myself saw Amíra, once of Goldyn Vale, thrall to a fire daemon. She disappeared over twenty winters past. Even the Dolmen declared Pook among the lost, betraying that it knew of such breaches, for it was not surprised."

"But those who are lost have gone there," Shadia objected. "No daemiani have come here – until now."

"That we know of," Ilynei argued. "At the very least they have been watching us. And now that I think on it, is not the Ringwall magic, set before the Rites begin, to protect the sprytes? Against what? Or the Mentors Circle set during certain magic training? Could this

not indicate the Dolmen knows more than it shares?”

“Yet prior to Danaí, do any know of daemiani entering Lampion?” Áliya circled back to the central question.

“I have reason to think so.” Teril rubbed his jaw, looking uncomfortable. “All know how we hew crystals from High Reaches, to be hauled to the glen and carved. Kristál Guild Master Naomi told me that she suspects some pilferage. Yet when she bespoke Eldrich Anoran and Indamia, neither seemed concerned. I gave little thought to it. Until this Mid-Summer’s Eve. We were at revel – you know how the goldenvine dew flows and the warm darkness lures many couples into the shadows. I was among them, not being on duty. We climbed to a small nook, not far from a shatter clearing, where crystals are first rough-hewn and freed from their stone trappings. When I later awoke, my partner was gone. I could not say what had disturbed me. Then came a faint clink from the clearing. Creeping among shadows, I glimpsed a wavering light behind some tall stones. It flared a moment, then was extinguished. I scented fading smoke. Hearing familiar voices, I sought a spot from which to observe. Two spoke, cloaked shadows among the star sparks that reflected off the scattered crystal shards.

“A good night to meet. Few remain awake. Tsaras was most pleased with the crystal.”

“Aye, Tokan, and I am most pleased with the red gold.” Amryn fingered a bundle. “With this added to what I have already received, I can soon bring all to the goldsmythes and have a torque wrought that should finally win the heart of my haughty Lithia.”

“Do you not worry that Guild Master Peliyoq will question whence it came?”

Amryn snorted. “Who says I would be fool enough to approach the Guild Master? Little Niemira long has enjoyed my visits and would most gladly do anything I ask. I shall tell her it is a gift – but not for whom, of course.”

“Are you not curious as to why Tsaras needs those crystals? They have taken many large ones.”

“As if it matters to me.” Amryn started down the path out of the clearing. “So long as I receive gold for my efforts. But come. Dawnshine is not far off, and we must be in our bowers. Caution, always.”

“I ducked into a shadowed cleft,” Teril continued, “as they descended towards Kristál Glen.”

“What said the Chief Táins when you told this tale?” Toron asked.

“They summoned both fey, who insisted my imagination confused dreams with reality, perhaps from too much goldenvine dew! Worse yet, each brought forth a witness who confirmed they were together the whole night.”

“And the Eldrich believed them? Over a Guardian?” Diestel’s amber face creased with disgust.

“They accepted the explanations, but aside promised to keep watch on both. Nothing further has been said.”

“And what, pray tell, gives you reason to believe they met with a fire daemon?” Tallac’s slight sneer made clear he thought Teril’s tale overblown.

“The smell of smoke; the flickering light – and that Tsaras is not a name known among any of the vales,” Teril retorted. “I sent queries to each dell, and there is no Tsaras among us. Nor is there another way to leave the shatter clearing except by flying, which I would have seen. So tell me who else they met with?”

“I believe it was a daemon.” Shadia scowled. “This bodes trouble. Secret meetings for what purposes?”

“Even more so,” Ilynei added, “it proves they are indeed crossing. Then why would the Dolmen not have summoned the high loremasters to seal the barrier anew?”

“Likely because it has gleaned that the daemiani have learned how to pierce the magic, and that to seal the barrier, which requires great use of spellcasting energy, is at best only a temporary solution,” Diestel offered.

Inwardly, Toron felt relieved. They had moved beyond blaming Danaí. He forbore to note that Teril’s tale had occurred after her incident. Whether Danaí had been the nut that snapped the branch no longer mattered. “If we are all agreed that the daemiani can cross, then what stance shall we take when Tizón comes to Council?”

“What choice have we but to wait and see the outcome?” Diestel paced restlessly. “To violate the rules of hospitality would be construed as an open act of aggression. Not knowing what Tizón wants – nor what his daemiani may be capable of – I counsel caution.”

Ilynei nodded. “Let me add to your wise words. Caution, yes. But let us still come dirq-girded and armed with spears of ceremony. And let us don the purple cloak. So shall Tizón not fail to see that we stand as Warlords, ready to protect our folk against all treachery.”

“And what of Pazin and Maílyn?” Áliya asked. “They will wonder at our attire.”

“Let one of us meet with them, and tell of our decision,” Teril suggested.

“I was not aware that we had yet all agreed to this course of action.” Tallac crossed his arms, scowling.

Toron kept his temper in check. He had never liked the burly Guardian, but like had nothing to do with being a guild member. They needed Tallac on their side. “You speak fairly. Let us show hands if we agree. Let those who do not, share their concerns.” All but Tallac raised a hand.

“I will agree only if we take another step,” he said. “None have asked what happens if Tizón does more than talk. As Guardians, it is our duty to anticipate, not just react. What is our plan?”

Glad he had held his tongue, Toron nodded at Tallac to continue.

“It is given that we must protect our Chief Taíns. The Lord and Lady’s Guardians are sworn to protect them. Beyond that, let all seek to kill Tizón. To lose their Tvashtar, if they are like most folk, would render them as ants without a leader. Dazed. Scattered. At least long enough that the Dolmen may secure the barrier.”

“And those that accompany him?” Shadia asked.

“Daemiani or féyree, they are traitors to Lampion. All should be killed.”

Killed. The word hung like a soiled cloud in the withering light. The Guardians glanced uneasily at each other. Each knew their duty was to become Warlord in times of battle. But war had long ago become an empty word. The idea of murdering a féyree was shocking. Only Tallac seemed unperturbed.

“It is agreed then, as Tallac says?” Toron saw all hands were raised. “Good. I will bespeak Pazin and Maílyn this gloaming.” He hesitated. “And may it not come to war.” At least not until we discover what lies behind all these bits and bracken, he thought, and are better prepared to defend ourselves. “Another point. I believe we need to be extra vigilant about the Great Dell. Although you will soon return to your vales, I would ask you to each send a Guardian to patrol the Dell’s perimeter and truce zone, to ensure wise eyes watch both day and night.”

“An excellent suggestion,” Tallac concurred. “I shall send Kalys from Gliffshado. He has been here not long ago, you may recall – he brought High Skald Yarbrough that ill-fated day.”

“A good choice.” Toron nodded. “And as there are no maidens to distract him,” he added, grinning as Tallac emitted a ribald laugh, “I know he will perform his duties properly.”

As the others flew away, Teril approached Toron. “A moment, if you will. Perhaps I should have spoken before all, but clearly Tallac doubts me; I would not fracture our delicate agreement. I swear on the Scrolls that it was a fire daemon. For one, gold is not found in the High Reaches. Amryn’s amassing so much proves numerous meetings. He is not well-liked in Kristál; there is a sour energy about him. And it is well known that unguarded spellcasting can attract undesired attention; sprytes are supposed to be taught this when they learn fire magic. But what says Amryn did not choose to attract such attention?”

“Well said. But even if deliberate, I doubt that this exchange is an idea of his making. But of what use could these crystals be? They are beautiful, especially when carved and shaped. But beyond that? It baffles me.”

“And me.” Teril flared his wings and sprang high, waiting for Toron to join him. “And I dislike mysteries.”

* * * * *

An egg-shaped Lúnasa surged above the trees, casting a wraith-like glow on the cloud tendrils twisted among the stars, and illuminating the clearing behind the great Shehn with a confusing weave of silvery light and branch shadows. The clustered podmates glanced uneasily at where the Dolmen stood among the Mentors. Nearby, three tall foxfire torches had been set in the ground to form a half circle around four féyree.

As she watched the Dolmen uncowl, Danaí felt a prickle of unease ache her shoulders. Staring at its skin that, unlike other féyree, emitted no bodyglow, she remembered how once she had honored it as the Most High, warranting unquestioning allegiance. Now, she suspected its every action. Just because of things that I didn’t ask to happen to me, she thought. Never again will I accept that because somebody is ranked higher than I and says ‘it’s right’ or ‘because’, it is so. One must make their own judgments based on facts, not solely on others’ opinions.

“Tonight ye will dance the Shadow Dance,” the Dolmen announced, after a handclap for silence. “Shadows represent both danger and power. More often than ye can imagine, ye will be in the dark, facing difficulties and troubles that will test thy wits. This eve, ye commence the diversion spells, among those remaining magics and skills ye are to learn before ye depart. Learn well, for truce zone or no, there are wood folk who will eat ye without a taste of remorse and much licking of jowls. The Shadow Dance combines cunning with magic. Ye know that in the dark, thy bodyglows reveal ye. Yet there be a way to dim so as to be nigh invisible. We give ye the Dimming spell. Listen closely. *Fayblay looyermóy. Grísaymon pócolor.*” The Dolmen repeated the spell twice. “Now Mentor Illiaí will show how to invoke the spell.”

Like a scrap of sunlight, Illiaí was easy to see in the gloom. “I will demonstrate the motions. Then I will add the words, and you shall behold its power.” Wrapping arms about her torso, she hugged her wings close, before crying out the spell while twirling about so fast she was a blur. There came a collective gasp from the pod as she dimmed to the color of faded foxfire. She stepped into a silvery patch of Lúnasa’s light – and vanished.

“How do you regain your bodyglow?” Sóhain called out.

“Reverse spin,” came Illiaí’s voice, several feylengths from where they thought she was. “While saying, *Allumaymóy!*” She reappeared in all her sunny glow.

“And now it gets even more interesting,” Toron announced, stepping clear of the other Mentors. “Night flying is discouraged because of hunters such as owls. Not that you

shouldn't fly if that will get you out of reach – which is another Teaching. But there are times flying is not the safest choice. Remember that motion is the surest way to attract any hunter's attention. Instead, you may confuse them with a shadow dance. Tarlokyn, let us show them."

The two Mentors stepped a short distance away. Toron dimmed to a green nearly black, then snapped his fingers. Unexpectedly, the féyree between the foxfire torches began to play a throbbing yet haunting melody. Before the pod's mesmerized eyes, Toron bounded high and began to dance, vanishing and reappearing, slipping in and out of the darkness and light so quickly, he was impossible to follow. Tarlokyn pursued, racing towards Toron in the brief moments he flitted through light patches. Finally he froze, waiting, watching. With a dart to the left, he shouted a triumphant, "Captured!" The music ceased.

"What did you observe?" Mentor Melítsa asked the pod, as Toron and Tarlokyn trotted up beside her, panting hard, but with broad smiles creasing their faces.

"Toron used the shadows more than the light to hide in," Aleméron offered.

"Good! What else?"

Ymeran answered. "He seemed to be all over the place – at least for a while."

"Yes – and you're on to something important. Why did you say 'for a while'?"

"I think that at the end, Tarlokyn started looking for an, um, rhythm to his movements? Like he was trying to anticipate his moves, not just where he'd been?"

"Excellent Ymeran! Small wonder that your Calling is that of Tracker." The tall bronze lad's waterweed green eyes brightened under Melítsa's approving smile. "Do you all understand? I see some shaking heads. Most hunters will pursue by following where you have been – but few are smart enough to try to determine where you will be. Now, all of you go to the other side but not quite to the edge. Stand far enough in to allow the Mentors to gather behind. They are the hunters and will not be dimmed. Your task is to cross the clearing and get behind the torches, proof you have escaped. Those caught shall stand over by that stone. None may fly. Dim yourselves." There was a soft rustle of wing tips brushing grass stems, and a brief delay as some required help to invoke the spell. But soon, like colored wraiths in a thick mist, the dimmed pod was crossing the clearing.

Being hunted. Danaí swallowed as she hustled along beside Joston and Damon. How odd that one of their final trainings was similar to the Hunted Rite – one she had flubbed because of panic. There was clearly more to this than just dodging; a cool head was needed.

"Let the hunt begin," Melítsa cried. The wild eerie tune seemed to sway the branches, causing the darkness and light to shift confusingly. They played with a dissonant beat, preventing a true rhythm of step, and Danaí strove to ignore the music as she darted from light patch to light patch. About her came cries of "Captured!"

I refuse to lose, she thought. Ahead crouched a root's dark hump, nestled against a brilliant splatter of light. She sprinted towards it, squatting at the verge of light and shadow. Abruptly her shoulders tingled; a Mentor paused a feylength away, stared about, then dashed past. She savored her triumph. It was blotted out as the Dolmen's cloaked figure emerged from the shadows behind her. She heard a whisper, tried to scream, felt her throat parch.

"Think thee that no spells exist to see a dimmed féyree? Thee shall not converse with daemiani through dreams nor other means and endanger our folk any longer!" It raised a finger. She lurched sideways to dodge a spell that sizzled past her wings, and collided with Mentor Majikian just beyond the root. They both went sprawling.

"What in the name of the Blessed Mother?"

Gasping, Danaí struggled to speak, turning to point. Nothing was there except shifting

shadows. She felt her throat loosen, the pain in her shoulders subside. Majikian waited. What was she going to say?

“Danaí? Are you all right? What happened?”

She sucked hard, voice still hoarse. “I tried to hide. Heard something crawling in the root and ran.”

“Consider yourself captured.” Majikian was staring doubtfully at her. “Brighten yourself.”

As they walked towards the torches, she saw two Mentors still chasing about, but could tell most féyree were already there. Only three stood behind the torches: Damon, Pation and Tyra. Still trembling, she moved among the pod to stand between Joson and Rhytha.

“What’s wrong?” Joson stared down at her.

“Dolmen,” she whispered. He uttered an oath, and she felt a comforting arm encircle her shoulders.

“You three come forth!” Toron motioned those behind the torches forward. “Share your ruses.”

“Ran like I had fire at my heels,” Pation said, sticking out a long leg to a ripple of laughter.

“Dodged among the middle shadows,” Tyra explained. “They blend with my brown coloring.”

“Like Illiaí, I just used the light and shadows to hide in,” Damon said.

“But you are bronze,” Quenton remarked. “Neither dark nor light would have been best.”

Damon looked a bit bemused. “Just lucky, I guess.”

Before Quenton could say anything further, Toron spoke. “You three unwittingly have adhered to the saying, ‘know thyself’. Now it takes on greater meaning. Know your strengths and your weaknesses. None of us are the best at everything. The Mother has granted us each different talents.”

Joson raised a hand. “But shouldn’t we seek to overcome our weaknesses?”

“Not all weaknesses can or even should be overcome,” said Mentor Qyon, who had been the tambour beater. “Skald lore counsels that one must pick and choose their battles wisely. If one is born short, should they resent those who are tall? Or should they instead accept their given height and seek ways to convert it to an advantage? But if one’s weakness is a quick temper or impatience, indeed it is wise to learn control and to redirect such energies in more positive ways. It is also how you seek to overcome your weakness. If you pursue a path that may harm others, or even yourself, then truth be that your weakness is actually overcoming you. Each action, each choice will have an effect on your lives, although of different weights.”

“Spoken like a true Skald,” grumbled Kerión, just behind Rhytha. “All tangled words and allusions.” He grunted as Síddiqui elbowed him silent.

“Let us dance again,” Toron commanded. “Thrice more, until the clearing is more shadow than light.”

Danaí searched, but could not see the Dolmen anywhere. She knew she would be sure to stay in the clearing’s center, even if it meant getting captured.