

SERA TREVOR



A
SHADOW
ON THE
SUN

A SHADOW ON THE SUN

Prince Theryn and his higar, Sir Atrum, are both bound by duty: Theryn serves the kingdom of Glinden, and Atrum serves his prince. Both would like their relationship to be something more, but the traditions of the Glin prohibit such a love between a master and his servant.

However, all rules are off when the king promises Theryn's hand in marriage to the enigmatic Prince Lyar of the fierce Soltaran Empire. It appears that Lyar needs Theryn's Light magic for some strange religious rite—one that might have dire consequences for the entire world. Now Theryn and Atrum must discover Lyar's scheme before the wedding occurs. They soon learn that Light cannot always illuminate, and the truth often lies in Darkness.

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

A SHADOW ON THE SUN

By Sera Trevor

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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A SHADOW ON THE SUN

By Sera Trevor

Photo Description

A slender young man with long, spiky brown hair stands in a forest. He's dressed in a fur-lined cape and a green shirt and tunic in the medieval style. He gazes off into the distance, as if he's looking for someone.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

“That’s our Runaway Prince. We were supposed to escort him to his wedding this week to the Crown Prince in a neighboring Kingdom, but he slipped out of the palace. He told me he didn’t trust his betrothed or their Kingdom and refused to marry, but was ordered to. He thinks they’re up to something. Knowing him, he’s gone to find the answer. He’s clever, excellent at stealth and stubbornly focused. I need to find him. Since childhood I’ve been his confidant, valet, protector. But he eluded me, left me. Did he drug/enchant me? I dreamt he visited and kissed me the night he left, promising he’d return. If only he knew how I felt, he’s my heart and I’d follow him to the end of the world.”

The Prince looks like an elf, but no elves/fae, I’m not keen on them. The BFF is lower class, maybe a half-breed but, unknown to all, he’s special in some way that affects the story. This society is OK with same-sex pairings, but very class conscious which is why the Prince and BFF haven’t gotten together yet.

LIKES: Must have HEA and third person only. Sex, Fantasy, Paranormal, Shifters, Humor, Magic, UST, Angst, Mystery/Suspense, Hurt/Comfort, Action. Alternating POVs OK, a little dark OK. Make me feel.

NOs: Dystopian, horror, onscreen torture, infidelity, stories told mostly in flashback. No head-hopping. I dislike loads of monologue and telling. Prefer dialogue, action, sex. No miscommunications easily fixed with talking.

Thank you,

Penumbra

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: mage/sorcerer, royalty, soulmates/bonded, friends to lovers, arranged marriage, magic users, religion

Word Count: 72,111

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my betas: Anna, who has made a cartographer of me, and Samantha, whose pushes feel like hugs.

A SHADOW ON THE SUN

By Sera Trevor

Prologue

The Shade wasn't *that* scary.

In fact, it looked just like the rest of the Glin forest. It was just... darker. And what was so scary about the dark? Theryn rather liked the tall black trees. He decided that his governess, his tutor, his friends, and even his father must all be cowards, because Theryn had been sitting right at the edge of the darkness for the last half hour and nothing bad had happened to him. He didn't even feel a hint of foreboding.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. He did feel a bit nervous, but it had nothing to do with the Shade. He was probably going to get a good whipping if anyone found out he was gone. He wasn't too worried, though. He'd created a Light image of himself, sitting alone in his room where he had been sent—unjustly!—for the crime of taking one of Cook's pies and replacing it with a Light image of a pie. Why was it wrong to eat the pie now instead of after dinner? The pie would get eaten either way. And really, it was their own stupid fault if they fell for the same trick twice.

A blue ball of light swirled into existence in Theryn's hand. He turned it into a bird and sent it flying off into the Shade. He could see it for a little while, but it gradually disappeared. When he waved his hand, it came back again. Of course, it was only a Light image of a bird, not a real one. Still, he didn't think it was entirely true that whatever entered the Shade never left again. He took a few steps closer, until his toes passed over the greens and browns of the forest floor and into the gray. He stood there for a moment, evaluating. He didn't feel any different. He took another step, and then another—

—and then he saw a boy, sitting in the crook of an enormous tree, right at the boundary between the Glin and the Shade. Half of the tree was ordinary; the other half was gray and black. The boy sat in the middle, looking wistfully into the darkness.

"Hey, you!" Theryn shouted.

The boy startled so violently that he nearly fell out of the tree. He looked down at Theryn with wide eyes. "Who's there?"

"I am," Theryn said. "Don't you know it's forbidden to go into the Shade?"

The boy blinked. "Yes, but no one cares where I go."

Theryn mulled that over. “That must be nice. Everyone cares a great deal where I go.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“Escaping. Is there room up there for me?”

“I-I suppose.”

“Good.” Theryn quickly shimmied up the tree, and soon he was sitting beside the strange boy, who had black, curly hair and gray eyes. “Do you come here a lot?” Theryn asked.

“Yes.”

“Have dark spirits come after you and tried to drag you into the Shade?”

“No.”

“Have you ever heard any ghostly music that was so enticing that you felt like you just had to follow it, but then it turns out that there was nothing there, and then the dark just swallows you whole?”

“No.”

“How about demons? Have you seen any?”

“No.”

“Has anything bad ever happened to you here at all?”

The strange boy thought about it. “I fell coming down this tree once, but I only scraped my arm a little.”

Theryn grinned. “I *knew* it.” He leaned back and propped up his feet. “So have you ever tried to go in there?”

“A few times, but you can’t get in. You just end up right back where you started.”

“Huh,” Theryn said. “I wonder what’s in there?”

The boy looked out into the dark. “I don’t know.”

“So what’s your name, anyway?”

“Atrum.”

Theryn thought he’d heard the name before but couldn’t quite place it. “Nice to meet you. I’m—”

“Prince Theryn,” Atrum finished. “Yes, I know.”

Theryn gave him another look. He wasn't dressed like a peasant, but he couldn't remember ever seeing him around the castle. "Are you visiting from somewhere?"

"No. I live here."

"What, in this tree?"

"No, in the castle. We just moved here a month ago."

Theryn thought some more. "Oh, I know who you are! You're Sir Raket's ward!"

Atrum looked away. "Yes."

"They say you're cursed," Theryn said with interest. "Is that true?"

Atrum shrugged. "It might be. No one wants to be around me."

"Huh," Theryn said. "Well, *I* want to be around you."

"You do?" Atrum said, his voice filled with disbelief.

"Yeah. You're the only other person who's brave enough to come out here. All the rest of them are either cowards or liars." He narrowed his eyes as he thought of that morning's events. "Or tattletales, like my cousin Irsir. You would never tattle on me, would you?"

He shook his head. "No, never."

Theryn smiled. "Great!" He started down the tree.

"Wait!" Atrum cried. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to play. Do you really want to sit in this dumb tree all afternoon? I've got at least another hour before they find out I'm not there. Let's go do something!"

"Like what?"

"Like anything," Theryn said, his smile wide and bright. "We can do anything."

Chapter One

The banners of Soltara flickered through the Glin forest like flames.

A delegation from Soltara had arrived that morning, for “negotiations.” This was highly suspicious, because Soltarans as a general rule did not negotiate. They conquered. They had unsuccessfully attempted to conquer Glinden several times over the past century, but the Soltarans had never breached their borders. The Glin’s defense was aided by their forest’s magic, which gave them advantage as long as they stayed within its borders. The Glin would not leave their forest, and the forest wouldn’t let Soltara in, and thus they were at an eternal stalemate.

Atrum stared at those banners as Theryn contemplated his next move in their game of strachet. Atrum wasn’t sure why he had chosen that game to play, since Theryn was rather poor at it. He always complained that it took too long, and Atrum always won. Both of these things were true. It was, however, a game that required a great deal of concentration, so perhaps it wasn’t such a strange choice after all. They could both use the distraction.

Theryn bit his lip and reached for his soldier piece, then seemed to think better of it and sat back again, tugging on his hair in the way he did when he was concentrating. Atrum didn’t mind. He was patient, and he always appreciated the opportunity to gaze at Theryn, who rarely sat still long enough to allow it. Even though they had known each other since they were children, Atrum would never tire of looking upon him. Theryn was all angles: his facial features sharp, his frame lean, and his brown hair always sticking out in unruly spikes. His hazel eyes seemed to shift subtly to a new color every day, as variable as the leaves of the Glin forest—a mix between the brightest green and the warmest brown.

Theryn at last made up his mind and picked up his general, moving it into Atrum’s grid. “Aha! What do you think about that?”

In response, Atrum moved his defender. “I think that I have won.”

“You most certainly haven’t. My archer is still in play,” Theryn said, gesturing to the piece in question.

“No, it isn’t, because I captured it half an hour ago.”

Theryn gave him a sheepish grin and waved his hand. The illusion of the archer vanished.

“It’s not very princely to cheat, you know.”

“Does it really count as cheating if I know you’ll always catch me?”

Atrum just shook his head with pretend exasperation. He gathered the pieces up. “Another game?”

“I don’t think so,” Theryn said. He wandered over to the window, gazing at the Soltarans’ caravan camped out in front of the castle. “What do you think they want?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“I don’t know why Father agreed to receive them at all. They can’t win against us. Surely the last century has taught them as much. And they have nothing that we want.”

“That you know of.”

“Our army is strong,” Theryn said. “And besides, the forest won’t permit them to pass.”

“The world is changing,” Atrum said. “That might not always be the case.”

Theryn snorted. “Their world, perhaps. But not ours.”

“Your father is a shrewd man. I’m sure he has a good reason for receiving them.”

“I wish he would share it with me. Just because I’m not the heir doesn’t mean I should be kept in the dark.”

“Have some patience.”

Theryn flashed him a grin. “You and I both know that the only way that’s going to happen is if you lend me some of yours.”

Before Atrum could respond, there was a knock on the door. Theryn called at whomever it was to enter. It was one of the king’s valets. “His Majesty wishes to see you in his chambers,” the man said with a bow.

“There, you see?” Atrum said.

“Yes, yes,” Theryn said with a wave of his hand. “You were right, as always. Shall we?”

Atrum rose from his seat and strapped on his sword. They were both dressed in their best clothes. Theryn wore a green tunic decorated with subtle patterns of leaves. His fine silk shirt was embroidered down the sleeves with

small flowers and vines. He wore a surcoat of green brocade, lined with ermine, which was belted at his waist with a band decorated with jade. Atrum was dressed in a similar fashion, albeit more simply. He favored blacks and grays of more humble materials. Atrum served as Theryn's higar—a highborn servant bound to his prince at the age of fourteen to serve him in all things.

Atrum and Theryn made their way down the hallway to the king's chambers. There were new flowers peeking in through the cracks of the walls. The people of the Glin had built the stone part of Glinrock Castle, but the forest had played an equal part in its construction, winding into every part of it. Ever since their people had retreated to the magic wood, they had protected each other, living in symbiotic harmony. No one had breached their borders in hundreds of years, but in spite of what Theryn thought, the world *had* changed. The Soltaran Empire controlled the entire continent of Erara now. Glinden was the last kingdom to escape its clutches. It seemed unlikely the Soltarans would be content to leave them be forever.

They soon reached the king's chambers. When they entered, they were greeted not only by the king, but also Queen Claudina and Belvar, Theryn's brother and heir to the throne. The king was sitting hunched in his chair with the Queen and Belvar on either side of him. They all looked very grim.

Theryn bowed. "You wished to see me, Father?"

King Olan looked away from his son for a long moment, twisting a ring on his finger. This was uncharacteristic; the king was a fierce man, not given to dithering. At last, he spoke. "I have reached an agreement with the Crown Prince of Soltara."

"An agreement?" Theryn said. "I didn't know there was anything to agree about, other than them staying out of our borders."

"Which they will," the king said. "There will be no further attempts at conquest. We will be left in peace."

Theryn snorted. "And you trust them?"

"Do you dare question my judgment?"

"No, of course not," Theryn said quickly. "I am merely curious as to why they would bother to inform us. It seems suspicious."

The king looked away again. "We have something they want."

"And what would that be?"

The king stood and looked his son directly in the eye. “You, son. They want you.”

Theryn blinked. “I don’t understand.”

“Their priests have determined that you are the ordained match for Prince Lyar—it’s something to do with that religion of theirs. It is important enough for them to trade their attempts at conquest for your hand. And I have given it to them.”

The news hit Atrum like a punch to the gut. Prince Lyar was the Crown Prince of the Soltaran Empire. He had led the army that had brutally conquered their northern neighbor, Norum, ten years previously. He had relinquished his command when his father became too ill to rule; he now served as Regent.

Theryn must have felt similarly shocked, for he stumbled back a few steps. “My hand? In marriage?”

“Yes.”

“But—” Theryn stuttered, trying to form a response. “They can’t win against us. They have never breached our borders—not once!”

“The Noorish could claim the same for their country, and yet they fell to Prince Lyar’s armies not ten years ago, and it was not five years after that Taives fell.” Taives was a small seaside kingdom and the closest seaport to Glinden; while Glinden was mostly self-sufficient, the loss of that ally had been deeply felt. “We are surrounded on three sides by the Empire now. Even if they cannot attack us directly, they have the ability to cut off all trade routes.”

“I told you that we should have come to Taives’s defense!” Theryn said.

“You were fifteen then—barely more than a child,” the king said sharply. “You are a child still. You have never seen a battle. I imagine you have a great desire to play at it. Well, I do not share your eagerness for wars, especially for ones we cannot win.”

Theryn flushed a little at his father’s words. It was true that he often boasted of the skills he’d gained on the training grounds, but he had yet to bloody his sword. “You don’t have any guarantee that giving me to them will slake their thirst for conquest!”

The king held up his hand to silence him. “The deal has been made,” he said. “I have made my oath to the Prince Lyar.”

“But—”

“You will not defy me in this!” the king roared. “You are a prince. Your duty is to your kingdom. You have made an oath of sacrifice for your people. Would you break that oath?”

“No, but—” Theryn turned to his brother. “Belvar, surely you don’t agree with this?”

“I’m sorry, Theryn, but this is the wisest course of action.”

Theryn looked to the queen. “Mother, please, say something. Talk sense into them!”

His mother shook her head, unable to speak. She held a kerchief to her face and tried to suppress a sob.

The king crossed the room and put a hand on Theryn’s shoulder. “It was not a decision I made lightly,” he said, more gently now. “There is no other way.”

Now it was Theryn who couldn’t meet his father’s gaze.

The king removed his hand. “Prince Lyar is waiting to meet you in the Great Hall.”

“Now?”

“Yes, son. Now.”

The queen approached Theryn and kissed him on the cheek. Her face was wet with tears. “I would save you from this if I could,” she said. “Be brave.” The queen touched her son’s face one more time before stepping back. Her ladies escorted her into the inner chambers, their hands on her shoulder, murmuring words of comfort. Atrum wished he could do the same for Theryn.

The four of them made a solemn procession to the Great Hall. More flowers bloomed along the high ceiling, which was made by the branches of living trees laced so tightly together that not an inch of light nor rain ever seeped in. The Soltaran delegation sat at the table on the dais at the far side of the hall. They were like a light in the room, adorned in a mix of golds, whites, and reds. They all rose when Theryn and the rest entered the room.

King Olan nudged Theryn forward. “May I present my son, Theryn, and Sir Atrum, his higard,” he said.

One man stepped forward. He was dressed the most richly of all, adorned in gold and red silks in the style of Soltara, with great puffed sleeves and breeches. On his hands, he wore a pair of brilliant white gloves. He was fair of

face, although his neat goatee gave a masculine strength to his features. His hair was like a flame, looking gold one minute and red the next depending on how the light hit it. Although Atrum knew him to be at least forty years of age, he looked no more than thirty.

He crossed the room, his piercing blue eyes never leaving Theryn for even a moment, as if he was afraid he'd disappear if he looked away. He arrived at Theryn's side, his gaze traveling up and down Theryn's body as he considered him. Without looking away, he beckoned to his entourage. One man stepped forward: an older gentleman with a black beard and eyes as dark as tar pits. He was dressed in a long red robe, over which he wore a fur-trimmed black coat. On his head he wore a tall, square black hat.

"It appears we've found him, my prince," the man said.

"Yes," Lyar answered without taking his eyes off Theryn. Atrum disliked the way he was looking at Theryn; his gaze conveyed a hunger that Atrum found disturbing. But what could he do?

"We should confirm it," the old man said.

"Is there really any need?" Lyar replied.

"We must be exact in these things."

"Fine, fine." Lyar waved his hand in assent. The man produced a thin black wand and a clear crystal from inside his robes.

"This will only take a moment, Your Majesty," the old man said to Theryn. "If you would hold this, please." He pressed the crystal into Theryn's hand, who accepted it with bewilderment. The old man waved the stick over his head, and the crystal glowed a brilliant white.

Lyar and the old man smiled at each other, then at Theryn. "Perhaps we could see a demonstration, just to put all doubts to rest?" the old man said.

"Would you mind, then?" Lyar asked Theryn. Theryn simply stared at him, unmoving. "I'm sorry," Lyar said after a moment. "Perhaps I was unclear. I would like to see a demonstration of your Light ability."

Theryn shook his head, as if coming out of a stupor. "No," he said.

Lyar cocked his head. "No? Why ever not?"

"Because I am not a dog, brought here to do tricks for you," Theryn said, his voice rising. "Nor am I a cut of meat at the market, to be poked and inspected before purchase!"

“Theryn!” King Olan roared. “Apologize to the prince!”

Lyar waved his hand. “No, he’s quite right,” he said. “Forgive me. I have been unconscionably rude. Perhaps we can start again?” He gave Theryn a little bow. “I am Lyar, Crown Prince of Soltara.” He nodded toward the old man. “And this is Father Plinius, my personal avower. He came into my service about ten years ago, and ever since then we have been looking for you.”

“What do you mean?” Theryn asked. “Why were you looking for me?”

In response, he removed one of his gloves. “There are two elements to Our Lord of Light and Life, Soltar: that of the Light of the sun, and that of the heat of Life,” Lyar said. He put his hand on the table beside them. A moment later, the smell of smoke began to waft through the air. When he pulled his hand away, a dark mark was left in the wood. “I have control of the Life. You have control of the Light. Each generation, two are born with exceptional gifts in each of these aspects. While there are others who share some small part of these gifts, there are none as strong as you and I.”

“And that’s what you want me for,” Theryn said. “My ability.”

“It’s more than that,” Lyar said. “Soltar Himself has decreed we should be one.”

“Your god is not mine,” Theryn said. “I will marry you because my father made an oath, and I made an oath to him. It has nothing to do with destiny.”

“In time, you will realize you are mistaken,” Lyar said mildly. “Now, a demonstration, please.”

Theryn threw up his hand. A blinding light flashed directly in Lyar’s eyes, who stumbled backward with a cry. “There you are,” Theryn snarled. “Are you satisfied?”

He turned to walk away, but Lyar caught him by the arm. Theryn let out a cry of pain; the smell of smoke wafted through the air.

Atrum lunged forward, grabbing Lyar’s arm and wrenching it away from Theryn. The moment he touched Lyar, something very strange happened. He couldn’t quite explain it. It was as if he were momentarily... *negated*. The world fell away; there was nothing but him and Lyar standing there, gazes locked. He seemed just as stunned as Atrum.

Atrum couldn’t say how long it lasted. He let go of Lyar’s arm. As soon as he did, he became aware of the commotion surrounding them—Lyar’s own

guards had rushed forward, weapons drawn. King Olan was screaming for Atrum to stand down. The priest and Belvar's voices also sounded as they tried to keep the peace.

"*Stop!*" Lyar shouted. "*Everyone stop!*" The commotion died down. His guards sheathed their swords and stepped back.

Atrum looked back at Theryn. He was cradling his arm, his chest heaving.

"Are you well, my lord?" Atrum said in a low voice.

Theryn looked down at his arm as he slowly released his grip. A hole had been burned in his sleeve, and his skin was red and blistered. "I'm fine," he managed to say through clenched teeth.

"Prince Lyar, I beg your forgiveness—" King Olan began.

"No, it's not necessary," Lyar said. He was staring at Atrum now with the same scrutiny as he had given Theryn earlier. The anger in his expression had been replaced by curiosity.

"If Sir Atrum has offended you, he can easily be dismissed," Olan said.

The reality of what he had just done hit Atrum. He felt a roaring in his ears as the blood rushed from his face. He had attacked a prince—a prince who was here as the king's guest. It was an unpardonable breach of etiquette. He would be lucky if a dismissal was all he received, although any other fate that might befall him seemed just as dire. He would be taken from Theryn. Theryn would leave with this monster, and Atrum would never see him again. No other punishment could be as cruel.

"No, that will not be necessary," Lyar said. "He has not offended me. In truth, he has paid me a great deal of respect by protecting my betrothed with such little thought to the consequences to himself." Lyar picked up his discarded glove from the table and put it back on. "My powers can be somewhat... volatile, especially when I am taken by surprise." His gaze returned to Atrum; he felt pinned in place by it. "You have served your prince well, Sir Atrum. It would please me very much if you continued to do so. Although if you could perhaps drop your guard long enough to allow me to speak to my betrothed, I would appreciate that as well."

Atrum didn't know what to make of that. He bowed. "Yes, Your Highness," he murmured and stepped aside.

"I am truly sorry for injuring you," Lyar said. He reached out. "Here, I can help—"

Theryn cradled his arm more tightly and took a step backward. "I can see to it myself," Theryn said.

Lyar dropped his hand. "Of course." Lyar directed his attention back to King Olan. "I think that we've all had enough excitement for one day. Perhaps we can start again tomorrow."

The king used a kerchief to wipe some sweat from his brow. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I think that would be wise."

Lyar turned back to Theryn. "Until tomorrow, then," he said with a bow. With that, the prince and his coterie left the hall.

As soon as he was gone, the king rounded on the two of them. "How dare you disgrace me in such a manner, both of you!" He looked to Theryn. "Your childishness nearly plunged us into war." Then he looked to Atrum. "And you, attacking a guest? Attacking *royalty*?"

"I was attacked," Theryn said. "What was Atrum to do—step aside and let him burn my arm off?"

The king had nothing to say to that at first. "It was unintentional, as Prince Lyar explained."

"But how was Atrum to know that?" Theryn said. "Besides, did you see how desperate he was for me? Atrum could have killed one of his servants and he would have praised him for his swordsmanship."

The king's face turned purple with rage. "That is not the only issue—you made me look like a fool!"

Theryn opened his mouth, but Belvar stepped in before he could speak. "No harm has been done, Father," he murmured. "Let's be thankful for that and have no more strife today."

The king took a deep breath. "Very well," he said after he had calmed himself.

"Are we free to leave, then?" Theryn asked curtly.

The king waved his assent. Theryn strode out of the room with Atrum following closely behind him. When they reached their chambers, Atrum shut the door behind them. At last, they were alone.

Theryn stared at the wall for a long moment, his whole body shaking as he clenched his fists. With a roar, he grabbed the strachet board and threw it at the

wall. Pieces scattered everywhere. “Have they all gone mad? I have trained for years to fight them, and now they want me to wed their prince? To sleep in his bed? To—” His breath hitched. “It doesn’t even make sense! Why would the heir to an empire marry someone who could not produce an heir? What is he playing at?”

Atrum put a hand on his shoulder. “We should see to your arm,” he said quietly.

Theryn allowed Atrum to lead him over to a chair. While Atrum retrieved some salve and a bandage from the bureau, Theryn removed his clothing. Atrum knelt beside him and examined the burn. “How much does it hurt?”

“I’ve had worse wounds,” Theryn said, which wasn’t really an answer. Atrum was seized with a sudden desire to turn back time and kill the prince where he stood, consequences be damned. Atrum started to rub salve over his skin. Theryn winced.

Atrum stopped. “Should I continue?”

“Yes—get the damn thing over with.”

Atrum did as he was told. He didn’t rise when he finished bandaging the wound. If he leaned forward just a little farther, he could rest his forehead against Theryn’s shoulder, but that short distance might as well have been miles. He could never touch Theryn the way he longed to touch him. He could never take him in his arms the way he yearned to now, to comfort him, to hold him so tightly that the world could never sweep him away. But since that could not be, he stayed where he was. He couldn’t quite bring himself to take his hand away from Theryn’s arm, however.

Neither of them said anything for a long moment. “Do you think this was an accident?” Theryn eventually asked, his voice low.

“I couldn’t say,” Atrum said.

Theryn stood and walked to the window, staring out at the forest. Atrum rose and moved to stand behind him. “Is there anything more I can do for you, my lord?”

Theryn rubbed his face. “Ready my horse. A ride will help me clear my head.”

“Should I ready my own as well?”

“No,” Theryn said. “I need some time to myself.”

“As you wish,” Atrum said. When he left the room, Theryn was still staring out the windows, still cradling his injured arm in his hand.

Atrum went to the stables and prepared Theryn’s steed. Theryn joined him shortly after, dressed in a new shirt and tunic better suited to riding as well as a cape lined with fur to warm him. He carried with him a small bag of supplies, which meant that he planned to be gone the rest of the day. He shot off into the forest the moment he mounted his horse. Atrum waited until he could no longer see him before returning to the castle.

He was making his way back to their chambers when he was stopped by the king’s valet. “The king wishes to see you, sir,” the valet said.

Atrum had expected this, but that didn’t stop him from feeling a sick sense of dread. “Take me to him.”

The valet led him to the king’s chambers, gave a quick bow, and retreated, leaving the two of them alone.

“You wished to see me, Your Highness?”

The king did not respond at first. He poured himself some more wine—it was plain that he was well into his cups. “How much have you been told about your mother?” the king eventually asked.

The question took Atrum by surprise. “She was a noblewoman,” he said. “She had brought disgrace upon herself by conceiving me out of wedlock, and she died in childbirth. Sir Rakel and his wife did not deem it necessary to tell me much else.” In fact, Sir Rakel and his wife did not deign to say much of anything to him beyond what was strictly needed to raise him.

“Disgraced, yes,” the king said. “Her husband died a few months earlier, just before you were conceived. He was dear to me—very dear. I grieved for him greatly, as did we all. But none seemed so shaken with grief as she. Or at least that’s how it appeared until it became clear she was with child. That much might have been forgiven—a woman, sick with grief, allows a scoundrel to seduce her. But she would not repent. Once her pregnancy was discovered, she insisted the child in her belly was her husband’s. It could not be so—the timing was not right. Yet no matter how hard we pressed her, she would not yield. I despise lies.”

The king rubbed his face. “And then there was your birth. A most strange affair. Throughout her labor, darkness surrounded her. No candle could be lit in her presence—no sunlight would shine in her room. It was black magic; there is

no other explanation.” He paused, staring into his wine goblet. “I almost had you killed. No good could come of a child born in such circumstances.”

Atrum remained silent for a few moments. “What changed your mind?”

“My wife convinced me not to. You were born on the same day, at the same time as Theryn. She said it would be an ill omen to kill you.” He looked up from his goblet. “And I am glad she swayed me. You have served my son well. He is wild and impulsive; I was uncertain how I would ever tame him until you were bound to him. You temper him. He is a better man and a better prince by virtue of your steady nature.”

Atrum wasn’t sure what he was expected to say. “Thank you, Your Majesty,” he said hesitantly.

“The reason I am telling you this is that I need your aid. Theryn must marry Prince Lyar. There is no other way for us. You must make him understand this.”

“I will do my best, Your Majesty.”

“You must do better than that,” the king snapped. “You will make him see reason. And once he is married, you will see to it that he behaves in a manner befitting the husband of the Crown Prince. I cannot be there to temper him. The task falls to you.” He took several steps forward until he was so close that Atrum could smell his sour breath on his face. “You owe me your life,” he said. “Remember that.”

Atrum stepped backward. “As you command, Your Majesty,” he murmured.

The king seemed satisfied. “You are dismissed.”

Atrum was barely aware of his surroundings as he made his way back to his and Theryn’s chambers. The maid had not visited the rooms since he had left, for the strachet board and all the pieces were still all over the floor. He knelt as he gathered them, setting them back into their proper places. Afterward, he remained on the floor. He knew there were duties he needed to attend to before Theryn returned, but his usual routine seemed foreign—something the man he had been when he woke up this morning would do. Things were different now. He had always been so sure of his purpose, but that was gone now. The story of the strange circumstances of his birth swirled through his head. Was he truly cursed?

He had always known he was different. From the time he was four, he learned to keep away from other people as much as he could. Atrum found the

Shade soon after Sir Rakel was called to Court when Atrum was eight. He spent most of his time there, wondering at its strange, dark landscape. It was impossible to enter—those who tried merely ended up where they started. But Atrum thought that if he was still enough, he might be able to vanish into it.

He may very well have, if it hadn't been for Theryn. The young prince was not frightened of him, and told him so the very first time they met. They had become friends then, and it was that friendship that drew him back into the world of the light. He worked hard to belong in the world because he wanted so badly to belong to Theryn. His wish had even come true when he became his higar.

Of course, he couldn't be with Theryn the way he truly wished, as a lover and an equal. But he was *with* him, all the same, and it would have been enough. But now with this marriage, could their bond endure? If Atrum kept his promise to the king and tried to persuade Theryn into submission, their friendship might never be the same. Even if he stayed in his service, he may lose him in the way that mattered most.

Atrum was not an oath breaker. But now he had to make a choice between serving his prince and serving his king. They were no longer the same thing.

Chapter Two

Theryn would be dragged to his wedding kicking and screaming.

That had always been the joke. Everyone knew Theryn despised the idea. He knew it probably would be thrust upon him eventually, but he was born so much later than his older brother Belvar, whom everyone assumed would be the only child because of his parents' difficulty in conceiving. Belvar already had his own little heir while Theryn was still a baby, and continued to have children at an impressive rate. That was more than enough to keep his father's more ambitious relatives at bay. Would it really be necessary for him to do the same? Especially since the partners he preferred weren't ones capable of bearing him children. He made sure that wasn't a secret in order to deter as many potential brides as possible. While marriage between men was not forbidden, it was not a possibility for most nobles, especially a prince. His marriage must produce heirs.

Well, now it seemed he had gotten his way. He would marry a man after all. Just not the man he wished.

It was only midmorning when he left. It was hard to believe that his life had changed completely in so short a time. He rode east, away from Glinrock Castle and the Shade, taking his time as he made his way through their forest kingdom. The Glin lived in harmony with the forest that protected them. To fell a tree was a very serious matter, to be done only after prayers to the green gods. Consequently, the Glin lived in tree houses, both in the branches and within trees that would accommodate them. Due to the magical nature of the forest, the trees helped wherever they could. Meadows served as their marketplaces. Their crops were all foods that could be easily grown in the forest: they worked for their harvests, but the forest always provided. His people were so connected with the forest that the name for the forest and the name for themselves were one and the same: the Glin. He couldn't imagine life without the safety of the cover of the trees. The sight of his kingdom was familiar, but he saw it with different eyes now that he knew he was to be exiled.

He stopped midday for a small meal and to rest his horse. When he mounted his steed again, he encouraged the horse to gallop faster and faster. The wind hit his face, stinging his cheeks and bringing tears to his eyes. At last, he reached the edge of the forest. He stopped just before he would hit the open sky. He squinted as he looked out over the land; the sun seemed impossibly

bright without the trees to soften its glare. He had defied his father on several occasions and rode out into that sun (dragging a nervous Atrum along with him). While it had been exciting, he felt a sense of relief when he was once again under the protection of the trees. He would never have that protection again.

He'd be dragged kicking and screaming.

Theryn wondered if that was true. If he fought them, what would they do? Would they restrain him? Would they gag him? But then how would he say his *I do's*? He laughed a little; it wasn't a sound of amusement. It was one of barely suppressed terror.

He took a few breaths to calm himself and continued to look out into that bright, flat land. Well, if he was to be banished either way, what was to keep him from continuing his ride? He had little on him except for a few bites of food and the clothes on his back. Where would he stay? What would he do with himself? He allowed himself a little fantasy of traveling through the land. He could disguise himself, taking odd jobs here and there. A part of him had always wondered what lay beyond the Glin.

But then what would happen to Glinden? And just as importantly, what would happen to Atrum? He'd be punished for losing Theryn—it was his job to watch over him. Would it be enough to get him executed? If it had been yesterday, he couldn't have imagined his father being so brutal, but it appeared he had been wrong about many things.

After some time, he turned his horse and headed back. It would be a long ride home; he wasn't likely to make it back before sunset—not that it mattered, as his Light ability would lead the way. Still, he should return as quickly as possible, lest they think he actually had run away. He wouldn't ride off like a coward, letting other people bear the consequences. Besides, he doubted he'd be successful. Prince Lyar had found him once through magic. He could probably do it again. And it was clear he would never let him go.

Theryn slept fitfully that night, plagued by nightmares of burning trees and scalding flesh. He woke up groggy and disoriented. He thought that he would perhaps have some time before he had to speak with Prince Lyar, but he and Atrum had barely gotten dressed when there was a knock at their door.

“Prince Lyar is here to see you,” a servant said.

He and Atrum exchanged a look. “You could send him away,” Atrum said. “It’s early for him to visit.”

Theryn shook his head. “No, I have to deal with him eventually. We might as well get it over with.” He nodded his assent to the servant. Lyar entered, dressed somewhat more muted than yesterday. He was carrying a long box in his gloved hands.

“Good morning to you,” he said with a slight bow. “How is your arm?”

“Burned.”

Lyar gave him a tight smile. “Might we have a word alone?”

“Sir Atrum stays by my side,” Theryn said. “Always.”

Lyar raised an eyebrow. “That’s going to make for an awkward wedding night.”

Theryn felt his face flush with anger and not a little bit of embarrassment. “Is there some other reason you’ve come this morning, other than to disturb my peace?”

“I’ve brought you a gift,” Lyar said. He presented the box. “I had hoped...” He trailed off. “Well, never mind what I had hoped. What I hope now is that it will please you.”

Theryn accepted the box with hesitation and opened it with equal trepidation. Inside was a wand—not the thin, black rod that Father Plinius had displayed earlier. This was a magnificent object, about the length of his forearm. It was made of silver and gold, laden with jewels and intricate metal work depicting the sun and the stars. Strange symbols were etched into the metal. At the tip was a large, clear crystal.

Theryn removed it. He handed the empty box to Atrum. “What is it?”

“It is a Magas wand,” Lyar said. “Carefully crafted to help those gifted with magical abilities to harness and amplify their powers. Although I hardly think you need any amplification, do you? Your power is stronger than any your people have ever seen, is it not?”

Theryn didn’t reply. It was true—he was unusually gifted. Small magical talents were not uncommon amongst his people, but no one had ever known what to do with Theryn. The magical tutors his parents hired could do little more than make sure he stayed out of too much trouble. “How does it work?”

“Take the wand in both hands,” he said. “Make sure it isn’t pointed at anything precious.”

Theryn aimed it at the wall.

“Now invoke the tiniest bit of magical energy you can manage,” Lyar said.

Theryn did so. A ray shot out of the wand; a rainbow danced along the walls. He smiled in spite of himself.

“It can be used for more extensive magic, of course,” Lyar said. “You will have to experiment with it. I can be of help to you in that.”

The smile left Theryn’s lips as he was reminded of who Lyar was and why he was here. He put the wand back in the box and bade Atrum to put it away. “I suppose you are in want of rainbows in Soltara, and that’s why you seek to wed me.”

Lyar laughed. “We have our fair share of Light in Soltara but none quite as magnificent as yours.”

“Why?” Theryn asked. “What do you need me for?”

“I thought I had explained it yesterday,” Lyar said. “Our Lord Soltar is made of two parts—”

“I am not interested in your theology,” Theryn interrupted. “What practical use do you have in mind?”

A flicker of anger flashed through Lyar’s eyes. “If I am not permitted to speak of theology, then I cannot tell you the purpose. Any discussion of magic must necessarily concern that from whom we derive it—our Lord of Light and Life.”

“Perhaps that’s from whom you derive it, but my magic comes from the green gods, as all magic here does.”

“You may think that,” Lyar said tightly. He sounded as if he were trying to keep his temper under control. “But all magic truly comes from Soltar alone.”

“If that’s true, then why do we heathens have access to it?” Theryn said. When Lyar didn’t have an immediate response, Theryn crossed his arms smugly. “Or hadn’t you thought of that?”

“Hold your tongue!” Lyar said with such viciousness that Theryn took a step backward. “I will hear no more of your heathen blather. You are to be my husband, and I will not tolerate such heresy to be spoken in my presence!”

Theryn got over his surprise and responded with anger of his own. “There was no talk of my conversion in our betrothal agreement, was there? You can force me to marry you, but you cannot force me to hold views that are not my own!”

Lyar took a step forward. As soon as he did, Atrum stepped between them, not to completely block Lyar’s path but to remind him of his presence. It seemed to work. Lyar moved no further. He shut his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them, his rage seemed to have diminished. “You aren’t going to make things easy on me, are you?” he remarked with a wry smile. “Very well. We shall leave the subject of religion alone for the moment.”

Theryn said nothing. His heart was still racing. Had Lyar planned to attack him again? Surely not—but he couldn’t be sure, could he?

“There is another reason for my visit,” Lyar said, affecting a lighter tone. “I have come to say good-bye.”

“Good-bye?” asked Theryn. “Where are you going?”

“Brode.”

Brode was a small village in Tamar, their neighbor to the east. Tamar was a country long under the control of the Soltaran Empire. “What’s in Brode?”

“It is where my entourage has set up camp. I had thought not to burden your father with hosting us. I shall return in a week for you.”

“Why a week?”

“I had thought you might want to say your good-byes,” Lyar said. “I realize that this betrothal is sudden.”

A fresh flood of anger and grief washed over him as he was reminded once again that he would be ripped from his home. “Sudden, yes,” he spat. “It isn’t as if my father was in much of a position to negotiate. You came to take what you wanted, as Soltarans always do.”

That flash of anger was back in Lyar’s eyes. “I could have taken more,” Lyar said. “As you say, your father is in little position to negotiate. Your trees have protected you thus far, but I assure you that in the face of Soltar’s true power, you will be helpless. We have not taken Glinden because it has not been in our interest. But take it we could, if we so desired. You would do well to remember that!”

Theryn was stopped short by that. “I’m sure you will remind me whenever I displease you.”

Lyar rubbed a hand over his brow. “And here we are at odds again,” he said. “I do not want this for us.” He stepped forward; Atrum asserted his presence again. Lyar paused. “Is your higar going to play referee in all our arguments?”

“He protects me,” Theryn said.

“I suppose you are afraid of me,” Lyar said.

“You’ve given little reason for me to feel otherwise!”

Lyar let out an ironic laugh. “No, I suppose I haven’t.” He held out his hand. “May we take hands and call a truce?”

Theryn hesitated, but it galled him to think that Lyar thought he trembled in fear of him. He stepped closer and took Lyar’s hand. Before he could stop him, Lyar brought Theryn’s hand to his lips. “Good-bye, betrothed,” he murmured. He released Theryn’s hand and then left the room.

“Did you hear that?” Theryn said as soon as he was sure Lyar was gone.

Atrum’s hands were clenched into fists. “He should not have spoken to you in such a manner,” he said with barely suppressed rage. “He should not have touched you in such a manner!”

“Obviously not, but that isn’t what I meant,” Theryn said. “He said he could take Glinden if he wished. My marriage is not the protection Father thinks it is!”

“It will change nothing,” Atrum said. “As you said, he has little room to negotiate. If your marriage offers even the smallest chance that Lyar will leave Glinden in peace, he will take it.”

“I won’t be made into a sacrificial lamb for a lost cause!”

“It isn’t yours to refuse,” Atrum said.

Theryn blinked. “So you agree with him?”

Atrum wouldn’t meet his gaze. “It is not my place to question the judgment of my king.”

His words felt like a slap. He couldn’t believe it—Atrum was his ally in everything. He gave him a long look; Atrum still couldn’t meet his gaze. His jaw was clenched tight, and he was breathing heavily. “But it is your place to question your prince, it seems,” Theryn said. When Atrum didn’t respond, he grabbed his cloak. “I’m going for a walk,” he said. “I don’t require your presence.” He left without looking backward.

Theryn left the palace grounds and made his way to the edge of the Shade, which was an hour's walk away to the west. No one went there, so he knew he would be alone. He sat down at the base of the enormous tree where he and Atrum had first met. Some people were unnerved being this close to the Shade, but Theryn had never found it so. In a way, he found it soothing, the way the shadows flickered like flames. There was something dreamy about the way the trees faded into darkness. Theryn had never been afraid of the dark.

He gazed up at the sky. The trees' branches laced together like large fingers, shielding him from the harsh rays of the sun. He shut his eyes and breathed in the scents of the forest, committing them to memory. He had a feeling that whatever happened, he would lose this forest. He would lose his place in the world. But what could he do, save for running away? He tried to think, but nothing came to mind. And if he couldn't think of anything, it was probably unfair to fault Atrum for having the same trouble. He sighed.

A shadow fell over him. He opened his eyes and was not particularly surprised to see Atrum looking down at him. "I told you your presence was not required."

"And since I question the judgment of princes, I came all the same," Atrum said.

Theryn smiled a little. He moved over to make room for Atrum, who sat down beside him. They both looked into the Shade. "We don't come here as often as we used to," Theryn said.

"We have responsibilities."

"You're right, I suppose." Theryn waved his hands; the ghostly image of two young boys at play flickered silently in front of them. "Father always told me to stay away from the Shade. If I had listened to my father back then, I never would have found you."

"Theryn," Atrum said. He sounded so hopeless. This was the only place where he called Theryn by his given name any more. Once they were no longer children, Atrum was expected to address him properly. Theryn hated that. With a flick of his hand, he sent the children off into the Shade, where they slowly faded away.

"If my father thinks that Lyar will honor his word once he has me, then he's a fool." Theryn thought for a moment. "He said that we would be helpless in the face of the full power of Soltar. Not Soltara, or the Soltaran Empire, or the

Soltaran army. He said Soltar, the god Himself. He also said that he believes all magic derives from Soltar. So when he spoke of Soltar, did he instead mean his own magic? Does he mean to increase his magical ability somehow? And if so, for what purpose? Maybe my father wouldn't be so amiable to the match if he knew it would make Soltara an even bigger threat."

"How would you prove such a thing?"

"I don't know," Theryn said, but then something came to him. "Lyar said they are camped outside of Brode. The Malusion Woods aren't far from there—perhaps a day's ride south. Brode is the closest settlement." The Malusion Woods were filled with wild magics, making it impossible for anyone to lay claim to them. "There have been rumors of especially volatile magic there. Perhaps Lyar has something to with it. Why else would he camp there?"

"It is close to our border."

"True, but the palace at Leaside is only a little bit farther. Why would he demand his entourage camp in Brode when they could be comfortably housed at a palace?"

"I couldn't say," Atrum conceded. "But even if he were up to mischief, how would you find out?"

"I would go there and see for myself."

"Before Lyar returns?" Atrum asked, surprised. "You'd need two days to get there, which means you'd have to turn around almost immediately to make it back in time. What do you expect to find in so short a time?"

"I don't know," Theryn said. "But what else can I do?"

Atrum didn't answer for a moment. "If Lyar thinks that you will not honor his agreement, Glinden could be put in great danger," he said carefully.

"So you think I should just give up?" Theryn snapped. "Are those your words, or my father's?" In lieu of a response, Atrum stared at the ground, his jaw clenched. Theryn sighed. "I don't mean to run away. I'm not a coward—I will return. But if there's a chance I can convince my father that Lyar is insincere in his promise to spare Glinden, there is a chance I can escape this. Don't you think that's worth exploring?"

Atrum said nothing for a long time. "I have taken an oath," he said at last. "You have as well. Breaking such oaths should not be taken lightly."

"You think I'm taking this *lightly*?" Theryn asked. "Believe me, I am not. My life is at stake here. Yours as well."

“I do not believe the prince will kill either one of us.”

“But our lives will be his,” Theryn said. “That is much worse than death. Why would you not fight against this?”

“We have no other choice.”

Theryn crossed his arms over his chest and looked off into the distance. “So I am alone in this,” he said, mostly to himself.

“No!” Atrum said. “You are not alone—you *must* know that you are not alone! I will be there for you, always.”

“Will you be there in my bedchamber when he fucks me on our wedding night?”

Atrum winced. *Good*, Theryn thought.

Atrum got to his feet and began to pace, back and forth like a great caged beast. Theryn felt a twinge of guilt; that had been a push too far. He got up and put himself in Atrum’s path. “I’m sorry,” he said. “That was blunt, but it’s what will happen. You have to face the truth of it!”

Atrum turned on him, his eyes wild. “Don’t you think I realize that? Do you know what it does to me, watching him speak to you the way he does, to see him mock you, hurt you? And to think, this is only the beginning.” He put a hand over his heart. “I would rather be dead than bear this, except that it would leave you alone.”

Theryn was shocked. “Don’t say that, Atrum,” he said when he found his voice again. “Please don’t say that.”

“It’s the truth.”

Theryn felt a sudden stab of anger. “Then come with me!” he said. “If you would truly rather be dead, then what do you have to lose?”

“If I were to go with you, your father would see me hanged.”

“That can’t be true.”

“He said as much. Even if by some grace of the gods he decided to spare my life, he would make certain that I was no longer a part of yours. Don’t you see? Whichever way I choose, I lose you.”

Theryn turned away. “You’ve lost me already,” he said.

The moment the words left his lips, he regretted them. He turned around to say as much, but Atrum had already retreated. Theryn wanted to call out to him,

but he couldn't think of the right thing to say. What he wanted to do was take Atrum into his arms and show him how wrong he was—it was impossible for Atrum to lose him, because he was a part of Atrum, just as Atrum was a part of him.

But that couldn't be. He felt the familiar stab of regret at how impossible it was to be so close to someone but still unable to touch. And besides—even if he could embrace Atrum the way he wanted to, even if it was only this once, it wouldn't change things. In spite of everything he had said, Theryn knew deep down that Atrum was right.

But Theryn would not go down without a fight. *Kicking and screaming*. If that's what it came down to, then so be it.

Chapter Three

Theryn was gone.

They had spent yesterday in formality, speaking to one another strictly as a lord to his higar. It broke Atrum's heart, but he thought it was best to not push it and wait for Theryn to come around. They went to bed, as they always did, in their chambers, with Theryn in his bed and Atrum on a pallet beside him. Atrum did not wake up the next morning the way he usually did. The servant who brought their breakfast had to shake him awake. Despite feeling groggy, he knew something was wrong immediately. He pulled back the curtains of Theryn's bed. He was still asleep as well—or so it appeared. When Atrum reached out for him, his hand passed through the vision. An illusion.

After his hand passed through the apparition, it turned to him. "Find me," it mouthed. And then it vanished.

"What does it mean?" the maid cried.

Atrum stared at where the apparition had been. He felt alarm, certainly, but also a strange sense of relief. "It means he got away," Atrum said.

Atrum made haste to the king's chambers, where he and the queen were having their breakfast.

"What are you doing here?" the king asked.

"Your Highnesses," he said with a bow. "Theryn is gone."

The queen gasped. The king sprang to his feet. "Gone? What do you mean, gone?"

"When I awoke this morning, I found that he was not in his bed. He had placed an illusion there to make it seem as if he were."

"And how did you let him escape?" the king roared. "You are his higar! It is your duty to sleep lightly in case your prince needs you!"

"Yes, Your Highness, but I believe he drugged me. I had to be shaken awake. I feel its effects still."

The king began to pace. The queen said timidly, "Is there a chance he's been kidnapped?"

"Don't be stupid," the king snapped. "He left an illusion and drugged his higar."

“But someone else could have drugged him and then forced him to leave the illusion...”

Atrum shook his head. “That is unlikely, Highness.”

The king eyed him. “And how are you so sure?” he said. “Did he tell you of this plan?”

Atrum hesitated. “It is well known how he feels about this betrothal.”

“So you *did* know.” The king strode toward him, only stopping when they were eye to eye. “Did you help him?”

“As I said, he drugged me.”

“Perhaps you agreed to take the drug to make it seem like you were innocent,” the king said.

“That is not so, Highness,” Atrum said.

The king considered him for a long moment. Whatever he saw in Atrum’s expression, he seemed satisfied. “I will send a search party.”

“Your Highness, if it pleases you—I think that would be a mistake,” Atrum said. “If it were known that Theryn has fled, then it might reach the Soltarans. Send me, alone.”

“And how are you to cover enough ground on your own?” he said. He gave him another long, assessing look. “Unless you know where he’s gone?”

Atrum swallowed. “I have an idea, yes,” he said. “Yesterday, he spoke of investigating rumors of unnatural magics in the Malusion Woods. He believes Lyar intends to increase his magical powers to the detriment of Glinden and believes he may find proof of it there.”

“And you did not tell me of this desire of his?” the king roared.

“No,” Atrum said. “I advised him against it, but I am not his jailer. I am his servant.”

“No, you are *my* servant, above all else. If I tell you to report his intentions to me, you will do so. Remember what we talked about our last meeting.”

As if Atrum could forget.

“Now, be off with you. Bring him back, and if I see fit to make you his jailer, then that is the role you will play. Do you understand?”

Atrum bowed. “As you wish, Your Highness.”

Atrum left the room. When he was halfway down the hall, he heard footsteps behind him. He turned and was faced with the queen.

“Sir Atrum,” she said. She pressed something into his hand. It was a prayer stone of Aeor, the green god of wind.

“I offer you the blessings of Aeor,” she said. “Would you pray with me?”

“Of course, Your Highness.”

They bowed their heads and joined hands, intoning a prayer to speed Atrum’s journey. They pulled apart when they were finished.

“Make sure he’s safe,” she said, her eyes shining.

“I swear it, Your Highness.”

She began to turn to leave but hesitated. “You have served my son well, and I think perhaps my husband forgets that. You needn’t fear for your safety when it comes to him.”

Atrum watched the queen as she disappeared into the royal chambers. He ran his thumb over the engraving on the smooth stone and then placed it in the pouch on his belt that all Glin carried for such stones. He hoped that Aeor and all the green gods would be with him, because he could use all the blessings he could get.

As soon as his provisions were packed, Atrum set out. While Brode was very close to Glinden’s east border, the Malusion Woods were quite a bit farther and to the south. It would be two days’ ride, and Theryn already had a head start. Because of his Light ability, he wouldn’t have had a problem traveling by night, but he would still have to rest at times. And Atrum had his own secret.

He could travel by night, too.

Ever since he was a child, he’d been able to see in the dark. He hadn’t even known it was an unusual ability until he was five or so. Once he realized that it was yet another thing that made him strange, he kept it to himself. He had also kept it from Theryn. He wasn’t sure why; otherwise, they had no secrets. Or at least that’s what he assumed. Perhaps Theryn also had secrets of his own. If he made good enough time, he might even be able to catch up to Theryn before he reached the Malusion Woods, especially since he’d made it evident that he wanted to be found.

But what would happen then? What if there was nothing to discover? Would Theryn give up and come home willingly? What if he didn't? Could Atrum bring himself to force him back?

No. If it came to that, he would do nothing. Over and over, he replayed their argument by the Shade the previous day. Theryn was right—if there was a chance to avert this, they had to take it, no matter how small. And even if the chance didn't work, he still couldn't bring himself to haul Theryn back against his will. Besides, he wasn't even sure that was possible. He smiled a little as he thought of his wild, strong-willed prince. No, he would not see him broken. Even if it damned the kingdom, he would not drag Theryn kicking and screaming to his fate.

Of course, that most likely meant a very poor fate awaited him. The queen seemed to think she could sway the king to have mercy if Atrum failed to bring Theryn back, but he wasn't sure even her influence could save him. Still, she had saved him once. Perhaps she could do it again.

He kept a steady pace, resting when necessary. He slept only a few hours before waking his horse and setting out again. His horse was used to such late night awakenings. Atrum had trained him to ride in the night. Fortunately there was some moonlight to guide the way, but even if there hadn't been, he could have continued. His horse trusted Atrum's directions, even when he couldn't see himself.

He rode until daybreak, rested again, and continued on a few hours after that. When he reached the Malusion Woods, he stopped. The woods were large and treacherous, known for many dangerous, wild magics. How could he track Theryn? Was it even possible?

As he was mulling it over, an eagle swooped down from the sky, landing on a branch in a tree right in front of him. The eagle cocked its head at him and then began to glow. It gave him another cock of its head and glided to the next tree. It looked back at him expectantly. Atrum grinned. He had been fairly certain that Theryn wanted him there, and now he had confirmation. He urged his horse forward to follow the bird.

He rode for an hour or so. At last the bird stopped at the edge of a gentle slope. It vanished like a candle being snuffed. He saw Theryn's horse tied to a tree; beside the horse, a rough campsite had been set up next to a stream. He unsaddled his horse and tied him to a tree beside Theryn's. When he was finished getting settled, he climbed the hill. At the top was Theryn, gazing intently at something in a valley below.

He looked over his shoulder and flashed Atrum a smile. “Took you long enough,” he said. “Come here—I want you to see something.”

Atrum joined Theryn and followed his gaze. Below them was a clearing, and in that clearing was a large dome of light. Atrum had never seen anything like it. “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Theryn said. “And every time I try to get near it, I end up back on top of this hill.”

“Like what happens when you try to approach the Shade?”

“Exactly.” Theryn sighed in frustration. “That’s the answer, I’m sure of it.”

“You better be sure,” Atrum said severely. “This move of yours was risky.”

Theryn looked sheepish. “Did my father believe I acted alone?”

“He believed it because it was true.”

“Yes,” Theryn said with a grin. “I thought that was awfully clever of me.”

“What if your father had decided that I was too compromised to be trusted and sent a search party for you? Would you have felt so clever then?”

“But he wouldn’t, and he didn’t, and here you are, by my side without incurring the king’s wrath. And you’ll get to be a hero when you bring me back!”

Atrum grunted in response. “I need to eat,” he said. He headed off down the hill, with Theryn trailing behind him.

They sat around the camp and ate some of their provisions. Later, they could hunt for their dinner. The scene was not so different from the many times they had gone hunting alone, except these woods were wild and unfamiliar, and the silence between them held tension instead of companionship.

“Are you very angry?” Theryn finally asked.

“Yes,” Atrum answered. “But not with you.” Theryn raised an eyebrow. “Well, mostly not with you,” he amended. “What in the green gods’ names did you give me?”

“Oppy root,” Theryn said. “But only a little bit.”

“And when did you manage that?”

“I slipped it into your wine while you were busy brooding. You brood very hard, you know.”

Atrum tried to look severe, but he cracked. He was just so relieved to be here with him, and to have Theryn be himself, all impulse and impish wit. After their last fight, he wasn't sure if things would remain the same between them. He knew now that he shouldn't have worried. Nothing could put out Theryn's light. He would make sure of it.

"How long are we to stay here?" he asked Theryn.

Theryn shrugged. "I don't know. Until we can figure out what that thing is."

"And what if we never do?"

"Then I suppose we'll never go back." Theryn's tone was flippant, but there was true dread in his voice.

"I thought you said I would get to be a hero," Atrum said, hoping to coax a smile out of him.

It worked. "Yes, but I also drugged your wine, and I cheat at stratchet. You should know better than to take me at my word."

"I should, and yet I can never quite learn the lesson."

Theryn smiled at him again. Then he sighed and fell onto his back, threading his hands through his spiky hair. "How long do you think we can stay?" he asked.

"Two days."

"Only two?"

"We will need another two to get home in time." Atrum paused. "Unless you truly mean not to return."

"It's something to think about," Theryn said. "We could be perfectly happy in these woods. Build a little house in that tree over there, hunt for food, try not to get struck by random bolts of raw magic energy—"

"—constantly dodge the retrieval parties sent by both your father and Prince Lyar."

Theryn waved a hand. "Oh, that's the easy part. I can make us disappear."

Atrum didn't want to admit how tempting the idea was. "You would get lonely for different company, I'm sure," Atrum said.

Theryn propped himself up on his elbows. "No, I don't think I would," he said quietly.

Atrum cleared his throat and stood up. The situation was already too complicated; they didn't need to fall into this flirtation again. They both knew it was impossible, and so it never went further than banter, but here in these woods, so far from home, it would be easy to forget the reasons why it couldn't be so. The last thing they needed was a distraction. "The dome," he said. "It must be Light magic. Can you tell how it's been created?"

Theryn sat up fully. He looked a little disappointed at the change in topic. "Yes, it's Light magic, but it's not like any that I've seen before. It's... I don't know, *thicker*, somehow. It feels heavy when I try to bend it. If I could get closer, I might have a better idea."

"But you can't get near it."

Theryn shook his head. "The top of the hill where you found me is as close as I can get. Every time I move forward, I end up right back there. It's very disconcerting."

"Show me."

They went back to the top of the hill. Theryn started to make his way down to the valley. Atrum watched him walk a few steps—and then suddenly, Theryn was back beside him. Atrum startled.

"You see?" Theryn said. "Disconcerting."

"Let me try." Atrum started down the same path Theryn had attempted.

"Be my guest, but I don't see how you—"

There was a whooshing sound in Atrum's ears, and then he found himself beside the dome. He looked back; he could see Theryn at the top of the valley. It was as if he covered a great distance in only a few steps. Theryn was waving at him frantically, so he stepped toward him—

—and just like that, he was back by his side.

"How did you do that?" Theryn asked.

"I don't know. I merely walked toward it, and there I was."

Theryn tugged at his hair while he thought. "It's like I'm being reflected—but you aren't."

"Perhaps it's made to keep away those who have Light abilities," Atrum suggested.

“That could be so. It’s good work, whoever did it.” Theryn’s face lit up. “Wait here.”

He ran off down the hill. He came back with the Magas wand Lyar had given him in his hands. “Here,” Theryn said, giving it to him. “I’ve tried waving it around from over here, but it hasn’t done anything. Maybe if you tried waving it around right next to it.”

“I’m not a Light mage.”

“Well, I *am* a Light mage, and there is fuck all I can do, it seems. It can’t hurt for you to try.”

Atrum raised an eyebrow. “You don’t know that for sure.”

“I suppose not, but do you have any better ideas?”

Atrum grasped the wand firmly and straightened his shoulders. “Right,” he said. “So I should just wave it around.”

Theryn shrugged. “Or maybe whack it on the side.”

Atrum took a deep breath and stepped forward. Once again, he found himself by the dome. He squinted at it; the light was bright but not overpowering. It swirled and rippled like sunlight reflected off a pond. It could have been beautiful, except that looking at it gave Atrum an uneasy feeling in his stomach. The thing was *humming*, like a swarm of wasps.

He took the wand and waved it over the surface. Nothing happened. He did this a few more times but got the same results. He looked back to Theryn and shook his head. Theryn made a bashing motion with his hand. The wand was growing hot in his hand. The unsettling feeling deepened, but Atrum pushed that feeling down. He took the wand in two hands and tapped it on the dome. The surface rippled and seemed to give a little. He pushed further. He was met with resistance, but slowly the wand worked deeper into the light, until a dark crack appeared in the surface. Light reflected off the jewel in the wand, shooting off wildly into the sky. The dark crack grew bigger—and then Atrum was pulled down into it.

He fell on his face. He managed to turn over just in time to see the crack close behind him. He got to his feet. The wand was still in his hand, but when he waved it at where the crack once was, nothing happened. He turned to take stock of his surroundings. He looked up to see the dome overhead, but instead of the brilliant white it was on the outside, the inside was a hazy gray that still swirled and moved in strange undulations. It almost felt like being underwater.

The light reflected off the dusty ground, which was nothing but bare dirt. Under the center of the dome, there was a large mass of darkness.

Atrum wasn't sure what to do. Part of him wanted to continue to try to find a way out, but hadn't the whole point of this been to find out what was inside the dome? Besides, a part of him felt... attracted to the shadowy swirl. He held the wand out in front of him like a sword and stepped cautiously forward. When he was about a foot away, the mass began to quiver. Small dots of white light appeared in the blackness, and suddenly the great mass split apart into many separate forms. The forms took shape—human shape. The small dots of light were eyes—completely white but eyes nonetheless. Each form had a gray band wrapped around its neck.

Son. You have found us.

No one had spoken, and yet Atrum heard the words. The wand dropped from his fingers. "Who—who are you?"

There was a great sigh—not heard but *felt*. The shadowy forms drew in closer. He shrank away. "Stay away!"

He does not know us. He is afraid.

The forms retreated, except for one. It was in the shape of a young woman with long, flowing hair. "Do not be afraid, Atrum," she said. Her voice was much more clear and centered than the words before but still came out as almost a whisper. "We do not mean to frighten you."

"Who are you?" he asked again. "How do you know my name?"

"We are your family, Atrum."

"I don't understand."

The shape held out her hand. "Take my hand," she said. "It will make things more clear."

Atrum wasn't sure what to do. After some hesitation, he reached out. The moment their hands connected, Atrum felt as though he was dissolving. The edges of him grew blurrier and blurrier until he realized how artificial those edges really were. He was not separate. He was part of a *whole*. And that *whole* surrounded him now, was a part of him as much as he was a part of it, and all around him was love. Deep, abiding love, tinged with regret.

Poor child. To grow up so alone, so apart. It's unnatural.

He could not survive with us.

We don't know for sure.

We tried already. We failed. His mother—

Another deep sigh. Aching sorrow filled Atrum, filled all of them.

“What happened to my mother?” he asked. Or perhaps he just thought it—it seemed to be the same here.

We loved her too much. We wanted to bring her back with us, but she did not survive the crossing.

“The crossing?”

To the Shade.

No child of Light can live in the Shade. It is known. It was foolish to try.

What choice did we have? They are monsters—

Hush. They are simply children. They do not know what they do.

Atrum opened his mouth to speak again—but he didn't feel as if he had a mouth to open. He tried to breathe, but he had no lungs. Panic began to fill him.

He's frightened—let go!

And all at once Atrum was himself again, on his knees, heaving in great gasps of air. The young woman was back. She knelt beside him and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Are you all right?”

Atrum nodded, but it wasn't true. He felt cold and empty. He started to shake. The young woman took him in her arms, enveloping him in a deep embrace. “Poor child,” she said. “Poor lonely child. How we have missed you.”

He returned her embrace. He felt less cold. When the shaking stopped, she gently released him but kept one hand on his as they sat on the ground.

“That was foolish of us,” she said. “It was too much at once.”

“I still don't understand.”

“It is hard to explain,” she said. “That's why we thought it would be easier to bring you into us, but we can speak this way as well.”

“Who are you?”

“We are that which dwells in the Shade. We are the darkness that existed before the dawn of life, and we will exist long after the sun of life sets at last. And you are our son, born of us.”

“How?”

“Sometimes, we of the Shade like to visit your world. We find you very enchanting, you children of Light, and your world holds many splendors. We slip through the shadows, taking shapes that please us. Sometimes we sit a little too long in a shadow, and the shape bends us, gives us new form. It was so with your mother’s husband—a fine man, strong and kind. We loved to be with him, to do the things he did, see the things he saw. But then one day, he became ill, and then he died. Oh, we grieved.”

There was a low moan from the others; Atrum felt it in his bones. He shivered. The young woman stroked his hand. When he had settled again, she continued. “And his wife grieved. We had grown to love her as well as her husband did. It pained us to see her in so much pain. So we went to her, in her husband’s form.” She paused then. “We meant no harm. We meant only to comfort. But something strange happened. She became with child.”

“With me,” Atrum said.

The young woman nodded. “A child like no other. There has been none but you. Strange—but to have a child! What happiness we felt, like the happiness of the people of Light! A joyous occasion—we have watched children being born in the Light many times before.” The grip on his hand grew tighter. “But they did not see it that way!” Her voice had become harsh. There were angry murmurs from the others. “They were cruel to her, to our beloved! They abused her, punished her!”

Why? the others wailed. *Why?*

“They were frightened,” the young woman said. “They did not understand. So we came to take her away, to dwell with us in the Shade.” And now the young woman’s voice was filled with sorrow. “But we could not bring her. She could not cross over.”

She began to weep. The others wept, too. Atrum felt tears on his own face—a few at first, but then he was overcome with sobs, so intense that his whole body shook with it.

The young woman took him in her arms again. “Oh, son. Our beloved son. We did not want you to meet the same fate. We have ached for you each day. We watched you, loved you from afar, but we knew we must stay away.”

The others moved in then, joining the embrace. Atrum felt himself melting again, but the feeling eased before he was gone completely. He was still

himself—but a part of them as well. It had always been so. It seemed so strange to him now that he hadn't known before.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“We have been trapped,” the young woman said.

“Trapped? By whom?”

As soon as he asked the question, he saw the answer in his mind. It was a man, cloaked in darkness from head to toe.

He is not of the Shade. He traps those of us who venture into the world of Light.

“But why?” Atrum asked.

To control us. To change us. He can bend us to his will. It is fatal to us to become one of his creatures. We have lost so many.

Atrum reached up and touched the collar around the young woman's neck. “He traps you with these,” he said, already knowing the answer.

Yes. We cannot change, or slip into other shadows. We are stuck in our current forms. The Light from the dome traps us further. If we could get out, get free of these collars, we could return to the Shade. All shadows lead there; distance does not matter to us.

“I can get us out,” Atrum said. The others moved away as Atrum got to his feet. He picked up the wand from where it had dropped to the floor. “I used this to get in; I'm sure that I can get us out again.”

But before he could speak any further, a crack appeared in the dome. The crack grew wider; the dark form of a man stood contrasted with the bright light.

It's him!

The others swirled around Atrum; he felt himself moving forward.

Run, son! Run past him! We will keep him busy, but you must go! Do not turn back! GO!

Atrum found himself thrust forward. He felt an icy terror as he passed through some unfathomable darkness. A noise unlike anything Atrum had ever heard emitted from the orb—a high-pitched shriek, like nails upon glass. A moment later, he was through it and back into the light—chilled to the bone, nauseated, and faint, but in the light, nonetheless.

He dared a look back. His family had surrounded the unnaturally dark figure; they had their fingers into it, dragging it into the orb. Atrum wanted to help, but they were doing this for him. Staying would benefit no one. So he did as his family had told him.

He ran.

Chapter Four

Theryn made his nineteenth attempt to get to the dome. He tried sidling up to it this time, as if he didn't care at all about getting to the dome but just happened to be strolling by, maybe getting just a little bit closer this time.

It didn't work. He found himself unceremoniously dumped back at the top of the hill.

"Damn," he muttered under his breath.

It had been a good half an hour since Atrum had disappeared into the dome. There was still no sign of him. Theryn paced back and forth, pulling at his hair. This always happened—Theryn had a foolish idea, Atrum begrudgingly went along with it, and then Atrum ended up getting hurt. It was like when they were children and Theryn found a rare claxil bird's nest and wanted to get a look at the hatchlings. Atrum had warned him climbing the tree would be dangerous, but he climbed up with Theryn anyway. Atrum had fallen out of the tree and seriously injured his leg. To be fair, Theryn had also fallen out of that tree and broken his arm, but that didn't matter—it was a terrible idea, and he really ought to have been the only one who paid the price.

What price was Atrum paying right now for his loyalty? Was he being harmed? Could he even be—

No. Theryn wouldn't even let himself think it. He lowered his head and ran head-on toward the dome, letting out a mighty battle yell. As always, he ended up right back where he started. He cursed and kicked the nearest tree.

He was rethinking his strategy when he noticed a dark figure on the other side of the valley. It was far enough away that Theryn might have missed it, except the form was so black that it appeared almost like a hole in green hillside. It was walking toward the dome without any trouble. It paused outside of the dome, which parted for him. A moment later, a burst of darkness streamed from the crack in the dome, enveloping the figure.

And then, suddenly, Atrum was at his side. He grabbed Theryn's arm. "Run," he said, dragging him after him. "We have to run." He was shaking; his already ashy complexion was even paler than usual.

"Why? What's happened? Are you all right?"

"Run, we have to—" Atrum stumbled. Theryn caught him before he hit the ground.

“We have to—” Atrum said weakly.

“Run,” Theryn finished. “Yes, I know.” He slung Atrum’s arm over his shoulder so that he could support his weight. “I don’t see that happening right now,” he muttered, mostly to himself. Something was coming after them, clearly, but Atrum was in no condition to make a swift escape. Theryn would just have to improvise.

He got them down to their campsite. The horses were neighing nervously. Theryn waved his hand and the horses stilled. Their eyes would see nothing out of the ordinary. He waved his hand again, encompassing the whole campsite. No one would be able to see them. It wasn’t an illusion he could hold indefinitely, but it would do for right now. He eased Atrum onto his back. Atrum’s eyes were fluttering shut.

“No no no no,” Theryn said, patting his cheek. “No, you have to stay with me! You do every other damnable thing I say—don’t stop now!” It was to no avail. Atrum’s eyes shut.

Just then, the dark figure Theryn had seen earlier floated over the hill. It was shaped like a man wrapped in a black, hooded cloak—but it didn’t *move* like a man. It glided down the slope toward them, spilling over the grass like ink. The thing stopped and looked around. Theryn held his breath. After a moment, it moved on. It circled their camp several times, but Theryn’s illusion seemed to hold. It gave up eventually and disappeared back over the hill.

Theryn let out a sigh of relief. He turned his attention back to Atrum. He was still shivering, but his breathing had evened out. Theryn took off his cloak and wrapped Atrum in it. For extra measure, he lay down beside him and curled himself around him. “You said you wouldn’t leave me alone,” Theryn said quietly. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

Gradually, Atrum’s shaking stopped, but he still did not awaken. Theryn held on to him for a little bit longer, allowing himself to pretend that circumstances were different. He felt so strong and solid in his arms. But that was an illusion, as much as the one Theryn had created. Atrum could easily slip from his grasp if he wasn’t careful. He swore that from now on, he would be.

It was over an hour before Atrum finally began to stir. Theryn had somehow managed to nod off, but he snapped awake the moment Atrum began to move. He reluctantly uncoiled himself. Atrum rolled over; their gazes met. Theryn

could feel his breath on his face, and could feel Atrum's body shift against his. It was very distracting.

"So you decided to come back, after all," Theryn said, attempting to keep his tone light. He rather expected that he failed. "For a moment, I thought you were going to break your promise and leave me."

Atrum blinked, still blurry from his slumber. "What happened?" he asked.

"I saw you disappear into the dome," Theryn said. "You were gone for maybe half an hour, and then some dark creature broke you out of it. You got to me, told me to run, and then passed out."

Atrum looked around. "But we're still here," he said.

"Yes," Theryn said. "Did you hear me mention that you were passed out?"

"How did we escape, then?"

Theryn wiggled his fingers. "I told you I could make us disappear."

Atrum flashed him a brief, weak smile. It heartened Theryn to see it.

"We should leave," Atrum said. He attempted to get up, but Theryn put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Not so fast. I don't think you're quite ready for that." And Theryn wasn't ready for him to leave his side just yet, but he didn't add that. "Besides, you still need to tell me what happened to you."

Atrum looked into Theryn's eyes for a long moment, as if he was gathering up courage. But then he looked away. "I don't know where to begin."

"You could start at the part where you got swallowed by an evil dome of light," Theryn said. "I pretty much know what came before that."

Atrum smiled again, but it was only a quick quirk of his lips before his expression became somber again. "But you don't know what came before," Atrum said quietly. "Neither did I."

"Would you stop with the riddles?" Theryn said. "Just tell me what happened!"

Atrum turned his head away, his eyes cast downward. "If I tell you, you may never look at me the same way again."

Theryn put a hand on Atrum's face, pulling his gaze upward. "Atrum," he said. "There is nothing that you can say that will make me think less of you."

After another long moment, Atrum at last gave in. "I met my family."

Theryn blinked. He had already thought of a half dozen explanations of why Atrum might be so reluctant, but that certainly wasn't among them. "What do you mean?"

Atrum then told Theryn everything—about the people of the Shade, and how they had begat him with his mother. He told him about how *whole* he felt with them, how he had at last found the answer to a question he could scarcely even form before—why he was so different, and where he had come from. He explained how they were trapped in the dome. He told him of the strange malevolent being who was torturing them, and how he had only escaped because his family had helped.

When he was finished, Theryn was silent. He had no idea what to say. Atrum looked away again. "I knew you would not understand," Atrum said. "And now you must think me a monster."

In response, Theryn took Atrum's face in his hands and kissed him full on the lips. Atrum tensed at first, but it didn't take long for him to give in. They kissed each other, drinking each other in the way they had each wanted to for years. Theryn shifted his body until his thigh was between Atrum's legs. At that, Atrum broke the kiss and pulled back a little.

"Theryn," he said. Just hearing his name come out of Atrum's lips made a pleasant shiver rush down Theryn's back. "Theryn, we can't."

"Why not?" Theryn asked. "Everything is going to shit. My father has sold me to a monster who is enslaving your family. I've never cared for the idiotic rules that have kept us apart, and I find I care even less now." He paused. "You do want me, don't you?"

"Yes," Atrum responded. "More than anything. But how can you still want me, after what I've told you?"

"You great big idiot," Theryn said. "You could tell me you were descended from tentacle monsters from the moon and I wouldn't care."

Atrum began to laugh. It started as a low rumble in his chest, but soon his whole body was shaking with it. It was a laugh of joy and relief. Theryn started to laugh as well, feeling giddy with what they were doing at last. Atrum wrapped his arms around Theryn and kissed him furiously. Soon they were tearing at each other's clothes, throwing back the cloak that Theryn had wrapped Atrum in. They had to pull apart to remove their tunics and shirts, but the moment their chests were bare, they were on each other again. Theryn gasped at the feel of Atrum's skin against his own. His chest was covered with

deep black curls that trailed downward onto his belly. Theryn did what he'd wanted to for years and trailed his fingers through that dark patch, following it to where it disappeared beneath his hosen.

Atrum threw his head back and moaned. Theryn's fingers fumbled when he tried to undress Atrum further. He gave up and cupped Atrum's crotch through his clothes and rubbed. Atrum let out another loud moan and thrust against Theryn's hand. After a few moments, Atrum pulled back and somehow managed to untie his hosen, and then he reached over and undid Theryn's as well. Atrum had always been the smarter one of the two of them, although he still wasn't clever enough to manage their boots. They pulled their clothes down to their thighs, which was good enough for their purposes.

Another kiss, and soon Atrum was flat on his back with Theryn leaning over him. Theryn drank in the sight of him, trying to decide what he wanted to do first. He wrapped his hand around Atrum's straining cock. It felt just as good against his palm as he always imagined it would. He ran his thumb over the head, which was already leaking. Atrum rolled his hips upward, encouraging Theryn to move. Theryn took his hand away long enough to give his palm a couple of wet licks, then returned it to Atrum's cock, giving it a long, firm stroke. Atrum threw his head back again with a moan. He surged his hips upward, begging for Theryn's touch. Theryn gave it to him, but a lot more slowly than he expected Atrum wanted. Theryn's own cock ached for attention, but he ignored it for the time being. He loved watching Atrum like this, coming completely undone from his touch. After a few more moments of slow, teasing caresses, he sped up his strokes until he had Atrum panting and writhing.

Atrum pushed him back. "Want to touch you," he said. Theryn certainly wasn't going to argue with that. Atrum pushed himself up until he was sitting. He took Theryn in his arms, tender despite the heat of the moment. They kissed again while Atrum ran a hand along Theryn's chest. Theryn gasped when his fingers grazed a nipple. Atrum stopped and did it again, and again, until it was Theryn who was panting and desperate. Theryn put his hand on Atrum's and guided it to his mouth. He licked his hand, bringing each of his fingers into his mouth and sucking them lasciviously and then lapping at his palm until it was good and wet.

Once he was finished, Atrum brought his hand to Theryn's cock. Atrum was much more merciful than Theryn. He immediately began to stroke him hard and fast. Theryn held onto Atrum's shoulders for dear life, mouthing and nipping at his neck and shoulder as Atrum brought him closer and closer to

climax. When he was close, he tried to push Atrum back, but Atrum kept at it until Theryn shot his seed all over Atrum's hand and his own stomach.

It took him several minutes to catch his breath. When he was finally able to move, he peeled himself off Atrum's chest. When he dropped his hand between Atrum's legs to return the favor, he was surprised to feel the slick evidence of Atrum's own climax.

"Watching you was enough," Atrum said when he noticed Theryn's puzzled expression. In spite of his climax, that made Theryn's cock twitch.

There wasn't much to clean themselves off with. Theryn ended up grabbing the end of his cloak and reminded himself to give it a good scrub in the stream later. They pulled up their hosen but left their shirts and tunics off. Atrum wordlessly encouraged Theryn to lie down, which Theryn happily did, resting his head on Atrum's chest. Atrum ran his hand absently over Theryn's hair. They lay together for a long time, saying nothing. It was a moment they both knew would have to end soon—there was too much left to be done. But for now, they basked in it. Theryn took a deep breath, taking in the musky scent of Atrum. He wanted to commit this moment to his memory—every last detail. Especially since it was a moment that they might not have had, due to Theryn's foolishness.

Theryn sat up abruptly.

"What's wrong?" Atrum asked, sitting up as well.

"I could have gotten you killed," Theryn said.

"How do you mean?"

"I sent you off to that dome without knowing what it was, or what might happen if we tampered with it. And now I'm dragging you into even worse danger, I'm sure."

Atrum was silent for a moment. "Before I met you, I was hiding from the world that rejected me. I was a sad, frightened child. But then you found me." He cupped Theryn's cheek in his hand. "If it hadn't been for you, I think I would have vanished. You saved me. You save me still."

Theryn put his hand on Atrum's, turning his palm so that he could kiss it. He wished he had something as touching to say. "Do you remember the brothels I used to drag us to?" Theryn asked after a moment.

Atrum dropped his hand. "Yes, I remember," he said with an infinite amount of patience. "But the last thing I want to think about at the moment is you with other men."

“I just wanted to say that I was always thinking of you,” Theryn said. “Every time, I wished it was you.”

“You did?”

“Did you somehow fail to notice I always picked pale men with dark, curly hair? Although they were never brawny enough for me—I suppose there’s more of a demand for pretty whores rather than strapping ones. Although there was that one fellow—What was his name? It began with a T.”

Atrum shook his head and laughed. Theryn grinned, too. “I’m sorry, but I’m about as good at declarations of love as I am at strachet.”

Atrum’s expression shifted from amusement to something more serious. “Is that what that was?” he asked quietly.

In response, Theryn took Atrum in his arms and kissed him again. “Yes, you great big idiot.”

“You truly are awful at this.”

They both laughed and held on to each other, still giddy with the joy of being together at last. But the laughter soon died. Theryn wished desperately that they could hold on to this moment, but he knew they couldn’t. “What are we going to do?” he finally asked.

“We’re going to stop him,” Atrum said.

“Yes, well, that’s all very good and well to say, but *how*?”

Atrum rubbed his face. “All right. Let’s go over what we know. Lyar is using my family to create creatures for some unknown purpose. He needs you to give him the power of Light, for reasons that remain unclear. It’s safe to say that whatever advantage your abilities will give him is potentially enormous. If you try to get out of the marriage, he will attack Glinden and may very well win this time.”

Theryn pressed his lips together in a thin line. “Our best option is if we could convince my father that handing me over is the same as handing over his crown to Lyar. He isn’t going to honor his agreement—I’m sure of it. He’d have no reason to once he gets what he wants out of me.”

“But that still leaves Glinden in danger,” Atrum said. “We need to know more about his plans and the extent of his power.”

Theryn gave him a long look. “What are you saying? Do you think I should go along with it?”

“For now, yes.”

Theryn shook his head. “No. I can’t do that.”

“We don’t have much of a choice. The one advantage we have is how badly he wants your ability. If we resist, he will most certainly take you and the country by force, and we will have lost everything. But if you can make him believe he’s won, we might discover something that can give us an advantage.”

“And what if we don’t find that before the marriage?” Theryn asked. “What then? Do you think I should let him take my ability and me as well?”

“No,” Atrum said emphatically. “At that point, we would escape. You have your Light magic to aid us.”

Theryn sighed and covered his face with his hands, taking a moment to center himself. “All right,” he said. “I’ll go along with it.”

Atrum put a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll get through this.”

Theryn didn’t really see how, but he didn’t say anything. He stood up. “I suppose we should get dressed and head out.”

“No,” Atrum said, standing as well. “Not yet. My family is trapped in that dome. We have to free them.”

“How?”

“Can you use an illusion to conceal me?”

“Yes,” Theryn said. “But once you start breaking them out, I’m not sure if I’ll be able to cover everyone. That shadow man is probably still lurking around; an escape attempt will likely draw attention to us.” He paused. “Maybe I could make a distraction.”

“That could work.” Atrum picked up his discarded shirt and tunic. Theryn got dressed as well. Atrum gathered their swords and handed one to Theryn. “We should be prepared to fight.”

“Agreed,” Theryn said as he strapped on his sword.

Atrum armed himself as well; he also took the wand. When they were prepared, they walked to the top of the hill. “Do you think the shadow man that followed you is in there, or has he left already?” Theryn asked.

“I don’t know, but we can’t sit around and wait. If he’s still here, he could be harming them.” He looked aside. “We’ve already wasted too much time.”

Theryn felt a bit of guilt at that. He *had* distracted him—but then again, he couldn't really bring himself to regret it. "We should make haste, then," Theryn said. "We can hope he's already gone. Did your people tell you anything about him?"

"No," Atrum said. "They didn't have much time. All they told me was that they were being turned into mindless creatures of destruction. The shadow man orchestrates this, but I suspect he is merely an instrument of someone else. He looks like a man, but he most certainly isn't. When I escaped, I believe I passed *through* him, not around him. That's what injured me. It felt as if the life was being sucked from me. I've never felt so cold."

"What kind of evil has he wrought upon us?" Theryn muttered. That thought spurred him further. "I still have us under concealment, but it's going to be tricky for me to hold it while I also make a distraction. I'm going to create a line of mirror illusion straight from here to the dome. Stay to the left and walk as straight as you can back to the camp."

Atrum nodded. "And if we're discovered, what sort of distraction will you create?"

Theryn thought about it and was struck with inspiration. "I have a better idea," he said. "I'm going to create duplicate images of you and the others. If it can't figure out in which direction you're escaping, we could buy time. How many of your people are in there?"

"About twenty."

Theryn bit his lip. "It pains me to say it, but I don't know how we're going to discreetly leave these woods with twenty other people."

Atrum shook his head. "I say twenty, but that is not wholly accurate. They aren't normally confined to one shape, but they've been collared with some sort of magic that prevents their shifting. If we can break the enchantment, they can escape on their own. Distance means little to them, for all shadows lead back to the Shade."

"How exactly are we going to do that?"

Atrum looked down at the wand. "This pierced the dome. Perhaps it can break the collars as well. It's worth a try, at any rate."

Theryn ran a hand through his hair. "It doesn't seem like much of a plan."

Atrum smiled a little. "You don't like plans."

Theryn smiled back. “True enough. Are you ready?”

Atrum patted his sword. “As much as I can be.” He prepared himself. “On your mark.”

Theryn flexed his fingers. “Go,” he said.

Atrum took a few steps; in a matter of moments, he was transported to the dome’s side. He took the wand and cut into the side, as he had before. A moment later, he vanished. There wasn’t much Theryn could do but wait. Fortunately, he did not have to wait for too long. A quarter of an hour later, the dome opened again. Dark shapes shot out from the crack, moving at incredible speeds. They disappeared into the shadows. After that, Atrum emerged. He was not alone; a dark figure accompanied him. It looked like a woman.

He didn’t have much time to puzzle over it, for as they were leaving, the shadow man returned, coming over the other side of the valley as he had before. And he wasn’t alone. Several large creatures that looked like hounds trailed behind him. Theryn waved his hands, bending the light around Atrum and his companion, but the shadow hounds had their noses to the ground. It appeared the shadow man had gone for reinforcements.

Atrum and the woman appeared beside him. Theryn didn’t have time to ask about the woman. “I don’t think my illusions are going to work this time,” he said, pointing grimly at the shadow man and his hounds. “Looks like he plans to sniff us out.”

As soon as he spoke, the shadow hounds lifted their heads and perked their ears.

Theryn cursed. “Run!”

The three of them ran down the hill, but once they were there, the shadows of the trees morphed; the shadow man and his creatures emerged. The horses bucked and neighed, pulling at their leads in terror. Theryn and Atrum only had enough time to draw their swords before the creatures attacked, their dark jaws open and snarling. Theryn was half afraid that their swords would have no effect on the creatures, but his sword hit solid matter when he struck at the hound. The blow didn’t hit anything vital, but it was enough to send it staggering back several feet. However, it righted itself quickly.

He glanced over at Atrum, who was fending off his own hound. The woman Atrum had brought with him was engaged in a struggle with the shadow man; they disappeared into the shadows. Theryn didn’t have time to investigate, for

the hound Theryn had struck lunged at him again. He slashed at it, cutting its throat so deeply that the head was nearly severed. The hound fell to the ground and was still.

He immediately rushed to Atrum's side to aid him. The hound pounced on Atrum, pinning him to the ground. With a shout, he thrust his sword through the hound's back. It made a noise like the echo of a howl as it spasmed. Theryn put one foot on the carcass and pulled his sword out. Atrum pushed the creature off of him.

Theryn offered an arm to help Atrum up, which he accepted. "Are you all right?" Theryn asked.

Atrum opened his mouth to respond, but then his eyes widened as he caught sight of something over Theryn's shoulder. He yanked Theryn backward and behind him. The creature Theryn thought he had killed first was back, fully formed. It lunged at them again. As Atrum fought it, Theryn saw with horror that the other creature was stirring as well. If they couldn't be killed, how on earth were they going to escape? He thrust his sword back into the hound that was still on the ground; even if he couldn't kill it, perhaps he could pin it in place. That left him unarmed, however.

Except, of course, for his powers. He'd never used his magic as a weapon—his illusions were very detailed, but they had no substance. However, these creatures were made of shadows. He lit up one of his hands and then drew that light upward until he had a glowing beam of white light in the shape of a sword. He joined Atrum's side. Atrum had pushed the hound back a few paces, but it was getting ready to pounce. Theryn thrust his sword of Light forward. The creature screamed as the light penetrated it. It disintegrated before their eyes, the darkness swirling into the air until there was nothing left.

Theryn turned to the pinned creature and subjected it to the same treatment. It melted away just as the other had. Theryn and Atrum met each other's gaze, their chests heaving with exertion.

"Good thinking," Atrum said, nodding to the Light sword.

"Thanks." He looked around. "Where's the woman?"

Just as he said that, a black mass hurled out of the shadows toward them. Theryn approached the mass cautiously; he didn't want to hurt Atrum's companion if she was in there. He held his Light sword up to the mass. It split into two, with the woman stumbling out toward Atrum and the shadow man

heading straight for Theryn. Theryn struck at him with his weapon, but the shadow man caught the light in his hands. It didn't seem to hurt him at all. In fact, he began to manipulate the light itself, bending it backward. Theryn shut his hand, causing the light to vanish, but that didn't stop the advance of the shadow man.

Atrum rushed at him with a roar, but his sword went right through him. However, he seemed solid enough that when he struck Atrum with the back of his hand, he went sailing through the air until he hit a tree and crumpled to the ground. Atrum's companion hurled herself at the shadow man, too. She plunged a hand inside him, causing him to emit an inhuman shriek, but he was able to push her off. As she fell back, he waved his hand; a beam of light shot out of it and wrapped around her neck. She fell on her knees, clawing at it to no avail. The shadow man began advancing on Theryn again.

Theryn backed away, unwilling to turn his back on the man. It proved not to be a wise move, for he tripped on a root and crashed to the ground. The shadow man loomed over him. Theryn scrambled backward, but he had nowhere to go. The shadow man bent forward. He had no face under his black hood that Theryn could see, only darkness. Although he had no eyes, Theryn had the impression that he was being stared at, long and hard. Theryn could feel the dread and the cold Atrum had described, now mere inches from his face. He cried out in fear, but his voice was swallowed by the man—no, the *thing* above him.

The shadow man stopped. His attention shifted to something just beyond him. He got up and drifted away. Theryn rolled over to see what the creature was after. It was the wand, lying on the forest floor where Atrum had dropped it. He picked it up. Once he had it, he stepped into the shadows, and then he was gone.

Theryn got shakily to his feet. Atrum had just regained his footing as well. They moved toward each other. "Are you all right?" Atrum asked.

As soon as Theryn nodded, Atrum went to the woman's side. She was sitting on the ground, her hand around her throat. Atrum knelt beside her and took her hand tenderly in his own.

"Trapped again," she said. Her voice was a strange, smoky whisper. Everything about her was strange. Although she had the shape of a young lady, she had no clearly defined human features. She was less of a person than a walking shadow. The outline of her hair flickered around her as if she were

underwater. The only parts of her that weren't black were her eyes, which were bright white.

Atrum looked up at Theryn. "Is there something you can do?"

Theryn knelt on the ground as well. He examined the collar. It didn't seem too complicated—just a band of Light magic. But when he tried to bend it, he found he couldn't. He tried several times to no avail. "I can't bend it," he said. "It feels like the dome felt; there's a... heaviness. I don't know how else to describe it."

Atrum looked grim. "You should have gone with the others," he said to her.

"You have been alone too long. You have need of our presence."

"I have need of my newly found family to remain safe!"

Theryn felt awkward listening to them; it was clearly a family matter, and he didn't want to interfere. He went to tend to the horses, who were still upset. They were trained for battle but not so much for attacks by shadow monsters. By the time he had them calmed, Atrum and the young woman had finished their discussion and were now approaching him.

"She's coming with us," Atrum said.

"Of course," Theryn said. "I wouldn't dream of abandoning your... sister?" he guessed.

"We are his father," the young woman said.

"I see," Theryn said, although he really didn't.

"They don't have individual identities the way we do," Atrum explained.

That didn't make matters much clearer, but he had a feeling that further explanation would take some time. There were more pertinent questions to be answered at the moment. "Does anyone know exactly what happened just now? He was winning. Why did he stop?"

"I could not say," the woman said.

Theryn turned to the woman. "He seems to be some sort of shadow creature, and yet he can control Light. How is that possible?"

"I know not what manner of creature he is. When we battled, I felt an emptiness in him, like nothing I have ever felt before."

"Perhaps he was once one of you, but has been corrupted?"

“No,” she said emphatically. “There is nothing of the Shade in him. Not even an echo. He was never one of us.”

Theryn let out a sigh of frustration. “Well, I suppose standing around here isn’t going to do much good. We should head back to Glinden. I don’t think we’ll be attacked again, but I have no desire to test that theory.”

They took a moment to refresh themselves and pack up what little they had brought. The woman rode on Atrum’s horse, her arms wrapped around his waist. They decided they would ride until they reached the edge of the woods, then set up camp there for the night.

The journey was thankfully uneventful, and they soon reached the edge of the woods. They set up camp by a stream, after which Atrum went out to hunt for some dinner. That left Theryn alone with the woman. Theryn finished setting up the camp fire—an easy task, given his Light ability. He angled the sunlight just so, and the wood and sticks they had gathered lit up in a blaze.

They sat around the fire, not saying much of anything. Theryn couldn’t help but notice that she seemed different than when he had first met her, even though that had been only a few hours before. She had been pitch black then—exactly like a shadow in that he couldn’t see the outline of limbs or skin or anything other than darkness. Now that had changed. She was still dark, but he could see the outline of a face, the curve of her shoulders and her arms, which were crossed closely in front of her chest. Her inky hair no longer waved above her; it behaved more like hair ought to, flowing over her shoulders and down her back. Distressingly, he couldn’t quite tell if she was wearing clothing.

“Atrum should find something soon, I imagine,” Theryn said, breaking the silence. “He’s an excellent hunter.”

“I do not require sustenance,” she said.

“Oh.” They lapsed back into silence. Theryn tried again. “Is there a way I can address you?”

She didn’t say anything for a long moment. “We are of the Shade,” she said hesitantly. It appeared Theryn wasn’t the only one who was feeling awkward.

“If we are to travel together, it might make it easier if I had a name to call you.” When she didn’t reply, Theryn said, “How about Shay? It’s not terribly original, but it would be serviceable.”

“Shay,” she echoed. “Yes. That will do.” She hunched down further, holding herself more tightly.

“Are you all right?” Theryn asked.

“We—” she began. She shook her head. “*I am... I am cold.*”

“I’m so sorry—how stupid of me.” Theryn took his cloak off and put it around her shoulders. “Here, get closer to the fire.”

She moved in closer. The light of the fire made her black skin shine. She shuddered. “I look into myself and see nothing,” she said. “At least in the dome, we could huddle together, but out here, there is nothing. There is only... *me.*” She began to rock back and forth. “How do you bear it? How do you lead such lonely lives and not go mad?”

Theryn put a hand on her back. “I don’t see myself as lonely,” he said. “I have Atrum.”

She lifted her head up; Theryn found himself looking directly into her glowing white eyes. “Yes. We are all so grateful to you for that. We have watched you for so long, and we have loved you as he loves you. His life would have been unbearably lonesome without you.”

Theryn had no idea what to say to that. He had spoken truthfully when he said that Atrum’s heritage didn’t change the way he felt about him. At the same time, it was a bit unnerving. He decided to change the subject. “Does that hurt you?” he asked, indicating the collar.

“No,” she said.

“Then why does it trap you?”

“It fixes us into place,” she explained. “When the shadow man caught me, I had taken the shape of this young woman. He trapped me into this shape so I could not escape.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I do not know if I can properly explain.” She turned her face back to the fire. “We of the Shade have existed since time began. We were content, but we were unchanging. Then something wondrous happened. Light appeared in the world, and with it, life. The children of Light entranced us. For the first time, we could take different shapes, feel different things—it was miraculous. We rejoiced with them, and they with us.

“All was well for some time. But it is the nature of Light to change, while we are always the same. The first generation moved on—to where, I do not know. The children they left behind were mortal. We saw death for the first

time.” She looked back up at him. “It grieves us to lose you. That’s why we stay in the Shade, only allowing ourselves brief visits, and only from a distance. We should not have gone to Atrum’s mother. We tried to stay away from Atrum to avoid the same mistake. We knew better, and yet...” She reached up her hand and touched Theryn’s face. “We are glad he had you, at least. You give him shape.”

As Theryn was trying to formulate a response, Atrum arrived back at camp with two rabbits slung over his shoulder. They dressed them and soon had them roasting over the fire. Despite her claim not to need sustenance, Atrum persuaded her to try some of the rabbit, which she quickly devoured. And in spite of her claims not to need rest, as soon as the sun had set, she nodded off. Atrum and Theryn got her situated in one of their bedrolls, which meant they had to share the other. It wasn’t much of a hardship. They shared a few kisses, but it felt uncomfortable to do more with Shay lying a few feet away. Atrum spooned up behind Theryn to settle into sleep.

“What are we going to do with her?” Theryn asked quietly.

“We’ll find a way to free her.”

“Yes, but what if we can’t? Without the wand, I have no idea how else I can break that damned collar.”

Atrum was quiet for a moment. “I suppose we’ll have to take her with us.”

Theryn snorted. “That’s going to be difficult to explain.”

“We aren’t leaving her,” Atrum said harshly.

Theryn rolled over. “I’m not suggesting that,” he said. “I’m merely pointing out that it’s going to be hard, especially with the way she looks.”

“But she’s changing,” Atrum said. “Surely you’ve noticed.”

“I have. She still looks odd.” Theryn thought about it for a moment. “But I could use an illusion to hide that.”

“That’s one problem solved,” Atrum said. “But how do we explain her presence?”

Theryn thought some more. “She could be your betrothed.”

“What?” Atrum said, aghast. “No!”

“Not truly, you oaf,” Theryn said. “But think about it. We can’t claim she’s a relative, because everyone knows you don’t have any. We can’t bring her

along as a servant, since it would be strange for me to request a female servant be brought along. But if she was a lowborn woman who you had secretly fallen in love with and we explain that to my mother, I'm fairly certain I can convince her to give us enough clothing and such to make her appear to be suitable to be your bride. She's very tenderhearted when it comes to love stories."

"And what about your father? Would he go along with it?"

"Why wouldn't he? It's not like we'll be around to stink up his castle with a lowborn girl. He owes it to us, at the very least."

Atrum was silent for a long moment. "All right," he conceded. "I can't see how else it can be done."

Theryn smiled grimly. "It looks like we're both betrothed, then."

Atrum responded with an equally humorless laugh. "I suppose so."

Theryn sighed and turned over, tucking himself against Atrum. "It will be easy. All we have to do is prevent Lyar from developing godlike powers, get away without being caught and without causing Glinden and Soltara to go to war, find a magical means for freeing Shay, and I don't know, abolish famine and disease from the land if we have some extra time. Nothing could be easier."

Atrum kissed the back of his neck. "You always told me we could do anything."

"I did, didn't I?" Theryn said. "It seems like now's our chance to prove it."

Chapter Five

They reached Glinrock Castle the next day around noon. Atrum's arms tightened around Shay; he had put her on the saddle in front of him because he was concerned she wouldn't be able to hold on. She wasn't doing well. She had changed even further from the previous day; she became more and more solid with each passing hour. They didn't have anything for her to wear, so they kept her bundled in Atrum's cloak. Whatever transformation was happening to her was hitting her hard. She didn't speak much. Atrum had confidence of his own abilities and that of Theryn's, but Shay's apparent weakness worried him.

Before they entered the castle grounds, they dismounted so that Theryn could work on Shay. He rubbed his chin as he examined her. Theryn flexed his fingers. A moment later, she was transformed. She became a beautiful young woman with flowing black hair and gray eyes not dissimilar to Atrum's. The Light collar around her neck seemed to vanish, although of course that was another illusion. She appeared to be wearing a typical peasant's dress under Atrum's cloak.

"We're going to have to get you actual clothing," Theryn said. "That illusion isn't going to hold up to much scrutiny if anyone touches you. Besides, you'll be cold."

Shay held out her hands, which were now pale. "This illusion—how long will it last?"

"Indefinitely. It's a simple one; I've just changed your coloring and hidden that collar. I haven't created anything, other than the dress."

It was strange to see her as an ordinary woman. "Do you need me to explain what will be expected of you?" Atrum asked.

"I have been watching the world of Light for countless years," she said. "I know how I should behave."

Atrum touched her shoulder. "It will be all right," he said.

She turned away. "We should go."

Theryn glanced back and forth between the two of them. "If you're ready."

Atrum nodded grimly. Before they went any further, Theryn pulled Atrum in for a quick kiss. "We'll get through this," he said. "And we'll get her through this, too. I swear it."

They remounted the horses and rode through the castle gates. There was a lot of commotion as they made their entrance, with people running about proclaiming the prince's return. The king's servants showed them to the royal chambers, where the king and queen were waiting to receive them. The queen took a step forward to greet them, but a stern look from her husband kept her in place. Atrum bowed and Theryn stayed standing, staring at his father defiantly.

The king addressed Atrum first. "You have done well, Sir Atrum."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

The king turned his attention to Theryn. "Now that you've had your final little tantrum, can I expect you to behave yourself, or do I need to put you under more stringent guard?"

Theryn's hand flexed into a fist by his side, but when he spoke, his voice was cool. "No, Father. That won't be necessary."

The king sighed. He waved his hand to the queen, who rushed forward to take Theryn in her arms. "Theryn, I was so worried!"

He returned her embrace. "I'm sorry to have caused you pain, Mother."

After a few moments, she pulled away, her eyes wet with tears. She looked to Atrum—and then past Atrum, to Shay. "Oh! And who is she?" she asked.

Atrum cleared his throat. "This is Shay," he replied. "My beloved."

"Your beloved?"

"Yes," Atrum said. He cleared his throat again. He'd never been good at lying. "I met her in the village last year, and I—well, we fell in love. I have kept it a secret since I know that a higarad can never marry before his lord, and because I know—I know she is not of proper standing. But I love her very much and would like to take her with us."

Theryn's mother reacted much in the way Theryn predicted. "Oh, Sir Atrum," she said, clutching his arm. "It does me good to hear that someone is happy in all of this." She turned a kindly eye to Shay. "Step into the light, my child, and let me have a look at you."

Shay did as she was told, keeping her head bowed. The queen put a hand on her chin, raising her face up. "Don't be shy. I will see to everything."

"If she's of lowly birth, then I cannot condone this," said the king.

The queen whipped her head around and glared at him. "You very well can condone such a thing, and you will. It is the least we can do. Besides," the

queen said, turning back to Shay. “I don’t believe Shay is of low birth. She bears a remarkable resemblance to Lord Yeril. He had at least a half a dozen natural born children, didn’t he?”

“I wouldn’t say the resemblance is strong,” the king grumbled.

“Then you’re blind,” the queen snapped. “She is the very picture of him. Who is your mother, child?”

“She’s dead,” Theryn interrupted. “She just died last week, in fact.”

“Oh, you poor thing! No wonder you look so stricken!” The queen shook her head. “It was Lord Yeril’s duty to provide for his bastards, and judging from your appearance, he failed in that duty. I don’t mean to add to your burden, but he unfortunately passed away last year. I believe that leaves it to us to provide for you in the way he should have. Wouldn’t you say that’s so, dear?” She narrowed her eyes at the king.

The king waved his hand. “Yes, fine.”

The queen touched Atrum on his elbow. “Say your good-byes for now. I am going to take good care of your beloved and see that she gets everything she needs.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Atrum said. He turned to Shay and gave her a brief kiss on the cheek. “Good-bye,” he said. In response, she clutched his arm; her grip was so tight it was almost bruising.

“Don’t leave me,” she whispered. There was panic in her wide eyes.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said. “I’ll come to see you soon.”

The queen took Shay’s hand. “There’s nothing to be afraid of,” she said gently.

Shay took a breath and then slowly released her grip. The queen whisked her away. Atrum stared after her. She had said she knew what was expected of her, but did she really? Would she be able to keep up this masquerade? And for that matter, could he?

As this was all swirling in his head, he felt Theryn’s presence by his side. Theryn gave him a quick smile of reassurance.

“Are we excused?” Theryn asked his father.

His father looked at them. To Atrum, he seemed very small, and very sad. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, you are dismissed.”

Atrum and Theryn left the chambers and made their way back to their own. Once they got there, Theryn ordered for a meal to be sent to them. They both took off their dirty traveling clothes to change into more proper attire, but before Atrum could get dressed, Theryn stopped him. He pulled Atrum over to his bed.

“Theryn,” Atrum said. “We can’t—”

“What are they going to do? Banish us?”

Against his better judgment, Atrum allowed himself to be pulled forward. Theryn wrapped his arms around him. There was no heat in his embrace—just comfort. With a great sigh, Atrum released his tension and allowed himself to be held.

They lay there together for several long moments. “Do you think she is going to be all right?” Atrum asked after a while.

“Yes.”

“You’re just saying that,” Atrum said. “You can’t know.”

“And I choose to believe the best,” Theryn said. “Don’t worry—my mother will do everything. All Shay has to do is stay quiet and let Mother boss her around.”

“She’s my family,” Atrum said. “I can’t even begin to explain what it was like to find out why I am the way I am. When I was with them in the dome, it was the first time in my life that I’ve ever felt *whole*. She sacrificed herself for me. I can’t let anything happen to her.”

“I know,” Theryn said, kissing the top of his head. “And we won’t.”

Atrum pushed himself up until his face was level with Theryn’s. He threaded a hand through Theryn’s hair and pulled him forward into a kiss. “Thank you,” he said.

Theryn kissed him back. In spite of themselves, things quickly grew heated. They were interrupted by a knock at the door, announcing the arrival of their luncheon. Atrum jumped out of the bed and hurried to put on his clothes. Theryn dressed as well. When the servant entered with their meal, Atrum tried not to seem nervous. Theryn didn’t look like he needed to try at all. Theryn was probably right; there was little that could be done to them if they were found in a compromising position. But after all the years he’d spent suppressing his desires, Atrum found it difficult to drop his nervousness so quickly.

After they'd eaten and rested, Atrum set out to find Shay. The queen had put her in a bedchamber on the east side of the castle. He had no doubt that tongues were wagging about Shay's mysterious appearance, but they would not be around long enough for Atrum to care too much about what others were saying.

Atrum heard some suspiciously cheery chatter coming from Shay's room. The door was slightly ajar, so he peered through to see who was doing all that talking. Shay was sitting in front of the vanity. Behind her stood a young lady of about eighteen years of age. He recognized her vaguely from Court but was not well acquainted with her.

"Oh, my lady is so beautiful, if you don't mind me saying!" Her chatter bubbled over as she brushed Shay's hair. "So much lovely, dark hair! I always wanted dark hair, but I'm afraid mine is so light and curly; I can't do a thing with it—oh!" She dropped into a curtsy when she saw Sir Atrum in the doorway. "Good day, my lord."

"And who might you be?"

"My name is Kindy, my lord," she said. "I am to be Lady Shay's lady-in-waiting."

She seemed pleased at the idea, although Atrum knew a great many ladies would be very insulted to wait on a bastard daughter who was only elevated that same day.

"You'll be coming with us to Soltara, then?"

"Yes, my lord."

Atrum hadn't even thought about how Shay would be attended to; Theryn was right to trust his mother to see to everything. "I would like a word with my betrothed," he said.

"Of course, my lord," she said with another curtsy. She left the room.

"How are you faring?" Atrum asked once Kindy was gone.

Shay didn't respond right away. She just sat perfectly still at her vanity, gazing ahead. She looked lovely in a lilac gown and a crescent cap lined with pearls. He touched her shoulder; she reached up her hand and curled it over his.

"This illusion of Light over my skin traps me further," she said. "It is a thousand times worse than being in the dome."

"I'm sorry," Atrum said.

At last, she looked up at him. Her great gray eyes were fathomless. “Will you allow me to hold you?”

Atrum knelt beside her. She wrapped herself around him, breathing a sigh of relief. Touching Atrum seemed to help some of her pain. “Does it get better?” she said. “I ache always. Is it so for you?”

“Sometimes,” he said. He’d always felt an emptiness; it was nice in a way to have that feeling explained. “You won’t be trapped long enough to have to accustom yourself to it.”

“And if you can’t free me—do you think this mortal form can die?”

Atrum pulled back. “Please don’t speak in such a way,” he said.

She touched his face. “You should not let it grieve you,” she said. “*We* are eternal. *I* am but a strand of hair, a sliver of fingernail—a part of the whole, but a part nonetheless. The loss of this one cannot damage the whole.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Atrum said. “You could have left when I freed the others, but you stayed. *You* made a choice. Doesn’t that give you an identity?”

“Do you not sometimes feel as though a part of you wished to do one thing, but another part of you wished to do something else?”

“Yes.”

“So it is with us. A part of us wished to stay with you, so I stayed.”

“But now you want to leave me?” Atrum put his head in her lap. “I have spent my whole life without a family, or even knowing who I am. Your death might mean nothing to you, but I could not bear it. I *couldn’t*.”

She put her hand on his hair. “Oh, child. My poor, lost child. What can I say?” She encouraged him to sit up. “I will try.”

“I will free you,” Atrum said. “I swear it. I will free us all.”

She patted his hand. “You should go to your prince. Share time with him while you can.”

Atrum kissed her cheek and then rose. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Be happy,” she said. “That is all I want from you.”

Atrum went to the door. As soon as she saw him emerge, Lady Kindy approached him. “My lord, I want to reassure you that I will take excellent care

of your betrothed. My mother was of a delicate constitution as well.” Her smile grew a little sad. “She passed away a few months ago. I have no desire to linger in this castle, and I am very happy that I can be of use.”

“Thank you, Lady Kindy,” Atrum said. He was glad of her help but worried if they could trust her if the truth ever came out.

Atrum and Theryn passed the rest of the day together much in the way that they used to. They went on a long ride through the forest, visiting their favorite places and old stomping grounds. Their last stop was their place by the Shade. Atrum stared long and deep into the darkness. He thought that perhaps knowing what was there would make it more scrutable, but it seemed just as unfathomable as ever. Was the rest of his family watching him right now? What were they thinking? What did they think of what was happening to Shay? He couldn't even begin to guess.

Dinner came and went. The Great Hall was more crowded than usual; once news of Theryn's engagement had been announced, nobles from nearby demesnes had been arriving for the betrothal feast. In spite of all the new guests, there was a certain hush in the Great Hall. No one knew how they were supposed to act around Theryn. He was their prince, and soon he would be gone forever. Gratitude was owed to him for his sacrifice, but since he had made such a public spectacle of his displeasure at his betrothal, the general feeling in the air was one of resentment. Their sacrificial lamb refused to ease their conscience by meekly offering his throat for the slaughter.

“It makes me sick,” Atrum said when they got back to their chambers. “They are the people we've known for all of our lives, and not one of them seems overly grieved at what is happening to you.”

“They're frightened,” Theryn said. “Of Soltara, and of my father's displeasure. I can't blame them.”

“But I can.”

Theryn drew Atrum in for a kiss. “Let's not talk about them anymore. In fact, I don't think I want to do much talking at all tonight. We won't have another moment like this—not once we start for Soltara.”

Atrum couldn't argue with that. They kissed again, and again. Atrum's arousal surged; he could think of nothing but Theryn—his lips against Atrum's own, his body pressed tight to him, the swell of his desire against his thigh. They stumbled back to Theryn's bed, parting only to hastily undress. Theryn

got undressed more quickly; he was completely naked before Atrum had more than his boots and his shirt and tunic off. It wasn't the first time they had seen one another so; they did spend nearly every waking moment together. But it had never been like this. Theryn lay down on the bed, his lean body splayed out in front of him, his already messy brown hair even more mussed. His rosy cock stood stiff and proud against his belly. Atrum was dumbstruck by his beauty, unable to do much of anything but stare.

Theryn laughed. "Are you just going to sit there all night staring or are you going to get in here with me?" Theryn pulled Atrum forward onto the bed. They fell into kissing once more. Atrum's hands moved over Theryn's bare skin, relishing the warmth that emanated from him. Theryn ran his hand down Atrum's back, then lower. Between the two of them, they shed the last of Atrum's clothing, and at last they were nude together, their bodies pressed against each other as their limbs intertwined.

Theryn worked his thigh in between Atrum's legs, encouraging him to rub against it. Atrum shuddered and moaned as he rocked against Theryn's body. He knew he should slow down and savor this moment as much as possible, but they had been building to this for years. It didn't get much slower than that. He took Theryn's cock in hand and stroked him to the same rhythm as his own thrusts. Theryn let out a moan of his own. Their mouths parted as they both gasped for air.

It was Theryn who put a stop to it. "Wait," he said.

It took every last bit of Atrum's will to stop moving, but he did as his prince commanded.

"I want more than this," Theryn said, his voice husky with desire. "I want to be inside you."

Atrum's cock jumped at the thought. "Yes," he said. "Gods, yes."

They kissed again for a moment before Theryn pulled away. He left the bed and went over to where they kept their toiletries. Atrum rolled over on his back, his chest heaving. His cock ached so badly that he couldn't help but stroke himself a few times.

Theryn reappeared beside the bed. He had a small vial in his hand, which he put to the side. "Wait for me," he laughed. He straddled Atrum's chest, pinning Atrum's arms with his knees and preventing him from touching himself further. The position put Theryn's jutting cock on perfect display in front of Atrum's face.

“Please, let me taste you,” Atrum begged.

Theryn repositioned himself to allow Atrum to prop himself up on his elbows. He took his cock in hand and guided it to Atrum’s lips. Atrum licked the head, which was already slick. Theryn let out a breathy gasp, which quickly turned into a moan as Atrum took the head in his mouth and sucked. Atrum took a little more into his mouth, flattening his tongue and lapping at the underside as he moved his head.

Theryn was only able to bear it for a few moments. He pulled out. “You’re going to make me come.”

“I want you to,” Atrum said. “I want to pleasure you.”

Theryn flushed. “I can’t say no to that, can I?” he said with a little laugh. He moved back and helped Atrum into a sitting position, which put Theryn in Atrum’s lap. They kissed again as they rolled their hips, rubbing their cocks together. “Have you ever had anyone inside you before?” Theryn asked.

Atrum shook his head. “Neither have I been inside a man myself.”

Theryn raised his eyebrows. “Well, what on earth were you doing when we went to those brothels? Playing strachet?”

“Hands and mouths only,” Atrum said. “I didn’t want to be with anyone like that, unless it was with you.”

Theryn put a hand on Atrum’s face, brushing his lips with his thumb. “Oh, Atrum,” he murmured. “How were we so stupid to wait this long to be together?”

Atrum knew there were a thousand reasons, but he couldn’t think of a single one in this moment. He leaned forward to capture Theryn’s lips in a kiss.

Eventually, Theryn pulled back. He urged Atrum onto his back. Atrum opened his legs as Theryn picked up the vial he’d brought. He slicked his fingers and then drizzled more between Atrum’s legs. Theryn rubbed him there, the heel of his hand pressing gently against Atrum’s balls while his fingers brushed Atrum’s hole. After a few more rubs, he lowered his head and took Atrum’s cock in his mouth. The pleasure was so intense that Atrum had to bite his fist to keep from shouting. Theryn took his time, moving his head slowly up and down Atrum’s cock. As he did so, he circled Atrum’s opening with one slick finger. Gradually, he pressed it in.

The sensation was uncomfortable at first, but Theryn’s mouth on his cock buried that discomfort with pleasure. Theryn kept moving in slow circles,

easing him open. He introduced a second finger. Atrum writhed; every way he moved, he felt consumed, by Theryn's mouth when he moved forward, and his fingers when he moved back. Theryn moved in deeper, touching a place inside him that sent throbs of pleasure rolling through him.

Theryn took his mouth off of Atrum's cock. "Did you like that?" he asked, his eyes hooded with desire.

Atrum could only manage a nod. Theryn continued fucking him with his fingers, introducing a third. The pain and discomfort faded the longer it went on. "I want you now," he gasped. "Please, now!"

Theryn carefully removed his fingers. He coated himself with more of the oil, moaning a little as he stroked himself. "Do you want—" He broke off with a breathy laugh. "Gods, I can barely speak I want you so badly."

Atrum laughed a little too; he was filled not just with desire, but also with joy. He and his prince, together as they were meant to be. He sat up and pulled Theryn into a kiss.

After a moment, Theryn pulled back again with another laugh. "You aren't helping!"

Atrum tried to look serious. "And what did you want to ask me, my prince?"

"I was going to ask you if you wanted to be on your knees or on your back."

Atrum moaned. The question alone was almost enough to make him come. "On my back," he finally managed to gasp. "Want to see you."

Theryn kissed him again. When he pulled away, he took a moment to gaze into Atrum's eyes. The laughter had left them; this moment felt almost sacred. "Lie down," he said.

Atrum eased onto his back. He parted his legs and bent his knees, exposing himself fully to Theryn. Theryn moved forward, his cock in hand. He pressed the head against him and then slowly pressed inside. Atrum felt *full*—as if he were being stretched to his very limit. Theryn kept his pace slow, allowing Atrum to accustom himself to Theryn's girth. At long last, he was completely inside Atrum, buried as deeply as he could manage.

"All right?" Theryn asked, panting.

Atrum managed a nod. Theryn took the vial and poured more oil where their bodies were joined. Slowly, he began rocking his hips, pulling out a little

and then pushing in again. With each movement, he pulled out a little farther until he was finally thrusting his whole length in and out of Atrum's body. Atrum could do nothing but hold on, his fists twisted in the sheets as waves of pleasure crashed over him again and again.

Theryn dropped his hand to Atrum's cock and stroked him in time with his thrusts. It only took a few minutes before Atrum was coming. Atrum slapped a hand over his own mouth to muffle his screams of pleasure as he shot his seed over Theryn's fist and onto his own stomach. Theryn moved both hands to Atrum's hips, anchoring himself as he pounded into him as fast and as hard as he could until he came as well. Atrum could feel Theryn's cock pulsing inside him as he emptied every last drop of his seed into Atrum's body.

Theryn managed to pull himself out before collapsing beside Atrum on the bed. They were both heaving in great gasps of air, unable to speak for several moments. Eventually, Theryn gathered enough energy to fetch a cloth. He cleaned himself first and then moved the cloth between Atrum's legs. In spite of how sensitive his cock was, Atrum felt another brief pulse of pleasure. He hadn't thought that possible.

Theryn brushed his thumb over Atrum's cheek; it was only then that he noticed the tears there. They kissed, all softness and gentleness now. Atrum pulled him into his arms, tucking his chin over Theryn's head. He still felt full of warmth and joy, but he could feel it starting to fade. All of the troubles of the outside world began trickling back into his head.

Theryn must have felt some change in him, because he pulled back to gaze into Atrum's eyes. "No matter what happens, no one can take this moment from us," he said. "No one."

Atrum rested his forehead on Theryn's. "I can't bear to lose you," he said.

"Then don't lose me."

Atrum pulled him close again. He knew that they should get up and dress themselves in their night clothes, then go to their respective beds. He couldn't bring himself to do it. The world would conspire to tear them apart from now on out—he would play no part in it.

Chapter Six

The sun was bright the day Lyar came for him.

Theryn felt very strongly that it should have been dark. There should have been gloomy skies, rain and thunder, gusts of cold wind so strong that they nearly blew you over. But it was spring, so of course the weather was mild. Cheery, even. He wasn't much for prayers, but he had prayed to Vanel, goddess of the rain, for at least a little drizzle. He felt betrayed; maybe he should have listened to his clerical tutor after all.

The entire household of the castle—nobles and servants all—were lined up outside to greet the Soltarans. Lyar arrived with his coterie at midmorning, as they had arranged. It was a much more momentous occasion than their last visit. Lyar had come to impress. He was at the lead, dressed from head to toe in red and riding a brilliant white steed that had reins lined with rubies and diamonds. He was flanked by four men carrying the banners of Soltara. Behind them were at least a hundred people, half of whom rode horses. Some of the mounted men were knights in armor. Others wore long, ornate robes that swirled with red and gold patterns. They must be the infamous priests of Soltar. Theryn recognized Father Plinius among them, dressed more grandly than his first visit. The men on foot were gaily dressed servants. A few covered carts brought up the rear.

As they moved closer, Theryn noticed with satisfaction that the banner men had to stop every so often to untangle banners from the trees. Perhaps the green gods hadn't completely abandoned him after all.

The procession at last reached them. Lyar dismounted. His gaze immediately found Theryn, but he approached Theryn's father first. "Your Majesty," he said with a bow.

King Olan returned the bow. "Welcome once again, Prince Lyar."

With that over with, Lyar turned to Theryn. He smiled. "My betrothed," he said, taking his hand. "I hope our conversations are more genial going forward." There was something in his gaze—regret? An apology? Theryn couldn't be sure.

"Today marks a joyous occasion," Lyar said, addressing the crowd. "At last, we have found that which we had sought for so many years. In the name of the Light and of the Life, we honor this marriage, and the peace it will bring

between our people.” He turned his attention to his priests, who had dismounted from their horses. “Come pay homage,” he said.

The priests formed a line in front of Lyar and Theryn. To Theryn’s great surprise, each priest knelt before him and kissed the hem of his tunic. That men of such obvious stature would kneel so reverently before him was beyond strange. He looked to his father, who seemed just as surprised at the treatment.

“What are they doing?” Theryn asked Lyar.

“Paying homage, as I said.”

“Yes, but why?”

“All will be revealed in its time,” Lyar said.

Theryn wanted to press him, but the situation didn’t lend itself to deeper conversation.

When the priests finished their homage, the whole crowd, Glin and Soltaran alike, entered the castle grounds for the feast that his father had had prepared. The Great Hall was as grandly decorated as Theryn had ever seen. The green mages had coaxed a brilliant array of flowers to blossom from the walls, covering them in a rainbow of colors. Interspersed amongst the flowers on the wall were green banners bearing the royal crest—a great oak tree. The table held a sumptuous feast. A group of minstrels played a merry tune as they all entered.

The mood should have been festive. But no amount of decoration and merry music could hide the fact that this was less of a marriage match and more of a sacrifice. The king and queen took their places at the head of the table. Normally, Belvar and his wife would sit on either side of them, but Lyar and Theryn were granted the honor this time. Atrum sat on Theryn’s right. Across from him sat Shay, which meant she was directly beside Lyar. Theryn looked over to Atrum as they took their seats. Atrum’s jaw was clenched tight. Shay’s position made Theryn uncomfortable, too. If Lyar had experience with manipulating the beings of the Shade, would he notice anything unusual about her?

The king made a halfhearted toast of welcome, after which the servants began serving the meal. If Lyar noticed the subdued mood of the Glin, he didn’t show it. He radiated self-satisfaction. Besides, it would surprise Theryn if Lyar noticed much of anything apart from Theryn, for he kept that sapphire-blue gaze fixed on him the whole time.

“You look radiant,” Lyar said.

“You look smug,” Theryn retorted.

His father gave him a stern look, but Lyar just laughed. “I wouldn’t say smug. I am full of joy.” He looked serious for a moment. “I realize that your feelings are... different at this time, but it is my hope that you will come to feel otherwise.”

It would be Theryn’s greatest joy of all to tell Lyar exactly what he thought of that idea, but it was hardly the time for that. Instead, he crossed his arms over his chest and remained silent.

When it was clear he would get nothing further from Theryn, Lyar turned to Shay. “I do not believe I have had the pleasure of making your acquaintance, my lady,” he said.

“This is Lady Shay,” Atrum said as evenly as he could manage. “My betrothed.”

Lyar raised an eyebrow. “Your betrothed?”

“Yes,” Atrum said.

“She’s coming with us to Soltara,” Theryn said.

“Is that so.” Lyar inclined his head to Shay. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Shay.”

Shay stared dully at her plate, unresponsive.

Lady Kindy, who was sitting at Shay’s side, gently put a hand on Shay’s. “The prince is addressing you, my lady,” she said.

Shay dragged her head upward. “A pleasure, Your Majesty,” she echoed, her voice barely above a whisper. Her gaze dropped to her plate.

Lyar gave her a strange look. “Is she ill?” he asked Atrum.

“Yes,” Atrum said after a moment. “Her health is fragile.”

“I hope she is well enough for the journey.”

Lady Kindy piped up. “I beg your pardon for being so forward, Your Most Gracious Majesty, but I shall be caring for my lady on the journey. It is true that her constitution is quite delicate, and I’ve only just begun to serve her, but I am already quite sure I can meet all of my lady’s needs. We won’t be a hindrance, and we are both ever so excited to see the glorious kingdom of Soltara!”

Lyar smiled at that. “What a charming and dutiful young lady you are,” he said. “What is your name?”

“Lady Kindy, Your Majesty,” she said, her cheeks flushed. “It’s all this excitement that has her overwhelmed, I’m sure. When she is apart from crowds, she is a most kind and demure lady. We would be happy to receive you in a more private setting.”

“I shall look forward to it, then,” Lyar said.

Atrum and Theryn exchanged glances. Lady Kindy had been very useful just then, but they would have to make it plain to her that such a thing would not be possible.

The feast was a slog to get through, and the mood of the crowd was so strange. All seemed much too quiet for a typical feast. The Glin were subdued for obvious reasons, but the Soltarans’ attitude seemed one of hushed reverence. Theryn could feel their gazes on him; he disliked it.

As the feast wound down, some of Lyar’s servants entered the hall, carrying with them two great chests. They were filled with gifts for Theryn’s parents—jewels and gold Soltaran coins, some fine silk dresses in the Soltaran style for his mother, and lastly, a few tomes of their holy books. It made Theryn feel even worse; he was being purchased. There was no way of disguising it. For their part, his parents didn’t look overjoyed with their new wealth, but that didn’t matter. They accepted the gifts, all the same. They were selling their son.

After the giving of the gifts, two of the older and most heavily decorated Soltaran priests said a prayer blessing their union. Or at least that’s what they said it was; it could have been gibberish for all Theryn knew, as they were chanting in ancient Soltaran. Even worse than that, however, was when the Glin druids did the same, giving their blessings. Theryn had to intone an oath to the green gods to honor his marriage, although he nearly choked on the words. He was making an oath he wouldn’t keep, which was a terrible sin. But surely pledging himself to a false god was even worse than that?

Even then it wasn’t over; mummers arrived after all the prayers to provide amusement and lighten the solemn mood. Theryn could barely sit still. All in all, it was several hours before Theryn could make his escape. He knew it wouldn’t be long lived, but he needed at least a little time to catch his breath. Atrum accompanied him back to his chambers but then asked his leave so that he could check on Shay. Theryn granted it, but not before he stole a few kisses. He had perhaps a quarter of an hour to himself when there was a knock at the door. He sighed and bade them enter.

A valet came in and bowed. “Prince Lyar requests to see you, my lord.”

“Tell him I am resting. If he wants to speak with me, he can do so tomorrow.”

The valet did not look very happy at that answer, but he bowed and retreated. A few moments later, Lyar burst through the door, accompanied by two of his own servants carrying a large trunk.

Theryn felt shocked at such blatant rudeness. “I did not give you permission to enter!”

“I should not require it,” Lyar said. “I am your betrothed, soon to be your husband. You will receive me when I call on you.”

“Why bother sending someone to request entry, then?” Theryn asked. “Requests that can’t be refused are demands.”

Lyar flashed his teeth at Theryn in what might have been a smile. “Just so,” he said.

“What do you want?”

Lyar motioned to the servants, who brought the trunk forward and placed it in front of him. “I have brought you gifts,” he said. “I thought you might appreciate receiving them in private.” A dusty smell wafted from the trunk as the servants opened it. Theryn peered inside. It contained clothes—lots of them, all in the ostentatious Soltaran style of puffed sleeves and breeches that seemed to give a square shape to whoever wore them. Theryn much preferred the Glin style of dress.

When Theryn made no move to remove any of them, Lyar bent and selected a handsomely decorated white and gold doublet. It was in very fine condition, but it had the smell of an older garment. He held it up to Theryn. A strange expression crossed his face and stayed there for quite some time. “It suits you,” he said at last.

Theryn pushed the garment aside and took a step away. “It does *not* suit me,” he said. “I have my own wardrobe.”

Lyar ran his hand over his goatee, perhaps hiding a frown. His blue gaze burned as he glared at Theryn, but when he spoke, it was in a carefully measured tone. “Glin fashion will seem out of place in my court.”

“Then my dress will match my condition,” Theryn snapped.

“That will only be true if you make it so,” Lyar said. He picked up the doublet again. “Come, let’s be reasonable. You should try them on at the very least.”

“No,” Theryn said firmly. “I won’t have you parading me around as if you’ve conquered me.”

“Is it really that large of a matter?”

“Apparently so.”

Lyar brought his hand to his mouth again. “Very well,” he said.

“Truly?” Theryn said, surprised. That had been suspiciously easy.

“There isn’t much I can do about it, is there?” Lyar said. “I suppose I could have my servants strip you and hold you down while I dress you like a child.” He let that sit for a moment. “But that would hardly be an auspicious start to our marriage, would it?”

Theryn took a step backward at the sudden malice in his tone but stopped himself from retreating further—he would not be bullied. He thrust out his chin. “If that’s all, then I would kindly request that you get the hell out of my chambers.”

“There is one more thing,” Lyar said. “And I am afraid I’m going to have to insist.” He approached Theryn. Theryn held his ground; he wouldn’t run from the man. But that meant that he was now face-to-face with Lyar, so close that he could smell Lyar’s breath. It was surprisingly sweet, like honey. Lyar reached down to a purse which hung from his belt and pulled out a gold ring. Before Theryn could react, Lyar took his hand.

Theryn could have pulled back—but what would happen then? He glanced at the servants; they were burly men. If Lyar changed his mind about starting their marriage off on the right foot, would Lyar have those men hold him down as he’d threatened? Theryn couldn’t bear to be subjected to that sort of indignity.

Lyar drew Theryn’s hand upward. His glove felt silken against Theryn’s skin. He found himself staring into Lyar’s eyes. The intensity of his blue gaze pinned him in place. Without looking away, Lyar slipped the ring onto Theryn’s finger. After a moment, Lyar dropped his gaze to the ring. “A perfect fit,” he said. He ran his thumb over the ring in a gesture of perverse tenderness.

Theryn finally came out of his daze. He snatched his hand from Lyar’s. “Get out.”

Lyar looked away. “As you wish,” he said. He sounded strangely sad. He motioned for his servants to pack up the trunk. They left the room.

As soon as they were gone, Theryn collapsed into a chair. He held up his shaking hand to examine the ring. It was a wide gold band with a diamond embedded in it. The metal felt heated—not hot enough to burn, but unusually warm.

A few moments later, Atrum came rushing into the room. When he spotted Theryn in the chair, he hastened to his side. “I just saw Lyar coming from here—are you all right?”

Theryn stood up. “I’m fine.”

“You aren’t,” Atrum insisted. “You’re as pale as a sheet.”

“I’m not pale,” Theryn said. He didn’t want Atrum to see how badly Lyar had shaken him. “I’m merely nauseated from having to talk to him.”

Atrum didn’t look convinced. “What did he want?”

“He wanted to dress me up like a Soltaran peacock. Apparently our Glin fashions are not suitable for his court. I told him that my clothes were fine the way they were.”

“You argued with him over clothing,” Atrum said. He looked disapproving.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I thought that we were going along with this engagement in order to discover Lyar’s secrets,” Atrum said. “If you needlessly antagonize him, we will discover nothing.”

“It wasn’t needless,” Theryn snapped. “If I let him dress me in Soltaran fashion, it will seem as if we’ve surrendered. We haven’t. Glinden is independent, not another colony of Soltara.”

“Nevertheless, we must choose our battles.”

Theryn felt himself flush—whether it was more anger or embarrassment, he couldn’t say. “I just had a battle with Lyar; I don’t need one with you.”

Atrum sighed. He pulled Theryn into an embrace. “There is no battle here,” he said. “I’m sorry. I should have been here.”

Theryn tightened his arms around Atrum. “You aren’t going to be able to be with me every time he’s here. And besides, what could you have done? I will have to get used to managing him. And you’re right. I was being childish.”

“It isn’t childish to want to protect your dignity.”

Theryn pulled back. “I admit I’m wrong, and now you’re going to find fault with that as well?” he said with faux exasperation. “There is no pleasing you.”

Atrum laughed. His hands drifted to Theryn’s hips. “We both know that’s not true.”

They started to kiss. Before things could get too heated, Theryn pulled away. “Hold on,” he said. Before things went any further, he wanted to take off the ring. It felt wrong to be kissing Atrum with the damned thing on his finger. But when he tried to slide it off, it stuck. He pulled at again—still nothing.

“What’s wrong?” Atrum asked.

“It’s this ring,” Theryn said. “Lyar forced me to put it on, and now it won’t come off.”

“He *forced* you?” Atrum said.

Theryn twisted and pulled at it with increasing desperation. Atrum fetched a vial of oil; they greased his finger and tried again, but still, it wouldn’t budge. The ring grew warmer and warmer the more they pulled, until at last it started to burn. Theryn let out a shout of pain. “It’s burning me!”

Atrum grabbed his arm and pulled him across the room to the water pitcher and basin. Theryn put his hand in the basin as Atrum poured the cool water over it. The burning stopped. After a few moments, Theryn pulled his hand out. As they watched, the diamond turned from clear to a deep red.

“Does it still hurt?” Atrum asked.

Theryn shook his head, but he really couldn’t say. It was true that it no longer burned, but he was overcome with a feeling of dread so strong that it made him feel ill. He reached down to try to pull at it again, but when he did, the ring grew warm once more. It cooled as soon as he took his hand away.

He stumbled back to his chair and sat down. Atrum knelt beside him. “He forced you?” Atrum asked again. “How?”

“He took my hand and put it on. I wanted to pull away, but he had his servants with him and I thought they might—” His voice gave out for a moment. He swallowed and forced himself to continue. “I thought they might hold me down, and I didn’t want to go through that, so I let him.”

Atrum’s hands clenched into fists. “He threatened you?”

“In a way,” Theryn said. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “He pointed out that he could have his men strip me in order to make me wear the clothing he wanted me to wear. He said that he wouldn’t, but then he insisted on the ring, and I thought...” He trailed off. A sense of shame radiated through him, although he had done nothing wrong.

“I should have never left your side,” Atrum said with vehemence.

“It’s all right,” Theryn said. “I gave you leave to go. And as I said, you won’t always be able to be at my side when he wants to speak with me.”

“But he wasn’t just speaking with you!” Atrum said. “He threatened you! Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“Because I was embarrassed!” Theryn shouted. They both startled at the volume of Theryn’s voice. “I am a prince of Glinden, well trained to defend myself, and yet he came into my own chambers and forced this thing on me, and there was nothing I could do about it!”

Theryn put his hands over his face, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. Once he had composed himself, he lowered his hands. He opened his eyes to the sight of Atrum looking up at him from where he knelt on the ground. His expression was somewhere between rage and helplessness.

“What can I do for you?” he asked quietly.

Theryn sighed. “If you could destroy Lyar and the Soltaran army, that would be lovely,” he said.

Atrum gave him a small smile. “Would if I could, my prince.”

Theryn looked around the room. It was too early for sleep, and he no longer felt in the mood for sex. His gaze lit on the strachet board. “How about a game?” he asked. “And some wine. No—not some. A *lot* of wine.”

“As you wish.”

Theryn set up the game while Atrum went to procure the wine. He returned with not only wine, but a small meal for the two of them so they wouldn’t have to show their faces outside the chambers until morning. The two of them sat and played, as they had so often in the past. It struck Theryn that they might not get the chance to again for a long time. Their days of idle games were over with. The games they were playing now had much higher stakes.

They woke up early the next morning. Most of their things had already been packed, but Theryn and Atrum took one last look around the chambers for anything they might need. When they were finished with their search, they knelt to pray to the green gods for safety and wisdom. Each of them carried a small pouch of their own personal prayer stones, etched with the markings of the gods who mattered most to them. Theryn hoped the green gods would stay with them on their journey, but who knew if they would hear their prayers so far away from the Glin.

With that done, Theryn turned back for one last look.

“Do you think we’ll ever see these rooms again?” Theryn asked.

“I couldn’t say,” Atrum said.

Theryn felt his eyes sting. He left the room before he embarrassed himself.

Lyar was waiting for them at the gates. Their horses had been saddled, ready for them to leave. Only Theryn’s parents, his brother, and his wife were there to greet them; there was to be no grand send-off. Atrum had said his good-byes to his foster parents the previous day. Shay and Kindy were there as well, standing beside two mares that had been gifted to them by the king and queen.

Father Plinius stood at Lyar’s side. The old man’s beady eyes darted over their small party. Whatever he saw in them pleased him, apparently, for he had a very satisfied expression on his face.

Lyar approached Theryn. “Good morning to you,” he said.

Theryn didn’t bother to reply. He turned to his family while Atrum went to speak with Shay and Kindy. His mother hugged him first. She was crying, a fact that he was sure was annoying his father, but when he looked to him, he saw tears in his eyes as well. When his mother released him, his father brought him into an embrace. “I did not want this for you, son,” he said, too quietly for anyone else to hear. “I hope you can find some happiness in your new life.”

Theryn wasn’t sure what to say. “I’ll try,” he finally said.

Belvar and his wife embraced him next. “Remember that you promised Cyreuld and Kinid you would write them regularly,” Belvar said, referring to his children. “Enine and Iraya aren’t old enough to read yet, so Cyreuld has promised to read your letters aloud.”

“Of course,” Theryn said. Another wave of sadness struck him as he thought about how he would not see his nieces and nephews grow up.

Atrum and Theryn reluctantly mounted their horses. Lyar and Father Plinius had already mounted theirs while Theryn was saying good-bye. Once they were all settled, Lyar directed his horse toward Theryn. "Shall we be off, then?" he asked.

Theryn nodded. What else could he do?

"We will ride at the front of the procession," Lyar said. "Follow me."

Theryn took one last look at Glinrock Castle. It had been his home his entire life. He had never thought he would leave it. He tried to burn it into his memory, but then he realized he didn't have to make an effort. The castle was a part of him, in the same way the Glin forest was a part of the castle. It had wound its way into him, becoming as much a part of his heart as his own flesh. With that realization, he turned his horse and followed Lyar. He didn't look back again.

Theryn and Atrum trailed after Lyar to the front of the procession. Shay, Kindy, and Father Plinius came along, too. Once they were at the head, the whole lumbering mass began to follow behind them.

They had been riding for about a quarter of an hour when Lyar addressed him. "I don't know what sort of monster you think I am, but you *will* be able to visit, you know. You needn't look so gloomy."

Theryn didn't think he could talk to the man without causing a scene, so he kept his jaw clenched shut.

They rode along a little farther. "I think that I perhaps owe you an apology," Lyar said. "I behaved poorly last night."

"Yes, you did," Theryn said. He regretted it the moment it left his lips; Lyar had wanted him to respond, and now he had.

Lyar smiled. "I am not used to having people... disagree with me. And I expect that you aren't used to being told what to do."

Theryn sighed. He'd already been baited into responding; he might as well finish the conversation. "Oh no, I've been told what to do. I just don't listen."

Lyar laughed. "Something we have in common, then."

Theryn did not like the thought of having anything in common with Lyar. "What did you do to me last night?" he said.

Lyar looked back over his shoulder at the rest of the procession. With the exception of Atrum and Father Plinius, the rest were fairly far behind, but not so much as to be completely out of earshot. "I will explain later, in private."

Father Plinius urged his horse forward until he was even with Theryn. “He has not harmed you, if that’s your concern,” he said.

Lyar glared at him. “You speak out of turn, sir!” he said. “This conversation has nothing to do with you.”

Plinius seemed startled by the rebuke. “My apologies, Your Majesty,” he said. He fell back until he was a ways behind them.

Theryn looked to Lyar, whose jaw was clenched. “What did he say to offend you?” Theryn asked.

“He is too familiar at times,” Lyar said. “He is my avower, and I value his counsel, but you and I are royalty. He should not enter the conversation unless asked.” He glared back at the man. “Particularly on sensitive subjects.”

Theryn wanted to press him about what made the subject of the ring so sensitive, but he was learning not to interfere with Lyar when his temper was raised.

They rode on in silence for quite some time. It took much longer to move with so many followers. Even though the last thing Theryn wanted to do was leave Glinden, he still found himself itching to move more quickly.

“We’ll get there soon enough,” Lyar commented.

Theryn startled. He hadn’t realized Lyar had been watching him so closely. But why should that be a surprise? Lyar was always watching him. He should keep that in mind. “And where is ‘there,’ exactly?” Theryn asked.

“Brode first,” Lyar said. “We will refresh ourselves there for the night and then move on to Leaside where the rest of the procession awaits.”

“The rest of it?” Theryn asked with surprise. How many more people could there possibly be?

Lyar smiled. “You didn’t think this was all, did you? We are to make a grand tour of all the lands between here and Soltara. One hundred men is not sufficient.”

“How many men are sufficient, then?”

“Two thousand, give or take.”

“Two *thousand*?”

He wished he hadn’t said anything, because Lyar seemed very pleased by his surprised reaction. “Oh yes,” he said. “We have a small portion of my army

to accompany us, naturally, and then there are the priests and the monks, a couple hundred of my most favored nobles, and of course, all of the servants.”

“And all that just to introduce me to your kingdom.”

“Not quite,” Lyar said. “Periodic royal progresses must be taken as a matter of course. The people must see whom it is who rules them.”

“And the size and might of the army that backs that rule,” Theryn added.

“Just so,” Lyar said.

And I along with it, Theryn thought glumly. He hated to be party to any displays of might by Soltara, but there was little he could do.

While the ride to Brode was a mere four hours for a single person on horseback, it took the group of them much longer because of their size and the need for frequent rest. They arrived in Brode in late afternoon. Brode was a small village, inhabited mostly by Tamaran shepherds. It was one of the few places where the Soltarans allowed the Tamarans and the Glin to trade, so the marketplace was fairly large for such a sparsely inhabited place. The people waved and shouted huzzahs as they paraded through the marketplace; Tamar had been under Soltaran rule for nearly a century, and most had converted to their religion. Lyar waved benevolently, but they continued riding through until they reached a large field just outside the settlement proper. A vast field of pavilion tents of various sizes in dazzling gold and red had been erected there.

Upon their arrival, servants came to see to the horses. Atrum went to Shay’s side, helping her and Lady Kindy dismount. That left Theryn alone at Lyar’s side.

A servant approached Lyar and bowed. “Dinner will be served in the mess tent as you commanded, Your Majesty.”

“Very good, Daron,” Lyar said. “See to it that everyone gets fed.” Lyar turned to Theryn. “You and I shall dine in private.”

“You and I and Sir Atrum,” Theryn said.

Atrum looked over at them when he heard his name said; he said a few things to Shay and then hastened to Theryn’s side.

“I thought that Sir Atrum would want to see to his betrothed’s comfort.”

“My place is at my prince’s side,” Atrum said.

Lyar looked annoyed. “Your dedication to your prince is admirable, as always,” Lyar said. “But surely you do not think he’s in any danger with me?”

Atrum squared his shoulders but made no reply.

Lyar's jaw clenched for a moment. He inhaled sharply and then let his breath out slowly. He directed his attention back at Theryn. "Of course, if you and Sir Atrum want to get settled, I can have my steward show you to your own tent after your meal. I had hoped to talk to you about your ring, but I suppose there's time for that later. Daron—" He snapped his fingers. "When Prince Theryn and his higard have finished eating, show them to their tent. Come to think of it, you also ought to have one set up for the ladies, since we hadn't been expecting them. I shall be dining privately."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the steward said.

"I will see you in the morning, then," Lyar said. He turned and began to walk away.

He hadn't made it more than a few feet when Theryn called out to him. "Wait."

Lyar turned around. "Yes?"

Atrum put a hand on Theryn's arm. Theryn ignored it. "I'll come with you," he said to Lyar.

Lyar smiled. "I am so pleased you've changed your mind," he said.

A stormy expression came over Atrum's face, but Theryn put a hand on his arm. "It's all right," he said lowly. "See to Shay. I'll be around soon."

"You're certain?" Atrum asked. The concern in his expression made Theryn feel a bit guilty. It wasn't fair to ask Atrum to stay by his side one minute and dismiss him the next. But what could he do? Lyar had made it clear he would only talk to Theryn alone.

"Yes," Theryn said. He tried to put as much reassurance in his voice as possible. "Go."

Atrum gave Lyar one last glare and then turned and walked toward Shay. Theryn watched him go, his dark cape billowing out behind him like a cloud of smoke. He looked back to Lyar.

Lyar gestured forward. "This way."

They walked a ways back, past the military encampment, and then to the top of a small hill. A grand square tent stood in front of them. Two guards stood by either side of the opening flap. Just as they were about to enter, a servant

approached them. Following him was a shepherd woman, clutching a small boy in her arms. The child was limp and looked feverish. Angry red spots speckled his face and arms.

“Pardon me, Your Majesty,” the servant said with a bow. “This woman has asked for a royal blessing for her child.”

Theryn expected Lyar throw off a few halfhearted words, but that wasn't what happened. He stepped forward and touched the woman on her arm. “What is your name?”

“Lina, sire,” she said. Her face was tear streaked. “Please, Sire, he was fine last night, but we woke up to find him like this. It's the Vor pox, I'm sure.”

Lyar ran a gloved hand over the boy's forehead. The boy whimpered but otherwise seemed unresponsive. “And what is his name?”

“Yavis.”

Lyar leaned closer to the child. “Yavis, you are going to be all right. The Lord of Light and Life is here for you.” He took off his gloves.

Theryn tensed in alarm. Was he going to burn him? Before Theryn could react, Lyar put his hand on the boy's forehead. The child's whimpers turned to screams, but it lasted only a moment. When Lyar removed his hand, the spots were gone. He no longer looked feverish. In fact, he even smiled a little before putting his arms around his mother and falling asleep.

“Oh thank you, Your Highness!” The mother wept. “Thank you, thank you.”

“It is not me you should be thanking,” Lyar said. “The Lord of Light and Life cured your son; I am but his vessel.”

“Praise be to Him!” she said.

“May the Light always shine upon you and yours,” Lyar responded. The mother thanked him a few more times before the servant could successfully lead her away.

Theryn realized that his mouth was hanging open. They had healers with magical talents in Glinden, but none who could have done what Lyar just did. “How did you do that?” he asked. “And isn't your power heat?”

“My power is not of fire alone,” Lyar said as he put his glove back on. “As I have said, I have the gift of Life. The sun holds two powers—that of Light,

which is illumination, and that of Life, which is the force that nourishes the world.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Think about it. If the sun went dark, all plants would wither and die, and with them the animals and people of the world. The sun *is* life itself. My power lets me manipulate the force of Life in each of us.”

“How does that lead to burning things?”

“Haven’t you ever been burned by the sun if you are out too long in it? Fevers, similarly, are like burns inside your body. The heart is the sun of life that beats in each of us. I cannot heal all illness, nor cure all wounds. But I can do what I can.”

Theryn was speechless. Lyar smiled and gestured to the tent. “Shall we?”

They stepped into the tent. Theryn wasn’t sure what he expected, but it wasn’t this. On the inside, it didn’t seem like a tent at all. It seemed exactly like a room in a castle might, except the walls were canvas instead of stone. There was a table with two wooden chairs, and then two fine chairs with velvet cushions off to the right side, as well as a small table. To the left was a *bed*, which seemed completely ridiculous to Theryn. This was an encampment. Who brought furniture to an encampment?

Lyar gestured to the table. “Won’t you have a seat?”

Theryn sat down as Lyar took the chair across from him. As soon as they had done so, three servants entered, carrying their meal and some wine. The servants laid out their meal, then bowed and left. Theryn’s mouth began to water immediately upon smelling the roasted meat and freshly baked bread, no doubt provided by the villagers. He ought to start questioning Lyar immediately, but he decided that he’d think better on a full stomach. He devoured his meal. It was much nicer than he had expected the food to be. Lyar seemed content to eat in silence, for which Theryn was grateful. He wanted him to talk, but first he needed to get his head on straight.

Theryn finished his meal. He looked up to find that Lyar was staring at him again. “Why are you always staring at me?”

Lyar blinked. “I’m sorry. I hadn’t realized I was doing so.”

Theryn snorted. “I find it more likely that you didn’t think I would notice.”

Lyar laughed a little and looked away. He actually seemed embarrassed.

After a moment, Lyar looked back to him again. “I find you very beautiful, and enjoy looking at you.”

It was Theryn’s turn to look away. Lyar peered at him. “It does not please you to hear me say that?”

“Why on earth would it?” Theryn asked. “I am not here by choice. I have no interest in you, and I have even less interest in what you think of my appearance.”

Theryn was prepared for a flash of Lyar’s temper. It didn’t happen. In fact, his expression became very complicated for a moment. Lyar took a large drink of his wine before speaking. “Fair enough, I suppose.” He gestured to the chairs. “I think we would be more comfortable if we moved to the sitting area.”

Theryn looked at the two nicer chairs with suspicion. It seemed a little too cozy. “I’m comfortable here,” Theryn said.

Lyar laughed. “These chairs are punishingly uncomfortable, and I refuse to believe that your arse isn’t aching as bad as mine from that long ride. Swallow your pride for a moment and sit down with me. Your virtue is safe, if that’s what you’re worried about.” Lyar got up and moved without waiting for Theryn’s response.

Theryn hesitated but ultimately decided to join him. He wouldn’t have Lyar believe he was afraid of him. He then realized that it was actually true—he *didn’t* fear him the way he had at the beginning of the day. It annoyed him that a brief moment with a sick child should shake his entire opinion of the man so much. He reminded himself of the relentless conquests Lyar had launched, costing hundreds of thousands of people either their lives or freedom. He thought about what Lyar was doing to Atrum’s family, and the dark secret machinations that atrocity seemed to foretell. And lastly, he reminded himself of the way Lyar had barged into his chambers and threatened him, even if the worst of it amounted to putting a ring on his finger.

Steeling himself, he took a seat beside Lyar. He would not be afraid, but neither would he be charmed. The chair was, as promised, very soft. In front of them was a low table with a teapot and two cups. “I can’t believe you would bring all this with you.”

“Why wouldn’t I? I have more than enough horses and more than enough men to bring whatever I wish with me, wherever I go.”

“Just because you can doesn’t mean you should. I’m sure the energy of both your men and your horses could be put to better use.”

Lyar tilted his head upward and heaved a great sigh of exasperation. “Is everything going to be a battle with you?”

Theryn didn’t respond. In truth, he knew his sniping seemed petty. He looked down at his hands, and thus at the ring as well. “What is this, and why can’t I take it off?”

In response, Lyar removed one of his gloves. He held up his hand; on it was an identical ring. Or nearly identical—upon closer inspection, the jewel was a tawny yellow. Lyar gestured to Theryn’s ring. “You must have been upset last night. I hadn’t expected it to become red so quickly.”

Theryn glared at him. “Of course I was upset—I can’t take it off, and it nearly burned me when I tried!” Just the memory of it was enough to flame Theryn’s anger again. “What have you done to me?”

Lyar took off his other glove and laid them both on the table. “I have begun the process of joining our abilities.”

“Joining?”

“Yes. It is part of the purpose of our marriage, after all.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you would have refused,” Lyar said. He gave Theryn a small smile. “Or am I wrong?”

He wasn’t, of course. Theryn stared at the ring. “What does the joining entail?”

“We will be able to draw on each other’s abilities,” Lyar said. “I hadn’t thought that it would take so quickly or else I would have said something earlier.” Lyar picked up the teapot on the table in front of them and filled both the cups. He handed one to Theryn. “My servants know to always have some sibus tea prepared for me. It can be drunk either cold or hot, but I think it tastes best hot.” He nodded his head. “Heat it up.”

“But... how?”

“You know how,” Lyar said.

Theryn wanted to protest that he didn’t, but he realized that wasn’t true. He felt a sliver of warmth inside him. It had burned uncontrollably the previous night, but now that he knew it was there, he could harness it. It wasn’t much different from his natural Light ability. He concentrated on the cup. Within

moments, it was boiling hot. He dropped it with a cry of pain; it shattered on the ground.

“Not so easy to control, is it,” Lyar said.

Theryn didn't respond to that. He bent down and picked up the pieces of the shattered tea cup and placed them on the table. “Can I heal as well?”

“Of course.” He paused. “Are you still wounded from where I burned you?”

Theryn nodded. He pulled up the sleeve, exposing where the burn had scarred him.

Lyar leaned forward very slowly. “Give me your right hand.”

Theryn's heart began to race, but he swallowed his fear and put his hand in Lyar's own. Lyar placed both of their hands over the burn. Theryn felt a gentle heat from Lyar's hand over his. “Follow this energy,” Lyar murmured. “Do you feel the difference?”

Theryn did. He was nurturing in the warmth inside of him rather than calling it forth. When they pulled their hands away, the scar was gone.

Theryn stared at the smooth skin for a long moment. Lyar, he noticed, had not leaned back. Theryn folded himself abruptly inward, crossing his hands over his chest. “And you have my ability now too, you said?” he said, changing the subject.

In response, Lyar twirled his fingers. A wispy image of a golden bird flickered into being. Another twist of his fingers and the bird flew over to Theryn. It was clearly artificial, but the movement was graceful and natural. The little bird lighted on his hand, cocked its head at him, and then dissolved into the air around it. “That was very good,” Theryn said. “Even I couldn't do that right away when my powers manifested.” Theryn looked at Lyar. “How did you manage it in so short a time?”

Lyar shrugged. “I have studied arcana for many years,” he said. He twisted the ring around his finger for a few moments, lost in thought.

Theryn also took a moment to think. “Was there another?”

Lyar's gaze whipped up from his ring to Theryn's face. “Another what?”

“Another person with my gifts. When we first met you said there are two born in each generation. But you're twenty years older than I.”

Lyar didn't respond for a long moment. “You're very clever, aren't you?” he said at last. “Yes, there was another.”

“What happened to him?”

“He died,” Lyar said shortly.

“Were you joined?” Theryn asked. “Is that why you want me—to regain the abilities you lost with his death?”

“I do not wish to discuss the matter further,” he said tightly.

“But—”

Lyar slammed his fist on the table. “You are testing my patience,” his voice rising. “I said I would not discuss it further!”

“Fine!” Theryn said, his own voice rising. “I won’t discuss him, but at least tell me why you want my powers so badly.” When Lyar didn’t respond, Theryn pressed further. “You can just say it; I already know the answer anyway. You want to use me to make yourself more powerful.”

Lyar sighed and sat back in his seat, his temper deflated. He rubbed his brow. “And why on earth would I need to be more powerful?”

Theryn blinked. “Because—” he started and then stopped. “Well, because that’s what people like you always want, isn’t it? To be more powerful?”

Lyar said nothing for a moment as he put on his gloves. “I have more power than anyone in Erara,” he said. “My father is enfeebled. I have no siblings left alive. The vast empire of Soltara is mine, and mine alone. And it *is* vast, Theryn. Almost unbelievably so. I have traveled all over, sometimes on my own and sometimes at the head of an army, exploring the lands that I, and my father, and his father, and his father’s father had worked so hard to conquer. It was to spread the Light of Soltar—that’s what I was always told. Well. The Light has been spread. Our rays touch on every last inch of this continent—with the exception of Glinden, of course. But what has changed? What was the purpose of it all?”

Theryn was completely dumbstruck. Was this some sort of trick?

Lyar smiled faintly at him. “That wasn’t the answer you expected, I take it?”

Theryn took a moment before he found his voice again. “But if not for more power, then what?”

“You will understand, in time,” he said. He held up his hand, silencing Theryn’s next objection. “Please, we’ve had enough argument for tonight, have we not? Let both the matter and ourselves rest for the moment.”

Theryn thought about pressing the matter further, but what was the use? Lyar would not tell him what he wanted to know—at least not yet. He rose from his seat. “Then I bid you good evening,” he said with a stiff little bow.

“Wait,” Lyar said. “Before you go, there is something I meant to give you.” He rose and walked over to a trunk in one corner and pulled something out. He went back to Theryn and handed him the object. It was a book.

“What is this?”

“The Biblion of Soltar,” he said. “Our holy book.” He lifted up a hand before Theryn could voice his protest. “I am not asking for your immediate conversion. I ask only that you give the matter some thought.”

There wasn’t much thought to give, since it would never happen, but Theryn accepted the book nonetheless. Religion seemed of the utmost importance to Lyar; perhaps there was a clue to his motivations hidden in there.

Theryn walked to the entrance and began to leave, but he paused. “I’m sorry for breaking your cup,” he said.

Lyar gave him a tired smile. “It is of no consequence,” he said. “There’s always another cup to be had. Good-bye, Theryn.”

“Good-bye.”

As soon as Theryn left the tent, he felt a sudden shock of cold so strong that he gasped. The feeling passed in an instant, but it left him shaking. He took a moment to compose himself. Maybe he was merely fatigued. It had been a long journey. He brushed the feeling off; he needed to find Atrum. They had much to discuss.

Chapter Seven

Watching Theryn leave with Lyar was one of the hardest things Atrum had ever done. His hand flexed by the hilt of his sword. So much of him wanted to charge the man regardless of the consequences to himself. But of course, Theryn would share in those consequences, as well as all of Glinden itself, which is why they were here to begin with. He hated how complicated it all was.

If he could do nothing for Theryn, at least he could be of assistance to Shay. She did not seem at all well. In fact, she appeared to be having trouble standing, only managing to stay upright with Lady Kindy's assistance. He replaced Kindy at her side, taking her slight weight onto himself. "What's the matter? Are you all right?"

"The sun," she managed to say. "The sky is bare here, the trees gone. The light is so bright, so bright..."

"My lady should not have been made to ride horseback," Kindy fumed. "Can't these barbarians see she is delicate? We should have had a carriage!"

Suddenly, Father Plinius was at their side. Atrum started. It seemed as if the man had come out of nowhere. "I am sure my prince would have been more than happy to provide it had we known there would be ladies accompanying us," he said. "I'm afraid you took us by surprise."

Kindy's face flushed in embarrassment. "Oh, forgive me for speaking out of turn, sir!"

"No, you are quite right," Plinius said. "Not to worry, though. There are plenty of carriages here. You shall both ride in comfort from here on out."

Kindy dipped in a curtsy. "Thank you, sir. If you would be so kind as to help us get my lady out of the sun, we would be ever so grateful."

"It would be my pleasure," he said. "You may use my tent. One is being erected for your use, but until then, I beg the pleasure of your company." He looked up at Atrum. "With your permission, of course. Can I expect the pleasure of your company as well?"

Atrum did not like the man. He spoke politely enough, but his dark gaze seemed so cold and calculating. He wanted nothing to do with him, but Shay slumped further. She needed to be out of the sun and in relative privacy as soon as possible. "Lead the way," he said with a grunt.

Plinius put a word in with the steward to have some food sent to them, then led the three of them to his tent in the northern portion of the camp, which seemed to be the area laid out for the higher-ups. He saw several of the priests retiring into their own enclosures. Atrum spotted what was clearly the royal tent just at the top of the hill. He tried not to think of what might be going on in there between Theryn and Lyar.

“Here we are,” Plinius said, ushering them into his tent. A pallet was set off in one corner for sleep, but the tent was dominated mostly by a table that was overflowing with books, scrolls, maps, and strange tools. Two large chests sat at the foot of the table.

Plinius gathered some of the mess off of the chairs and stacked it to the side. “Do forgive the mess,” he said. “I get a little too involved with my research at times. Please, all of you, have a seat.”

They all took their places at the table. A few moments later, servants arrived with plates of food. One of the servants offered to help clear the table, but Plinius vehemently forbade him from doing so. “Everything is where I need it,” he snapped at the servant. “We can eat around it.”

They each carved a place out on the table for their plates and began to eat. “What exactly do you research?” Lady Kindy asked, frowning at a particularly crowded chart full of symbols.

“Everything,” he said with a sharp smile.

“My goodness, but that must be quite overwhelming!”

“A hungry mind is never satiated.”

Kindy turned her attention from the scroll to a wand. Atrum remembered it from when Lyar and Plinius had first arrived in Glinden; they had used it to examine Theryn. She picked it up. “What is this?”

“Ah, that is a wand of Vivalance,” he said. “A deceptively simple tool, but a powerful one, nonetheless.” He took it from her. “It is made from the wood of a very special tree in the Malusion Woods.”

Atrum perked up at that. So they did have business there.

“Whatever does it do?” Kindy asked.

“It has many functions. For one, with the help of Vivalance crystals, it can determine a person’s magical proclivities.”

Kindy cocked her head. “But surely that isn’t very useful, is it? Couldn’t you just ask a person what their magical ability is?”

“Not everyone with an ability knows of its existence,” Plinius said. “In truth, most people have a propensity for one form of magic or another. With the Vivalance crystals, I can determine which discipline would suit a disciple best.” He raised an eyebrow. “Would you like to try it?”

“Oh, I am quite sure I’m very ordinary!” Kindy insisted. “I have never shown the slightest bit of talent.” But Plinius was already shuffling around in one of his trunks until he came up with a crystal. He walked over to Kindy’s side of the table.

“Stand up and hold this,” he said. She took the crystal in her hand while Plinius waved the wand around her. The crystal glowed a very pale pink.

“What does it mean?”

“You have a propensity for Life magic,” he said. “Albeit only weakly. If you were to join a nunnery, I would have you study the healing arts. I imagine you could become quite skilled.”

Kindy smiled. “Do you really think so?”

“The crystals never lie.”

“Do you have a talent?” Kindy asked.

Plinius smiled at that. “I do indeed,” he said. He picked up a knife. After a moment’s concentration, it shifted into a dark ball, which hovered over the table.

“What have you done to it?” Kindy cried.

“I have made it nothing,” Plinius said. “And thus, it can now be anything.” He gestured; the ball turned into a dark flower. “A flower for the lady?” he asked.

Kindy shook her head, unable to speak. Plinius shrugged and gestured again. It collapsed in on itself and vanished. Kindy gaped in astonishment. Atrum felt much the same way but tried to hide it. In all of the magic of the Glin, he’d never seen anything quite like that.

“Where did it go?” Kindy asked.

Plinius smiled again. “Nowhere. It is gone.” He took the crystal from Kindy and turned to Atrum. “Perhaps you would like to see what talents lie within you?” His manner was casual, but there was something hungry in his dark gaze.

“I think not,” Atrum said.

His gaze hardened, although he kept his tone light. “It’s quite harmless, as you can see.”

“No.”

Plinius bowed his head. “If that’s what pleases you,” he said. He turned his attention to Shay. “Perhaps Lady Shay would find it amusing. I can sense a most interesting aura from you...”

“No!” Atrum roared. “Put those foolish things away and do not bother us further.”

Everyone started at the volume of his voice. Kindy sat down, her head bowed and her hands folded in her lap. Plinius regarded him with a cool look. “I apologize if I’ve offended you,” he said after a moment. “I only meant to amuse.”

Atrum highly doubted that.

They all returned to their meals. Once Atrum’s temper cooled, he realized he ought to try to be more genial. The entire point of this whole charade was so that he and Theryn could get information about what Lyar was up to, and there was certainly a lot of information sitting around him right now. “I apologize for being short with you,” Atrum said. “It’s been a long journey, and I dislike being prodded.”

“I took no offense,” Plinius said. “My enthusiasm sometimes overrides social niceties.”

“I would be interested in hearing of some of your studies,” Atrum said. “You mentioned that you use wood from the Malusion Woods for your instruments?”

“For some of them, yes,” he said. “Those woods are a cornucopia of wondrous magical materials.”

“So you spend a lot of time there?”

Plinius paused. “Unfortunately not as much as I would like,” he said. “There is only so long that a mere mortal can stay in those woods without going mad. Have you ever been there?”

They locked gazes. “No,” Atrum replied. “The Glin stay clear of those woods. There are some things mortals are not meant to engage with.”

“Oh, I heartily disagree!” Plinius said. “Why would Our Creator put such things upon the earth if He did not mean for us to discover it?”

Atrum had no response to that foolishness. He looked over at a scroll on his right. He recognized some of the symbols from the ones on the Magas wand. “What do these symbols mean?”

Plinius peered over at the scroll. “Ah yes, these are the signs of the four elements of creation.”

“What are they?”

“I suppose it should not surprise me that you are unfamiliar with the truth of this world’s creation. You will have to study the Biblion, our holy book, in more detail, but I can tell you the basics now, if you wish.”

Atrum felt a flush of fury at his condescending attitude, but he did need to understand the Soltarans’ strange religion if he was to understand their motives. “I would be interested in hearing it,” he said.

“In the beginning, there was Nullom, the Void. That is that first symbol here.” He pointed to the image of a spiral. “Nullom is nothing, neither male nor female, plant nor animal, Light nor Darkness. It is the essence of death without salvation. But even Nullom contained a small spark of creation. That creation became Nuitey.” He pointed to the second symbol, which was a dark circle. “She is the Darkness.”

“But what is the difference between Darkness and Void?” Lady Kindy asked.

“A very clever question,” Plinius said. “Void is a blankness with no features. It is simply nothing. But the Darkness contains multitudes of things, though our human eyes may not see it. In Darkness, there is fertility. There is potential. Nuitey is quite beautiful, for those who can look beyond sight to see her.”

Atrum’s gaze darted over to Shay. It was a story very similar to the one she had told. Could there be some truth to the Soltarans’ religion? From her stance, he wasn’t quite sure. She was sitting as perfectly still as before, but her gaze had lifted. She watched Plinius with great attention.

“And then there was Light?” Kindy asked.

“Very good!” Plinius said. “Soltar was the Light. And Soltar’s great power is that He illuminates all. He could see Nuitey’s beauty and desperately wished

to possess her. But every time he approached, she retreated. She could not bear the intensity of His Light, you see. So what do you suppose he did?"

Kindy thought about. "Well, he must have dimmed his light somehow."

"Not quite. He separated Himself into two. The Light part of Him, called Luxor, stayed in the sky, which meant that the Life part of Him, called Vitalius, could embrace Nuitey at last. And from their union came the dawn of all life on earth."

"But when you speak of Soltar, you speak of Him as one," Kindy said. "How can it be so if He is two separate beings now?"

"They may live apart, but they function as one," Plinius said. "Although it is written they will be one once more."

"That's certainly very interesting," Kindy said. "Our faith says that the Dark and Light were one once but then separated into two worlds that exist beside each other. Parsep, the great divider, pushed the realms apart, but the effort was so great that he's spent the rest of his existence resting."

Plinius chuckled. "What a charming story. Do you think this Parsep of yours might ever push the realms back together?"

Kindy cocked her head. "Why would he do so?"

"Everything has a cycle, including our world. Just as the sun rises and sets, so too does the Light of Luxor."

"But didn't you say Luxor was the sun?"

"The sun is but a small manifestation of the Eternal Light of Soltar, which moves beyond where mortal eyes can see. What is interesting is that my calculations have shown that this Eternal Light moves much in the same way as our sun, only on a more cosmic scale. The appearance of life was its dawn." He paused. "And if my calculations are correct, we are soon headed into dusk."

"Dusk?" Lady Kindy asked. "Oh my goodness, do you mean that you think the world is going to end?"

"No, not end, exactly. But there will be a transformation. The dawning of the Second Day of Eternity will usher in a glorious new age, in which Luxor and Vitalius shall join as one once more and bring the Land of Light, where Luxor dwells, to earth at last."

Shay suddenly rose from her seat. "You are wrong," she said flatly. "There is no Second Day—only the one we have now. If what you call the Eternal

Light sets, it means a return to Void. Is that not the official teaching of your church?"

Everyone stared up at her in astonishment. "I beg your pardon, my lady," Plinius finally said. "I did not know you had studied such matters. Yes, that is the teaching of the Old Church, but recent studies have shown that our readings were in error. The evidence I have collected—"

"—is false," Shay interrupted, suddenly furious. "Is the Light we have now truly not enough for you?"

Plinius was stunned into silence. Atrum rose and put an arm around Shay. "Are you unwell?" he murmured.

She leaned her head against his shoulder. "I am tired," she said. "I do not wish to converse anymore."

Lady Kindy quickly rose to her feet. "Oh, my lady looks so pale!" she said. "How foolish of me to allow this!" She turned to Plinius. "Please, sir, she needs to lie down. Can you see if our tent has been prepared?"

Plinius rose as well. He had a very queer expression on his face; his hawk eyes were now focused on Shay in a way that made Atrum's heart pound in alarm. "Of course," he managed after a moment. "I shall return."

By the time Plinius had returned, Shay was nearly limp in Atrum's arms. "The tent is ready," he said. "The valet will show you the way."

"Thank you," Atrum said.

"No trouble at all," Plinius said. He inclined his head to Shay. "I would enjoy discussing theology with you again sometime, my lady."

The valet was waiting for them outside the tent. Shay stumbled a few times on the way; Atrum almost thought he was going to have to carry her. At last they arrived. All that was in the tent were two pallets and a trunk, which was enough for their purposes. Kindy went to the trunk while Atrum helped Shay onto the pallet. He stayed on the ground beside her, holding her hand.

"This is the wrong trunk!" Kindy cried. She rounded on the valet. "How could you be so foolish? There are several tonics that I need straight away!"

"My apologies, my lady," the valet said. "I will have your trunk fetched at once."

"And I shall go with you, since you clearly are unaware of which trunk belongs to whom," she huffed. She turned to Atrum. "I will return shortly."

“Thank you,” Atrum said.

When they had left, Atrum turned back to Shay. “Are you going to be all right?”

She gave him a weak smile. “Perhaps,” she said. “I have never had a mortal form, so I cannot say.”

“How do you know so much about their beliefs?”

“We have spent time amongst all human cultures,” Shay said. “We know their ways.”

“What was it about what he said that upset you so much?”

“The philosophy he spoke of is known as the Revelation of the Second Dawn. It is an erroneous reading of their scripture.”

“Does that mean their scripture is true?”

“As true as any other,” Shay said. “All of human faiths start with the dawning of Light. The Soltarans come very close to the real truth of it, except for their belief in Soltar Himself.” Her lip curled up in a sneer. “As if the Light of the Infinite would take the shape of mere man.”

Atrum hesitated. “Does that mean the green gods do not exist?”

Shay squeezed his hand. “They do, but they are not as powerful as you think them to be. They are children of Light, much as you are—older children, but children just the same.”

That was a monumental statement, but he would have to ponder it later. “What does the Revelation of the Second Dawn mean?”

“As he said, they believe that the cosmos experiences time the same way we do on earth. They believe that we are approaching a cosmic night, after which a new cosmic day will dawn, which will bring with it what they call the Land of Light—the realm in which they believe their righteous dead dwell.”

That was an odd concept to Atrum. The Glin believed a person’s spirit returned to the earth when the mortal form died, to be born again anew in an endless cycle. “Does such a place exist?”

“I could not say,” Shay said. “I know only of this earth.”

“So they are foolish,” Atrum said. “What does it matter?”

“Some of them believe they can bring about this night,” she said.

“Is that possible?”

“It is,” she said quietly. “It’s been done before.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are certain rituals that can bring about the suppression of both Light and Life on the earth. There was a race of people before your kind or even your gods appeared. They performed the ritual. All Light vanished for a moment, but it was enough to wipe out every living thing on earth. When it returned, Life was born anew.” She touched his hand. “I would not have the world meet that fate again.”

“Nor would I,” Atrum said faintly. “Do you know how this ritual was conducted?”

She shook her head. “No. There was something that prevented us from seeing it. Indeed, we only caught wind of it in the final days before it happened.”

Just then, Lady Kindy entered with two valets in tow, carrying their trunk.

“Just set it over there,” Kindy said. She turned to Atrum. “You should go. She needs her rest!”

Atrum looked down at Shay, whose eyes were already shutting. Kindy was right. There was nothing he could do here. He muttered a farewell to Kindy and left the tent.

He found a valet who directed him to the tent that he and Theryn would share. The interior of the tent was shockingly grand. There was an actual bed, frame and all. Off to the side was a pallet, presumably for him. A washbasin and pitcher sat off in one corner, beside which sat their trunk. The floors had been set with fresh rushes. A table and two chairs had been set up off to the side. On the table sat a bottle of wine and two goblets.

Just then, Theryn entered. Atrum rushed to his side. “Are you all right? Did he harm you?”

“No,” Theryn said. “The opposite, actually.”

Atrum gave him a puzzled look. “How do you mean?”

Theryn pulled up his sleeve and showed Atrum the smooth skin underneath.

“But your burn,” Atrum said, his confusion deepening. “Where did it go?”

Theryn opened his mouth to answer but paused. “Perhaps we should sit down. It’s a long story.”

After pouring themselves some wine, they sat down and exchanged stories. They fell into silence after they had both finished.

Theryn spoke first. "What if we're wrong about Lyar?"

That startled Atrum. "How do you mean?"

"What if he wasn't the one who ordered what we saw in the Malusion Woods?"

"Of course it was he!" Atrum said. "Who else would it be?"

"I don't know. Plinius sounds suspicious—maybe he's behind it."

"He is involved, no doubt," Atrum said. "But I am certain he must be working under Lyar's orders."

"How can you be so sure?"

Atrum stared at Theryn, not quite believing what he was hearing. "Are you saying you believe him to be honorable?"

"I didn't say that," Theryn said. "I merely think that we might have misjudged him."

"He is the Crown Prince of the Soltaran Empire," Atrum said, his voice slowly rising in volume. "It is he who is responsible for the Soltarans' endless wars and conquests, causing untold amounts of death and suffering!"

"Those wars and death started long before he was born."

"He threatened to have you stripped unless you complied with his wishes!"

"I saw it that way when it happened," Theryn said. "But perhaps I misinterpreted him."

Atrum pounded his fist on the table. "Damn it, Theryn, he *burned* you! He grabbed a hold of your arm and seared it so badly that I could smell your flesh burning!"

"But now that I've felt the power for myself, I realize how it can go wrong in just an instant," he said. "And I did blind him first, after all."

Atrum was struck speechless for a moment. "And you believe all this because you saw him heal a child?" he finally said. "He probably had the poor thing poisoned in the first place."

"Why would he poison a child?"

"To gain your sympathy! And it appears to have worked. I don't see how else you would come to defend the man who is torturing my family."

Theryn glared at him. “Do you think I’m a simpleton?” he said. “That I have no sense whatsoever? Is that what you’re saying?”

“No, of course not.” Atrum ran a hand over his face, trying to calm himself.

Theryn, too, took a moment to breathe. “I am not defending him,” he said in a more measured tone. “But if he really isn’t behind any of this, then we are focusing our energies in the wrong direction, and that does nothing to free your family, save Glinden, or save ourselves. We can’t blindly swing our swords and hope to hit something. The entire reason we’re playing along with this is to figure out exactly what is happening, isn’t it? We need to put our emotions aside and *think*.”

Atrum sighed. He poured himself some more wine. “Fine,” he said. “Let us think. If Lyar does not want to use your power to increase his own, then what is his intention?”

Theryn tugged at his hair. “I really have no idea,” he said.

For the first time since he’d entered, Atrum noticed Theryn had something in his hands. It was a book. “What is that?”

“A copy of the Biblion, their holy book,” Theryn said. “Lyar gave it to me.”

“Do you intend to read it?”

“Yes. There’s clearly some religious component to all of this,” Theryn said. “We knew that from the beginning.”

“Could their desire for your power have something to do with the Second Dawn?”

“But didn’t Shay say that adherents to that philosophy sought to bring on darkness?” Theryn said. “How would my Light power have anything to do with that?”

“It would explain what they want with my family,” Atrum said quietly.

They both took a moment to consider that.

“So instead of saving Glinden, we may have to save the entire world,” Theryn said finally. “Well, that certainly doesn’t sound impossible.”

Atrum took Theryn’s hand. “We can do anything, remember?”

“I was seven years old when I said that,” Theryn said. “I believed a lot of very foolish things at that age.”

“You believed in me,” Atrum said. “And now I believe in you. I’m sorry I got so angry. If you feel that we should think twice about our assumptions, then I am willing to open my mind.”

Theryn smiled. “And I promise to shut mine the moment Lyar does anything that even hints at villainy.”

“Then it’s settled.”

Theryn sighed. “So how do we proceed?”

“The same way as before,” Atrum said. “We keep our heads down and our ears open.” He paused. “Except I think we must do something about Shay sooner rather than later. She isn’t doing well. I don’t know how much longer she can last.”

“Last?” Theryn asked. “Do you think that she’s dying?”

“I don’t know,” Atrum said. “But whatever is happening to her is very painful.”

“I’ll talk to Lyar tomorrow about getting another Magas wand,” Theryn said. “I’ll suggest we use one to amplify his new ability, or something of the sort.”

“Won’t he want to know what happened to the one he gave you?”

Theryn shrugged. “I’ll tell him I forgot it.”

“Won’t he be angry?”

“Most likely.” Theryn grinned. “But I’ve never been particularly afraid of provoking a little anger.”

Atrum couldn’t share Theryn’s grin. “Be careful. His anger is much more dangerous than a scolding from your father.”

Theryn’s grin faded. “I will keep that in mind,” he said.

Atrum hoped that he would. Theryn always underestimated both the extent of the danger he faced and his ability to handle it. Atrum was always there to catch him when he fell, but when it came to dealing with Lyar, Theryn truly was alone. There was little that Atrum would be able to say or do.

He just hoped that Theryn was up to the task.

They were woken before dawn for prayers.

The Soltarans, it seemed, had a prayer ritual that required one to be up before the sun rose in order to give it proper greeting. Although neither Atrum nor Theryn shared the faith, they both had a curiosity about the Soltarans' strange rituals, so they pulled on their clothes and went out to join the others.

The sight was a bit eerie. All but Lyar and the priests were on their knees, facing the east. As the first crack of sunlight broke through the horizon, everyone raised their hands. Lyar and the priests intoned prayers in the old Soltaran tongue, which the rest of the camp intoned back. It lasted about ten minutes, until the sun was well and truly over the horizon. Afterward, the people got up, brushed off their knees, and went about their business. Lyar spotted Theryn and made his way to him, his arms open in greeting.

"Ah, there you are!" he said. "I was hoping you would join us for prayers. May the blessings of Luxor be upon you."

"And may the blessings of Vitalius stay with you long," Theryn replied.

Lyar's smile widened. "You've been reading."

"A little," Theryn said.

"Perhaps we can discuss it while we break our fast?"

Theryn's gaze darted over to Atrum briefly. "Yes, that would be fine," he said.

Atrum watched Lyar lead Theryn off. Just before he lost sight of them, Atrum saw Lyar's gloved hand touch Theryn's shoulder. Atrum fought the urge to unsheathe his sword and ensure that Lyar would never lay those dangerous hands on anything ever again. He took a deep breath and reminded himself that his anger was useless. His energy would be better used elsewhere. He went to the mess tent to grab something quick to eat. When he was finished, he made his way to Shay and Kindy's tent.

"Is anyone there?" he asked.

Kindy stepped out of the tent, shutting the flaps behind her. "Good morning, sir," she said as she dipped into a curtsy. "I trust you slept well."

"In truth, no," Atrum said.

Kindy sighed. "Neither have I. My lady was up all night."

"Is she awake now?"

"No. She fell asleep at last around dawn." Kindy twiddled her fingers. "I hope my lord won't be too offended by me asking, but—" She broke off and bit her lip.

Atrum put a hand on her shoulder. "I will not take offense at any question you might have."

Kindy flashed him a quick smile of relief, but her gaze darted away. "Yesterday, when we were with Plinius, Lady Shay seemed to know an awful lot about Soltaran theology," Kindy said slowly. "Especially for someone raised as a Glin peasant. Although she is very kind, she has strange manners and seems so lost, as if she were a stranger to the world." She looked up, meeting Atrum's gaze. "Who is she?"

Atrum didn't know what to say. "She is someone important to me, and to Prince Theryn," he said at last. "She is also someone in desperate need of your care. I can give you no further details. Is that answer enough for you?"

She took a moment to think about it. "It is enough," she decided. "But if you know more than I about what is best for her care, then please tell me."

"Keep her away from light as much as you can."

"I have figured that much," Kindy said, almost but not quite rolling her eyes. "Anything else?"

"Make certain that no one speaks to her unless the prince or I am present," he said. "Especially Lyar and Plinius."

"I was asking about how to care for her," Kindy said.

"Keeping them away is the most important thing you can do for her health."

Kindy's eyes widened a little. "All right," she said. "I will do my best." She smiled a little. "Fortunately for you, my mother hated conversation, and I am very talented at keeping visitors at bay."

Atrum smiled back. "Thank you," he said.

He left the tent and headed back to his own to make sure all of their things were packed. That didn't take long, so he was left not knowing quite what to do with himself. He ended up in the lower part of the camp, watching the servants breaking down the tents. It seemed like an impossible task, akin to dismantling a city brick by brick, but they were making surprisingly quick work of it, moving with the brisk efficiency that came from years of practice. Still, no matter how quickly they worked, it would still be several hours before they were through. Atrum looked in the direction of Lyar's tent. He wondered how long they would speak.

An hour passed, and still they hadn't emerged. Atrum was just considering going up there and making an excuse to get Theryn out when a large man who

Atrum recognized as a member of Lyar's guard approached him. He was a formidable looking man—burly and about a half a head taller than Atrum, who was quite tall himself. The man's face bore the scars of war. He carried something under one arm. Atrum braced himself for whatever might come.

“Good morning to you, sir!” the man said.

The jovial tone of his voice took Atrum by surprise.

“Sir Atrum, isn't it?” the man asked. “I'm Barras. Sir Barras, actually, although I've never quite got used to the title.”

Atrum had been prepared for rough words, or even a tussle, but in the face of pleasantness, he had nothing. “Pleased to meet you,” was what he finally said.

Barras grinned. He handed Atrum the thing he'd been carrying—it was a wide-brimmed straw hat. “You'll need it. I don't suspect you're much used to having to deal with the sun, what with your trees,” he said. “But believe me, it can get brutal, and it's not as if the likes of us gets to sit in covered carriages, is it?”

Atrum accepted the hat. “Thank you,” he said.

“Yes, well, I expect we'll be working together often—can't have you burned to a crisp.” He turned to leave, but Atrum stopped him.

“How long have you been in Prince Lyar's service?”

“Oh, I'd say about twelve years or so,” he said. “Got my start as a foot soldier in the conquest of Norum. His Majesty was pleased with my service and had me knighted. Not that I asked for it.”

“What manner of a man is he?”

Barras scratched his chin. “You understand that he is my prince, and as such my first response would be that he is a masterful ruler, ordained by Soltar to guide us all in the path of the Light and the Life.”

“I see,” said Atrum. “And what would your second response be?”

“That he's a good general, but is too forceful as a peacetime leader. He's an easy enough master to serve and can be quite generous. That is, as long as you don't upset him.”

“What happens if someone does?”

“Now you see, me blathering on about something like that is exactly the sort of thing he'd find upsetting.”

“He has a reputation as waging brutal war,” Atrum said.

“All war is brutal,” Barras said. “But the most brutal war of all is a protracted one. He made sure our victories were swift. That came at a price, but the people of Norum have lived in peace these past ten years.”

Atrum scoffed. “Peace under Soltaran rule.”

“Whoever sits in the palaces don’t matter much to common folk,” Barras pointed out. “What matters is that they know their villages and towns won’t be raided and sacked twice a year.”

Atrum didn’t have a response to that. Barras inclined his head. “It was nice getting better acquainted, Sir Atrum.” He left the way he came.

A short while later, Theryn and Lyar emerged from Lyar’s tent and made their way toward him. “Ah, there you are!” Lyar said to Atrum. “Theryn was just about to go looking for you. He needs you to see to his horse; he will be riding in the royal carriage with me. There’s just room for the two of us, but you can ride alongside. Theryn seems quite anxious to keep you close at hand.”

Atrum looked to Theryn, searching his face for some form of distress. He looked more uncomfortable than fearful. “I would like to freshen up a bit before we go,” he said to Lyar. “Why don’t I meet you at the carriage when it’s time to leave?”

Lyar waved a hand. “Yes, yes, fine,” he said. “There are things I must attend to as well.” He took Theryn’s hand. “I look forward to continuing our conversation,” he said.

Theryn smiled weakly. “I do as well,” he replied.

Lyar gave his hand a squeeze. “Until then,” he said. He began to walk away but paused. He ran a finger briefly over the green fabric of Theryn’s tunic. “I’ve changed my mind about your dress,” he said. “The style of your people suits you.” Before Theryn could respond, Lyar turned and walked briskly toward the main camp.

Atrum and Theryn returned to their own tent. “What were you discussing for so long?” Atrum asked as soon as they were inside.

“The great and glorious Lord of Light and Life, mostly,” Theryn said. “And he did most of the talking. I just sat there and nodded my head a lot.”

“You spoke of nothing else for an entire hour?”

“Well, not quite,” Theryn said. “We spoke of other things briefly.”

“Such as what?”

Theryn shrugged. “He told me some about our journey and all the things he wants to show me.”

Oh, I am certain there’s something he wants to show you, Atrum thought but said nothing.

“We also practiced my new abilities,” Theryn continued. “Look.” He held up a finger. After a moment, a tiny flame flickered into existence, like a candle. Theryn grinned at him.

And why shouldn’t he be pleased? What a fun, new trick he had learned. Atrum imagined Lyar showing him how to harness the power—holding his hand, coaxing the magic through his body and up to his finger, all while Theryn sat in rapt fascination...

Theryn cocked his head. “Is there something wrong?” he asked. “You just had the darkest expression cross your face.”

“It’s nothing,” Atrum said. “Did you ask him about the wand?”

“I didn’t get the chance, but I’ll bring it up as soon as we’re on the road.” Theryn touched his arm. “Are you certain you’re all right?”

In response, Atrum pulled Theryn in for a kiss. “I want this to be over,” he said when they at last parted. He cupped Theryn’s face in his hand. “Whatever comes next, I will face it, but this waiting is going to drive me mad.”

Theryn laughed a little. “You sound like me.” He gave him another quick kiss. “It will be all right. With as much as he loves to talk, I’m sure Lyar will detail his entire plan to me before we even reach Soltara proper.”

Atrum hoped he was right.

There wasn’t much else for them to do, so they went to see Shay. She was lying on her pallet still, although Kindy had managed to get her dressed.

“They do have a carriage for us this time, don’t they?” Kindy asked.

“Not to worry,” Theryn said. “Lyar assures me you will both be traveling in comfort.” He paused. “In fact, why don’t you go check to see if they’ve arranged it?”

“Certainly,” she said before she left.

“I have an idea,” Theryn said when she was gone. He waved his hand. The illusion on Shay’s skin dissolved. She sat up with a gasp.

Atrum knelt at her side. "Are you all right?"

"I feel so light!" she said. It was hard to see her expression when she was in her shadow form, but Atrum could hear the smile in her voice.

"We can give you periodic breaks," Theryn said. "It might ease the burden somewhat."

"Do you know how much longer I must wear this form?" she asked.

"We don't know yet," Atrum said. "But we are trying."

Theryn pulled at his hair. "I just thought of something," he said. "If we are successful at freeing you, what on earth are we going to tell everyone when you disappear?"

They all thought for a moment. "You could make the illusion that I died, could you not?" Shay suggested.

"I could," Theryn said. "As long as no one touched the 'body,' it might work."

"We have to think of Kindy as well," Atrum said. "Do you think we should tell her? It would make things easier on us if we didn't have to hide from her."

"I don't know," Theryn said. "Can she be trusted?"

"I believe she can," Atrum said.

"I do as well," Shay said. "Give me some time. I will explain it to her."

Theryn nodded. "I hate to say this, but we need to go. Lyar is waiting for me, and Kindy will be back soon. I'm going to have to put you back under enchantment."

Shay shut her eyes, steeling herself. "I am ready."

As Theryn laid the spell again, Atrum looked back and forth between the two of them. Neither of them were weak: Theryn was a proud prince of Glinden, and Shay was an immortal creature not of their world. And yet to Atrum, nothing else in the world seemed more fragile. He would die for them, he thought fiercely. If that's what it came to, he would die.

But it wasn't that simple. The world didn't work in such easy exchanges. There were no bargains to be made with fate. What would come, would come. They would have to be ready.

Chapter Eight

The royal carriage was every bit as grand as it sounded. The frame was shining gold, worked and melded into intricate patterns, most of them related to the sun in some way. Rich red fabric protected the top and the sides. The fabric appeared to be retractable, and the front was uncovered, allowing any passersby to see the occupants. Indeed, it displayed whoever sat inside very well, which Atrum was sure was the intention.

All this meant that, while Atrum was relegated to riding alongside the carriage instead of in it, he was still privy to Lyar and Theryn's conversation. The carriage was rather narrow, and the roads were wide and well maintained. That left enough room on the side of the road for Atrum. Sir Barras rode on Lyar's side.

The procession moved even more slowly than they had through the Glin forest. Dozens of carts were required to haul all of the tents and furniture. At least they didn't have the trees to impede their progress, although Atrum wasn't quite sure why he was anxious to reach Leaside. Who knew what sort of peril they would face there.

Lyar and Theryn had exchanged a few words as they started out, but it was a little while into the journey before their conversation truly began. "Look what I can do," Theryn said. He held out his hand; a very small ball of flame swirled into existence.

"You've figured that out since just this morning?" Lyar said, both pleased and impressed.

"Yes, well, it isn't too far of a step upward from what you showed me."

"It's still very impressive! I've always had trouble with fire. I can conjure it, but it takes more effort. I have the heat of Life, but truly impressive flames require Light as well."

"You have that now," Theryn pointed out.

"Very true," Lyar said. He took off his glove and opened his hand. A ball of flame soon appeared. "Here, bring your hand forward," Lyar said.

Theryn did so. Lyar's flame jumped to Theryn's. There was a loud cracking sound like a firework, followed by a burst of golden light. Theryn laughed.

He *laughed*.

Atrum gripped his reins more tightly and steeled his gaze straight ahead. He couldn't bear to look at them for the moment.

"You know, I was thinking," Theryn said. "Wouldn't you be able to amplify your Light powers more quickly with a Magas wand, like the one you gave me?"

"That's a splendid idea," Lyar said. "Why don't you bring your wand to my chambers tonight after the feast? We can experiment."

Atrum nearly fell off of his horse at that prospect.

"That sounds wonderful," Theryn said. "But the trouble is I forgot the one you gave me. Do you have another?"

There was a beat of silence. "You *forgot* it?" Lyar asked. All of the joviality had left his voice. "How on earth is that possible?"

"The same way it's possible to forget anything," Theryn snapped back.

"We aren't talking about leaving behind your favorite pair of boots! That was a gift from your betrothed. Didn't it occur to you that I gave it to you for a reason? Or are you too much of a backwater rube to recognize that was a piece of great power and expense?"

Theryn seemed stunned into silence. If Atrum could have leapt from his horse and punched Lyar in the face, he would have.

"It was a time of great upheaval," Theryn said eventually. "I was torn from my life to be engaged against my will to the leader of an empire that is my kingdom's greatest enemy. So yes, a few things slipped my mind. If it's so precious, then why wouldn't you wait to give it to me when we reached your palace? Or are you too much of a self-centered bastard to realize that I might be too distressed to keep track of presents I didn't ask to receive?"

Atrum held his breath. What would he do if Lyar attacked him? He could fantasize about hitting the man all he wanted, but that wasn't really an option.

But instead of the explosion Atrum expected, Lyar replied in a measured tone. "Fair enough," he said. "I suppose there's been no real harm done. I will send someone back to fetch it. Since we will be on the road, I'll just have my servant bring it directly to Illuro," he said, speaking of the capital city of Old Soltara. "I have a special room for wands where it will be kept. They are sacred objects, Theryn. If I was unclear on that before, I want to be sure that is not an issue again. Do you understand me?"

“Yes,” Theryn said hesitantly, because of course there was no wand waiting back in Glinden. Through his haze of anger, Atrum realized something—Lyar’s reaction meant he really didn’t have any idea of where the wand had gone, which meant he also didn’t know about Theryn and Atrum’s explorations. Could Theryn really be right? Was Lyar not behind it after all?

“Then the matter is settled,” Lyar said. “But Theryn, I want you to listen very carefully to what I say next.” He put his hand on Theryn’s face, turning it so that he was forced to look directly into his eyes. “Don’t you *ever* speak to me in that manner again. Understood?”

Atrum couldn’t quite make out Theryn’s response, but whatever he had said appeared to appease Lyar. Lyar settled back in his seat.

Conversation petered out after that for some time. It would take them all morning to reach the castle at Leaside. As they moved along, signs of human cultivation of the land became more apparent. It was strange for Atrum to see; in Glinden, the people worked around nature, tucking themselves in wherever they would disturb the forest least. Out here, the natural world was bent to humanity’s will. Seemingly endless fields of the grains folded out around them. The peasants working the fields would stop their labor to cheer on the royal procession. Atrum couldn’t help but notice how weather-beaten and tired they looked. In Glinden, they didn’t work quite this hard to eat. They ate no grain in Glinden; their diet came from crops that grew with the forest, not against it.

“It’s good to see this part of the country restored,” Lyar said, breaking the silence. “There was a famine here a few years ago.”

“Was there?” Theryn said.

“You really are isolated, aren’t you?” Lyar commented. “Yes, there was a brief spell of famine. I heard it was nowhere near as bad as the one I witnessed fifteen years ago. I made the mistake of coming to see for myself. There was only so much I could do.”

“Do?” Theryn said. “I wouldn’t think there would be much to do at all.”

Lyar held up his hands. “Oh, there is. I do have the gift of Life, after all. Alas, it is not an infinite resource. I taxed myself too greatly attempting to bring back some of the crops. And then, of course, there was the health of the people.” He paused, fixing his gaze out on the fields. “Your first instinct is to help the children, but that’s the wrong approach. Healthy children soon slide back into illness with no adults to care for them.”

Theryn had no response for some time. "I'm sorry to hear of their troubles," he finally said.

"So am I," Lyar said. "So are we all."

Atrum couldn't be sure, but it seemed that Theryn's posture shifted slightly; he was no longer as tense as he had been the past hour. Another half truth to regain Theryn's sympathy after their last exchange, Atrum thought, but he knew that was unfair. Lyar didn't sound like he was speaking false. If only Lyar would make himself either plainly good or plainly evil; it would be a lot easier on Atrum's nerves.

At last, they saw the castle of Leaside in the distance. While it was not as big as Glinrock Castle, Atrum had never seen such a large structure that was solely man-made. It seemed strange to see it standing there in stark relief to its surroundings; there was nothing of the natural world around it. It was fortified, walling it off from even the surrounding fields.

The gates of the castle opened at their approach. A crowd had gathered around the entrance, shouting huzzahs and waving flags. As they passed through the gates and into the courtyard, a flock of doves was released. Trumpets sounded a fanfare. Inside the gates were even more people, more finely dressed than those who had met them outside. The cries kept getting louder and louder. The noise was made worse by the clacking on the cobblestones that paved the courtyard, which was quite large. Atrum could see a stage erected toward the back, in front of which were tables filled with food and benches on which to sit. Two chairs were at the head of the central table, presumably for Lyar and Theryn.

Atrum looked to the royal carriage. Lyar was waving magnanimously, flashing his widest smile. Theryn sat frozen in place, his face twisted into what could generously be called a smile. When they reached the center of the courtyard, a richly dressed man and woman approached them. Both bowed deeply as Lyar and Theryn rose. Lyar said something in a low voice to Theryn, who nodded in response. They each descended from the carriage on opposite sides, then walked around to the front and met in the middle.

"You may rise," Lyar said. When they had done so, he turned to Theryn. "Prince Theryn, may I present to you the Duke and Duchess of Leaside."

"Our joy at receiving your presence knows no bounds, Your Majesty," the duke said. "We are ecstatic at the honor you do us by making our humble castle the first stop in your journey. It is my greatest hope that you will find pleasure in your stay."

“I’m sure everything will be lovely,” Theryn said hesitantly.

“Of that, there can be no doubt!” Lyar smiled at him warmly. “The duke has made my court quite comfortable these past few weeks.”

“Your Majesty is too kind,” the duke said.

Lyar clapped. “Well! What have you planned for us today?”

“That would spoil the surprise!” the duke said. He gestured toward the stage. “Come and have a seat. Refresh yourselves while you enjoy some entertainment.”

Lyar and Theryn moved forward. Atrum moved to follow, but Lyar turned and held up a hand. “Your services are not needed here at the moment, Sir Atrum,” he said. “You can see to your horses and to Prince Theryn’s things. Sir Barras can show you where to go.”

“I am my prince’s higar,,” he said. “It is in our tradition that I remain by his side always.”

“Yes, but you aren’t in Glinden anymore, are you?” he said mildly. “Now, let’s not make a scene. That would displease me greatly.”

Atrum opened his mouth to protest, but Theryn spoke up before he could say anything. “It’s all right,” he said. “I’ll be fine without you.”

“There—your prince commands it,” Lyar said. “Besides, oughtn’t you also see to your betrothed? I don’t suppose she’s well enough to enjoy the entertainment. If you don’t wish to, I can have Plinius see to her arrangements.”

Atrum’s face flushed with rage, but what could he do? Theryn gave him a look that he imagined was supposed to be reassuring; it didn’t help. He turned and walked back toward the others. He couldn’t help but look back over his shoulder once. Lyar’s hand rested ever so slightly on Theryn’s back as they moved toward their seats. Atrum’s hands balled into fists.

Sir Barras approached him and clapped him on the back. “You don’t like the match your prince has made, do you? Well, you aren’t the only one. But if that’s what Prince Lyar desires, it isn’t for us to question it.”

That surprised Atrum. It hadn’t occurred to him that the marriage was not a popular one. “I take it you aren’t pleased with the prospect, either?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Barras said. “No one who values their life would say that, if you catch my meaning. And that ought to include you. Remember what I said earlier about displeasing His Grace.”

It appeared Lyar was the sort of prince who would both give greatly of himself to ease a famine and do unspeakable things to anyone who disagreed with whom he chose to marry. The mystery of the man only deepened the more he learned. At any rate, he would do well to heed Barras's advice, no matter how much it pained him. "Where am I wanted?"

"You should see your lady off to the north wing; that's where the royal apartments are. Your trunk should be sent up soon, after the servants have had a bite to eat."

Atrum nodded and gave his thanks. He collected Shay and Kindy; a servant showed them the way to the royal apartments. Atrum couldn't help but feel awe as they made their way through the castle. Glinrock was magnificent, but in a more natural way. Leaside was a completely human invention, though Atrum could scarcely believe that mere humans had constructed such a place. The floor was a polished wood—the first time Atrum had seen such a thing in person. The floors of Glinrock were either earthen, stone, or living wood. The echoes of their feet through the high ceilings were so loud as to be unsettling, except for when they happened upon one of the many intricately patterned carpets that covered the floor every so often. The white walls were overlaid with patterns of silver and gold that seemed curiously geometric to Atrum—so unlike anything one would see in the natural world. Although, of course, there were the suns—the images were everywhere.

At last, he, Shay, and Kindy reached the room where the ladies would be staying. It was small and less ornate than the rooms they had passed, but Atrum recognized that Shay and Kindy were being shown a great deal of honor to be placed here. Lyar's doing, no doubt—his impression of him took on yet another dimension. They took a small meal in the chamber. Shay had little to say, as usual, but Kindy seemed as if she would burst with excitement. When they were finished eating, Atrum excused himself so that he could take stock of Theryn's room. A pallet had been set up for him there, which cheered him. At least they were not to be separated permanently.

Since he doubted he would be sent for any time soon, Atrum sought out Barras again. His comment about the marriage had him curious; he wasn't sure if he would be able to get much out of the man, but it was worth a try. He found him in the stables, overseeing the care of the dozens of horses that they had brought with them. Some men unharnessed the horses while others began the grooming, and still others saw that the horses were fed and watered. The general cart horses were herded into the paddock behind the stable, while the finer horses were put into stalls. It was quite a busy scene.

“Can I be of any use?” Atrum asked.

“Now there’s something you don’t see every day,” Barras said. “A man who could be with his betrothed, but instead comes down to muck about in the stables.” He laughed. “On second thought, maybe that isn’t so rare.” He looked over the stables. “I can’t say that I have a place to put you. I was just about to leave myself.”

“Do you mind if I join you?”

“If you wanted to speak with me, you should say as much,” Barras said. “There’s no need to pretend you enjoy shoveling manure. What can I do for you?”

Atrum looked around to make sure no one was paying attention. “What did you mean earlier about others not approving of the marriage?” he said.

“Well, as for myself, I couldn’t be happier with His Majesty’s betrothal,” Barras said loudly. He lowered his voice. “But other men—well, other men say that the match is blasphemous.”

“Blasphemous?” Atrum repeated. “Why? Because Theryn is Glin?”

“That certainly doesn’t help matters, but no.” Barras considered him for a moment. “How much do you know about our faith?”

“Some,” Atrum said. “But not much.”

“Do you know the Book of Begatus, at least?”

“Your creation story? Yes, it was explained to me by Father Plinius.”

“We see marriage—especially a royal marriage—as the meeting between Nuitey and Vitalius, female and male. It is from such unions that life is created and the royal lineage is sustained. Prince Lyar has obviously chosen a different path with this marriage. It is in keeping with the Revelers.” Barras paused. “You do know about the Revelers, don’t you?”

“The followers of the Second Dawn,” Atrum guessed. “I take it you don’t subscribe to that belief yourself.”

“I subscribe to whatever belief is most likely to keep my head on my shoulders,” Barras said. “That’s about as theological as I get.”

“I take your point,” Atrum said. “What about Lyar’s marriage to Theryn is significant to the Revelers?”

“The Revelers believe that a royal marriage should not be for the purpose of creating an heir. The royal couple should symbolize Luxor and Vitalius, joining them as one the way Soltar will be joined in the end times.”

“How is royal lineage determined, then?”

“According to the Revelers, the union of the two will reflect the rays of Soltar onto two more worthy successors, who will eventually join and continue the process.”

“I’m sure that doesn’t sit well with whoever is next in line to the throne in the traditional manner.”

Barras chuckled, but there was not much humor in it. “That’s putting it lightly.”

“Who is next in line after Lyar?”

“That would be Belunta, King Verem’s niece. She has a stronghold in the north, and she is not very happy about Lyar’s zeal for the Revelers, nor about the way he is essentially removing women from the line of succession.”

“Lyar has no siblings, then.”

“Oh, he did. Two brothers, and a sister as well, all younger.”

“What happened to them?”

“The official cause of death is plague.”

“And what’s the unofficial cause?”

“Queen Yerina murdered them, and then herself.”

Atrum was taken aback. “What? Why?”

“She was mad. Why else? She poisoned them all. Lyar would have died, too, but I believe his Life ability saved him.” He shook his head. “Poor lad. He was only ten.”

Atrum couldn’t help but picture it—a child waking up in a room where everyone he loved was dead. He shook himself out of it. He didn’t want to feel sorry for Lyar. “What does Lyar’s father think of the religious schism?”

“The king has been feeble-minded for the past ten years. He barely knows his own name, let alone the state of his empire. Lyar has left his Prime Minister, Lofrol, in charge of the affairs as he has made his journeys, and Lofrol is wholly devoted to both Lyar and the Revelers’ cause.” He shook his head.

“There will be war. There’s always war in Soltara, but this time it will be civil war.”

“And Lyar’s marriage to Theryn might tip the scale?”

“Could be. Of course, according to the Revelers, it will be some time before the new heirs become apparent, so perhaps Belunta will bide her time and build up her army. Old King Verem is still on the throne, after all. If Lyar enters a marriage with no possibility of producing heirs, it might suit her to let it be. Let Lyar take the throne upon his father’s death, then rally the followers of the Old Church to make a bid for the throne. If she wins and Lyar and his husband are killed, there is no other heir. She can step in as easy as you please.”

“Surely Lyar knows this.”

“He counts upon the loyalty of his army, which is a great deal more vast than poor Belunta controls at the moment.” He paused. “And it might be that he doesn’t think it will be necessary to defend his throne.”

“Why is that?”

“There are a branch of Revelers who believe we are living in the end times right now. The last book in the Biblion—the Book of Revelment—states that Soltar’s two forms will unite once more. Soltar will be One, as he was in the beginning of time. Soltar will have Nuitye in His full godhood. They will become one flesh. The earth and the Kingdom of Light, where Luxor currently dwells, will be joined as one. The worthy will all dwell in the Kingdom of Light, and the rest will be devoured by Nollum for good.”

His words made a shiver run down Atrum’s spine. “And Lyar holds these beliefs?”

“Perhaps. He has remained cagey on the issue. The Old Church considers it heresy—even worse than the less radical Revelers.” Barras patted him on the back. “But that is all talk. It’s been my experience that the good Lord of Light and Life is content to leave His children squabbling without much interference. I am certain whatever the result of this war of philosophy produces, the world will keep on much as it has. If I were you, I would make sure I had absolutely no opinions on the subject whatsoever. It should be especially easy for you, being a heathen and all. Keep your head down and leave the philosophy to our ‘betters’.”

“I will,” Atrum said. “Thank you.”

He left the stables. Not quite sure what to do with himself, he wandered until he came across the entrance to the gardens. Again, he was stunned by the

human mastery on display. Every flower and blade of grass was kept in strict order. There were even hedges clipped into shapes, like lions and eagles. The paths either ran in straight lines or curved in perfect arches. He passed several ornate fountains, all of them flowing without purpose. He found it impossible not to appreciate the beauty, and yet at the same time, it made him uneasy. Plants were not meant to grow this way. It was almost as if the life had been taken out of them.

After some time, he returned to his chambers to wait until he was called for. Fortunately, it was not too long. A servant came to summon him to the Great Hall. Atrum thought they had already had their feast, but apparently it was just a prelude to the main event. Since the royal apartments had their own separate entrance, he had not yet seen the Great Hall. Even his earlier experiences did not prepare him for what he saw: everywhere he looked was glass. The walls were *mirrored*. Mirrors were a rare commodity; to see so many and to have them be so enormous took Atrum's breath away. There were exquisitely detailed ceramic statues of various animals: deer, horses, wolves, lion, and even a dragon.

Atrum was not the last to enter; everyone else was just arriving as well. The crowd of people seemed impossibly huge, but part of that was a trick of the mirrors. Still, there was at least three hundred people there, all dressed in noble finery. There were eight long tables with benches for seating. At the back of the hall was a dais, which seated about twenty people. Atrum could see Theryn and Lyar already there, along with a group of high-ranking priests and lords and ladies. Atrum would be sitting with the rest of the guard at one of the lower tables, but he hoped to speak with Theryn for a moment.

Theryn's face lit up the instant he saw Atrum. Atrum wanted nothing more to take him in his arms, but he had to settle with a bow. "How was your afternoon, my prince?" he asked.

"Long."

They didn't get to say much more than that before they were interrupted by Lyar. "Good afternoon, Sir Atrum," he said. "I don't see Lady Shay amongst the guests. Is she still unwell?"

"Travel does not suit her," Atrum said.

"Pity. I am so looking forward to getting to know her better. Plinius says that she is a most intriguing woman."

"She dislikes crowds, Your Highness."

A trumpet sounded, saving them from further conversation. A herald and two trumpeters had entered from the back of the hall. Theryn gave Atrum one last look before taking his seat beside Lyar, with the duke on Lyar's left and duchess on Theryn's right. Atrum took his seat at the lower table, positioning himself to be as close as possible. Once everyone had found their seat, the herald cleared his throat and unrolled a scroll. "It is the duke and the duchess's great honor to present this feast to His Most Gracious Majesty, Prince Lyar, he of the lineage of the Eternal Flame and most high servant of our Lord of Light and Life. Our hearty congratulations are offered on the occasion of his betrothal, and we welcome Prince Theryn with open arms. May this celebration be the first of many, and may your reign be long and fruitful."

The herald concluded his speech with a bow. He stepped out of the way as food was carried into the hall, although that seemed too casual of a description. It was *presented*, with all the pageantry of the earlier entertainment in the courtyard. Gaily dressed dancers pranced through the hall as servers presented the food.

As they began to serve, several more servants wheeled in an enormous display that seemed to mimic a woodland scene. Except, of course, all the animals were dead and roasted. A row of quail, adorned with their feathers, lay nestled in a bed of lettuce and vegetables that had been cleverly prepared to look like shrubbery. Several roasted rabbits peaked out through burrows that had likewise been fashioned out of other foods. There were even a few "trees;" the wood seemed real, but the foliage was not. There were live songbirds on the trees, their little feet tied to the branches. They let out desperate trills as they tried to get free.

Atrum looked up to see Theryn's reaction; he seemed just as horrified as Atrum. It was one thing to eat of the flesh of animals; that was nature's way. It was another to make a mockery of their carcasses in such a fashion. The poor trapped birds only added to the horror.

Lyar took a quick glance at Theryn before turning his attention to the duke. "Well, this is certainly an impressive display."

The duke smiled widely as he wiped some sweat from his brow. "Nothing gives me greater pleasure than to satisfy you, Your Majesty."

"I said it was impressive," Lyar said. "I did not say I was satisfied."

The duke's face fell. His wife actually let out a small cry, which she quickly muffled with a handkerchief. "What is it that displeases you, Your Majesty? I will fix it at once!"

“The birds,” Lyar said. “It seems rather cruel to have them tied to the tree, don’t you think?”

“Oh! Yes, of course, Your Grace!” The duke turned to the servants. “Release the birds at once!”

“Don’t be stupid,” Lyar said. “They’ll only fly off and bash themselves against one of the mirrors. Here—” He stood up and stepped down from the dais and toward the display. He removed one glove, then took out a knife from his belt and cut one of the branches on which a bird was tied. The creature attempted desperately to escape. Lyar used his ungloved hand to stroke the bird’s head. Almost at once, it calmed down. He handed the branch to a servant and then did the same for the other four birds. Everyone in the room had gone silent, watching Lyar as he worked. When he was finished with the last bird, he stepped back up onto the dais.

Everyone was still watching him. It was almost as if the room was holding its breath. He raised his crystal glass. “Let us continue the celebration!”

With that reassurance, conversation started up again.

“I really must apologize, Your Grace,” the duke said again. “It did not occur to me that such a thing would disturb you. I only meant to recreate a woodland scene in an amusing way, as a tribute to your betrothed—”

“You are forgiven on the condition that you cease blubbering and allow me to enjoy my meal.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the duke said quickly.

Servants mounted the dais to serve them. Theryn accepted some of the vegetation from the abominable display but opted for a roast chicken from one of the other servers. After they had been served and began to eat, Theryn turned to Lyar. “How did you do that with the birds?” he asked.

“It’s all part of the power of Life,” Lyar said. “Similar to healing. I could show you later, if you like.”

“I would,” Theryn said.

The terrible thing was that Atrum could tell he meant it.

Atrum spent much of the rest of the meal in a daze, dodging attempts at conversation from Barras and the other guards. There were several more courses: puddings and pies and jelly molds and cakes, all spectacular, all too much. His stomach hurt. And all the while, he had to listen to Theryn and Lyar

talk. About their abilities, about Lyar's religion. About the cities Lyar would take him to, the things he would be able to show him. He couldn't even look away, for the mirrors everywhere reflected them, dining and laughing. Was Theryn thinking of him at all? The first time Atrum tried to catch his eye, Theryn met his gaze immediately and gave him a reassuring smile. But the second time, he missed him. He also missed the third. Atrum stopped trying after that. For all it mattered, Atrum might as well have been a shadow on the wall.

The meal at last came to an end, and people began to move about. Some left; others lingered to talk. Lyar was in much demand; he told Theryn he could leave if he wished. At last, Theryn's attention turned to Atrum. The two of them left with haste for the royal apartments.

"Thank the gods," Theryn said once they had entered their chambers. "I thought that would never end!"

"You seemed to be enjoying yourself well enough," he muttered under his breath.

"What was that?" Theryn asked. "I couldn't quite hear you."

"It's nothing," Atrum said. "I was merely agreeing that it was a long day."

Theryn gave him a quizzical look but didn't press the issue. He walked over to the window, which faced west. The sun hovered over the horizon, ready to dip and cast them all into darkness. "It's a beautiful view," Theryn said. "Look at the gardens."

Atrum joined him. "I walked them today, while you were enjoying your pageantry."

"I wouldn't say I was enjoying it," he said. "There was a play that was so ridiculously dramatic that I almost laughed. Something about forbidden lovers who were driven apart. Everyone ended up killing themselves by the end, which seemed a bit unnecessary. And that wasn't the worst of it by far. I have never met so many people in my entire life. And they treat me so strangely, just like his priests do. I hope that Lyar doesn't expect me to remember any of their names."

Theryn leaned out the window and took in a deep breath. "I think I should like to see the gardens tomorrow. They look spectacular." He looked back at their finely decorated room. "This whole palace is spectacular; I never even knew something so wondrous could be built by human hands. And Lyar says this is nothing compared to the palaces we will see."

Atrum glowered at the setting sun. “It’s unnatural. Every bit of this is like that horrid display at the feast; dead things twisted to resemble life.”

“Oh, don’t be so dour,” Theryn said. “It isn’t all bad. Look at this bed.”

Atrum turned around to see Theryn sitting on the edge of the enormous four poster bed. The curtains had been tied back, but Theryn was still framed by reams of rich fabric—much richer than any to be found in Glinden. Theryn kicked off his shoes. “It’s very comfortable; nothing twisted about it at all.” He waggled his eyebrows. “Care to join me?”

Atrum took a few steps forward. As he drew nearer, Theryn pulled his tunic over his head, leaving him just in his shirt. Atrum stopped when he was directly in front of him but didn’t reach for him. Theryn wanted him still, clearly, but what else was in his heart?

Theryn hooked his foot on Atrum’s leg and pulled him forward. Atrum was caught off balance and tumbled on top of him. Theryn laughed and kissed him then; Atrum could feel the smile on his lips. He allowed it for a moment, trying to put all other thoughts out of his head and just enjoy what they had here, but he found it impossible. He braced himself on his arms and pushed himself up.

Theryn misinterpreted his actions and reached to remove Atrum’s clothing. Atrum put his hands over Theryn’s, stilling them. “Wait,” he said.

Theryn gave him a puzzled look. “What’s the matter?”

Just then, there was a knock on the door, startling them both.

“Who do you suppose that is?” Theryn said.

“I don’t know.”

They climbed off the bed. “Probably a servant,” Theryn decided. He didn’t bother putting his tunic back on. “I’ll see what they want.”

He opened the door, but instead of a servant, they found Lyar standing there. The red glow from the setting sun illuminated him. He held something in his hand.

“I thought you were conversing with your subjects,” Theryn said, once he recovered from his surprise.

“I escaped,” he said. His gaze flickered downward. “I see you were preparing for bed.”

Theryn clasped the front of his unlaced shirt in one hand. “Well, it’s been a long day.”

“So it has.”

“What is it you want, then?”

“I feel I owe you another apology,” Lyar said. “For earlier today, when we spoke of the wand. I’m afraid my words were more harsh than I intended.”

“Oh,” Theryn said.

Atrum didn’t know what to make of that “oh.” Was it acceptance of the apology, or was he unimpressed with Lyar’s words? Or perhaps he was even moved? The hand at his shirt front seemed to relax ever so slightly.

“Instead of apologizing to me all the time, perhaps you should simply avoid offending me in the first place,” Theryn finally said.

Lyar smiled. “I shall keep that in mind.” He held up the object he had brought with him. Atrum could now see that it was a candle in a simple bronze holder. “I’ve brought you a gift. It is customary to bring a candle and a blessing to any guest who you bring into your home. This may not be my home, but I *have* brought you here, so I think the duty lies with me.”

“Oh. Well, thank you,” Theryn said. He reached for the candle, but Lyar did not release it. Instead, he folded his other hand over Theryn’s.

“May the blessings of Light be upon you,” Lyar said. “Light within, and Light without. May the blessing of Life bloom within you, for in this home, I will see no harm befall you.” The wick of the candle flickered into life. Lyar released Theryn’s hand. “Good night, betrothed.”

“Good night,” Theryn echoed back weakly. He shut the door.

Atrum couldn’t bear to see that candle in Theryn’s hand a moment longer. He strode across the room and took it from him. He blew out the flame and threw it aside. Before Theryn could say anything, he covered his lips with his own, one hand on the back of Theryn’s head, and the other tight around his waist, holding him close. Theryn soon returned the embrace, his arms snaking around Atrum’s back as he threw himself fully into the kiss. Atrum steered them toward the bed; he pushed Theryn down, climbing on top of him as he kissed him still.

Atrum drew back only to remove Theryn’s shirt, diving back in the moment his chest was bare. He kissed Theryn’s neck, first behind his ear, then at the base of his throat. He dragged his open mouth downward until he reached a nipple. Theryn gasped as Atrum sucked at the tight bud. As he worked his nipple, Atrum rubbed his hand between Theryn’s legs.

“Atrum...” Theryn gasped. He grasped at his shoulders, trying to pull him back up, but Atrum moved out of his grasp to unlace Theryn’s hosen. The moment Theryn’s hard cock was exposed, Atrum grasped it in one hand and took it into his mouth. Theryn cried out, his hips bucking upward. Atrum put his free hand on his hip to hold him down as he bobbed his head up and down Theryn’s length. The sounds Theryn was making—all those desperate cries and pants—drove Atrum to go faster, take him deeper, do anything he could to make Theryn come completely undone.

Theryn kept grabbing at his shoulders, but he was so overcome with pleasure that his movements were clumsy. He finally twisted his fingers in Atrum’s curls and tugged. “Atrum, wait—I’m going to—”

But Atrum didn’t stop. He kept going until Theryn’s protests turned into wordless moans. Theryn’s hands suddenly curled to fists. His whole body tensed as he shouted his climax. Thick streams of seed pulsed onto Atrum’s tongue; he kept his lips wrapped around his cock until every last drop had been spent.

At last, he let Theryn’s cock slip from his lips. He buried his face against Theryn’s thigh, his own breath coming in gasps. He felt Theryn’s hands again, tugging him. This time, he allowed himself to be pulled up. In a moment, he was face-to-face with Theryn. He was still panting, his cheeks a rosy pink. He tried to meet Atrum’s gaze, but Atrum kept his eyes cast downward. Theryn touched his face. “What just happened?” he asked.

“Did it not please you?”

“Of course it pleased me!” Theryn said with exasperation. “You got a mouthful of my seed—I don’t know how much more obvious a sign you need.” Theryn pulled Atrum’s face upward, forcing him to meet his gaze. “Why won’t you look at me? Why didn’t you let me touch you?”

Atrum had no response. Theryn peered intently at him for a moment. Whatever he saw in Atrum’s expression made his eyes widen in surprise. “You’re jealous!” he exclaimed.

Atrum looked away again. “I am not jealous.”

“You are!” Theryn sat up. “I don’t believe it. How on earth could you possibly be jealous of Lyar? And don’t you dare try to deny it,” he said when Atrum opened his mouth to respond. “I *know* you.”

Atrum got out of the bed and walked over to the window. “If I can’t deny it, then I have nothing more to say.”

Theryn just stared at him for a moment, his mouth hanging open in a perfect O of shock. “This isn’t fair,” he finally said, pulling at his hair. “I’m only doing what we had talked about—listening to him, making it seem as though I’m receptive. And by the way, this was *your* plan to begin with!”

“I said you should listen to him,” Atrum said. “I said nothing of looking at him the way you do.”

“And how is that?” Theryn snapped. “How do I look at him?”

“With fascination,” Atrum said. “When he touches you, you smile. When he speaks to you, you laugh. It is beyond *listening*, and it is driving me mad!”

“You’re already mad if you believe that I would choose the man who attacked my people and ripped me from my home to the man I’ve known and loved for most of my life!”

The sun had set by now, cloaking the perfect gardens of the palace in darkness. He turned his attention back to the room, which was lit only by the soft glow of the fireplace. The look on Theryn’s face was like the sun setting, and Atrum was the cause of it. Shame came over him. He strode back across the room and knelt in front of Theryn, putting his head in his lap. “Forgive me,” he said.

Theryn sighed. “Oh, stop that, you great big idiot, and get up here.”

Atrum climbed onto the bed as Theryn took off the clothing that Atrum had only halfway removed. Theryn kissed him. “I love *you*,” he said. “And no one else. I am not going to fall in love with Lyar, no matter how many babies and woodland creatures he saves. And I am most certainly not going to marry him. Do you believe me?”

Atrum nodded.

“Good.” Theryn began to take off Atrum’s clothes.

“I shouldn’t sleep on the bed,” Atrum said.

“Who said anything about sleeping?” Theryn kissed his cheek. “We have a little while. We should enjoy it.”

Theryn helped Atrum out of his clothing. They kissed and touched each other gently, with none of the desperation of before. Theryn took Atrum’s cock in his hand and stroked him while he kissed him softly on his cheeks, his lips, even once on the tip of his nose, which startled a laugh out of Atrum. Atrum buried his face in the crook of Theryn’s neck as his strokes grew faster. He came with a sob.

Theryn drew the curtains so that they could lie with each other for a moment in the dark. Theryn always had known that Atrum found the dark soothing, even before they knew what he was. He used his powers to create a gentle blue orb of light in one corner so that he could see as well. Atrum wanted nothing more than to drift off into sleep in Theryn's arms, but they didn't have that luxury. He wondered if they ever would.

"There's something I need to tell you," Atrum said after some time.

"What's that?"

Atrum explained his conversation with Barras about the Revelers and the coming schism and possible civil war. It left Theryn so astonished that he couldn't speak for several moments. "I spent an hour listening to him prattle on about the first children of Vitalius and Nuitey, and who begat whom for at least six generations, and then three Soltaran homilies from the Biblion that I assume were supposed to be enlightening but left me baffled, and he never *once* mentioned that he believed I was their god incarnate."

"Half their god," Atrum said. "And I think it's less that you are the god and more that you can bring him forth."

"This is insane." He ran a hand through his hair. "So he truly is trying to end the world. Or at least, someone is." He sighed. "The question is how. Does Shay know any more about the ritual?"

Atrum shook his head. "Only in vague terms."

"Damn," Theryn said. "Then we have to figure out how the ritual works and stop him." He sighed. "With any luck, whatever he's planning wouldn't work to begin with, but we've been having a run of bad luck lately."

"Yes, we have," Atrum said with a humorless smile. "Barras was right that we need to keep our heads down. We must do nothing that arouses Lyar's suspicions."

"And you do realize that will involve me playing the part of his betrothed?" Theryn asked. "Are you going to go insane with jealousy?"

"I will try not to."

"Please do," Theryn said. "Although I won't worry too much," he added after a moment. "You going insane with jealousy apparently means I get the best cock sucking of my life. It's not a bad problem to have."

Atrum started to laugh. It started small, but soon his whole body was shaking with it. Theryn laughed too. They wrapped their arms around each

other as their laughter faded. Atrum wished he didn't have to let this moment go. It might be the last laugh they enjoyed together for quite some time.

When they had quieted down, Atrum forced himself to speak again. "There's something else you should know," he said quietly.

Theryn groaned. "I don't think I can take any more tonight."

Atrum could have left it at that. He could have kept Lyar's tragic history to himself. But surely Theryn would hear of it eventually. "When Lyar was a child, his mother killed Lyar's brothers and sister, and then herself. She tried to kill Lyar as well, but he survived."

Theryn's eyes widened in shock. "How awful," he said. "How completely and utterly awful."

The look in his eyes was exactly why Atrum hadn't wanted to tell him. "Whatever happened to him as a child is of no consequence to what he's doing now. We can't take pity on him."

Theryn gave him a look. "But we can certainly feel sorry that it happened, can't we?"

Atrum couldn't meet his gaze. "Yes, of course," he mumbled.

"You accuse me of being blind to his true nature, but your sight of him isn't exactly clear either," Theryn said. "I should hope that your hatred isn't so deep that you can't feel sorry for the helpless child that he was. And I think it has a great deal of consequence to what is happening right now."

"I merely meant—" He stopped his half-formed excuse. "You are right, of course. I am sorry that it happened to him."

Theryn put a hand on his face. "It changes nothing," he said. "I simply don't want to see you grow ugly in spirit because of all of this. We must both keep sight of that."

Atrum kissed the palm of his hand. "As you say, my prince." He held on to his hand after his lips had left it. "But promise me one thing: do not forget that he is dangerous, no matter how sweet his apologies."

"Do you think I need to be reminded?"

Atrum smiled a little. "You have never fully appreciated threats."

"That is not true!" Theryn paused. "All right, perhaps there is some truth to it." He kissed Atrum's hand just as Atrum had kissed his. "I promise."

They lay together for a little while longer, but they had to part eventually. Atrum got out of the bed and tended to the fire before preparing himself for bed. As he curled up on his pallet, he wondered if he and Theryn would ever escape this madness. The answer to that would have to wait until they answered the more pressing question: how on earth would they stop Lyar?

Chapter Nine

Theryn had never thought he'd see the world.

The thought had honestly never even occurred to him. The people of Glinden did not leave the wood; they were almost completely self-sustaining, so there was no need. Their small kingdom had always seemed large enough for adventures. What could be more marvelous than the wood, filled with secrets and wonders too numerous to ever be fully explored?

As it turned out, the world held much more than he had ever dreamed. As their progress continued, they passed through many lands that used to be independent until Soltara had conquered them all. Each of the lands they visited had wonders all its own: there was Tamar first, the land in which Leaside resided. It was filled with gentle hills of grass and a sky so open and wide that Theryn almost felt like they were flying as they traveled. From there they went through Lestone, a large mountainous country with peaks that seemed impossibly high. He couldn't help but imagine climbing them—what would the world look like from way up there? He supposed it would seem small—as small as Glinden seemed to him now. From there, they moved through the small, swampy nation of Nalir, then on to the coast of Dosod, a large country bordering Old Soltara, and one of the first to fall under Soltaran rule. The world had opened to Theryn. Even if he could have gone back to Glinden after all of this was through, he wasn't sure that he would.

But while his zeal for exploration had grown, his patience with life in the royal progress had become thinner. He was sick of the all endless villages they passed through, where he was expected to smile and wave and pretend that he truly meant to take on these people as his subjects. He was sick of dealing with the Soltaran nobles that resided in the manor houses and palaces that used to belong to the indigenous people; the Soltarans had kicked the nobles of the countries they conquered out of their palaces and installed Soltarans to govern the lands. He found the Soltarans' conquering presence odious, but he still felt a bit sorry for the Soltaran nobles. Whenever the Royal Progress came through, they swarmed over their hosts like a plague of locusts, sucking their resources dry. It was tiresome to listen to these people profess how deeply honored they were to host the royal progress when it was clear that they found the royal visit both exhausting and terrifying, because failure to please their prince could mean ruin. Theryn tried to express delight to reassure them, but it was always

the same. Feasts and festivals, jousting, fireworks—after the third time, the whole process lost its appeal and became yet another trial to be endured.

And then there was the royal court Lyar had brought with him. They were all simpering fools who showed Theryn a level of reverence that he found uncomfortable, even though he had always been a prince. The worst were the bishops and priests, all Revelers, who could not get enough of Theryn. They asked him questions about his powers, requesting demonstrations. They liked to touch him; Lyar ordered it to stop, but they found ways around it. They'd brush against him as they passed by, or make an excuse to reach over him at dinner. He once caught a priest lifting strands of hair that had stuck to a velvet chair he had sat upon.

They asked him endless questions about his childhood. They were especially interested in the solar eclipse that occurred on the day of his birth but seemed somewhat disappointed that there weren't any other miraculous occurrences. Many speculated on his heathen birth and what it might mean directly to his face. The general consensus was that it had something to do with the Shade. After all, Soltar split into Vitalius to be closer to Nutey, so it made sense.

"I wish you would tell them to stop," he said to Lyar one day. They had arrived in Brinroso, a palace in the seaside land of Dosod two days earlier. Most of the feasting and celebrating was over, so they were dining alone on the balcony of the royal chambers.

"Your wish is my command," Lyar said. "Let me guess: Father Vesmos is the worst offender?"

"He tried to cut off a lock of my hair!" Theryn said. "He came right up behind me with a pair of scissors and then claimed it was an accident when I caught him in the act of snipping. How do you accidentally cut a person's hair?"

Lyar laughed. "You can't blame them for their zeal, but yes, I can see how that would be tiresome. They will trouble you no more."

"Thank you." Theryn fiddled with his dinner knife. Being the central figure in a religion was still uncomfortable for him, particularly since he didn't believe a word of it. What he thought didn't matter, anyway. They were fanatics, and like most fanatics, their actual god meant much less than their idea of him.

Theryn looked out at the Consenea Sea below them. Their table was situated right at the edge of the balcony, so he could see the whole shoreline. He could even feel the spray of the sea on his face. He had never seen a sea before Lyar had taken him. The only coastline of Glinden was with the Great Ocean on the west side of the Shade, where they had been told by the sailors of Taives was a dark shore no ship dared approach. Would he have seen it if Lyar hadn't ripped him from his home?

"I have always found the climate of Dosod most agreeable," Lyar said, jolting Theryn out of his thoughts. "Don't you think?"

"Yes, it's very pleasant."

"It's good for one's health as well. Lady Shay seems to be benefiting from it."

"Yes," Theryn said. "Her health is much better." It was true that Shay was improving. Or not *improving*, precisely, but she had grown more accustomed to her circumstances. Shay had told Kindy the truth, and she had been as understanding as they had hoped. Kindy's care, as well as the brief freedoms from the illusions Theryn was able to grant her, strengthened her enough that she was able to more convincingly pass as a Glin lady. She said nothing more of her views on the Soltaran faith. She was quiet and demure, taking her proper place at the feasts, answering questions asked of her with brief politeness. Lyar and Plinius attempted to get her to speak further but seemed content enough to let her be when she did not respond. Still—there was something in Lyar's gaze when he looked upon her that worried Theryn. He looked at her as though she was something he hadn't known he had lost and was now intent to keep.

"How are you finding your food?" Lyar asked, stirring him from his musings yet again.

"Baffling," Theryn said. He had a plate full of seafood, some of which he'd only ever read about. He recognized the fish, of course, but he'd never seen some of the others. He picked up a shelled creature called an oyster. "How on earth are you supposed to eat this?"

"Ah yes, those are a bit tricky," Lyar said. He reached across the table. "Here, let me show you."

Theryn handed the oyster to Lyar. "The trick is the correct placement of the knife," Lyar explained. He worked the tip of his knife into the hinge of the shell. "Then you push like so, give it a twist—" There was a small popping

sound. "Once that's done, you slide the knife under the oyster to separate it from the shell." He handed it back to Theryn.

Theryn stared at the slimy gray mess in the shell. "And then what am I to do with it?"

"Slurp it up."

Theryn made a face, which elicited a laugh from Lyar. "I felt much the same way when I encountered my first oyster, but it's really quite good. Trust me."

Theryn worked up his courage and brought the shell to his lips. He tipped the thing into his mouth. The texture was strange, but once he got past that, he found it as good as Lyar had promised.

"Well? What do you think?"

"It tastes like the sea."

"That it does." Lyar looked out over the balcony to the gently rolling waves of the sea. "The interesting thing is that the oysters here taste much different than the oysters of the Okata Ocean, which in turn taste different from the ones in the Shiroto Bay. Each oyster encapsulates its home perfectly."

"I can't imagine having visited all those places."

"I will take you, if you'd like."

Theryn snorted. "Please don't add another thousand miles to our journey just to show me what different oysters taste like."

"I didn't mean now. I meant after we are wed."

Theryn grew very quiet. He never knew what to say when Lyar brought up the wedding. "Won't you be busy ruling?"

"An empire is much too large for one man to run on his own," Lyar said. "My ministers see to the function of Ilturo, my nobles see to their own lands, and my generals see to my armies. As long as I plan my route ahead of time, my messengers can reach me." He gave a little half smile. "There really is no one quite as useless as a Regent. I can only make decisions in broad strokes. The implementation of those rulings is all dealt with by others."

"You sound as if that bothers you."

"I suppose it does."

"Why?"

Lyar took a long drink from his goblet. "I would rather my actions accomplished my goals, rather than my orders. Perhaps they will someday." He set his goblet down. "But as I am useless except for my words, it means that I can issue orders from anywhere I please. I move my court periodically and take frequent journeys. I don't think I could stay in one place for very long."

"And would we drag two thousand people in our wake?"

"No," Lyar said. "A small retinue would be unavoidable, particularly once I am King, but we could manage with a few loyal men."

Like Atrum, Theryn thought with a sudden pang of guilt. He had not thought about him almost the entire evening. "And you wouldn't feel nervous without your army at your back, protecting you in case the local peoples prove to be disloyal to their conqueror?" He regretted his words as soon as they passed his lips. He had promised Atrum he would not be needlessly provocative. But then again, a wholly pleasant evening with Lyar seemed like a betrayal.

To Theryn's great surprise, Lyar did not take offense. "Oh, I am certain of it. In fact, I traveled the whole of the Empire alone when I was your age."

Theryn blinked. "How alone do you mean?"

"I mean it was just myself and no other. I was anonymous. I wanted to see what life was like without the trappings of Court. I knew I could not stay away forever, but two years was enough to see much of the Empire."

"And your father allowed it?"

"No," Lyar said. "He expressly forbade it. But he was weak by then. He hadn't the power to stop me." He looked out over the ocean. "And at the time I had no mind to stay in Ilturo, or Old Soltara, for that matter."

Theryn thought about that for a moment. "Was it because he died?" Theryn asked.

"What are you talking about?" Lyar asked. "My father is alive, and you know as much."

"I don't mean him. I mean the one you told me of before. The other one with my powers."

Lyar grew very still. "And how did you come to that conclusion?"

"If you were traveling on your own, that means you didn't have him with you. Therefore, you must have lost him already," Theryn said.

Lyar didn't answer him right away. He picked up an oyster and shucked it. "You are very clever, as always," he said eventually. "Yes, that had something to do with it. And I have no desire to discuss the matter further."

"What was his name?" Theryn asked.

Lyar stabbed his knife into the wooden table with such violence that Theryn nearly jumped from his seat. "That is enough of your meddling. Must you always push me? If I say I do not wish to speak on it more, you would do best to change the subject or keep your mouth shut!"

Theryn went silent. He had achieved his provocation after all, it seemed.

Lyar removed the knife from the table. He sat back and looked away as he rubbed his brow. After a moment, he stood and walked to the edge of the balcony. "Come here," he said. "I have something to show you."

Theryn went to Lyar's side. Lyar pointed out over the sea. "Do you see that mass there, off in the distance?"

Theryn squinted. "I think so."

"That's the Isle of Serin. I have been through Dosod twice before and have never managed to make it there. They say they have lagoons there that are bluer than the sky and sand that is whiter than snow." He turned to Theryn. "I would take you there, once we are wed. Would that please you?"

"I should be glad to see it," Theryn said, which was true enough.

Lyar rested his forearms on the railing. "Perhaps we could even go alone. Who knows what the world will be like?"

"What do you mean by that?" Theryn asked. "You are always making cryptic comments about the 'way the world will be,' but you never explain what you mean."

"How are your studies going?" Lyar said in lieu of a direct answer. "I believe the last time we spoke, you were on the Book of Raynis."

Theryn gave a great sigh of frustration and then retrieved the Bible from the table. He was always required to bring it whenever he and Lyar met. There was no chance he would convert, but understanding Lyar's beliefs was probably the best way to understand what he had planned. "Yes, I'm halfway through the Book of Raynis, but I would really like to talk about the Book of Revelment." He flipped through the holy book to the last chapter. "It says: 'And there will come a time of great despair. The Cosmic Sun will set, casting

the nations of the earth into Darkness. But have not despair, for Soltar will choose two: a Son of Light and a Son of Life. With their joining, Nuitey will be made Flesh once more, and Soltar will embrace her fully at last. From that time forward, all that is Dark will be made Light, all that suffer will be filled with joy, and the kings of the earth will rule without war, for all will revel in Soltar's glory. And with His return, the righteous dead will live once more on earth, and Nollum will devour the unrighteous forever'." Theryn shut the book. "And that's who you think we are: the Son of Light and the Son of Life?"

"I would refer you once again to the Book of Raynis, chapter three, verse fourteen."

Theryn gritted his teeth and opened the book again. "And so Chaeld and Emler asked unto their father: when will our sufferings cease? And their father said, Be silent with your prattling. Your sufferings will cease when your faith is made perfect. Until then, you will suffer and be glad of it, for only through the journey through Darkness can one truly see the Light'."

Lyar raised an eyebrow. "Would you say your faith is perfect?"

Theryn shot him an annoyed look. "Perhaps it would be if you ceased your riddles and just told me what you have planned."

"Turn to the Book of Yerin, chapter four, verse two."

Theryn did so. "Faith must come before certainty, or else it is not true faith at all'."

"Just so."

Theryn felt like hurling the damnable book into the sea but managed to restrain himself. Instead, he sat it back down on the table. He joined Lyar again, leaning over the balcony, letting the briny sea smell wash over him. This, at least, was pleasant. They stood there together for some time until their solitude was interrupted by the arrival of a small lizard scurrying up the side of the balcony.

Lyar smiled. "Hello, little friend," he said. "Come here." He held out his hand; the animal obeyed him, as animals always did. Lyar stroked his bright-blue breast while the creature cocked its head, as if waiting for further instruction. "I think this is an excellent opportunity to practice, don't you?"

Theryn perked up at that. He didn't enjoy their theological discussions, but he did like exploring their shared abilities. Lyar removed his glove. They joined hands because they'd found their powers worked better when they were in

physical contact. Theryn always felt a little guilt when they did so, but there wasn't a way around it; the hand seemed the least guilt-inspiring place to touch.

“Show me how you would create an image of this creature.”

Theryn waved his free hand; an identical lizard appeared. As he did so, he felt a gentle pulse run through his hand and into Lyar's. It was a way of *showing* him, rather than explaining. What they could do was beyond mere words. Lyar waved his hand and his own lizard came into existence.

“That's better than your last try,” Theryn said. “Your details are improving.”

“Yes, but I can't seem to both make a convincing image and make it move naturally. It's always one or the other.”

“Yes, it is tricky to do both.” Theryn's lizard scurried along the balcony and disappeared down the edge. Lyar attempted to make his own lizard follow, but the movement was more mechanical than natural. He waved his hand in frustration; the lizard vanished.

“I think that is a skill I will have to master after we're joined,” Lyar said. “Now it's your turn, if you wish.”

Theryn nodded.

“Hold out your hand, like so.”

Theryn opened his palm in imitation of Lyar's. He felt a pulse in their joined hands, followed by a gentle current of energy flowing into his heart. He knew then how to call to the lizard and make it come to him. He flushed with triumph. He'd only been able to manage that with insects so far.

“Very good,” Lyar said. “Do you think you can go a step further?”

“Yes.” Theryn could feel the energy pulsing in his heart; it made him feel giddy, almost as if he'd had too much wine. “What can I do next?”

“Give him some of your energy. Just a little; he is a small creature, after all.”

Theryn focused his attention carefully. Suddenly, the lizard began running up and down the balcony with comical speed. It came back around and scurried up Theryn's arm, around his neck, and then onto his head. Theryn laughed. “I think I gave him a bit too much!” he said.

Lyar chuckled as well. “Then call him down.”

Theryn did so until the creature was back in his hand. He could feel its little heart beating so quickly it was more of a vibration than a steady thumping, and its breath was coming in gasps. “How do I calm it?”

Once again, he felt the pulse from Lyar’s hand. Theryn drew the energy from the lizard as slowly as he could. Its heart and breath began to slow—but then it began to slow too fast. He was sucking the life out of the poor thing. He tried to stop it, but before he could control himself, the creature grew limp in his hand. “Oh!” Theryn cried. He released Lyar’s hand to cradle it in both hands, willing life back into it, but it seemed too late.

“You have to be careful when you start a drain,” Lyar commented. “It can be difficult to slow, especially upon such a small creature.”

“How do I bring it back?”

“If it’s dead, there’s no helping it,” Lyar said.

“*How do I bring it back?*” Theryn repeated with more emphasis.

Lyar looked at him with surprise. “Why are you so upset? It’s only a lizard.”

“My people only kill out of necessity. We don’t slaughter animals for our own amusement.”

“This wasn’t amusement,” Lyar said. “We were training.”

“It doesn’t matter! What I did just now is a sin.”

Lyar actually laughed. “A sin? Don’t be ridiculous.” He started to walk back to the table. Theryn grabbed his hand and turned back to the lizard. He pulled what he needed from Lyar and touched the lizard. It jolted back to life. As soon as it oriented itself, it scuttled back down from where it had come.

Lyar stared after the lizard in something close to awe. “I have never managed that before.”

“Have you ever tried?” Theryn snapped back.

“Once,” Lyar said quietly. “Although it was on something much larger than a lizard.” He cast his gaze downward. “And I was very young at the time.”

Theryn realized he must mean his mother, or his siblings. The image of a child desperately attempting to revive his family filled Theryn’s mind before he could stop it. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Lyar met his gaze again. “I see from the look on your face that you have heard the rumors of the truth of my family’s death,” he said. “I had wondered if anyone had dared tell you. I suppose you feel a great deal of pity for me.”

“Pity is what I feel for lizards,” Theryn said.

“And what is it, then, that you feel for me?”

Theryn had no answer to that. “What does it mean, for us to be fully joined?” he asked instead.

“We can borrow small bits of one another’s power right now, but for one of us to use more would cause a significant drain on the other. Once we are joined fully, that will no longer be the case.”

“How will we join fully?”

Lyar ran his thumb over Theryn’s hand. “How do you think?” he said, his voice a low murmur. He gently pulled him closer until they were a breath away from one another. Theryn felt a spark flowing from their joined hands and settling inside him.

“I’m tired,” Theryn said. He attempted to let go of Lyar’s hand, but Lyar held him tight.

He leaned in further, until his face was beside Theryn’s. His body was so close that Theryn could feel the heat radiating off of him. “Stay a while longer,” he said. He turned his head; he would kiss him at any moment.

Theryn yanked hard, freeing his hand at last. “I’m tired,” he said again.

Lyar clutched the railing and drew in a deep breath to compose himself. “Fine, then,” he said. “I suppose if you stayed much longer, Sir Atrum would barge in to rescue you.”

Theryn should have let the comment pass, but he couldn’t. “I am in no need of rescue.”

“Then you might want to inform Sir Atrum. He seems to be itching for the chance to liberate his fair prince from the vile wretch who would force him into marriage.”

It seemed that perhaps Atrum should worry more about his own provocation of Lyar rather than Theryn’s. “If he has given you offense, then I apologize, but I have seen no disrespect in his treatment of you.” He gave a little half laugh. “And surely it can’t surprise you that he has little enthusiasm for this match. He

is my loyal and faithful servant, and he would never take action against you. I don't know what else you expect me to do."

"You could order him to improve his attitude," Lyar said. "But you don't give him orders very often, do you? Your relationship is a very queer one for a master and his servant."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I think you know," Lyar said. He turned back to the sea. "Good night, Theryn. Don't forget your Biblion."

Theryn grabbed the book off the table and stomped toward the door. Suddenly, a chill came over him; it was so strong that he shuddered. He must have made a sound, because Lyar turned from the balcony.

"Is there something the matter?"

"It's nothing," Theryn said. "I just felt cold for a moment. It's probably the sea air—I'm not used to it."

A strange expression crossed Lyar's face. "The sea air," he echoed. "Yes, that must be it. Be careful not to catch a chill."

Theryn thought of the warmth of Atrum's arms. "I assure you, I won't."

He began to make his way inside when he heard Lyar again. "I bade you leave me—must you linger?"

He whipped around. "Believe me—I have no desire to stay in your presence!"

But Lyar wasn't looking at him. His gaze was directed at the darkening sea. It didn't seem he heard Theryn at all.

Theryn threw open the door and stormed inside. The chambers he and Atrum had been given were a ways off from Lyar's. The palace, which had been beautiful in the sunlight, now seemed as cold and damp as a cavern. He swirled a light into existence at his side, which caused a number of shocked looks on the faces of the people he passed.

He had absolutely no idea what to think of what just happened. It was harder than he had thought, this pretending. It had seemed easy on the face of it—play along, gain his trust. But this wasn't a game of strachet. He wasn't a player, moving pieces around the board. He was the piece itself, hopelessly lost in a game he had little control over. Did Lyar have any more control than he did? Did Atrum? Or Plinius? Or Shay?

He gave more energy to the light by his side, making it as bright as sunshine. If only it were that easy to illuminate the rest of it.

When he at last reached their chambers, he found Atrum sitting at the fireside. He leapt to his feet the moment Theryn entered. Without saying a word, Theryn strode forward and pulled him into a tight embrace.

“What’s wrong?” Atrum asked. “What has he done to you?”

“Nothing,” Theryn said. He laughed a little. “Or everything. He is the instrument of all of this, isn’t he? The one who set up all the pieces.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He knows,” Theryn said. “About us.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes.” But then he shook his head. “No. I don’t know. I was not made for this. I was happier when all I wanted was escape.”

Atrum grew still in his arms. “Has that changed?”

“No!” Theryn gave him a brief, firm kiss. “No, that isn’t what I meant. Everything is so muddled now.”

“I don’t understand.”

“That makes two of us.” He kissed Atrum again, more slowly this time. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore. Take me to bed.”

Atrum wrapped his arms tighter around Theryn. “As you wish, my prince,” he said. They fell to kissing again. For a brief time, Theryn was free of confusion.

Later, when Atrum was asleep, Theryn took out his pouch of prayer stones and pulled out one for Bursa, the bear goddess of protection, and one for Egari, the eagle god of wisdom. He said a prayer to Bursa, begging for her to watch over him. He said another to Egari, asking for his clear sight to help guide him. He put the stones away, promising to pray with more regularity, for the farther they got from Glinden, the more need he had for the green gods’ aide. He hoped they were listening.

Months passed. There were more lands and more castles, and seemingly endless villages. They hadn’t taken a direct route to Ilturo, instead moving through as much of the southern lands as possible. But as they moved into Old

Soltara, the lands where Soltarans had made their homes before they developed a zeal for conquest, the reception they received from the nobles grew stonier. The feasts were much less grand, the people much more sour. The nobles cast out to the far-off lands had less prestige than the nobles of Old Soltara, and were thus more open to the Revelers' interpretation of scripture. A philosophy that could potentially dim their rivals' power was a welcome one. Likewise, the peasants of all of the Empire found much to like in the Revelers' teachings, as it put the idea of hereditary nobility into question and promised rulers ordained by Soltar Himself and not mere mortals.

No one dared say anything against Lyar, but the hostility of the holy men and the nobles was almost palpable at times. When Theryn mentioned it, Lyar just laughed. He said that none of them were foolish enough to attack him, and they would all know the truth soon enough. Theryn tried to get him to elaborate on that, but he would say no more on the subject.

Lyar also kept his own counsel concerning Atrum and Theryn. That one night where he had hinted at a knowledge of their relationship was never repeated. Theryn and Atrum tried to be more discreet, and Atrum made a valiant effort to not seem as if he wanted to leap for Lyar's throat every time he was in his presence. Meanwhile, Theryn continued to make himself agreeable to Lyar, which was a task perhaps even more difficult than Atrum's. With each day, Theryn found he lost more and more of himself to Lyar. Lyar had traveled so much that he had many stories of far-off lands and strange peoples, and he was a wonderful storyteller. Other times, he would ask Theryn about his childhood, drawing stories out of him that Theryn had only half-remembered and may have forgotten had Lyar not invoked them. He would come out of these encounters dazed, almost as if he'd been in a dream. And then there were those damned candles—one for each palace they visited, always with the same blessing, always with his gloved hands touching Theryn's bare ones in the briefest caress...

If he didn't have Atrum, he might have fallen under his spell completely. Of all the things that were happening, that was the most frightening of them all.

Through it all, Theryn and Atrum both did their best to discover Lyar's plans. Theryn attempted to coax information out of Lyar directly, while Atrum stuck to the shadows, observing his court and servants and making discreet enquiries. All of their efforts proved fruitless. Whatever Lyar planned for Theryn either had been decided long ago or was spoken of in total secrecy. As they grew closer and closer to their destination, Theryn began to despair of ever finding a solution.

His and Atrum's plan had been to escape if they couldn't find a way to defeat Lyar, but Theryn didn't think that would be possible. It wasn't just a matter of evading Lyar's guards and finding a place to hide anymore. As long as Lyar's ring was on his finger, Theryn wasn't sure he could be free. A magic bond had slowly developed between them. More and more, he felt Lyar's presence even when he wasn't in the room, and he always had a sense of where Lyar was. He felt a physical ache when they were separated for too long. The more they practiced magic together, the stronger it became. He was sure that had been Lyar's intention. If it were so, then it didn't matter how far they ran; Lyar would find them eventually.

He suspected the bond had something to do with Lyar's Life magic. He used his own nascent Life ability to explore it. It was as if their life essences were joined. Did that mean breaking it would harm him, or perhaps even kill him? He couldn't be sure.

He said nothing of the bond to Atrum. Atrum had begun to make vague mentions of killing Lyar if they could find no other way out. If Atrum knew that it could potentially kill Theryn as well, he wouldn't go through with it. And if Lyar really did mean to destroy the world, then that was an option they might have to take. He didn't want Atrum to hesitate.

But what if it didn't come to that? What if they were wrong and Lyar merely wanted him as a symbol of the Revelers' faith? Lyar hadn't known about the wand, and perhaps not the dome in the Malusion Woods. It was true he'd made vague statements about the eventual coming of the Land of Light, but so did all the Revelers. It didn't necessarily mean he was actively working toward it. What if the dark magic they witnessed was solely the work of Plinius? Perhaps if Lyar was given evidence of Plinius' dark workings, he'd put an end to it. Theryn would twist his ring when he thought of this possibility, usually on nights after Atrum had fallen asleep and he was left alone with his thoughts. If escape was not possible, and neither his death nor Lyar's was necessary to save the world...

Would marrying Lyar truly be a fate worse than death? He didn't think so. His mind skittered away from the thought the first time it scuttled into his head, but more and more, he was forced to consider it. Lyar seemed content enough to leave his relationship with Atrum alone; if that continued, he and Atrum could still be together even if Theryn couldn't break Lyar's bond. He should have found the thought of being married to Lyar completely repulsive, but he didn't. It was true that Theryn didn't think him a good man, exactly: he was

arrogant, self-righteous, and had a nasty temper. All the same, Theryn had grown to enjoy his company. He was intelligent, and charming in his way. He'd taken Theryn to places he'd never thought he'd see and taught him things he would have never known but for him. Theryn could never love Lyar, but he could live with being married to the man if it were mostly for show.

He did not dare bring up the possibility to Atrum, because he knew exactly what he would think of that idea. But what else could they do? If they attempted escape, he was sure they'd be caught and dragged back to Ilturo. Rather than being a willing participant in the marriage, Theryn would be a captive—and he was sure that Atrum's fate would be far worse. Lyar would have him executed. Glinden could also possibly fall. If Lyar decided that since Theryn hadn't kept his word, he didn't need to, either. Wouldn't it be best to agree to it—to preserve Atrum's life and at least some semblance of his own autonomy?

At the beginning of all this, Atrum had said he felt whatever way he chose, he would lose Theryn. Now Theryn felt the same way about Atrum. His love for Atrum had not diminished at all, in spite of his conflicting feelings regarding Lyar. But he knew even to mention going through with the marriage would seem like a massive betrayal to Atrum. He wouldn't be entirely wrong either. For even if the marriage was loveless, he wouldn't be able to avoid that wedding night. And of course, there might be other nights as well, given how plain it was that Lyar desired him. How many nights in his new husband's bed would it take before he lost Atrum forever?

He found himself speaking less and less to Atrum of the future. Atrum seemed equally grim. Theryn wondered what thoughts were going through his head. He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

At last, their long journey came to an end. They finally reached Ilturo. Theryn felt sick to his stomach the morning they were to enter the city. Atrum and Theryn said nothing to each other as they dressed. As instructed, they both wore their finest clothing. Lyar approached Theryn when he saw him emerge from his tent. His gaze bore into Theryn's own; his intensity was something that Theryn should have been used to by now, but it still had the capacity to unnerve him as much as it did on the day they met.

Lyar took Theryn's hand and brought it to his lips. "Are you ready, betrothed?"

Theryn gave him a shaky nod.

Lyar pulled him forward. "Our carriage awaits."

Theryn looked at Atrum over his shoulder. Their gazes met briefly before Theryn was whisked away. He'd looked so lost. Theryn wanted to comfort him, but how could he when he couldn't even comfort himself?

The land sloped as they moved forward. In two hours' time, the city came into sight. Soon they reached its borders. The city's gates opened to receive them.

"I really wish you had allowed me to dress you in the Soltaran fashion," Lyar said as they entered. He sat straight in his seat, his shoulders squared as if bracing for a fight. "This might go over better."

"I thought you said no one dared defy you."

"I said no one was foolish enough to defy me," he said. "However, I am often surprised at just how stupid people can be." Lyar craned his head over to Theryn's side of the carriage. "I trust you have your sword at the ready, Sir Atrum?"

Atrum startled at being addressed, but he quickly recovered. "Yes, Your Grace." He shot a concerned look at Theryn.

Lyar turned to his own side. "And yours, too, Sir Barras?"

The big man grinned. "As always, my lord."

"Should I be worried?" Theryn asked Lyar.

"Of course not," Lyar said. "We have the cause of the Light on our side. However, Light occasionally needs heavier forces to defend it."

As they drew closer, Theryn looked around them in awe. They had seen some spectacular sights on their progress, but Ilturo was something altogether different. For a start, it was the largest city Theryn had ever seen. There were so many buildings clustered so close together that it almost reminded Theryn of a forest—a forest of browns and reds, topped with colored domes instead of leaves. Bright colors adorned many walls with frescoes of scenes from the Biblion. Even the streets were grand, paved with cobblestone in a rainbow of colors, forming swirling patterns that seemed to shift before his very eyes. It was truly a City of Light. Despite his feeling of ill omen, he couldn't help but admire it.

"It's beautiful," Theryn said.

Lyar snorted. "It's a pit of vipers, is what it is."

“I’m surprised you would speak of your home city in such a way.”

“My true home is in the Land of Light,” Lyar said tightly. “As it is for us all. Now, smile and wave at the vipers, lest they bite you.”

The mood of the crowd indeed seemed off. There were small pockets of ecstatic supporters, waving banners and shouting verses from the holy book. There were also groups that gave Theryn such cold looks that he actually felt a chill go down his spine. Most of the rest were caught in between, cheering them on in what could only be described as a polite fashion. Theryn glanced briefly to Atrum, who already had his hand on his sword.

They drew closer to the palace, which was fortified much as the city was itself. It was only then that Theryn got the first glimpse of ugliness. The gates of the palace did not shine like the rest of the city. Instead of bright colors, they were a sickening shade of brown with the occasional flicker of iron. There were lumps instead of smooth plaster and stone. It was only when they were right on top of it that Theryn realized why.

There were bodies hanging on the walls—dozens of them, reeking of decay. Some hung in cages; other were hanged with ropes and chains. There were dark shapes on spikes—heads, Theryn realized, although they were so decayed that he hadn’t been able to make them out at first. As they drew even nearer, Theryn could hear a buzzing sound: flies, enjoying a feast.

Theryn felt so ill he thought he might vomit. He looked to Lyar to see his reaction. Lyar looked irritated. “I told them to have those taken down,” he said.

Theryn stared at him. Could this really be the same man he’d come to know? Was he truly a monster, after all? “Why are they there?” Theryn eventually choked out.

“They’re criminals of the worst sort.”

“What were their crimes?”

“Treason. Blasphemy. They committed crimes that endangered the lives and souls of our empire. In death, they at last are useful—as a deterrent to those who harbor evil in their hearts.” Lyar seemed to notice Theryn’s great distress at last. “Do you not punish criminals in Glinden?”

“Not like this,” Theryn said, his voice a hoarse whisper.

Lyar set his jaw in annoyance. “It seems their wickedness continues even after death,” he said. “They’ve upset you.” He touched Theryn gently on the arm. “You will see no more of this, I promise.”

It was only a few minutes later that that promise was broken. As the gates opened, there was a sudden explosion. The company of guards that preceded the royal carriage were blasted backward. Pieces of their bodies and those of their horses flew through the air. The ones who remained intact screamed as they burned.

The crowds erupted into panic, with people stampeding to get away from the ghastly scene. Even in the midst of the chaos, Theryn could make out some of the shouted words: “The sun of Soltar shall never set!” and “Long live the Lady Belunta!”

A mob of about twenty men rushed the royal carriage. Both Theryn and Lyar lept out as the knights and guards who flanked the carriage formed a protective circle around them. Neither of them had a sword, but Sir Barras produced one for Lyar. He did not extend the same courtesy to Theryn. Theryn searched for Atrum, who appeared quickly at his side. Atrum threw himself in front of Theryn just as a man managed to break through the line of guards. Atrum made quick work of him, killing him with only a few thrusts of his sword. But while Atrum was distracted by the attacker, another of the mob squeezed in from behind. He grabbed Theryn’s arm and began to drag him away.

Theryn shouted for help as he tried to break free, but another man joined his attacker and grabbed his other arm. Lyar and Atrum both leapt to his defense, each of them dispatching Theryn’s would-be assassins.

“Get into the carriage!” Lyar shouted.

“Get me a weapon!” Theryn shouted back, but everyone was too busy fighting to respond. Theryn climbed into the carriage, but instead of cowering on the floor, he stood on one of the seats. He gathered as much of his Light power as he could muster and created a sword, much like the one he had used on the shadow creatures so many months before. This sword was even more impressive. It glowed with a light so brilliant that the fighting stopped as everyone shielded their eyes. When they got over the surprise, they all looked up at Theryn in wonder. A strange, brief silence came over the crowd.

Father Plinius suddenly appeared, pushing his way forward through the crowd. “It is the Sword of Luxor!” he shouted to Lyar. “Hurry—you know what you must do!”

Lyar sprang up beside Theryn. He moved behind him and grasped the sword as well. His gloves were gone; the feeling of their bare hands together sent a

jolt through his body. Lyar held his body flush against Theryn's, causing that surge of energy to increase. A swirl of flame encircled the sword, making it even more brilliant. A beam shot from the sword into the sky, and for a brief moment, it seemed like there was a direct connection between the earth and the sun itself.

Father Plinius climbed up on the carriage as well. "There are those who doubt the true word of Our Lord of Light and Life," he said, his voice booming. "Behold Prince Theryn, the vessel of Luxor! The sword he wields is the Sword of Luxor, as it has been foretold!"

The silence broke. The shouts and screams returned, their strength tenfold what it was before. Theryn felt the energy draining from him; he couldn't keep the sword up much longer. He began to feel woozy but couldn't seem to let go. Just when he thought he might faint, Lyar released him. The sword vanished. Theryn fell forward against Lyar, who caught him. Theryn was too weak to do much but hold on. All of his senses began to grow dim. The crowd's roar became a distant buzz. The beautiful buildings and the wall of horrors alike grew blurry. Lyar eased Theryn into the seat of the carriage before standing up again, arms raised in victory. He didn't notice Theryn sliding from the seat. It was Atrum who caught him.

Sir Barras appeared at Atrum's side. "Get him in the gates!" he shouted. Each of them slung one of Theryn's arms over his shoulder, bearing most of his weight as they hobbled to the gate's opening.

Theryn heard Lyar shout after them. "Barras, leave him! Atrum will take him. See to Lady Shay—make sure she is safe!"

Theryn wondered why Lyar seemed to care so much for her safety, but the thought left him quickly; it took all of his concentration to avoid slipping into unconsciousness. They had made it inside the gates, but an entire courtyard still remained between them and the palace doors. They stumbled across it, with Atrum nearly dragging him. The sun bore down on them, impossibly bright and hot. Theryn thought he would burn if he had to be in it a moment longer.

At last, they reached the doors, which had opened for them already. A rush of servants ushered them inside. The room they entered was cavernous—Theryn hadn't known ceilings could be so high. A stunning mural covered the entirety of the ceiling, depicting the sun as it moved through the day, from dawn at the east of the room to dusk and night at the end. Theryn had much chance to admire it, for he was laid on his back on the floor. He blinked. The ceiling swirled. Night and day became one.

Gradually, he saw Atrum's face above him. His lips were moving, but Theryn couldn't make out the words. Atrum put a hand on his cheek. All at once, the world came rushing back to him. The sounds of the melee around them hit him like a clap of thunder. He gasped.

"Are you all right?" Atrum was saying. "Theryn, speak to me, please!"

Theryn tried to answer, but he found it difficult. He nodded and managed a small "yes."

More noise, more clamor of boots on the floor. Theryn didn't even have to sit up to know who it was, for his voice was booming through the room. It was Lyar. He managed to prop himself up on his elbows to see what was happening.

"—and tell Lofrol to get to work on that list of noble families who remain loyal to the Old Church," he was saying to a man by his side. "There may be a second attack from Belunta's supporters."

"And what do we do with the assassins?"

"Kill them. Make a spectacle of it. We must do everything to deter any further attacks—at least until tomorrow. For tomorrow, none of this ugliness will matter."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The men all departed, scurrying in different directions. It was only then that Lyar turned to Theryn and Atrum. He walked toward them. Atrum, who had been sitting by Theryn's side, stood. Theryn realized with horror that Atrum's hand was on the hilt of his sword.

"What have you done to him?" Atrum demanded. He sounded half-crazed.

"He has been drained, but he is otherwise unharmed," Lyar said. "I can return his energy." He moved forward.

"No!" Atrum's hand flexed on his sword. "You will not touch him again!" A moment later, Atrum suddenly cried out in pain. He yanked his hand off the hilt of his sword, as if it had become very hot.

"That was a warning," Lyar said. "I can make it much hotter than that."

Atrum moved, but not to stand aside. He seemed to be readying himself to attack Lyar with his bare hands. Theryn mustered every last bit of strength he had left in him and stayed his hand. "Atrum, please," he said. "He speaks truly. I am unharmed."

Atrum whipped around, looking down at Theryn. Atrum's face was a storm of anguish. Theryn tried to smile. "Please. Stand aside. It will be all right, but only if you stand aside." Because if he didn't, Lyar would kill him. He would rip him to pieces and nail him to the wall, and Theryn would have to watch the flies and the buzzards pick at his flesh. *Please*, Theryn tried to say with his eyes. *Please don't give him a reason.*

After another tortured moment, he moved out of Lyar's way.

Lyar took Atrum's place by Theryn's side. He reached down and clasped his hand—the one with the ring, where their connection was strongest. Theryn gasped as energy flowed from Lyar to him, snaking inside him until it reached his heart. He sat up with a jolt, but a moment later fell backward again.

Lyar smoothed his hand over Theryn's hair. "How do you feel?"

Theryn again tried to sit up but still couldn't manage it.

"Don't exert yourself," Lyar said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "You will still be weak. I couldn't give it all back to you just yet. There are things to be done. But perhaps a little more." He touched his cheek again. Theryn felt a flow of energy, although not as strong.

"Did you feel him?" Lyar murmured. "Did you feel Luxor's presence in you?"

Theryn's mind flashed to the bodies on the wall and to the orders Lyar had just given to have their attackers brutally and publicly murdered. He didn't fear for himself, but what of Atrum? "Yes," he said, deciding to play along. "Yes, I felt him."

Lyar's smile was ecstatic. He kissed his brow. "Praise be to the Light, and to the Life. We are so close, my love." He slowly helped Theryn to his feet. Theryn could stand, but just barely. "We'll take you to my chambers," he said. "You can rest there."

"I will go with him," Atrum said. He looked confused and frantic. "I am his higar—it is my duty to be at his side!"

"I think you would be of most service to your lady at this time," Lyar said, gesturing to the door. Shay and Kindy had entered under the protection of Sir Barras. "Barras, take Atrum and the ladies to their chambers and make sure they remain... safe. I will send a few others to aid in their protection."

Atrum looked back and forth between Shay and Theryn. "I am Theryn's higar," he said again. "When there is danger, it is my duty to be at his side."

Lyar pressed his lips together. “It is your duty to serve your prince, and he doesn’t need you at the moment.” Lyar turned to Theryn. “Isn’t that so?”

“Yes,” Theryn said, affecting a cold tone. He wanted Lyar’s attention directed away from Atrum. “Atrum, I don’t need you. I will be in Lyar’s chambers, with his guards to keep me safe. You’re being a nuisance. Just go.”

The devastation on Atrum’s face was greater than if Lyar had ordered his immediate execution. But surely he knew Theryn was pretending? Memories of the past few months flashed through his mind: all the small lies he had told and all the secrets he had kept. And now there was his seeming admission to feeling Luxor’s presence. Perhaps he couldn’t blame Atrum if he thought Theryn had abandoned him.

Atrum bowed. “As you wish.” He retreated. It was what Theryn had wanted to happen, but he still felt as if his guts were splayed out on the floor. He wanted to give Atrum one last look before he left to somehow communicate what was truly in his heart, but Atrum didn’t look backward.

Lyar began to lead Theryn up the long staircase. “Do not grieve for him,” he said. “Or any of them. All pain will end soon, now and forever.”

His words were like ice water down Theryn’s spine. He began to feel dizzy again. He struggled to stay conscious, but the world began to fade into a vast whiteness, with only Lyar’s arms preventing him from tumbling into it.

Chapter Ten

Atrum kept his gaze forward as he left Theryn and Lyar. He managed to keep his back straight and footsteps sure, but in truth, he felt as limp and lifeless as Theryn. Surely Theryn hadn't been turned? His mind raced as he went over the last few months, searching his memories for any signs that Theryn had converted.

He didn't have time to think, though—Shay and Kindy were waiting for him. If he could not help Theryn, then at least he could aid them. Kindy was weeping. For once, it was Shay who was supporting her. Sir Barras did not look happy about his orders. "Are you ready?" he asked.

Atrum nodded vaguely. He put a hand on Shay's arm. "How are you faring?"

"This must end soon," she said. "One way or the other."

"What does that mean?" Kindy wailed. "I am so tired of all these riddles and uncertainty."

Shay shushed her gently. "All will be well. Remember what I have told you. The path ahead may look dark, but I will always guide you."

"We should go," Sir Barras said. "Before things get uglier."

The four of them made their way up the enormous staircase, turning left when they reached the top. The corridors seemed too long and too narrow. Atrum recognized in an abstract way that the palace was glorious to behold, with all of the fine paintings and crystal chandeliers, the richness of the rugs they walked over, the beauty of the lavishly decorated windows that let the sun light everything around them. But to him, all the finery might as well have been the shackles and instruments of a torture chamber.

At last, they reached their rooms. "Right, so, it seems like my prince wants to make certain that you're trapped here," Sir Barras said. "However, I do not feel particularly inclined to follow those orders."

"Whatever happened to keeping your head down?" Atrum said.

"Yes, well, you bow your head too much and it might end up on the chopping block. I'm leaving. Got a brother in the country who'll take me. I can't imagine anyone would bother to come after me—not with what's going on here. It's bad business, and it's going to get worse."

“Take Lady Kindy with you,” Shay said.

“Oh no, my lady!” Kindy protested. “I won’t leave you!”

Shay touched her face. “My child, you cannot help me here. There is work that must be done. Go, and be safe. I will come to you when I can.”

She continued to weep, but she nodded her head. Barras put an arm around her. “There’ll be more after me to see to your confinement,” Barras said. “I’d tell you to leave, too, but since they have your prince, I’m fairly certain you won’t take the advice.”

“I have work here, too.” He grasped Barras’s hand. The two of them had become good friends on the long road here. “Be safe, my friend.”

“You as well.”

He led Kindy off and soon they disappeared around the corner.

“What do we do now?” Atrum asked.

“We confine ourselves to our quarters,” she answered.

“What?” Atrum said. “Why?”

“Because walls cannot hold us,” she said. “It is best, however, that they think they have us trapped.”

“What do you mean?”

She opened the door. “We will speak of it more, in private. Wait until the other guards have come.”

“And then what?”

“And then I teach you.”

They entered the rooms and took a seat. Soon afterward, the additional guards showed themselves. They asked where Barras had gone; he and Shay claimed ignorance. However, it was as Barras had said; there was too much going on to be concerned with an errant knight, or a missing lady-in-waiting for that matter. Shay pretended to faint; Atrum was able to convince the guards they could do their duty outside the door. At last, they were alone.

“What do you mean to teach me?” Atrum asked.

“I have been thinking,” Shay said. “No child of Light can pass through the shadows, it’s true—but you are not a child of Light. Not entirely.” Her hand went to her throat, touching the invisible collar. “This binds me, but you have no such limitations. I believe I can teach you to walk through the shadows.”

Atrum hardly knew what to say. “How long have you had this thought?” he asked at last.

“For some time.” She smiled a little. “You must forgive us. We are infinite; we think slowly.”

“But now, you must act quickly,” Atrum urged. “I must get to Theryn.” Even if Theryn no longer loved him, Atrum knew he was in danger. He had made a vow to lay down his life for Theryn, and it was a vow he intended to keep.

Shay shook her head. “Theryn is safe for now. It is clear that whatever Lyar plans, he needs Theryn safe.”

“It is *not* clear!” Atrum felt like screaming, but he kept his voice down. “You saw what he did; he nearly drained the life out of him!”

“Going to Theryn now would not save him. We must know Lyar’s plans. I only know of the ritual, not its specifics. If you find him and discover what he plans, perhaps we can stop him.”

Every part of his being desired to go immediately to his prince’s side, but he recognized the wisdom of her words. He gave her a shaky nod. “What must I do?”

“Draw the drapes,” she said. When Atrum had done what he was told, she beckoned him to her. Although the room was dark, he could still see with clarity.

“The world of Light is a world of variance,” she said. “It is what makes you so appealing to us. The world of Darkness is all the same. That has its advantages, particularly now.” She gestured around them. “The dark here is the same everywhere. Because of this, you can be anywhere, as long as you stay in the shadows. Do you understand?”

“I believe so,” Atrum said. “But what if I want to leave the shadows? Could I not travel somewhere and step out into the light again?”

“That I do not know,” she said. “But it is a possibility. You are a special case, Atrum. You belong in both worlds.”

“Or neither,” he muttered. His mind fluttered back to Theryn. What was in his heart at this moment? Was he frightened? Or was he content to be in Lyar’s arms? Did Atrum even want to know? He shook his head. No. He must concentrate. “How do I do this?”

“Forget yourself,” Shay said. “There are no others of the Shade here, as we have avoided this place since the captures began, but if you are to move in the shadows, you must remember: *we are one*. The path you travel and yourself are the same.”

“Yes, but *how*?”

She took his hand. “Our hands are not two,” she said. “They are one. *We are one*. You know this deep in your soul. You have always known this. Remember the feeling you had when we met.”

Atrum shut his eyes. He breathed in deeply, then out again. Over and over, he repeated the mantra: *We are one. We are one.*

Suddenly, he found himself in darkness. It was startling enough that he almost lost it, but he returned to his mantra. Very lightly, without invoking too much of himself, he thought of what he hoped to find. *Lyar. Where is Lyar?*

He found himself in a strange chamber. The stained glass ceiling gave the light shining through a dark, eerie glow. Strange symbols covered the tiled floor. A stone altar stood in the center of the room; there were two symbols carved at the top and two at the bottom above an altar rail made for kneeling. Atrum flitted from one shadow to the next to get a closer look. The symbols were the same as the ones he saw on Plinius’s papers back in Brode: Void, Darkness, Light, and Life.

Lyar and Plinius stood at a table off to one side, examining scrolls by candlelight. “It must be tomorrow,” Plinius was saying. “There is no way around it.”

Lyar ran a hand over his mouth. “You said there would be time,” he said. “At least a year, possibly more. We were to be married first, and properly joined. He was to become accustomed to my court, continue in his religious studies—”

“It is clearly the will of Soltar that His Incarnation begin now. Your betrothed invoked the Sword of Luxor. The ritual must be performed by tomorrow, or never at all.”

“But we are not fully joined yet,” Lyar said. “Nor has he been baptized.”

“You’ve had months to persuade him.”

“Yes, well, Theryn isn’t easily persuaded.”

“Then perhaps you should have pushed your suit harder on both accounts,” Plinius snapped. Atrum had never seen anyone treat Lyar so disrespectfully,

apart from Theryn. He waited for Lyar to lash out, but he didn't. In fact, he seemed almost deferential.

"You're right, of course," Lyar said. "I simply wanted him to come to us with a full heart and not because he was forced." Lyar gripped the altar, a pained expression on his face. "What are we to do?"

Plinius patted his hand. "You say that he's seen the Light of Luxor, and you are joined enough that you can make great use of his magic. It is enough. Would Luxor have acted through Theryn if Theryn was not ready? We must have faith."

"Yes," Lyar mumbled. "Faith."

Plinius's stare hardened. "You must not show a single moment of doubt," he said. "Not one. That was part of what doomed you before."

Lyar straightened himself. "My faith is perfect," Lyar said. "It's merely nerves. It must not turn out the way it did before." Lyar looked aside. The way the candlelight hit his face cast it in shadows. Atrum could have jumped to those shadows, if he wished. He almost did. All of his anger, grief, and fear had left him; all he felt now was curiosity. What was going on inside that head? Would getting closer give him a better idea of it?

No, he decided. Being too close obscured clarity. He would have to remember that, later.

"It won't be like last time," Plinius reassured him. "You have me to guide you." He rolled up a scroll. "There are sacrifices that must be made. That was your mistake before. You wanted salvation without the pain. It is written: 'He who seeks the Light—'"

"—must first embrace Darkness'," Lyar finished. "Yes. Yes, I know." He rubbed his face. "Has Leor gathered enough shadows?"

"I believe so. Of course, with a vessel as strong as Shay, the number will not matter as much."

"I still think you're wrong. It shouldn't be her. It should be Atrum. I *felt* something when we touched that first time."

"The Darkness in Shay is much stronger, my prince, and she is a woman as well," Plinius said. "What you felt from Atrum may have just been residual due to his proximity to her." He paused. "Or perhaps it is a familial relationship. I do not believe she is his intended."

Lyar snorted. “That much has been clear for quite some time, especially given how often my betrothed fucks him. But why bring her with him?”

“Who can say,” Plinius said. “What matters is that she’s here. Another sign of Soltar’s impatience to bring the Land of Light to the earth at last. Sister Shrivah is many months, if not years away from learning the ways of Darkness as I have learned the ways of Void. To have a natural child of Darkness handed to us just as we found Theryn is a clear indication of His will.”

“Do you think Shay can find salvation?” he asked. He sounded strangely concerned.

Plinius spread his arms. “She may. Soltar will give her the opportunity. She seems familiar with the teachings of the Old Church; it will make it easier for her than if she were a complete heathen.”

“And what of Leor?” Lyar asked. He sounded like a child now, begging for reassurance. “What will become of him?”

“You know my feelings on the matter.”

“His soul was *not* devoured by Nollum,” Lyar said fiercely.

“You think that black husk left in his wake has a soul? It follows orders well enough, but it cannot speak. It is an echo of the man you knew. You know as much.”

Lyar fell silent. When he spoke again, it was with hesitation. “What if at the time of Leor’s destruction, his soul was pushed into Theryn’s body? It would make sense. They look so alike, although their temperaments differ. Leor was always so sweet.” Lyar paused. “Perhaps Leor’s anger at me for what happened is why Theryn is so resistant.”

“The transmutation of souls is a heathen belief,” Plinius said firmly. “His ability was passed into a new body, it’s true, and his appearance as well, but nothing more.”

“Then what became of Leor?” Lyar cried. “I do not believe that he is gone. He was too good to deserve that fate!” Lyar clutched his hands in his hair. “But if it’s true that he really is gone, then what is this strange husk that haunts me, that obeys my will but says nothing? That peers at me with no eyes, that screams at me with his silence...” He broke off and took a few deep breaths, composing himself.

Plinius put a reassuring hand on his back. “All will be made well in the end. Have faith.”

Lyar gave a humorless laugh. “Faith is all I have.” He wiped at the tears on his face. “Faith. And perhaps Theryn.” He sniffed and stood up straighter. “He should meet my father before it happens.”

“He must be baptized, too.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Do you think he will be agreeable to that?”

“He says he felt Luxor’s Light. I pray that means he has already converted in his heart. I’ve made sure he knows his scripture.”

“Good.” Plinius rubbed his back. “Go to him now.”

Lyar headed for the door. Atrum was going to follow, but then something caught his attention. He was not alone in the shadows. In the shadow of the altar was... nothing. Nothing at all. It was a darkness darker than shadow—it was an absence.

And the absence moved.

Atrum followed it without thinking. The road of shadow led there.

Atrum found himself falling, as if down into a dark pit. He landed and felt himself thrust from the shadows. As soon as he was back to himself, the implications of what he had just heard hit him like a punch to the stomach. He forced himself together; there was no time for fear.

He looked around him. He was in a wood of some sort, but everything seemed somehow wrong. There was blackness amongst the trees, but it wasn’t shadows. Everywhere was cold. He heard strange hollow sounds, like the echoes of echoes. Occasionally, something would brush against him, sending shudders through his body. Where could he be?

As soon as he thought the question, the answer came to him: it must be the Malusion Woods. Although they were on the other side of the continent, Shay had said distance had no meaning for their people. The question was why he had ended up here, of all places. Perhaps the special properties of the Malusion Woods made conducting the sort of magic Plinius needed easier. But no matter how black his spirit was, he couldn’t pass through the shadows. His mind went back to the shadow man who had attacked them there so many months ago. Maybe Plinius had found some creature who could.

He couldn’t really know where he was headed; still, he sensed something—a path of sorts. He followed the feeling. Gradually, in the distance, he saw a

light. It was small and dim, almost pitiful in the way it struggled against the oppressive darkness around them. He moved forward. The light grew larger and larger. When he reached it, he found a dark-hooded figure, sitting alone in the middle of that pitiful light. It was the same dark figure that had attacked them before. It held in its hand the wand Lyar had given Theryn.

He should not have taken it, the creature was saying without words. It was mine, he shouldn't have taken it, it was mine...

“Do you mean the wand?” Atrum said.

The creature started. It turned its head to Atrum. *You can hear me?*

“Yes.”

The creature held still, but then shook its head. *No one hears me.*

“But I do,” Atrum insisted. “Plain as day.” When the creature didn’t respond, Atrum gestured to the wand. “We’re sorry for taking it. We didn’t know it belonged to you.”

It was not you who took it. It was Lyar. The creature held the wand tighter. He shouldn't have taken my Light.

Atrum sat down beside the creature. “No,” he said. “He shouldn’t have.” He reached out his hand. Every part of him screamed with repulsion, but he gritted his teeth and pressed onward. He placed his hand where the shoulder of the creature should be, even though it seemed more like a hole in his surroundings than a part of it. Surprisingly, he felt something. It was cold, but solid. “Are you Leor?” he asked gently.

I was, it said. But that was a long time ago.

So not a creature after all; this was truly a man. “What happened to you?” Atrum asked. “How did he steal your Light?”

He didn't steal it. I gave it to him. But he should not have taken it.

“Why did you give it to him?”

It was supposed to save the world. I would see my father again, he would see his family. There would no longer be war, or sickness, or death. The creature stopped and hugged the wand a little tighter. We were young. We did it wrong. We tried to do only the part of the Light and Life, but Plinius has told Lyar that he must invoke Darkness and Void as well.

“And that’s why you’ve been taking my family,” Atrum said.

He cocked his head. *Your family?*

“The people of the Darkness came to my mother, and she became pregnant with me,” he said. “I am in between the Light and the Dark. Just like you seem to be in between Life and Death.”

It is not the same, he said. I have no eyes to see, no mouth to speak, no hands to feel. I have ears to hear, but what I hear only brings me despair. He does not want me. I repulse him.

“That is not true,” Atrum said. “If you have ears to hear, then you just heard the same thing I did—Lyar wants you back! He started all this to restore you.”

He’s found another. The one who stole my face. Ever since he came, Lyar has pushed me away.

“That is also untrue.” Atrum stopped himself to turn that thought over in his mind. Lyar said Theryn resisted him. He felt a rush of shame at his doubts about Theryn’s intentions. Of course Theryn had to send him away. He was trying to save him. “We have both been deaf,” Atrum said. “They love us still. I heard him say that he only pursues Theryn because he thinks that there is something of you in him.” He increased the pressure on Leor’s shoulder. “But Lyar must not be allowed to continue with his actions. There is no Land of Light waiting for us. My family is as old as time, and they remember no such man as Soltar and have seen no such kingdom as the Land of Light. Lyar will end us all if he keeps on this path.”

Leor considered this. *You are right, he concluded. But what can we do?*

“I don’t know,” Atrum said. He thought for a minute. “Can you describe the ritual Lyar plans?”

When we did it, it was just the two of us: Light and Life. But the ritual calls for four vessels, one for each of the elements. Then the essence of Life will be fed into the essence of Light, making a light so bright as to rival the sun. The essence of Void will be fed into Darkness, making a gaping black hole. The Light will enter that impossible Darkness, and the world will cease to be. It is supposed to make room for the Land of Light.

“So Lyar will put his energy into Theryn, and you will put the voided shadows through Shay?”

It can’t be me. The vessels must be mortal. Whatever I’ve become is something else. Plinius will serve that role. His talent is not a natural one, so he needs the shadows I converted to Void to give him the power to be the vessel.

“Why didn’t it work when it was just the two of you?”

I could not control the energy he gave me without counterbalance. I sucked some, but not all, of the Light from the world for one brief moment, and then I collapsed into blackness.

“That’s what caused the eclipse on the day Theryn was born,” Atrum said.

Yes.

“If he looks so much like you and has your ability, is it true that there is some of you in him?”

Leor didn’t answer for a moment. *Perhaps. But I am still myself, and he is still himself. Lyar is wrong to think otherwise.*

Atrum thought about everything Leor had just told him. “Shay is not mortal, either,” he said. “So she can’t be the vessel of Darkness. What will happen if he starts the ritual with the wrong people?”

The world would remain intact, but the vessels would be destroyed.

Atrum felt sick at the thought. “Then we must not let that happen.” He gestured to the wand. “If you give that to me, I can free Shay. All we need to do is find a way to rescue Theryn.”

Lyar will not let him go. You will have to fight for him.

“That is what I have pledged my life to do.” Atrum stood up. “Come. We have much to do.”

Leor rose as well. He handed the wand to Atrum. *Free your sister, he said. Lyar wants Theryn baptized. If I can prevent that, it will stall him. You can perhaps save Theryn then.*

Atrum accepted the wand. “Thank you,” he said.

He turned to leave but stopped. “There is nothing in this for you,” he said. “Or Lyar for that matter.”

It is my sacrifice, Leor said. Perhaps our religion isn’t exactly as true as we had thought, but there is much good in it. We are taught that sacrifice for the greater good is the most important deed a person can undertake.

“That is true in our faith as well.” He touched Leor again on the shoulder; this time, he didn’t seem so cold. “Farewell, Leor. I wish you luck.”

Atrum closed his eyes and felt for where the absence ended and the shadows began. Once he found it, he slipped away. He would go to Shay first, and then

Theryn. Hopefully, she would have some insight once he spoke with her. He didn't think he could pull Theryn through the shadows and fighting their way out might prove impossible. Lyar had an army, as well as formidable powers of his own. Atrum would have to think, and quickly. All of life hung in the balance.

Chapter Eleven

Theryn woke up with a start. He didn't know where he was at first. His hazy memories came back to him slowly. The bodies. The explosion. The sword of Light.

He shook his head in an attempt to unuddle it. He looked at his surroundings. He was lying on a large four-poster bed, dressed only in his smallclothes. A female servant was sitting beside the bed, watching him. When she saw he was awake, she stood and left the room before Theryn could say a word.

He tried to sit up, but he was still very weak. He squinted at the sunlight pouring into the room from giant windows. When his eyes adjusted, he was better able to see where he'd been put. It was Lyar's chambers, he was sure. Everything was red—the silken bedspread beneath him, the bed curtains around him—even the furniture was of a reddish-brown wood, polished until it shone. The only thing that was not red in the room was a brilliant wall hanging of a golden sun. It was positioned to catch the sunlight, which made it glow.

He swung his feet over the side of the bed and was just about to attempt to stand when Lyar entered. He crossed the room to take a seat on the bed beside Theryn. "I was told you had awakened," he said. "How do you feel?"

"Better," Theryn said, but only because he didn't want to say *weak*.

Lyar smiled. "Good." He smoothed his hand over the bedspread, seeming lost in thought for a moment. He abruptly stood and opened a trunk that lay at the foot of the bed. "Your clothes were damaged in the attack," he said. He opened the trunk and took out a gold and white doublet and a fine silk shirt. Theryn recognized them from when Lyar had first presented them to him in Glinden. "I thought you could wear these."

There was something about the way that he was staring at the clothes that left Theryn deeply unsettled—his gaze seemed unfocused and faraway. Lyar shook himself out of it. "Let's get you out of bed."

Lyar helped Theryn to his feet. Theryn didn't know what to do; he didn't want to wear the clothes, but he hadn't the strength to fight him. "I think I need more rest," he said.

"You do, I'm sure," Lyar agreed. "But I need you to be strong for just a little longer. Then we will all have peace."

“What does that mean?” Theryn cried, but Lyar seemed not to hear him. He was staring at the clothes again. He laid the doublet and shirt on the bed before reaching to remove a pair of breeches from the trunk.

“Here,” he said, moving behind Theryn. “I’ll help you.”

Theryn trembled as he allowed Lyar to dress him. He put him in the shirt and buttoned up the doublet. He put stockings on his feet, along with breeches. Last, he slipped on a pair of ornate golden shoes. When he was finished, he stood back and looked Theryn over with that same faraway gaze. He took Theryn’s hand. Fortunately, Lyar’s own were gloved again; Theryn didn’t think he could deal with the intimacy of their linked touch at the moment.

Lyar pulled him over to a full-length mirror. He stood behind him. “Look at yourself,” he said. “You’re perfect.”

Theryn couldn’t answer. Any words that left his lips would betray the amount of horror that was brewing inside him.

Lyar turned him around. Theryn kept his gaze downward to avoid looking into Lyar’s eyes, but Lyar placed a finger on his chin and lifted his face. “Do you remember?” he asked.

“Remember what?”

Lyar looked away. “Nothing. Never mind.” He took his hand again and led him toward the door. “We have to meet my father.”

“Now?”

“Don’t worry yourself—we won’t spend much time with him. I doubt he’ll even understand who you are—his grasp on reality is not always firm. Still, I must honor my father. In spite of all, I must honor him.”

Theryn allowed himself to be led from the room. They twisted their way through several long corridors. Castles like this were supposed to be dark, but everything was so bright. Theryn thought he would go blind from it. They passed a group of portraits. One stood out: a lovely woman with Lyar’s red-gold hair, surrounded by children.

Lyar caught Theryn looking at it. “Yes, that is my mother,” he said. “She was called Yerina. Those are my brothers and sister with her.”

Theryn focused on the oldest child, a serious-looking boy of about ten. It must have been Lyar—which meant this portrait had been completed shortly before their deaths.

They continued on. At last, they reached an old wooden door. It was the only thing Theryn had seen in the palace that wasn't grand. Lyar knocked on it. "We're here," he said.

There was a sound of a lock being undone. A priest greeted them at the door.

"Theryn, may I present to you Father Agim, my father's personal avower."

Agim bowed. "It is an honor to be in your presence, Your Grace."

"How is he today?" Lyar asked.

Agim shook his head. "Not such a good day, I'm afraid. I think he heard the commotion; it's thrown him off."

"What a shame," he said. "How has he been doing on his repentance?"

"Very well, my lord. He prays daily for forgiveness."

"Good, good." Lyar gestured for Theryn to enter the room, following behind him. Agim shut the door.

This room, unlike the others, was a dark place. The furniture was plain and worn. Only a small window let in a sliver of light. There was an old man sitting in a musty, old chair, staring at nothing. Lyar motioned for Theryn to come over.

"Hello, Father," Lyar said loudly. "It is your son, Lyar."

The old man lifted his head. When he saw Lyar, he began to weep.

"Now, none of that," he said. "You despise crying. That's what you always told me." He turned to Theryn. "This is my father, Verem, third of his name, ruler of Soltara, Emperor of Light." He turned back to the old man. "Father, this is my betrothed, Prince Theryn of Glinden."

The old man looked at Theryn. His brow furrowed in confusion. "Leor?" he asked.

Lyar froze. "No," he said tightly. "You're confused, Father. This is Theryn. We are to be married."

Verem reached out to him. "Leor, my boy," he said. "I did not think to see you again. How goes it? How is your father?" His expression suddenly darkened. "No, no, the father is a traitor. I put his head on the block. What to do with the son, though—that is the question."

Lyar grabbed Verem's shoulder. The old man cried in pain. "Shut your mouth, you stupid old man!" His face was twisted in such fury that Theryn took a few steps backward.

"Forgive me, forgive me," the old man wailed. "I ask only to be forgiven."

His words calmed Lyar, and he released his grip. "Yes. Just so. You are forgiven, as are we all, by Vitalius's mercy." He ran a hand over his mouth. "I think that is enough for today," he said. "Say your good-byes, Father."

Verem grabbed Theryn's hand in his feeble grasp. "Run, boy," he said. "He is wicked, like his father. Run!"

Lyar backhanded Verem, who fell to the floor with a cry. He grabbed Theryn's arm. "We're leaving," he said, marching them to the door. Before they left, he gestured to Agim. "I think he could use some more repentance," he said. "The day of reckoning is upon us, after all."

The priest bowed. "Your Grace is most wise."

Lyar relaxed his grip on Theryn's arm once they had left but didn't release it entirely. "That could have gone better," he eventually said. Theryn had no response to that.

As they went back through the corridors, Theryn wondered who on earth Leor was. It must be the one who came before him, whom Lyar had loved and who had died. Why had his father thought he was Leor? And why had Lyar reacted so violently? He dared not ask.

They passed by the portrait of Lyar's family again. Lyar stopped. He placed a hand on the hem of his mother's skirt. "They said she was mad, but she wasn't," he said softly. "She merely wanted to bring us to the Land of Light." Lyar smiled at him. "You'll meet her soon. I wonder if she's as kind as I remember." Theryn could swear her eyes were watching them—eyes that shone with the same madness that now gripped Lyar.

"I'm sure she is," Theryn said in a broken whisper.

They continued on until they reached Lyar's chambers again. A small meal was laid out on one of the tables. "Our food is here," Lyar said. "Good. We still have much to do today." He gestured to one of the chairs. "Sit. Eat."

Theryn remained standing. "I'm not hungry."

Lyar pressed his lips together. "You need to keep your strength up," he said. He gestured to the seat again. "Eat."

Still, Theryn wouldn't move.

"Fine," Lyar said. He sat down and began to eat. "If you won't eat, you can change into your baptismal outfit."

"Baptismal outfit?"

"Yes," Lyar said. He gestured to the mirror with his fork. "It should be hanging over there."

"You want to baptize me today?"

Lyar set down his utensils and stood. He walked over to Theryn and put his hands on his shoulders. "I know this is all very sudden. It can't be helped. Your invocation of the Sword of Luxor has forced us to act quickly if we are to complete the ritual by the end of tomorrow."

"A ritual for what?" he asked, although of course he already knew. He wanted to hear it from Lyar.

Lyar smiled, his whole face filled with bliss. "We are going to bring the Land of Light here to earth, just as in the Book of Revelment. Your powers are needed, as are mine, and Lady Shay's as well."

Theryn didn't respond; how could he?

Lyar frowned at his expression. "Aren't you excited? There will be no more pain, no more death. By this time tomorrow, we will all be living in paradise..." His frown turned to a look of concern. "You're trembling."

Theryn didn't know what to do. Lyar had said that the ritual had to occur by the end of tomorrow. If Theryn escaped him for at least that long, maybe he could prevent the ritual from happening. But how? And even if he managed to flee, Atrum and Shay remained trapped. Could he free them? But then there were the mobs on the street, and Lyar's men searching out 'heretics'—could they even get out of the city if they did manage to escape the palace? How long would it take Lyar to find them? What would happen when he did? The questions crashed through Theryn's mind like waves; he thought he might drown in them.

Lyar put a hand on his back and led him to the mirror. "Do you need help getting changed?"

Theryn shook his head. Lyar returned to his seat and resumed eating.

Theryn stared at the outfit. It was a simple white linen shirt and breeches. He could go along with it and bide more time; surely the green gods would

understand he didn't mean a word of it. But there *was* no more time. He couldn't help Atrum if the world had ended.

"No," Theryn said.

Lyar paused in his meal. "What do you mean, 'no'?"

"I won't be baptized."

Lyar stared at him in disbelief. "Is it out of concern for your friends and family?" he asked. "You needn't worry. It's true they are heathens, but Soltar will give them a chance to repent when He arrives, as He does to us all upon death."

Theryn shook his head. "No," he said. "This ritual will not work. You're dooming us, Lyar. Surely you have to see that!"

Lyar stood again. He cocked his head as he looked at Theryn. "You know something about this already, don't you?" he said. "Who told you?"

Theryn shook his head, unable to think of a lie. Lyar strode over to him and took his shoulders in his hands. "*Who told you?*"

"You'll kill us all with this," Theryn said. "And I won't help you!"

Lyar's face reddened with rage, his hands gripping Theryn so tightly it would bruise. His expression changed suddenly, and his grip eased. "I know what's happening," he said. "This is Nollum, the keeper of the Void, speaking through you, trying to test me. You have to fight him, Theryn. He wants to keep the Land of Light away, but you're filled with the Light of Luxor now. Nollum shrinks in the face of such Light."

"I felt no presence of Luxor," Theryn said. "I invoked the sword because I had no weapon when the mob attacked. I've done such a thing before."

Lyar looked at him in confusion. "But earlier, you said—"

"I was lying. I was frightened for Atrum. But if you kill us all, that does Atrum no good."

Lyar released him. "More lies," he said. He started for the door. "I'll send for Father Plinius. He knows Nollum's tricks and can work them to his advantage. He'll know what to do."

"Father Plinius can do nothing to sway me!" Theryn said. "This isn't some demon talking, Lyar—it is I, myself, and I am telling you that I would rather die than help you in this scheme!"

Lyar whipped around. His face was contorted in fury. “If you truly feel that way, then it is not you who would die. No, your beloved Atrum will suffer for it.”

He strode back to Theryn and grabbed him by the arm. “We may not have much time left, but there’s time enough to make his death slow. We can go now,” Lyar said. “I’ll have him brought to the dungeons and you can watch as my executioners rip him to pieces. It can take hours. I can have Lady Shay’s lady-in-waiting join him as well. Can you imagine that sweet voice of hers screaming out in pain as she’s cut open and—”

“Stop!” Theryn cried. If Lyar hadn’t been holding his arm, he would have fallen to his knees. “Don’t—don’t hurt them.”

“*Then tell me the truth!*” Lyar screamed in his face. “It was the Sword of Luxor, was it not?”

Theryn gave him a shaky nod.

“And you felt Luxor’s presence, did you not?”

“Yes,” answered Theryn, his voice a hoarse whisper.

Lyar released him. He pointed at the baptismal outfit. “Get. Dressed.”

Theryn did so with shaking hands as Lyar paced the room, his chest heaving. When Theryn was finished, he grabbed him by the arm and ushered him from the room. This time, they descended the stairs. They made their way to a building connected to the right side of the palace. From the looks of it, it was a chapel. It was as grandly decorated as the rest of the palace. Stained glass windows depicted images of the sun and of fire—the symbol of Life. Toward the back, there was a dais, on top of which was a wooden altar. He looked to the ceiling; there was a hatch, connected to a lever on the wall beside the dais.

The chapel was empty except for two men: Father Plinius, who was standing to the right of the dais, and a man Theryn didn’t recognize. The ornateness of his clothing suggested someone important.

“Theryn, this is Bishop Sulero, who has been instrumental in spreading the word of the Revelers.”

“It will be my great honor to bring you into the Light,” the man said.

Theryn did nothing; he felt paralyzed.

Lyar shoved him in front of the altar. “All you have to do is stand here and say yes when appropriate,” Lyar said. “Do you understand?”

Theryn nodded.

The bishop began to speak in the ancient tongue. It wouldn't have mattered if he had been speaking a language Theryn could understand; he wouldn't have heard it. Images of Atrum's violent death kept running through his mind. After some time, Lyar nudged him, startling him into awareness. "Pay attention," he hissed.

The bishop repeated himself. "Do you, Prince Theryn of Glinden, accept the word of Soltar as the one truth of the world?"

Theryn shut his eyes. "Yes," he whispered.

"And who here speaks for him in the name of Life?" the bishop asked.

"I do," Lyar said. He took off one glove and picked up a knife that had been set on the altar. He pricked his thumb. When the blood began to flow, he smeared it on Theryn's forehead.

"And who speak for him in the name of Light?"

"I do," Plinius said. He reached for the lever to open the hatch.

But when he pulled it, no sunlight shone through. In fact, all of the glass windows went black, plunging them into darkness. Lyar let out a roar of rage.

Theryn was flooded with relief. He hadn't expected this, but he wasted no time in taking advantage of the situation. He dared not invoke his Light ability, so he simply turned and ran. It should have been a straight shot out to the door.

But before he could get very far, he felt a drain on him so forceful that he was brought to his knees. Light filled the chapel. He managed to turn around to see Lyar stalking toward him, an enormous ball of Light floating behind him. Plinius followed in his wake. Theryn scuttled backward; he hadn't the strength to do more.

Lyar grabbed him by his shirt and jerked him to his feet. "Did you know about this?" he snarled.

Theryn shook his head. "I didn't know, I swear it."

Lyar relaxed his grip but didn't release him. "No," he said. "No, of course not. You were unconscious, and then you were with me the rest of the time." He sucked in a deep breath through his nose and let it out slowly. "So who is our saboteur?"

"The Lady Shay, of course," Plinius said. "This kind of magic would take someone with powerful Dark in them, and I tell you again, she is more powerful than you realize."

“I am still not convinced,” Lyar said. “If her weakness is a show, it’s been a very good one.” Lyar looked Theryn in the eye. “Perhaps it is Atrum? He has some power of the Dark in him, does he not?”

Theryn tried to keep his expression neutral but failed. “I see that he does,” Lyar said. “It disappoints me that you would not share that fact with me. Is he strong enough to do something like this?”

“I don’t know.”

Lyar balled his hand into a fist, twisting Theryn’s shirt. “Do I have to remind you about the consequences of lying?”

“Truly, I don’t,” Theryn said. “We knew he had some Dark ability, as you said, but it wasn’t strong. He could merely see things in the dark, for example. He has shown no other abilities.” Which was true enough; Theryn wasn’t about to mention his unusual parentage.

He released Theryn’s shirt but immediately took him by the wrist. “I suppose I will have to ask Atrum and Shay myself, assuming they are still where I left them. You will wait for me in our chambers.” He turned to Plinius. “Call some guards; have them meet me there.”

Lyar dragged him out of the chapel, up the stairs, and to his chambers. He pushed him through the door. A few moments later, the guards arrived. Lyar told them to station themselves outside of the door. “I suggest you pray while I’m gone,” he said to Theryn. “Perhaps after some reflection, you’ll come to your senses. Our day is not yet done.” With that, he left.

Theryn sank to the floor. What had just happened? Had Atrum found a way to free Shay? Was it she who had darkened the chapel? But even if that were true, where was Atrum? He couldn’t move through the shadows, which left him vulnerable. He tried to think of something he could do, but nothing came to mind. He buried his face in his hands and wept.

He wasn’t sure how long he sat there. After some time, he felt someone touch his shoulder. He started violently, his hands falling from his face—and then a wave of relief crashed over him. It was Atrum. He threw himself into Atrum’s arms. “Oh Atrum,” he said. “I had thought he would kill you!” He held Atrum’s face in his hands and covered it with kisses. “I’m so sorry—I didn’t mean what I said before—”

“I know,” Atrum interrupted. Their lips met as they clung to each other.

Theryn pulled back. “How did you get in here?”

“I came from the shadows,” Atrum said.

“How is that possible?”

“I am a child of Darkness as well as Light,” Atrum said. “Shay believed that it might be possible; she was right.”

“How did you free her?” For the first time, Theryn noticed something in Atrum’s hand. It was the wand that had been taken from him in the Malusion Woods. “With that? Where did you get it?”

“From the one who took it in the first place.”

Theryn gave him a baffled look. “Who?”

Atrum told him of the conversation he’d witnessed between Lyar and Plinius, and how he had discovered Leor and what he had told him, both about himself and the ritual they were to perform.

“So that’s who Leor is,” Theryn said when he’d finished. “I met Lyar’s father, and he kept calling me by that name.” He tugged at his hair. “Does he really think I’m him?”

“Plinius keeps telling him otherwise, but I do believe he does. Ever since you met him, Leor says Lyar’s been trying to banish him from his life. That would make sense if he thinks that Leor’s spirit is somehow in you.”

“He’s completely mad.”

Atrum looked grim. “It appears so.”

“Can you take me through the shadows?”

Atrum shook his head. “Shay thought it was a risk even for me. She has gone back to the Shade to bring others to aid us. Perhaps she can cloak us in darkness so we can’t be seen—that would be different from trying to pull you through the shadow roads themselves. We would be able to escape.”

“How quickly will they get here?”

“I am not sure.”

“We just need to keep Lyar distracted until they arrive.”

“He’ll be distracted enough by Shay’s absence. He can’t continue without a vessel for the Dark. I’m more concerned with what he might do to you in the meantime.”

“He won’t hurt me,” Theryn said. “Not my body, at least.”

Atrum pressed his lips together. "I would not be so certain of that." Atrum thought for a moment. "Could you pull energy from him the way he does from you?"

"He has much better control of it than I," Theryn said. "And I'm so weak now."

"Wouldn't the wand help?" Atrum said, handing it to him.

"It might," Theryn said. "I haven't had the chance to practice with it, but I can try."

They were interrupted when the door opened. Atrum immediately vanished into the shadows, making it appear as if Theryn was alone. Lyar stepped in. He closed to the door and locked it behind him. "Shay and Atrum are gone."

"They are?" Theryn realized he was still clutching the wand. He hid it behind his back.

"Yes. Vanished into thin air, it seems." Lyar gave him a long look. "Or perhaps into the shadows. Who were you talking to just now?"

"No one. I was praying."

Lyar made a motion with his hand as if he were gathering something. Theryn gasped as he felt his energy drained once more. A light appeared above them; it was so bright and wide that all of the shadows in the room grew small or disappeared entirely. There was a thick quality to the light, just as there was with the dome in the Malusion Woods. "To assure our privacy," he explained. He knelt down beside Theryn. "You've been weeping," Lyar said. He cupped Theryn's face tenderly and ran his gloved thumb over the wetness on Theryn's cheek. "Were you truly praying just now?"

"Yes," Theryn said, stalling for time. "Will you pray with me?"

Lyar smiled with relief. "Yes, of course," he said. He knelt beside Theryn. The moment Lyar shut his eyes, Theryn drew the wand. Lyar noticed at the last second; he flattened himself on the ground. The beam of Light soared over Lyar's head and crashed into a window, shattering it.

Lyar was on him in an instant. "You deceitful little snake!" he snarled as he ripped the wand from his hand. "Where did you get this?"

Theryn said nothing. That last burst of energy had drained him almost completely. Lyar examined the wand. "This is the one I gave you," he said. "But you said you'd forgotten it. Why would you lie? Besides that, your trunk

isn't even in this room. If you didn't bring it with you from Glinden, then how on earth did it end up here? I ordered my rider to bring it directly to Ilturo from Glinden; I haven't had the chance to check, but it should have been brought to the wand room. And you couldn't have gotten it there; you've been with me the whole time."

Theryn remained silent. Lyar grabbed his arm and dragged him to his feet. "Answer me!" he screamed in his face. When it became clear Theryn would not, he shoved him back with a snarl. Theryn struggled to stay on his feet. He winced in preparation for the blow that was sure to come.

But Lyar didn't hit him. He roared with frustration and retreated to the other side of the room. He paced back and forth, his hands on the side of his head, pressing as though he was containing an explosion. Theryn grabbed hold of the back of a chair to steady himself. He tried to think of anything he could do, but he was too fatigued to even form thoughts. No shadows, which meant Atrum and the others couldn't save him. No power left, so he couldn't save himself. He had to *think*.

Lyar stalked toward him suddenly, but his furious expression had changed to one of imploring. He took Theryn's face in his hands. "Why do you fight me?" he asked, his voice desperate. He rested his forehead against Theryn's. "Can't you see what I want for us? For the world? How can I make you understand?"

Theryn broke from Lyar's grasp with a twist of his head, but Lyar put his hand back on Theryn's face, this time bringing him in for a kiss. The moment their lips met, Theryn felt a spark jolt through the bond that connected them. He gasped. Lyar pulled back for a moment, searching Theryn's face. He kissed him again. The same jolt went through him.

Lyar steered him backward until Theryn's thighs hit the bed. The kisses had fed some energy back into Theryn; he tried to stand, but Lyar was all over him, surging forward until Theryn was flat on his back. Lyar kissed him again and again. Theryn tried to push him away, but Lyar didn't seem to notice. Lyar pulled back and took the tips of the fingers of one of his gloves between his teeth, yanking it off. He put his bare hand on Theryn's face. Theryn gasped. The desire that rolled through him from that touch was so intense that it obliterated his thoughts. He forgot what had brought them to this moment, and even what was happening. All he knew was that he wanted Lyar desperately.

"You feel it, don't you?" Lyar said, panting. "The connection between us. It's almost complete."

Theryn's mind cleared for a moment. "No," Theryn managed to gasp, but then Lyar kissed his throat right where Theryn's pulse beat wildly under his skin, and Theryn was lost again.

"I recognize you now," he said between kisses. "I should have the moment I saw you, but Plinius said it couldn't be so. But I knew. I *knew*. You're him. Your soul is just so buried that you've forgotten yourself." Lyar slipped his hand under Theryn's shirt; his caress was overwhelming. Theryn's cock was as hard as Lyar's, which he felt pressed against him.

"I have waited so long for you," Lyar said as he ran his hand over Theryn's skin. "That husk you left behind—it haunts me, you know. It follows me everywhere; I can feel it hiding in the shadows wherever I go. It curls up beside me in bed sometimes; I tolerated it because I thought it was you, but it wasn't. You're here now, warm and alive by my side, as you should be." Lyar captured his mouth in another kiss.

Theryn pushed Lyar's hand away from his chest, but that only led to him slipping it between his thighs. Theryn moaned. He couldn't help it.

"Stop," Theryn said when he'd caught his breath.

"Why?" Lyar said. "Why should I stop when we've been apart for so long?" He buried his face in Theryn's neck as his hand continued to move. Theryn moved his hips, although he wasn't sure if it was to get away or to lean into the touch.

"Our first time was here," Lyar said. "Do you remember? How we drew the bed curtains when the maid came in. We could barely contain our laughter." Lyar moved his hand faster. "You were my light after they died, and I blew you out like a candle. No wonder you hate me now. No wonder you resist."

"Please," Theryn gasped. Lyar brought their lips together, kissing him so hard that it left them both breathless.

"Once these bodies are joined, you will come back to me fully," Lyar panted. "We will be together, as we had always dreamed. Oh Leor..."

Lyar withdrew at last, his hands and mouth leaving Theryn's skin as he went to unfasten his own clothing.

That was his mistake. As soon as his hands left Theryn's skin, his mind snapped back into focus. He grabbed the hand on which Lyar wore his ring and *pulled* with all his power. Theryn's hands grew hot. He thrust them into Lyar's face; Lyar screamed as his skin burned.

Theryn stumbled off the bed. “*I am not Leor!*” he screamed.

Lyar crawled to the edge of the bed. The burns on his face had blistered in ugly clusters of yellow and white. He covered his face with his gloved hand while his bare one grasped outward, seeking him. Theryn pulled again with his power, drawing more of Lyar’s strength into him. Lyar collapsed, moaning in pain.

Theryn just stood there for a moment, his chest heaving. The sudden rush of energy left him almost giddy. “Leor exists, but not in me. While you were looking for Shay and Atrum, Atrum came through the shadows to me. Atrum is the mortal child of the people of the Shade, and he was able to talk with Leor in his current form. He’s not as gone as you think—he just can’t speak in a way you can hear. He loves you, Lyar.”

“It isn’t him,” Lyar said. “It *can’t* be him. For if it is, there is no way of saving him.” He tried to push himself up, but his arms were weak. “I never meant—”

“It doesn’t matter what you meant!” Theryn waved his hand. “All of these grand intentions—to end death, to save the world—none of it matters! What you’re doing is wrong. Do you know who Shay really is? She’s a creature of the Shade—the same as the ones you had Leor gather and corrupt. We couldn’t remove the collar of Light that trapped her, so I put an illusion on her until we could find a way to free her. She has existed since the beginning of time, and she remembers no Soltar.”

Lyar just moaned, still clutching at his face.

The strange giddiness in Theryn began to dissipate. He felt more like himself. “I’m sorry those terrible things happened to you,” he said. “Truly, I am. But what you’re doing is not the answer. Shay says the ritual you hope to perform is real—it is capable of bringing about the end of the world. But it won’t bring a god to earth once more. The Land of Light may exist in some form, but you can’t bring it here. You can’t undo your past.”

Lyar didn’t respond. He was lying still on the bed, breathing shallowly. Theryn approached him with caution. “But there are things you can still do. Call off your soldiers. End the religious persecution. Let me go.” Lyar still didn’t move. Theryn reached out and touched him. “Lyar—”

Lyar leapt at him with a roar and tackled Theryn to the ground. Theryn’s head hit the floor with a thud, momentarily stunning him. Lyar straddled him and grasped Theryn’s head, the heel of his hand digging into Theryn’s

forehead. Theryn felt Lyar start to drain the energy from him again, so quickly this time that he felt as if he would vomit. Theryn watched the blisters fade from Lyar's face as he stared down at him, his expression twisted in either triumph or anguish. Theryn couldn't tell which. The world started to fade out; all he could see was Lyar's dark silhouette, framed by blinding light.

Chapter Twelve

Atrum tried again to push into the shadows.

But that wasn't how shadows worked. You *slipped* into shadows. He tried to clear his mind as Shay had taught him, but ever since he had been thrust from Lyar's chambers, he couldn't concentrate on anything but the thumps and muffled shouts and screams coming from the room. He had already tried the door, but it was locked and too sturdy to break down. Light was pouring out from under door, almost as if it were liquid.

He had to retreat when some soldiers rounded the corner. He ducked into a dark corner by the stairs and tried again, but still he could not enter. Whenever he closed his eyes, his mind was filled with visions of what may be going on in that room. But even if he could get back into the shadows, would it do any good? The light coming from the room was so strange... He wanted to scream with frustration.

Some time passed. He couldn't be sure if it were minutes or hours, because every second felt like an eternal torment. Gradually, the shadows around him began to take shape. Shay had returned, and she had brought others.

"He pushed me out!" Atrum said. "He did something with Theryn's magic, and I was thrown from the room. There were shouts and screams, and a strange light shining from the bottom of the door..."

Shay laid a shadowy hand on Atrum's shoulder. It felt different than when she had been trapped by the collar, like the brush of a cool feather. *Do not worry. We will find a way.*

Several of the others melted back into the dark. A few minutes later, they returned. *Lyar is calling for you, Atrum.*

"For me?"

He dropped the Light barrier and believes you are in the room, watching. A pause. He is threatening Theryn.

"What? How?" Atrum tore at his hair. "I need to get in there!"

You can't if you are this agitated, Shay said.

"Then I'll just go in the fucking door!"

Then he'll have you for sure. You will give up your one advantage. Shay took his hand. *Be one with us.*

The others surrounded them until he was completely engulfed. His determination didn't waiver, but his torment eased. Saving Theryn became simply a task to be done. The shadows swept him up, and a moment later, he was in the room.

Lyar was standing in the center of the room in a circle of light. He was clutching an unconscious Theryn from behind in one arm. His other hand held a blade to Theryn's throat.

"I know you're here!" Lyar shouted. "I can feel you moving through the shadows, Atrum. Show yourself or I will kill him." He pushed the knife until he drew a drop of blood.

"Let him go," Atrum said. His voice echoed through the room, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

Lyar's gaze darted around the room; he clutched Theryn a little closer. "Perhaps you are thinking that I won't hurt him because I need him. But that isn't really true, is it? If I don't have a vessel for the Dark, then I can't complete the ritual anyway."

The shadow people noticed Leor's Magas wand on the ground by Lyar's feet. That wand could be used to contain them. Still, they reached the consensus that Atrum must go. Lyar was mad. He might do anything.

Atrum stepped from the shadows, holding his hands in the air. "Here I am, as you wished," he said. "Let him go now."

Lyar sheathed his knife. He lowered Theryn to the ground and then picked up the wand. Lyar waved it. The circle of light that had surrounded him grew broader, encompassing Atrum as well. He waved it again; two rings of light appeared in the air beside him. They looked like the collar that had once trapped Shay.

"Take one and put it around your neck," Lyar said. Atrum hesitated, his body tensing as if he was trying to decide whether to attempt an attack. Lyar whipped out the knife again and held it over Theryn's body. "*Put it on or he dies!*" he screamed.

Atrum took the ring. "How?"

"Just press it against your neck."

Atrum did so. The moment the ring encircled him; he gave a great shudder and fell to his knees. If this was how Shay felt, it was a wonder she was able to function at all.

“In case your family is waiting to pounce on us,” he said. “Oh yes, I know,” he continued at Atrum’s stunned expression. “Theryn told me everything. I know about Shay and the story of your birth.” He opened his arms, as if displaying something huge and wonderful. “Do you see now how Soltar works His blessings? If things had not happened exactly as they did, I would have never learned that Shay was not the one I needed.” He loomed over Atrum. “I need you.”

“If he told you everything, then you know your beliefs are false,” Atrum said. “Your actions will not bring forth the Land of Light.”

Lyar backhanded him, causing Atrum to topple over. “I will not listen to this blasphemy!” He kicked him. “Get up.” Atrum struggled to his feet. “Put your hands in front of you.” Atrum did as he was told. Lyar plucked the other ring from the air and clasped it on to Atrum’s wrists, binding his hands in front of him. One last wave of the wand tethered Atrum to the ring that encircled them.

When he was satisfied Atrum was secured, he knelt down beside Theryn. He gathered him in his arms and kissed him tenderly. Atrum knew it was fruitless, but he pulled at his restraint. The calm of the shadows was leaving him; all he wanted to do was rip Lyar to pieces.

“Wake up, beloved,” Lyar said. Theryn stirred, as if waking from a slumber. Lyar kissed him again. “I need you to get up now; do you think you can stand?”

Theryn brought a hand to his face and rubbed his eyes. “Atrum?” he asked, his voice thick with confusion.

Lyar’s expression hardened. He took Theryn by the arm and pulled him to his feet. Theryn seemed to be coming out of his daze. His eyes widened when he saw Atrum. “Atrum!” He stepped toward him, but Lyar held his arm fast.

“We don’t have time for any touching reunions,” he said. “We’re going to complete the ritual now.” He looked at the wand in his hand. “I meant to use my own wand, but this one will do. Indeed, perhaps it is fitting that this is the one that will usher us to paradise.”

Lyar waved the wand. The dome of light moved with them as he headed toward the door. Outside the dome, he could see shadows darting around them, flying close but unable to break through. They made their way slowly down the hallway, with Atrum being pulled by the light tether and Lyar bearing most of Theryn’s weight. It must have taken every last ounce of Theryn’s energy for Lyar to control the Light the way he did now.

Atrum struggled again, but it was fruitless. He would have to think of another way to get out of this. He shut his eyes for a moment and called on the calm of the Dark as he surveyed the situation. Lyar, clearly, had gone mad. There would be little reasoning with him, unless Atrum went along with his delusions. In spite of the threats against Theryn's life, Lyar was treating him very gently. He had called him "beloved." Atrum might be able to use that. "Look at what you're doing to him," Atrum said. "He can barely move. You're draining the life out of him."

Lyar gritted his teeth. "All will be well in an hour's time."

"Are you certain?" Atrum asked. "You killed him once—banished him to a fate worse than death, and here you are marching him up to that altar again."

Lyar stopped at that. He looked at Theryn, whose eyes were fluttering shut again. "He won't be alone this time," Lyar said. "Whatever happens, I will go with him."

"Do you think he would choose your death? He loves you. He wants you to live."

Lyar laughed—a sound a mad man would make. "He would wish whatever I wished for myself. That was always his way. And what I wish more than anything is to see the Land of Light, one way or the other."

That had proved less successful than Atrum had hoped. "Then think of every subject of your Empire—every soul on the earth, even. Would you risk their lives? For what? The righteous will all see the Land of Light in their time, will they not? Why risk everything to bring it here?"

Lyar just stood there, shaking. Atrum very slowly moved closer until he was at the end of the tether, but that still left him only an arm's length away. "Undo this tether. Bring down the dome. Restore him. It is not yet too late." Lyar's shoulders slumped. Atrum held out his arms. "Let me take Theryn, and then you can—"

Lyar's head shot up. He stood straight again, glaring at Atrum. "Give him to you?" He laughed. "Oh, you nearly had me, Nollum, creature of the Void. But my faith will not be shaken." He started moving them again.

Atrum cursed himself under his breath. He had been so close.

As they resumed their path down the hallway, they came across a servant woman, who screamed at the sight of them. "Find Plinius and tell him it's happening now," Lyar ordered. When the petrified woman didn't move, he

shouted. “Do it now or I’ll have your head!” The woman gathered her skirts and ran.

They made their way very slowly up the stairs. Up and up they went—the stairs seemed endless. Theryn stumbled several times. Lyar was shaking—perhaps with the effort of keeping up the dome. Plinius soon caught up with them and joined them on their ascent; in his hand he carried a wand, which had a black crystal at its end. At last, they reached a door at the top of a tower and entered the same chambers Atrum had been in earlier.

“Allow me to ease your burden, Your Majesty,” Plinius said. He waved his own wand. The edges of the dome turned to blackness and then expanded outward. Just as the shadows could not pass through Light, they could also not pass through Void. Lyar gasped as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Atrum’s chain of Light and the collar dissipated, but the tether was immediately replaced by a band of black energy tying him to the floor.

Plinius cast a disparaging eye at Atrum. “Were you not able to recapture the woman?”

“She isn’t the one we need. She was a creature of the Shade, hidden by an illusion. Atrum is the one we want. He was fathered by the shadows and born to a mortal woman.”

“Fascinating,” Plinius said. “Yes, I suppose you were right, then.” He waved his wand again. Atrum was yanked toward the altar. Another tug and he was at his knees at the place marked with the symbol for Dark.

“What of the Void creature?” Lyar asked. “The one that was left in Leor’s wake?”

“He has been dealt with,” Plinius said. “He is trapped in the Woods and is unlikely to escape.” Plinius waved his wand. What he conjured was not Darkness. It was as if a hole had been torn out of the very fabric of reality. The creatures who were the remnants of his family poured out, surrounding Plinius in a swirl of black. He took his place above Atrum, at the symbol for Void.

Lyar helped Theryn move gently to his place. As he pressed him to kneel, Theryn made one last attempt at an attack, although it was laughably feeble. Lyar waved his wand, and Theryn’s hands were bound by Light and tethered to the altar as Atrum’s had been.

“I am sorry, my love,” Lyar said. “All will be right soon. We can forget all this ugliness and live in peace forever.” He kissed his forehead before standing.

“You can still stop this!” Atrum said, although he wasn’t sure that was true. Black shapes kept pouring from the hole in the center of the room; an unnatural humming sound filled the air.

Lyar ignored him. He pulled a lever on the wall, which opened a portion of the domed glass ceiling. Sunlight poured in, aimed directly at the place on the altar marked for Life.

Lyar and Plinius gave each other one last look. Plinius looked elated. “Are you ready for eternal salvation, my prince?”

Sweat poured off Lyar’s brow. He wiped at it with the back of his hand. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, peace eternal.”

“Shall we begin?”

They both raised their wands above their heads. The crystals glowed. They began to chant. The dark creatures swirled around Plinius, faster and faster. At the same time, the sunlight shining in from the ceiling took on a liquid quality that seemed to pour over Lyar like a fountain of gold. As they continued, the crystals on their wands grew brighter and brighter.

Atrum pulled at his tether as hard as he could, but it was to no avail. Had they truly failed? “Theryn!” he shouted. “Theryn, you have to fight!” But Theryn seemed barely conscious.

Plinius and Lyar pointed their wands at Atrum and Theryn. Beams of energy, one black and one white, shot out from the crystals. Atrum jolted backward as the beam hit his chest. Something dark and terrible began to fill him. It was as if he were collapsing in on himself. He tried to look to Theryn, but a darkness blacker than black had surrounded him. It expanded with each passing moment. He felt like he was falling—

—and then someone caught him. He felt himself shoot upward. The blackness around him parted just in time for him to see the hole collapsing inward. Plinius was sucked into it so quickly that he didn’t even have a chance to scream. The hole closed up as if it had never been there. None of the creatures remained.

Atrum’s tether had been severed. He looked around for his savior, thinking that perhaps his family had somehow managed to break through the barrier. But it wasn’t them.

It was Leor.

He didn't have much time to consider it, for while Plinius had been stopped, Lyar had kept going. The Life energy swirled around him, the golden glow turning to red. The red flowed with a roar from him into Theryn, who grew brighter and brighter. He was awake now, his eyes and mouth wide open as the energy grew stronger and stronger. He lifted off the ground, his form becoming a silhouette in the sphere of Light around him, which grew larger with each passing moment.

"How do we stop this?" Atrum shouted above the roar of the energy.

Go to him, Leor said. Contain him if you can.

Atrum didn't hesitate. He flung himself into the sphere.

He felt as if he were floating. It burned at first, as though his skin would melt off his bones. But after a moment, the feeling eased. Atrum wondered the reason for it, and then he realized it was he himself. His presence was a cool shadow on the unbearable light that surrounded them. He saw Theryn's form, suspended in the middle. He looked like the reverse of the people of the Shade—white with dark eyes. Atrum floated toward him.

Theryn turned his black gaze to Atrum. "I can't hold it!" Theryn gasped.

Atrum put his hand on Theryn's shoulder. "I will hold it for you." He pulled him into an embrace. Atrum could feel the overwhelming energy enter him; it struggled to fill him, but that wild energy was met with patient darkness. It at last receded. The light began to fade. Suddenly, the air around them cracked as if something had burst. They fell to the floor in a heap. When he had oriented himself, Atrum rushed to take Theryn in his arms again. Theryn returned the embrace. They lay together, huddled on the floor.

They both looked up to the altar to see Lyar's red glow cool like a dying ember. When the glow dissipated at last, Lyar was left, his shape a red silhouette. A black shape stood behind him. It blinked out for a moment. Theryn let out a gasp.

"What's wrong?" Atrum asked.

"I just felt something cold go through me," he said.

They looked to the altar again. There, in a blue silhouette, stood a young man who looked remarkably like Theryn.

"Leor?" Lyar's form gasped.

The figure nodded.

“But—” Lyar looked down at Theryn and then back to the figure. “I thought that—”

“I know,” Leor said, his words plain as day. Strangely, his voice was nothing like Theryn’s. It had a soft, sweet quality to it. “It’s over now.”

Lyar began to weep. “I did it to save you. To save everyone.”

Leor put his hand on Lyar’s shoulder. “I know,” he said again.

Lyar fell into his arms, his body shaking as he wept with more sorrow than Atrum had ever heard. “I missed you,” he gasped. “Oh how I missed you. Can you ever forgive me?”

“You are my heart,” Leor said. “How could I do anything else?”

The two of them twined together, holding each other for a long time. Lyar eventually pulled away. “What happens now?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Leor said and held out his hand. “Let’s find out together.”

Lyar took his hand, and the two of them seemed to move forward, although toward what Atrum wasn’t sure. They became smaller and smaller, until at last they vanished.

Theryn and Atrum looked at one another with astonished expressions. “Where do you think they went?” Theryn asked.

Atrum glanced at the place where they had disappeared. “Who can say?”

Before they had more time to contemplate it, the shadows began to come to life. Atrum and Theryn got to their feet. Shay stepped forward and embraced Atrum. “We were worried,” she said. She flickered back into the shadows for a moment, passing on the information she’d just absorbed from Atrum.

Theryn was still shaky, but his strength seemed to be returning. He brought one hand to his other, feeling where the ring was. “It’s gone cold,” he said with wonder and relief. He slipped it off, and it clattered to the floor. “We have to get out of here,” he said. “I doubt anyone is going to believe their prince vanished into midair. They’ll take us for assassins.”

“You can come with us,” Shay said.

“What do you mean?” Atrum asked. “You said it was impossible for him to travel through the shadows.”

“It was,” she said. “But you two are joined now.”

Theryn and Atrum looked at one another. Slowly, Theryn put out his hand. After a moment's concentration, a ball of shadow appeared in it. He laughed. "So we are." He took Atrum's hand. "Now try yourself."

"I've never used magic," Atrum protested, but Theryn squeezed his hand.

"It's simple. Just will it to be so."

Atrum concentrated. To his amazement, a small flicker of light appeared in his hand.

"Are you certain I can walk through the shadows now?" Theryn asked.

Can you hear me? Shay asked in response.

Theryn startled. "Yes, in my head."

Then you can come. Atrum can show you the way.

Atrum took Theryn's hand. There was a connection between them now, deeper than words. "Come with me," Atrum said.

They stepped into the shadows. There was a rushing sound, and suddenly they found themselves in a strange place. It was dark, but since they could see in the dark, it mattered little. Vague silver shimmers that resembled trees and houses and other objects of the world waved hazily in the darkness. There was solid ground under their feet, but when they walked, it made no sound. Silver shapes moved and shifted into animal and human forms, as fluidly as wine poured into a cup. Shay stood before them, as did a tall, broad-shouldered man. Or at least, something that was shaped as such.

The man approached Atrum. *Son.*

It only took Atrum a moment to understand. "You were the one to father me," he said.

Yes. The man put a hand on his shoulder. *We have loved you greatly from afar.*

"Yes, I know," Atrum said. "And I have loved you all before I knew you existed."

Atrum felt the man smile. The man turned to Theryn next. *We are most happy to welcome another son as well.*

Theryn's mouth dropped into an 'O.' "I-I'm very honored, sir," Theryn said. "Or my lord. Or—"

We have little need for titles.

“Yes, I imagine not.” Theryn looked around them. “But we can’t stay here,” Theryn said.

No. You both have Light within you. The Shade is no place for you.

“Then why have you brought us here?”

You may pass through here to anywhere you wish.

“Anywhere?” Theryn asked.

Yes. And you may do so whenever you like.

Theryn and Atrum looked at each other. The possibilities seemed too numerous to even contemplate, especially for two Glin boys who had never thought to even leave their forest. “Where do you want to go?” Theryn asked.

Atrum pulled Theryn in for a long kiss. So much promise was in that kiss—the promise of both freedom and security, of the heat of passion and the welcome shade of companionship. Atrum’s heart felt so large that it could encompass the whole world. “It matters not to me,” he said once they had parted. “Wherever you go, I will follow.”

Epilogue

They lived in Norum sometimes.

The Noorish were a private people. Once Atrum and Theryn had their cabin built out in a remote area of the woods, no one particularly noticed or cared about their comings and goings. The mountains were as spectacular as Theryn had imagined. Theryn made Atrum climb them the hard way, even though they could have reached the top in a moment if they moved through the shadows. The air at the top was cold and clear, and yes, he did feel as if he could see the world from up there. He kissed Atrum at the peak, for now it did not matter who saw them kissing. The whole world could see.

Norum had the added benefit of being the first country to regain independence from the Soltaran Empire. The Empire had begun its decline almost immediately after Lyar's mysterious disappearance. As Sir Barras had predicted, the emperor's niece swooped in immediately, but Belunta wasn't the only one with pretensions to the throne. There was civil war in Old Soltara. It grieved Theryn that so many would lose their lives, but there was little he could do. His presence had disrupted the country's politics enough. Best that they thought he disappeared with Lyar.

That meant that Theryn's family thought he had vanished, too. Theryn looked in on them from the shadows from time to time. They grieved at his death; his mother was so distraught that he almost revealed himself to her, but they had promised the people of the Shade that they would not reveal its secrets. Her grief passed with time, as it did with the rest of his family. Theryn enjoyed looking in on them now and again, watching his nieces and nephews grow. They would be fine young lords and ladies. It seemed that Glinden would go on as it had for a thousand years. He was glad of it.

He was also glad to find Barras and Kindy well. Although Kindy had been extremely discreet throughout their adventure, she had been unable to hold their secrets as she and Barras fled Ilturo. She told the whole story to him. Fortunately, Barras was a likewise discreet individual, which turned out to be one of many things they had in common. They were both eminently practical with naturally sunny dispositions, so they very quickly decided the only sensible thing to do was get married. With the help of Barras's family, they soon settled into a comfortable life. Barras laid down his sword in favor of a plow, and Kindy nurtured her nascent Life ability, becoming a healer of modest renown.

Because they already knew of the Shade, Atrum and Theryn could visit with them freely. Shay went with them on those visits; her time trapped in a mortal form set her slightly apart from the others. She and Atrum were both something different, caught between worlds. Theryn was secretly pleased, for Shay's continuing presence in their lives meant that for the first time, Atrum knew what it was like to have a mortal family. The people of the Shade were loving, but not so good at chatting and playing strachet.

When Atrum and Theryn weren't in Norum, they were in Lestone, or else Tamar, or Dosod. They visited the Isle of Serin, and the water was indeed as blue as the sky and the sand as white as snow, just as Lyar had said. Whenever they visited a new place, Lyar seemed to be there, through the stories he had told Theryn of his travels. In spite of everything, Theryn hoped that he had found peace, at least. Perhaps wherever he and Leor were, they were as happy as Atrum and Theryn.

And they *were* happy. Deliriously, magnificently happy in a way that Theryn never thought would be possible. He was free of his princely status, and Atrum was freed of his servile bonds—although he did still like to please his prince at every available opportunity. Their lives could not have been more perfect.

Perhaps a bit of the Land of Light had arrived on earth, after all.

The End

Author Bio

Sera Trevor has been a fan of sweet man-on-man loving from probably too early an age. (You know those buttons on certain websites that you have to click to verify you're over eighteen? She would totally click them before she was eighteen. Please don't tell her parents.) She earned a B.A. in English Literature, which was fun, but she was always somewhat disappointed in the lack of hardcore gay sex in the Western canon. Thus she spent a lot of time on the Internet, satisfying her desires via fandom. She has now made the plunge into original work.

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